

INNOVATOR Q&A

How a R.I. theater is bringing Nashville to the Ocean State, thanks to Taylor Swift's dad

The United Theatre in Westerly, R.I., has a new partnership with the legendary Bluebird Cafe in Tennessee

By [Christopher Gavin](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 17, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Tyler James Kelly and Kara McKee perform at the United Theatre in Westerly, R.I., as part of the announcement of the Nashville North initiative. GEORGE CORRIGAN

PROVIDENCE – Rhode Islanders looking to hear some authentic [country music](#) soon won't have to travel further south than [South County](#).

The [United Theatre](#) in [Westerly](#), R.I., recently unveiled a new partnership with the [Bluebird Cafe](#), the legendary [Nashville](#), Tennessee, venue that's long served as a haven for musicians and songwriters in America's "Music City."

Dubbed "Nashville North," the initiative will bring Bluebird talent to New England for performances at The United beginning in November, among other perks, according to Carly Callahan, the theater's executive director.

"The experience of being at the Bluebird is a bucket-list experience for so many people," Callahan said.

"It's major for us," she added. "It really is."

Callahan spoke to the Globe about what the new program means for The United and how it all got started, thanks in part to Scott Swift, the entrepreneur also known as the father of [a local Westerly musician](#), [Taylor Swift](#).

Q: What is Nashville North?

Callahan: We consider it to be a groundbreaking initiative that's creating a cultural and musical pipeline between Nashville, Tennessee, and Westerly, R.I.

This program is integrating world class musical experiences, educational opportunities, and economic development to our region through programming collaborations with the iconic Bluebird Cafe and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, which is home to the [Taylor Swift Education Center](#). We're also working with Southwest Airlines, and there are other partners that are on the horizon.

So does that mean, essentially, Rhode Islanders can expect to see some Nashville talent coming up to The United?

Yes. So the original inception for this idea came from the wonderful Scott Swift, who has been an instrumental part of The United from the very beginning. He was a [founding donor](#), helped bring the building to life in 2019, and he recognized the importance of creating a space where arts and culture could thrive in Westerly and in Rhode Island.

So his idea back last summer was to bring some of the singer-songwriters from the Bluebird Cafe to Westerly, and to Rhode Island. And he connected me directly with Erika Nichols, who's the Bluebird's chief operating officer and general manager.

Erika has taken some of the work at the Bluebird and has deliberately put it in other places around the country and around the world. In fact, it's happening in London as we speak. And so the opportunity arose to be able to contemplate bringing some of that artistry of those singer-songwriters up to Westerly via the United States and from there, the initiative grew.

This will allow our region in New England to experience some of the magic of the Bluebird.

Scott Swift is described as “financial advisor and entrepreneur” but to be clear, we’re talking about Taylor Swift’s father, correct?

That is correct. *(laughs)*

Taylor, you know, she's of course a beloved member of our community but has deep ties to the Bluebird ... and the Country Music Hall of Fame. Her DNA is all over both of these communities in the most wonderful of ways. It was Scott that brought the idea to us directly, but you know, Taylor is obviously hugely impactful worldwide and I just feel like it's such a wonderful connective tissue to have the Westerly-to-Nashville connection in that regard.

Does Taylor have any involvement in Nashville North?

It's Scott that has the involvement. We, of course, would be thrilled for any connectivity to Taylor. But Scott is the Swift in question right now. *(laughs)*

Performances are one part of it, but as this initiative continues, there will be be educational opportunities for Rhode Islanders?

The educational opportunities are actually happening in real time. We are a program participant in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and Taylor Swift Education Center's Words and Music Program, which is an educational program to expose young people to what singer-songwriters are, and how to write a song.

Students, over an eight-week period, are taught the basics of songwriting, not the music, but the

lyrics. It starts with a free write, and from there, students are able to hone in on subjects and themes. They're taught about chorus and verse and hooks and what goes into creating the structure of a song.

At the end of this period, their full lyrics, the songs in their entirety, are given to this stable of Nashville singer-songwriters that the Country Music Hall of Fame has formed and developed. And they take these lyrics and bring them to life in a fully realized song for these students.

So this Words and Music program is currently being implemented as part of our United "After School Arts" program, which is our free arts education program for middle school students.

How does The United sees this as an economic development opportunity for the state and for Westerly?

By bringing these nationally recognized artists into The United and expanding our programming, we're going to be driving tourism. We're going to be increasing foot traffic in downtown Westerly and in the region generally, and create new opportunities for local businesses.

It's also, of course, underlining our town's identity and the region's identity as a cultural hub, attracting visitors who want to experience world class entertainment in an intimate setting [who] aren't necessarily, you know, going to get on a plane to Nashville.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

The Boston Globe's weekly Ocean State Innovators column features a Q&A with Rhode Island innovators who are starting new businesses and nonprofits, conducting groundbreaking research, and reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to reporter Alexa Gagosz at alexa.gagosz@globe.com.

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