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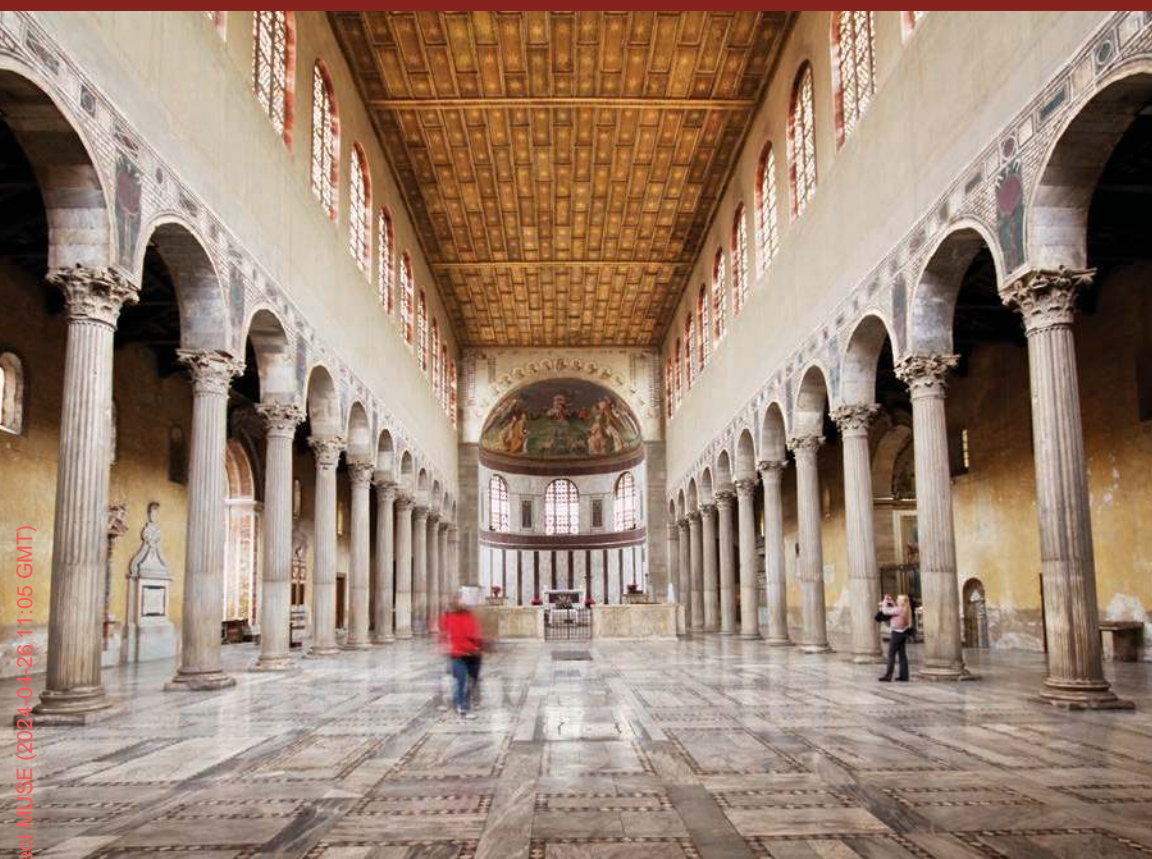
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# ForumJournal

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## Why Do Old Places Matter?



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# Musicians Ben Folds and Eric Nathan Discuss Old Places and Creativity

COMPILED BY THOMPSON MAYES AND ELIZABETH BYRD WOOD

Why are creative people drawn to old places? Richard Florida, in his writing on the creative economy, notes the relationship between people who do creative work and old places that have a sense of authenticity. Jeremy Wells, in this journal, explores the way the presence of patina in old places evokes the spontaneous appearance of vignettes about the past in the mind's eye. These ideas suggest that old places somehow foster imagination and creativity. In his August 2014 post on the [Preservation Leadership Forum Blog](#) and in his article in this journal, Tom Mayes encourages preservationists to explore more fully the idea that old places foster creativity, particularly as the United States looks to a future economy that is based more on creative work.

To further this conversation, the editors of this issue of Forum Journal asked two musicians from different genres to share their thoughts on how old places inspire them. Recording artist Ben Folds was interviewed in January 2015 for the July issue of *Preservation* magazine about his efforts to save Studio A, and agreed to further discuss how old places, like Studio A, foster creativity. Classical composer Eric Nathan, who titled a recently commissioned piece “Why Old Places Matter,” responded to written questions from the editors about how old places have influenced his work.

He is also the subject of a [PreservationNation blog](#) that appeared March 4, 2015 on the PreservationNation website.

## BEN FOLDS

[Ben Folds](#) is an American singer-songwriter and record producer who lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Ben Folds**

PHOTO BY RICK SMITH





In his open letter to save Studio A, Ben Folds lists more than 150 musicians who have recorded there, including numerous rock, pop and country superstars. Its acoustic environment, comfortable atmosphere, and decades of history all make Studio A “a special place,” he says.

PHOTO BY RICK SMITH

For more than a decade, he has operated the historic RCA Studio A in Nashville—a site that has been in the news over the past year because of its threatened demolition. Constructed in 1965, Studio A has welcomed a host of musicians over the years ranging from Elvis Presley to Dolly Parton to Perry Como. With its unique acoustic environment, the studio is an essential part of Nashville’s music legacy. In 2014 a new owner announced plans to demolish the Studio A building and build 80 condominium units in its place. Folds posted an impassioned plea on his Facebook page to save the building. In his [post](#) he said, “there is no space like [Studio A] anywhere on the planet. These studio walls were born to ring with music.” Late last year, fortunately, three preservation-minded buyers purchased the building and plan to work with Folds to continue running it as a recording studio.

We asked Folds about why Studio A is so important to creating music. Is it the space and the acoustics, themselves? And do old places like that have distinctive sounds?

Folds explains that every place has a distinctive sound and that the sound of Studio A has made its way “pretty soundly into country music history.” He notes that when he is in the studio, he can take his time and that the studio provides a sanctuary for making music. “[The space] is not particularly technologically intimidating,” he says. “For some people, personally, it puts them in the mood. I think the studio has a peace that I really like, and I’ve noticed a lot of other musicians like it too.”

He goes on to say, “With creativity, it’s not just you. Circumstances, the environment, your company are all equal parts in this. And [some of that can come from] being in a place where you’ve had incredibly solid creative input in terms of the curve of your sound, the way the space feels, how much space there is over your head, the colors, the wood, all these things.”

When asked if he thought people's imaginations are spurred by old places and their history, Folds recalled his first performance at the [Fillmore](#), a historic music venue in San Francisco, remembered for showcasing such talents as the Grateful Dead, Santana, Jimi Hendrix, Otis Redding, Cream, and countless others. He says that initially he found the history of the Fillmore to be intimidating because he thought he could never live up to the earlier performers. "I would have preferred to play in the parking lot," he admits. Yet he says that now he "definitely gets a charge from performing in an old space, because I like the feeling of knowing that you're in the continuum."

Folds wants very much to save Studio A. It's worth saving, he says, because "if a place works for 40 years, through all those changes—social and musical changes—and it's still there, and it's still making relevant records...and if artists are still coming to the studio and making [music that earns] Grammys...then there is something really working about this [space]."

Folds notes that some people think that it is the people, the musicians, that made the studio what it was. They feel that maybe today's musicians should find their own building and start fresh with no associations. "I just don't agree with that," he says. "One, I think what they did [at Studio A] was very special and should be preserved. And I also think that, if it wasn't important, they wouldn't have built it as a space to make that kind of music. And it's a very enlightened space."

He goes on to say, "I've never heard of anyone feeling overwhelmed or intimidated by [the studio]. There's something about the place that once you come inside, you just feel like making music. I think that's what makes it such a special space, and why it's been so successful for almost 50 years now. I know when I tell my friends you should record there, I know the phone call I'm going to get the next week, which is, 'I could not believe how wonderful that was. We made our best record.' I mean, that happens over and over again. So there's something to it."

When asked if he's ever been inspired by an old place to write music, Folds comments that he is more inspired by old places than

new. He reports, “I’m going to record in Dublin soon, because I like the feel. It’s not the oldest city in the world, or Europe at all, but I like the feeling of it, I like the cobblestone and the history there. I feel really good making music in those places. I think some of it is pace. I think it’s built by people with a different perspective. And if it lasts this long, the perspective has sustained, you know. It’s kind of a test of time.”

Folds likes being part of the continuum that is found in old places: “There’s something comforting about doing what your father, and your father’s father, and your father’s father’s father did, to some extent, and being in the same places. If we can keep this alive, it’s something that ought to be represented. There are some places that we all decide, this is an important reminder of where we came from. It’s humbling. And it makes you feel larger, as well, for being part of it.”

In his open letter to save Studio A, Folds talks about the stories and tales of people making music there, such as this one:

*When an old guy comes in and tells you that he was part of the crew that was waiting around for Elvis to show up, and they got out roller skates and roller skated around the room, it just connects you to it. You can completely imagine that. And it sounds so human. [Elvis] recorded after they took the skates off and got to work and became history. You can see the space that they did those things. Maybe someone will come in and walk into the studio and tell some young kid, you know, I was in here, and this old guy came in—and it makes it, well, the whole thing has inspired me.*

## **ERIC NATHAN**

[Eric Nathan](#) is an award-winning composer who has garnered international acclaim for performances of his work at the New York Philharmonic’s 2014 Biennial, Carnegie Hall, Aldeburgh Music Festival, Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, Aspen Music Festival, and other prestigious events and venues.

Nathan, like Mayes, was a Rome Prize Fellow in 2013. Following his time in Rome, Nathan wrote a trio for the Boston Symphony Chambers Players, which premiered at Jordan Hall at the New



England Conservatory of Music on January 11, 2015. The piece is called “Why Old Places Matters” and in the [program notes](#), Nathan comments that this work “is a personal expression of the feelings and emotions I have experienced in ‘old places.’” He explains, “‘Why Old Places Matter’ is structured in two movements. The second movement returns to places encountered in the first movement, as we might in recalling a memory, trying to live in a space again and for longer, the memory becoming a new ‘old place’ of its own.”



**Eric Nathan**

PHOTO BY REBECCA FAY PHOTOGRAPHY

**How are you inspired by old places? What is it about them that inspires you?**

When I experience an old place I feel I am engaging with how it puts my experience of the present into a larger perspective, connecting me with the history and lives of those who came before me. My experiences in old places have inspired my music both emotionally and philosophically. It is in part the atmosphere that inspires me—in Basilica Santa Sabina it was the enveloping sense of tranquility, solitude and sheer beauty that fills its dark, cavernous space—but I am also inspired by imagining a window into the lives of those who shared a similar sensory experience of this space in very different times from my own.

**Your work has been performed in historic places, including Jordan Hall at the New England Conservatory of Music, Carnegie Hall, the Villa Aurelia at the American Academy in Rome, and other old places. Do old places like that have distinctive sounds? Is it the space and the acoustics, themselves?**

Every space has its own unique “sound” acoustically and also atmospherically. While I was at the American Academy in Rome I met and spoke with the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, who is writing a book on the sense of atmosphere in architecture and the other arts, such as visual art and music. Pallasmaa spoke about

experiencing the specific atmosphere of a place immediately upon entering it, an experience that arises in large part from one's peripheral vision.\* I agree that there is a special atmosphere in these great historic spaces that enhances our sensory perception of music through multiple senses but also intellectually and philosophically—being able to take part in a sense of historical continuity with all who have shared in experiencing this unique sensory world. A place such as Carnegie Hall has such a history to it that when performing there or listening to music there as an audience member, one cannot help but imagine all the musical greats who have shared their music in that hall. While the atmosphere of New York City outside Carnegie Hall, or Rome around the Villa Aurelia, has changed so much over the years, the sense of these interior spaces has for the large part remained the same, and I find this emotionally powerful and inspiring.

Specifically, each of these historic spaces, from Carnegie Hall to Jordan Hall, has a very personal acoustic. When I had my orchestral piece “Glimpse” performed in Carnegie Hall’s Stern Auditorium I was struck with how the space transformed my piece—it took on an additional sense of polish—the acoustic tapered each phrase so beautifully, only the way Carnegie Hall can do. So, too, was the experience of hearing the horn solo in my “Why Old Places Matter” reverberate in Jordan Hall’s warmly hallowed space. The experience of hearing the piece in this hall is unlike any other, and it makes the performance unique. As a composer, I find that the acoustic of a specific hall gives me different lenses with which to engage with my music. I sometimes feel as if I meet the characters in my pieces anew in different spaces—not only for how the music sounds acoustically, but for how the performers react to and build off the atmosphere of a space through the subtleties in how they phrase and infuse musical lines with feeling. And so I’m very excited to be able to hear the Boston Symphony Chamber Players perform my piece again this summer, but this time in Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, so I can experience it in a different space. This hall is relatively new but it feels like a personal

\* For more by Julian Pallasmaa, see his article “Dwelling in Time: Reflections on Experiencing Architecture” in this issue of *Forum Journal*.



“old place” to me, as some of my most formative experiences as a musician took place performing trumpet on that stage as a student at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute. I am looking forward to how my experience of engaging with my own work changes and evolves through hearing it in this special place, an “old place” with added personal significance to me.

**You perform as well as compose. Are you often conscious of the history of a place when you’re performing in it? Do you think about other performances or performers who have gone before you?**

In a space such as Carnegie Hall I cannot help but think of all the musical greats who have walked out onto that stage and experienced a similar thrill of performing in that hall. There are definitely spaces that are uninspiring—ones where as a performer I have to work much harder to imbue the music with the emotion required. However, I feel that any “great” hall definitely gives an intangible charge to the performer that enhances the performance. This differs from hall to hall and also night to night—how the atmosphere of the hall changes with the energy of the audience and chemistry of the other performers on stage. When I performed trumpet in Carnegie Hall as a member of the New York Symphony, and in Jordan Hall on the radio show *From the Top*, the atmosphere of these spaces made it so easy for me to perform, and I was able to build off the charge the space and the audience to find new places in my musical expression that I would not have discovered in the practice room or in another space.

Similarly, when I compose, I sometimes bring my pencil and paper to different spaces for inspiration. Sometimes I will try composing in a concert hall, or an old church, or by finding a spacious place outdoors to find different creative lenses which I can use to experience my musical material and to see what music, turns of phrase and ideas come from engaging with my music in a different atmosphere. In composing “Why Old Places Matter,” I would sit in old places around the Williams College campus—in Chapin Hall and Thompson Memorial Chapel—for inspiration. I both composed and performed excerpts of my piece in these spaces to be inspired not only by the atmosphere but by the acoustic of a large, reverberant

space. I was trying to get closer to the sense of being in the cavernous space of Basilica Santa Sabina (which was an ocean away at the time I was composing the piece), but I think the experience of using other old spaces in my process piece helped give it a broader influence so that it is not tied to just one space, and led it in directions that I couldn't have foreseen when I started. However, I would love to hear it performed in all three spaces. I have imagined the results but it would be thrilling to experience.

**Do you have any theories about why old places and creativity seem to go together? Do you think people's imaginations are spurred by old places and their history?**

I can't speak for others, but for myself, I am incredibly inspired by this sense of a shared past and present. As a composer, realizing that I was experiencing a similar sense of space in Basilica Santa Sabina in Rome to those who experienced the space in the 5th century inspired me to compose my piece "Why Old Places Matter." It made a powerful emotional impression on me and I felt as if I had a window into life in the year 400 and that I had a shared sense of experience with those who lived then. By writing the piece it was a way for me to express and catalog how I felt experiencing the place in my own "present" and could allow me to be part of this unspoken dialogue of experience across the centuries.

**What other thoughts do you have about the relationship between music, creativity and old places? What are we missing in the preservation world that we should pay attention to?**

I found that not only have old places been inspiring to me creatively by allowing me to take part in an imagined shared experience with those from a very different time, but they have spurred me to create as a way of capturing the experience in trying to better understand it. In my experiences visiting places that affect me so strongly, I sometimes have an all-encompassing and almost overwhelming experience, such that I feel I can't take it all in at once and that I need time to unpack the experience. I find that memories tend to distill such experiences and that in a memory I can get even closer to what was at the heart of my experience. I also find that I can never completely relive the special sense of



The 5th century Basilica Santa Sabina in Rome provided the inspiration for Eric Nathan's work "Why Old Places Matter." The composer was moved by its "enveloping sense of tranquility, solitude and sheer beauty" and a feeling of connection with "those who shared a similar sensory experience of this space in very different times from my own."

PHOTO BY [NICK THOMPSON](#)  
VIA FLICKR UNDER [CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE](#)

space I feel in a place with a photograph or a video, but that music gets me the closest to reliving or understanding that experience emotionally. And while the emotions of my experience are unique to my own memories I hope that they can speak powerfully enough to others to share in that experience or create new experiences for them of their own. So, in composing "Why Old Places Matter," it also serves on a personal level too, allowing me to find a way to keep returning to these old places that I have found inspiring.

However, I wonder how my engagement with a specific old place (such as Basilica Santa Sabina) will change as I grow older, if I were to experience it again many years later. Would I feel the same sense of place (assuming nothing about the space has changed) or will my perception of it be different because it was influenced by memories of the experience that have become distilled into something new? And, how will the experience of being able to "re-live" the experience I had at age 30 in the Basilica by listening to my piece performed live 30 years from now impact how I will experience revisiting this place? Or even right now, after having composed the piece and having engaged with it on such a deep emotional level? I do feel that there was a different sense of awe that I experienced when I visited Basilica Santa Sabina for the first time than I did after visiting it often over the course of one year—after which it became a personal "old place." The experience deepened with time, but also continually changed.

Perhaps I should compose a new piece about Basilica Santa Sabina every 10 years or so, to see how my emotional engagement with it changes—perhaps it won't, but I guess only time will tell.

How do our experiences with old places change over time? How do we engage differently with historic old places versus personal “old places” (such as a childhood home)—and how does our engagement change when a historic old place then becomes a personal “old place” to us?

**How do you—how could anyone—listen for inspiration at an old place?**

I try to allow myself to be open to the unique sensory experience of each place—to let the place envelope me in its atmosphere and history. Sometimes it is not until much later, months perhaps, that the inspiration comes—or it may not come at all. Upon visiting Basilica Santa Sabina I knew that I felt a special connection to the place—it became one of my favorite places in Rome. But it wasn’t until I returned from Rome that I was able to write a piece about it, to understand where in my memories of it to listen for the inspiration, and that the lens that would help open it up for me would be a literary source, Tom Mayes’ essays on “[Why Do Old Places Matter?](#)” So, I would recommend to others to be open and keep listening—to the space and your memories of a place. It may not be the place itself that directly inspires you—it may be how the place asks you to see yourself differently. In composing “Why Old Places Matter,” all of the musical material and emotions that I tried to re-create came from inside me—but Basilica Santa Sabina helped me unlock them. FJ



**AUDIO**

To hear Ben Folds talk about RCA Studio A on MSNBC and why this place of creativity is so important to him, [click here](#).



**AUDIO**

To hear a clip of Eric Nathan’s composition, “Why Old Places Matter,” [click here](#).