

Spotlights



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DECATUR, GA

BY BROOKE PORTER

SPOTLIGHT: DECATUR

Actors command the stage, dancers fly through the air, and up-and-coming musicians show what they're made of at an open-mic night. It's all in a night's work in DECATUR, GA.



Founded in 1823, this performing arts haven is the second oldest municipality in the Atlanta area. Named after US Naval hero Stephen Decatur, the courthouse square—the focal point of the community—is built on land where two Indian trails once crossed. Now, 185 years later, the area is a charming, close-knit community of families, university professors (from nearby Emory University and Agnes Scott College) and creative types who make Decatur's art scene tick.

One such artistic resident is Shelby Hofer, cofounder and managing artistic director of the avant-garde **PushPush Theater** (www.pushpushtheater.com), which was founded in the Virginia-Highland area in 1997. By 2003, the company had outgrown its space, so Hofer chose to settle in Decatur, which has considerably smaller arts funds than the City of Atlanta. It's a decision that she considers a more-than-worth-it sacrifice.

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"Decatur is extremely progressive, and it's very diverse. We love diversity, and it felt like the right place to be," she says.

And it is. See for yourself when you visit the 5,000-square-foot space in East Decatur Station, a live/work development that has changed the face of the city in recent years. Every Wednesday at 10pm, experience **The Doug Dank Project** (www.thedougdarkproject.com), a long-form improv show that fuses the unpredictability of adlibbing with the permanence of real-life stories. Each week, a guest monologist will reveal a true tale from his or her life, inspiring gripping (sometimes funny, sometimes not) scenes.

But PushPush Theater is not only there to entertain. "The niche we serve in Decatur and in Atlanta, and maybe Georgia, is we are a theater that exists to develop performing artists," Hofer says. "About 20% is for the audience, 80% for the artists."

The focus is on the process more than the product—but what is created is always worth watching.

For less boundary-pushing works, reserve a seat at **Theatre Decatur** (www.theatredecatur.com), which has been an important member of Decatur's performing arts community for almost 30 years. Formerly called Neighborhood Playhouse, the company was renamed in 2006 to signify its dedication to the community. From May 29 through June 29, catch *Cowgirls*, a rollicking story about two groups of women and their clashing musical styles—country and classical.

Music of another sort—the voices of singing songwriters—thrives at **Eddie's Attic** (www.eddiesattic.com). Open since 1992, this live music venue was the vision of Eddie Owen, whose initial idea was to open an acoustic music club that focused on independent folk artists. "Oh, there were places," Owen says, on the existence of folk venues in the '90s in Atlanta, "but not this kind of place. I have always been about the song and the songwriter... and there was a very young, strong community of songwriters that lived in and hung around Decatur."

Almost two decades later, his dream is still alive—although the genres have expanded to include everything from country and blues to bluegrass and rock. And Eddie's Attic has helped catapult local artists—John Mayer among them—to stardom.



While the Attic now hosts big-name artists as well, its focus remains on the performing songwriter— and open-mic night is the time to listen in. Every Monday at 7:30pm, acts perform two songs each, and at the end of the night, one finalist advances to the acclaimed biannual Open Mic Shootout; find out who will win it all on June 7.

Like Owens, Sue Schroeder— the artistic director and cofounder of the contemporary dance organization **Several Dancers Core** (www.severaldancerscore.org)—couldn't imagine being anywhere but Decatur (although the dance company does have a second location in Houston). "What's great about Decatur is that it has a small-town feel, which means people are more approachable," she says.

The professional dance group (aside from Atlanta Ballet, it's the only company in the city that contractually employs dancers) is only one piece to the puzzle. The second is Core Presentations, which includes events like "Lunchtime in the Studio," when dancers or artists give intimate performances. The final—and possibly most meaningful—element is the charitable Core Initiatives. "Dynamic X-Change" is a good example of the work they do; the program uses dance as a way of healing children and adults who have been exposed to abuse, homelessness or AIDS.

Uplifting audiences and bringing people together—whether through a dancer's moves, a songwriter's lyrics or an actor's lines—is what the performing arts are all about.

"I think an active arts scene... enriches the community experience," says City Manager Peggy Merriss, who has worked for the City of Decatur for 25 years. "It adds to the quality of life, whether it's visual or performance. I think that's a real important piece to any kind of community that wants to be seen as thriving and vibrant. I think it's a really big draw in a subtle way. Without it, you'd notice when it's gone."

DECATUR ARTS FESTIVAL

MAY 20-31: Decatur is not only dedicated to the performing arts, but also to the visual arts. And for 20 years, the city has celebrated this passion with the Decatur Arts Festival. Programs run all week, from a juried fine arts exhibit and film festival to a children's festival and the ArtWalk. The event is organized by the Decatur Arts Alliance (www.decatuartalliance.org), which works with local businesses, galleries and artists to bring people to the area. "It's not only a

really nice festival about great art, the artists have a great time, too," says Cheryl Burnette, the organization's executive director. "One artist said he liked it because it was a party that he was coming back to every year." Well, it is a party—and you're invited.

EATS EDDIE'S

*Longtime Decatur resident and proprietor of Eddie's Attic **Eddie Owens** knows where to go for the best meals in town.*

ACT I: BREAKFAST

"Crescent Moon pancakes and eggs over easy." 174 W Ponce de Leon Ave 404-377-5623 www.crescentmooncafe.com

INTERMISSION: LUNCH

"Brick Store Pub for a brat and Guinness." 125 E Court Square 404-687-0990 www.brickstorepub.com

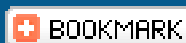
ACT II: DINNER

"Café Lily for a nice plate of pasta and bottle of Chianti." 308 W Ponce de Leon Ave 404-371-9119 www.cafelily.com

ACT III: DESSERT

"The Chocolate Bar for anything they have." 201 W Ponce de Leon Ave 404-378-0630 www.thechocolatebardecatur.com

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