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Making space for trans voices: Monthly women and nonbinary singer-songwriter series expands mission to include trans community



Host Jess Martin, center, performs during the first night of the expanded Song Share Sessions at Drawing Board Brewing Company in Florence. The series is held the first Thursday of every month. STAFF PHOTO / DANIEL JACOBI II

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A singer-songwriter showcase series in Florence is expanding to include the trans community.

[Jess Martin](#), a nonbinary singer-songwriter, has hosted the Song Share Sessions event series for women and nonbinary singer-songwriters at Florence’s Drawing Board Brewing Company from 7 to 9 p.m. on the second Thursday of every month since last January, but she was inspired to expand the series after speaking with trans singer-songwriters who didn’t identify as female or nonbinary and weren’t sure if they could take part. (“They’re always welcome,” Martin clarified, “but I wanted to more explicitly list that.”) Starting this past Thursday, Jan. 9, the Song Share Sessions kicked off for 2025 with a broader purpose.

Drawing Board was the right place for the series in the first place, Martin said, because the venue has always been openly supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. The owners, Corey and Tonka Lynch, display a rainbow flag outside the bar year-round, and the “[Beliefs and Initiatives](#)” page on the brewery’s website asserts that the brewery “was founded around the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We believe that every identity is valid and promise to take steps to prove this through our actions every day.”



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To the Lynches, fully including the trans community in the series is a way of rectifying an unintentional oversight that had kept out “a part of the community that could really benefit from this space,” said Tonka. Open mic-type events that aren’t specifically for women or trans people, she said, are “almost always dominated by white middle-aged men.”

“As someone who’s queer and is not that demographic, it can feel pretty isolating to be in those spaces,” she said. “You can’t show your true self in a space like that.”

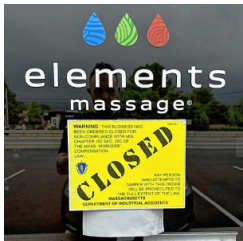
Martin agreed that playing in venues as a queer performer can be intimidating. Her goal, then, is not only “to help people find that inner strength, but find a community that can be there in the audience with them.”

At the Song Share Sessions, even people who just watch “can really sense how collaborative it is,” said Lynch, and people who may have come to a session before not wanting to perform at all “are now the first ones up.”

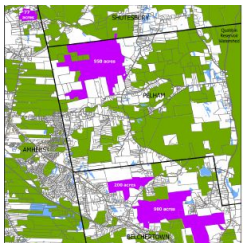
“Every performer gets what they’re looking for out of it,” she said. “It’s a space where people can feel comfortable.”

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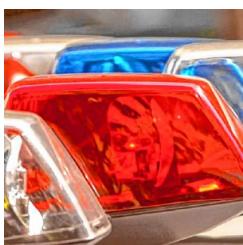
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Though a Song Share Session is similar to an open mic — each performer gets the opportunity to perform one or two songs within 10 minutes — it's less formal, with a few key differences. For one thing, a Song Share Session features a 20-minute period before the show in which the performers can check in with each other about how they're feeling and what they're looking for — if they want feedback, if they just want to practice playing in front of an audience, etc. (People who'd rather listen than play are always welcome, too.) This check-in period, Martin said, is “a solid time to get to know each other as humans and what is inspiring us to create music and put it into the world.”

The performers can opt to get feedback from the crowd, though the sessions require that the feedback is constructive: as Martin said, “constructive feedback” and “joyful reception” are “sometimes all we need as artists.” The culture she fosters at the Song Share Sessions pushes back against “the culture of ‘harsh criticism means I’m being truthful.’”

Another difference: the performers don't even have to sing from behind a microphone. If someone wants to play from their chair, that's absolutely fine.

“No pressure,” said Martin. “Meet people where they're at.”

As the series continues, Martin wants to see the turnout grow, to see more local female, nonbinary, and trans performers feel empowered to perform and grow as artists. She'd also like to expand the offerings to include workshops on technical and business skills related to the music business — how to use foot pedals, for instance, or how to book gigs. In fact, local singer-songwriter Collee Williams, who performed at a Song Share Session last year, was able to get a gig at Drawing Board after Martin encouraged them to speak to Lynch about performing there — going, as Martin said, “from seeking permission to having that power.”

“I love seeing that, nurturing that development,” Martin said. “This could launch someone to the next step. It makes all the difference.”

As it happens, the start of the 2025 Song Share Sessions will very nearly overlap with the brewery's two-year anniversary. When the Lynches were looking to open a brewery, Tonka said, they had two aims: to find a space that would allow them to make “good beer, quality beer, consistent beer,” and to build up a community once that space was established. They wanted to run a business where guests could

“come in, read a book, do a puzzle, craft, play some music, listen to some music,” and they suspected Florence might be the right place for it.

“Turns out we were 100% right,” said Lynch. “The community here is incredible.”

By hosting programming like the Song Share Sessions — especially now that trans performers are explicitly invited — the Lynches feel that they’re giving back to the community that’s helped their business grow. Now, Tonka said, they’re grateful for “making us feel welcome and allowing us to do the same back for those who come through these doors.”

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