Richmond has an incredible fine and performing arts scene that belies its relatively small size. This city’s rich cultural heritage includes an active artistic community whose roots lie in the “Richmond Group” or “Richmond School of Art.” This significant group of artists came together in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, drawing support from many parts of the community and gaining widespread recognition across the state and region.

Richmond is also referred to as the “cradle of recorded jazz” because some of the earliest jazz records ever made were recorded in the early 1920s in the Gennett Records building that still stands in the Whitewater Gorge. Additionally, Richmond is believed to have been the smallest community in the United States with both a professional opera company and a professional symphony orchestra. While the Whitewater Opera has since closed its doors, the Richmond Symphony Orchestra continues to be source of community pride and enrichment.

This history of influential visual, recorded and performance art fills Richmond with an artistic spirit that is both surprising and inspiring to newcomers.

**Visual Art**

The “Richmond Group” was composed of many notable artists, such as George Baker, Charles Conner, Maude Eggemeyer, the Eydens (Sr. and Jr.), Edgar Forkner, Frank Girardin, Anna Newman and the Overbeck sisters. In part as a result of Richmond’s Quaker emphasis on women’s equality, women as well as men were important members of the Richmond Group. Perhaps the most significant artist, however, was John Elwood Bundy, a largely self-taught artist from a Quaker family who first took a job at Earlham for no pay in 1887, and became a full-time artist in 1895. Considered “the Dean of the Richmond art movement,” he was a central influence in the 1898 establishment of the Art Association of Richmond. This group devoted to promoting the arts in Richmond is better known today as the Richmond Art Museum, the second-oldest art museum in Indiana.

Natural landscapes were the main subject matter painted by the Richmond Group. Indiana’s natural beauty provided wonderful inspiration to these artists, especially the Wayne County area with beautiful forests and streams and an abundance of spring wild flowers. These artists exhibited both locally and nationally, some receiving international praise for their work. For example, Charles Conner’s painting “A Wet Night in February” won the high honor of being hung in the main hall at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1905.

While the artists taught and worked on their pieces, patrons of the arts in this area provided impetus for their work. One particularly notable patron was Daniel Reid — a wealthy Richmond son, namesake of both Reid Hospital and Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in town — who established a $500 purchase prize in connection with the Annual Exhibition of the Richmond Art Museum in the early 1900s. As a result of this, along with the arts patronage in the area, many famous international painters’ works were sent to Richmond’s Annual Exhibition. In 1904, a Monet was displayed right along with the work of local artists in the high school classrooms that had been converted to display rooms for the exhibition. One of Mary Cassatt’s pieces also adorned a wall in the 1906 exhibit. Seeing artwork from these famous international painters influenced the Richmond Group.
As many as 10,000 people attended the Annual Exhibitions. To accommodate the interest, the Richmond Art Museum began to arrange a traveling exhibition around the state, the first exhibition of its kind. Appreciation and focus on the arts was so great during this period that students who graduated from the Richmond High School Art Program in the 1920s and ’30s had immediate acceptance to the Chicago Art Institute.

Today, many talented artists continue to work in Richmond, Wayne County and environs. The Richmond Art Museum, Leeds Gallery at Earlham, and Indiana University East all host exhibitions devoted to local artists. There are also many art competitions in the area, including the Whitewater Valley Art Competition.

**Recording Industry**

Gennett Records was founded in the Whitewater River Gorge by the Starr Piano Company, releasing its first records in 1917. The list of famous names that recorded for Gennett, both here and at the company’s Manhattan studio, is an honor roll of jazz and popular giants. In 1922, the Friars Society Orchestra (later known as the New Orleans Rhythm Kings) made their first recordings here, joined the next year by Jelly Roll Morton in the first interracial recording session. King Joe Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, newly arrived in the north from New Orleans, made music here with the young cornet player Louis Armstrong, as well as Lil Hardin, Armstrong’s wife on piano.

In 1924 the Bix Beiderbecke made the first of several sessions at Gennett with the Wolverines, a group from the Indiana University campus, which included Hoagy Carmichael. Early blues artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton and Big Bill Broonzy, and early country music performers such as Vernon Dalhart, Ernest Stoneman and Gene Autry also recorded in the gorge.

Currently the Starr-Gennett Foundation is active in keeping Richmond’s important recording legacy alive. The Whitewater Gorge Redevelopment project and the Jazz Heritage Preservation group have revived interest in not only the gorge itself as a physical site of immense potential for the city, but also in the commemoration of the achievements of those early recordings. The annual Gennett Walk of Fame Festival, begun in 2007, inducts major Gennett recording artists with permanent medallions in the gorge on the site of the original company. The Walk of Fame inducted 25 artists between 2007 and 2009.

**Performing Arts**

Richmond’s own history of community performance art is itself very rich. The city supports a professional symphony orchestra — The Richmond Symphony Orchestra — that has a six-concert season each year, including a classical series alongside “Pops” concerts in the Civic Hall Performing Arts Center, part of Richmond High School. The RSO was founded over 50 years ago, in 1956-57, by two Earlham music professors, Manfred Blum and Leonard Holvik, with Blum conducting the orchestra for its first quarter-century. The Orchestra hosts community outreach activities such as pre-concert discussions, open rehearsals that allow the public to hear the orchestra for only a small charge, children’s concerts and master classes. Actually, the foundation for this orchestral music was laid in 1899 when the first complete high school orchestra in the United States was founded in Richmond High School. Richmond Community Schools continues to support orchestral music, and its high school students have the opportunity to play with the RSO musicians and participate in the annual Young Artists Competition.
As for chamber music, the Chanticleer String Quartet holds concerts around the area during the summer, along with its annual open-air concert at Chanticleer Farm, the location of its first public performance. The Quartet draws support from its patrons, the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. The grants provided by the state and national organizations have ensured continued performances and also helped to support Chanticleer’s educational mission in the schools. The Quartet, joined by a drummer, a dancer or mimes, performs workshops for elementary and middle school youngsters, built around such themes as rhythm, community-building or humor in music. These performances invite active participation in music-making. Choice of music is varied, being largely classical but with admixtures of jazz, ragtime or folk idioms. These activities, combined with the festival concerts, have extended the reach of Chanticleer’s music to the area’s younger generations. Watch the local paper for specific details on the summer performances.

The theatre arts also thrive in Richmond, resulting from the vision and talent of Norbert Silbiger, an immigrant from central Europe and survivor of Nazi concentration camps. Other contributors to the creation of Richmond’s community theatre include Quaker Hill teacher Mrs. Hazel Thornburg Emry, Ed Nusbaum, Cleo Thornburg, Joe Hoch, Elmira Kempton, Jane Kemper, Dail Cox and A.O. Vioni. In the spring of 1941, under Mrs. Emry’s aegis and with Silbiger signed on as director, a brave band of volunteers created a board, drew up by-laws and set up shop as the Richmond Civic Theatre, Inc.

The building that became the Richmond Civic Theatre was originally built as a vaudeville house in 1909. Many famous acts graced the stage here, including Jack Benny, George Burns, many famous big bands and opera singer Roberta Peters. Also, during the early years, the theatre housed a Turkish bath in the basement and a barbershop on street level. In the 1930s, moving pictures took the place of vaudeville, so the theatre was converted for film showings. To stay open as a movie theatre during the Depression, the upper floors were leased out to renters, dentists and doctors. In the late 1950s, the Richmond Civic Theatre, Inc. purchased the building and turned it back into a performance theatre. Now those upper floors house costumes and other theatre equipment. The Civic Theatre provides large main stage shows, smaller cast productions, youth theatre and a Classic Film Series.

Each year, Civic Hall Associates puts on a “Proudly Presenting” series that brings a half dozen Broadway shows, headline performers, dance troupes and others to the Civic Hall Auditorium, owned and operated by Richmond Community Schools. And each year, Indiana University East sponsors a “Lively Arts” series that brings notable performances to Richmond.

The Earlham campus also hosts many outstanding performances. The College brings nationally known performers and lecturers to share their talents and ideas with the Earlham and Richmond communities. Earlham’s full schedule of events includes performances by the Earlham Theatre Department, the Earlham Concert Choir and the Earlham College Orchestra. Additionally, students and faculty of the Art Department, along with other local and national artists, exhibit their works in campus galleries. All of this complements the College’s well-known and ongoing Artist and Lecture Series.