

Can Music & Sports Museums and Halls of Fame Make the Cut?

By Dan Martin

What if a museum has to present something you really can't look at or touch but you can hear it, watch it, or play it? That's the dilemma both music and sports museums face.

Natural history, art, history, and other artifact museums typically offer their visitors exhibits of important or relevant objects. Science Centers offer artifacts but also exhibits and activities where, by engaging with the exhibits, visitors learn about scientific principles or ideas. Children's museums are all about engaging with exhibits. Some museums in all of these categories use virtual reality and film experiences as well. Artifacts, hands-on or engaging exhibits, virtual reality experiences, and film are the modern museum's storytelling tools.

The tools a museum deploys and the mix used in specific projects are determined by availability of artifacts, the budget, the target market (kids, for example, are big on interaction) and the skill sets of storytellers (experience designers). All of these have an impact attendance and gate revenue. Telling the story well and using the right tools to reach a target market helps penetrate that market successfully. It follows that the larger the target market, the larger the potential attendance and revenue.

That is why we're always taking a swing at sports and music markets. Whatever your nationality, it's likely your country is a voracious and enthusiastic consumer of both music and sports, so the fan base for music and sports – or target market for a music or sports museum – is huge. However, museums are not the venue that first comes to mind for either sports or music which are more typically experienced at home on TV, on a personal digital device, or at the stadium or arena live. Their natural medium for enjoyment is the actual play or performance or game – not a museum exhibit.

Matt Solari of BRC Imagination Arts observes that sports and music museums “try to take a transcendent moment of shared emotion and turn that into a fixed display that can be catalogued and turned into an exhibit.” He continues: “Sports and music are about moments. Artifacts are not about moments. You need to create the moment to give meaning to the artifact.” That's a tough charge, but Matt is right – the importance of sports or music memorabilia isn't usually self-evident and the objects are usually ordinary ones. Building “wow” around such memorabilia isn't simple.

It's different with art and natural history museums. A giant dinosaur or evocative piece of art can draw emotion right out of us – whether it's a wow or an ugh! The individual objects in their collections have that power and they usually don't look like ordinary everyday objects. The wow remains when the dinosaur skeleton is taken out of context – not true for a sports object. Matt points out that “Babe Ruth's home run ball is only fascinating to people who know who Babe Ruth was and what that home run meant.” The greatest collection of Gold Records, even by an artist with broad, even universal, appeal, has the same problem. For sports artifacts – and musical ones too – the case of the “missing moment” is a serious one.

As a result, Jerry Eisterhold of Eisterhold Associates says that these museums are really “Not about music and sports. They are about the sacred and the tribal.” They target often target the already converted – the core fans. Eisterhold continues “By the fact of their existence, a Museum or Hall of Fame canonizes its' content, and tells us all what was important.”

That pleases the core audience however Solari points out that “the challenge most sports museums face is that they have a series of static artifacts that are only interesting if guests bring their own stories with

them. With so many distractions today, those stories don't tend to be celebrated the way they used to." The (primarily) artifact approach can be a smart approach as you ultimately target people who can bring the excitement and understanding with them. But it does leave the larger potential audience uninterested. Too much focus on artifacts can take a subject that is inherently dramatic and exciting and suck all the drama and life out of the topic.

The result is that many music and sports museums that rely on artifacts may seem to do well enough, but they actually haven't realized the attendance and revenue potential of their subjects. In a year, they typically draw a small fraction of the attendance their subjects draw in a typical season or even just a couple of games or performances. If museums could get closer to offering the emotional high and the actual experience that music and sports themselves elicit in a single visitor experience, they could reach a much larger market.

Shawn McCoy of Jack Rouse & Associates (JRA) puts it another way: "The first thing to remember as you begin to plan and design a guest experience is that the project is being developed for an external audience. Therefore, you need to focus your experience about the subjects and stories that the broader audiences are actually interested in, not just what the CEO, marketing department, or team archivist wants to talk about."

Expectations have been reduced by years of low but steady attendance at venerable sports museums in Cooperstown (NY), Springfield (MA), and Canton (OH). Meanwhile, the design industry has added astonishing tools to their design kits (though some can be pricey), and our own cultural expectations of entertainment have grown increasingly sophisticated. The small communities where many music and sports attractions are located can be dominated by these institutions. As the source of community pride, expectations for excellence of experiences or entertainment can be low.

Still, the testament to their power to attract is that this category of museums appears to draw well for specialty -- or even major museums. The leading music museums manage to outdraw other major museums in their markets. Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum easily outdraws the adjacent science center and the natural history museum in that city. Seattle's Experience Music Project only finishes in the top ten for that town but nevertheless tops half a million in attendance.

Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum tops everything else in town except the zoo; even for major museums, zoos are tough to beat in attendance. (Zoos are the top educational/cultural attraction in most places.) Perhaps because Nashville is a place so intertwined with our cultural image of country music, a stop at the Country Music Hall of Fame is a must while in town. It is also a strong enough link or magnet to entice visitors to come to Nashville just because the museum is there. It's too early to tell how well the relatively new Grammy Museum will do in attraction-rich Los Angeles.

For some reason, the leading sports museums are mostly in small cities like Cooperstown, NY; Canton, Ohio; and Springfield, MA where they dominate other museum choices in attendance. The Hockey museum is the exception. It's in Toronto and does respectfully.

Many such museums benefit from yearly induction ceremonies that remind locals as well as the fan base that the museum is there and relevant. The downside is that inductees are the stars of 10 to 25 years ago because it takes the passage of time to prove who are champions worthy of inclusion in a Hall of Fame. The implied downside is that today's young fans may have no idea who the old-timers are and believe that the museum is really for their parents and not them. Someday a sanctioning body will figure out a way for nominations to come sooner; say for 2012, they would come in 2014. Then, nominations

could be greeted with fanfare, certified much later when the athletes have demonstrated meeting the test of time.

All museums need to be refreshed regularly, especially, as pointed out by JRA's Shawn McCoy," to keep guests, especially local ones, interested in visiting and re-visiting your facility." Done well, the annual induction exhibits can fulfill this function.

It is a demonstration of the power of the music and sports museum concept and its magnetism that they have the power to draw people to remote small cities year after year. Find Cooperstown on a map. It's a lovely community, but, although it is in the center of the incredibly populous northeastern US, it is "centrally isolated" Cooperstown, realistically, is on the way to or from nothing major. If you never make it to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum because you never travel to Cleveland, it's even less likely that you would get to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. That community could be termed a distant southern suburb of Cleveland (but is actually closer to Akron with which it shares a small airport).

The small market location of most of these museums may argue against their redevelopment (Cooperstown will always be centrally isolated). An analysis would answer that, but it likely would also suggest that a new music or sports museum that can successfully capture the spirit of the subject should be located in a larger market.

Whether located in a large or small market, such a museum should try to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. This is really critical in small local markets where you have to go after every fish in the pond – no limits to get to the best levels of attendance. Residents love to take their visitors to places that appeal to them too. The value of a large market is that with a large mass of population you can target a segment which is equivalent to an entire small city, and you can target precisely and charge a premium for the experience. Or, if the attraction has broad appeal, you can target the whole market.

JRA's Shawn McCoy points out that "with an audience-centric approach, you want to make sure that the guest experience appeals to a wide variety of demographics, interests, and learning styles. There are those who are more interested in the past than the present, while others may have no interest in history." He points out that you have to use every tool you have – graphics, displays, media, immersive environments, interactive exhibits, one-of-kind events and ongoing programming – to touch everyone with the spirit of the sport or music you're presenting.

Music museums have a key advantage over sports museums as they try to capture the spirit and seek to be emotionally evocative. The only way to represent Carlton Fisk's game-winning home run is to show video of the hit or display the bat he used. While this might do for baseball fans who know the lore of that hit, it may not grab or convey the significance of the play to casual or non-baseball fans. Recreating the "best game ever" is a challenge, but music can be performed live.

A music museum has the ability not only to tell the history of a musical piece, but actually offer a performance of the piece live for visitors. Even if the composer has been dead for hundreds of years, visitors can hear and see what that person created. Not surprisingly, almost all of the music museums have performance venues. Yet, surprisingly, performance is seldom a regular part of the museum experience. Sports museums often rely on film to put visitors in the moment plus an array of modest interactive exhibits.

We'll close with a comment by Matt Solari: "A modern sports museum – one that has a chance to be successful – should celebrate the emotion of glory. Rather than just displaying artifacts, it should put guests back in the moment – let them experience the moment of glory. Great sports moments help us

transcend our everyday lives, and unless you let people experience that moment, it's just a bunch of stuff." When this is finally pulled off, we'll have a music or sports museum worthy of the mass audience.