

Face the Music



SOUND ADVICE

Why Austin should invest in a music museum

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

Austin's reputation as a music mecca was born long before Live Music Capital of the World became our slogan in 1991. But anyone seeking insights into music's importance to the fabric of this city—and the entire state—won't find it in our version of Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum or Los Angeles' Grammy Museum (where the first family-sourced Stevie Ray Vaughan exhibit is now on display). That's because, despite repeated attempts, it still doesn't exist.

Cities throughout the country are creating sophisticated music attractions to lure tourist dollars and preserve unique aspects of their heritage. But the politics, funding challenges and opposing wills that thwarted past efforts here could leave us like Chicago, which, to the chagrin of blues aficionados

and economic-development overseers, lost the National Blues Museum, opening in 2015, to St. Louis.

"Austin is a great American music city, and by not having something that captures, collects and ultimately celebrates its musical legacy, it's conspicuous by its absence," says Grammy Museum Executive Director Bob Santelli, a Rock Hall veteran and former executive director at Seattle's Experience Music Project (now EMP).

If we're not careful, that legacy could disappear. With an active market for memorabilia from guitars to lyric notebooks, artists or estate executors understandably might sell to the highest bidder or donate to an already-established repository. And artifacts deteriorate; protecting a legacy ideally includes cataloging, digitizing and carefully archiving materials, including recordings.

Music centers also help keep endangered traditions alive through exhibits and programming, and with schools cutting music curriculums, such centers become important avenues for exposing students to potentially life-changing experiences.

And with thousands flocking to South By Southwest, the Austin City Limits Festival, F1 races and myriad other festivals, conferences and events, the tax income from ticket and ancillary sales alone could be huge. The Rock Hall's nearly 500,000 yearly visitors add \$107 million annually to Northeast Ohio's economy.

Austin does have the Texas Music Museum, which houses an archive and simple displays at 1009 E. 11th St. But in 30 years, founder Clay Shorkey has been unable to raise funds for a staff, much less a world-class attraction. And Texas State University has the Center for Texas Music History, where director Gary Hartman teaches, oversees publications and programming and curates exhibits, such as 2012's *Texas Music Road Trip* at the Bullock Texas State History Museum. But the center's San Marcos location, 30 minutes from Austin, rules it out as a site. After the Bullock exhibit

attracted 175,000 visitors—its second-highest attendance ever—Hartman and Bullock officials discussed establishing a permanent exhibit in the Bullock's vacant third-floor space. But the State Preservation Board wanted a \$3 million endowment along with the artifacts.

Collectors Martin and Christine Theophilus also met with Bullock administrators after their Museum of Magnetic Sound Recording ranked No. 1 among ideas submitted in a proposed-use survey for the Seaholm Power Plant redevelopment. They couldn't raise funding in time to enter the actual design competition, but they're still working to establish a permanent home for their extensive collection. "Our mission is to preserve and educate folks about the history of sound recording," Martin says. They want to convey how recording technology impacts music, broadcasting, film, video and science, with recording studios and a theater.

Austin Music Office sound engineering consultant David Murray reports his office has held informal discussions with a group interested in creating an Austin-focused music museum. But that might limit its appeal for tourists or major sponsors, both necessary for long-term survival. And, as Santelli points out, "It's far easier to build a museum than it is to sustain one."

Adds Hartman, "After nearly 15 years of hearing different proposals for a music museum, I've come to the conclusion that the realistic way to do it is to take existing organizations that are already doing this work, and bring them together to collaborate."

There's also the matter of competition from Houston and Dallas, though a city-commissioned 2001 strategic plan noted that a Texas music museum "clearly belongs in Austin as the capital city of Texas music." But it called for the city to provide at least start-up support, or risk losing out to a competitor. "If this occurs," it warned, "the unique character of Austin, written in its musical heritage, will continue to decline."

Clearly, it's time for Austinites to harmonize on a plan and get it done—before another Texas city does. **AM**

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