



Rocking the Cradle

For both fans and young musicians, Grammy Museum Mississippi closes the distance to the stars.

story by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A young music fan enjoys the sunshine on opening day. Politicians and dignitaries, including Governor Phil Bryant, hold the blue ribbon as it is cut. Members of Jackson-based Southern Komfort Band march through the crowd. Living blues legend Vasti Jackson electrifies an onlooker during his opening-day set. Emily Havens, the executive director of the museum, thanks supporters for their part in making the day a reality.

Los Angeles, with its glitz and paparazzi and year-round sunshine, feels every inch of its 2,000 miles from the Mississippi Delta. But if you want to wind up an L.A. star—or even just get a taste of that glamour—turns out the Delta is not a bad place to start.

“It’s possible to start anywhere, even a small town, and succeed in this industry,” Tricia Walker says. She should know. One of her songs, recorded by Alison Krauss, won a Grammy Award. Now, as the director of the Delta Music Institute at her alma mater, Delta State University, Walker brings an all-star collection of students to L.A. each year to perform at “Mississippi Night.” The event is a part of the weeklong lead-up to the Grammys.

Brennan Barham, a senior at DSU, has sung at the event for three years straight. She’s gotten comfortable there; she considers this year’s performance her best. The crowd knows and loves Mississippi, she says—as soon as they hear the state’s name, they begin to cheer.

With good reason: Grammy officials call Mississippi the “cradle” of American music. We birthed both B.B. King and Elvis Presley, the kings of blues and rock n’ roll. Then there’s Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music. And Ike Turner, credited with recording the first-ever rock n’ roll song. And Jerry Lee Lewis. Mavis Staples. Britney Spears. The list goes on and on.

Mississippians have won more Grammys per capita than natives of any other state. Which is why this spring, just before the ribbon was cut on one of the most technologically advanced museums in the world, Neil Portnow, the president and CEO of the National Academy of Recordings Arts and Sciences, called Cleveland the “right next place” for a Grammy Museum.

Like its sister museum in Los Angeles, Grammy Museum Mississippi celebrates the entire creative process behind the recording industry, from front-stage headliners to the engineers in the back booth. The Grammys, after all, are sponsored by the National Academy, and honor not just marquee celebrities but composers, songwriters, and producers also.

“We want to showcase Mississippi, but this is about everything,” says Vickie Jackson, external affairs manager at the new museum. The first temporary exhibition, for example, explores the way American music has bounced back and forth across the Atlantic. “Ladies and Gentlemen...The Beatles!” is on display until mid-June. Later that month, it will be replaced by “Pride & Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan.”

On opening day, families wandered the 28,000 square feet, winding through an extensive history of the Grammy Awards. The artifacts reflect the flash of the big event. You’ll see a trumpet played by Miles Davis and gowns in which Beyoncé and Taylor Swift walked the red carpet, not to mention clothing more off-beat—from a feathered headdress worn by New Orleans legend Dr. John to the robot suits donned by French electro outfit Daft Punk.

But this museum is about more than gawking at objects behind glass. Visitors can jam on state-of-the-art instruments or take lessons in historic dance moves from an interactive recording of R&B star Ne-Yo. Step into recording booths to learn songwriting from blues master Keb’ Mo’ or sit down and master the basics of music production.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On opening day, a student explores a keyboard in the Roland Live exhibit. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by a display of real Grammy Awards. In one of the three self-contained “pods”—a centerpiece of the museum—a student learns techniques of music production.

“Eighty percent of what we’re doing every day is going to be education,” says Emily Havens, the museum’s executive director. “We want to make sure visitors have a worldly perspective on music, the history of music, and what Mississippi has given to the world.”

Pointing to a touch-screen tabletop, across which flows a musical timeline that ripples like the Mississippi River, Jackson notes that only a handful of equivalent exhibits exist in the world. “This thing, from the design perspective, will probably win awards,” she says.

Rita George, the deputy executive director of Grammy Museum at LA Live, says that they had been approached for years about opening a second museum. But the proposal from Cleveland was the first to be truly convincing. The chance to partner with Delta State, where DMI students study the technical and business side of music, was key. It means the museum is more than just a place to visit; it’s also a resource cranking up the volume on a growing local music scene—which might just keep the flow of Mississippi Grammys strong.

“We want to plant our flag here,” George says. “This is how much we believe.”

Since their proposal was accepted five years ago, the Cleveland Music Foundation, the nonprofit that operates the Mississippi museum, raised \$20 million to support this launch. Local officials estimate that as many as 100,000 visitors will come each year, bringing \$20 million into the city.

On opening day this March, while children streamed through the museum doors, dignitaries clustered atop the front porch that was built as an homage to the welcoming tradition of so many Southern homes, and decked out for the weekend with a classic L.A. red carpet. Out on the lawn, a series of musicians, including, of course, Grammy winners and nominees, serenaded the crowd.

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Barham, meanwhile, was working hard. As a part of her senior project, she helped produce tracks for an interactive karaoke exhibit. During the two-day opening festival, she served as a production assistant. Her job: ensure the performers' experience was smooth.

She was well trained by Walker and her DMI professors; as able behind the scenes as up on stage. As she handed over a check to pay the Southern Comfort Brass Band, she took the chance to sell the group, up from Jackson, on this mighty little music town. Stick around, she said to Jamie Abrams, the band's tuba player.

Abrams set down his horn and looked out on the lawn—filled with fans, professionals, and a few L.A. stars. "Oh, we'll be hanging around," he said, smiling. "We'll be right here." M

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