



*More than 2,000 people attended the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi's grand opening celebrations
Photo courtesy GRAMMY Museum® Mississippi,
Photographer Rory Doyle*

GRAMMY Museum Opens in Blues Epicenter

By Tim Parsons

It's been said, "If you don't dig the blues, you have a hole in your soul." The movers and shakers at the Recording Academy also say: If you don't know about the blues, you don't know the whole history of American music.

On March 5, 2016, the Recording Academy opened the doors of the GRAMMY Museum in Cleveland, Mississippi, the epicenter of where blues music and its offshoots – jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll – began. The museum is the second GRAMMY Museum in the nation, the first opened in Los Angeles in 2008.

The outside of the museum is adorned like a metal sharecropper's cabin and the expansive front porch and lobby are decorated in tile that emulates cypress wood. It is a blend of modern and historical Mississippi. More than 5,600 people visited the museum in its first five weeks.

"Many people are surprised by how many items and exhibits are interactive with touch screen and audio, and can be experienced by listening, touching and reading," said Executive Director Emily Havens. "The Music Table is probably our biggest success. You can explore music and discover where different forms of music in Mississippi come from, as well as the artists, songwriters and people in the music industry who have shaped what Mississippi has given to the world. The technology is really unbelievable."

The 15 permanent exhibits include Mono To Surround, which allows visitors to hear the evolution of sound; History Of Dance, featuring a touch-sensitive, multicolored dance floor and tutorial video; and an interactive exhibit allowing visitors to produce a record with contemporary bluesman Keb' Mo'. Others, such as the Mississippi Music Legends, Mississippi Music Bar and Mississippi Music Trail And Timeline exhibits, explore Mississippi's musical heritage and contribution to American music culture. While some visitors spend an hour or two at the

museum, there are several 17 to 22-minute films offered in a 130-seat theater, along with countless artifacts and extensive archives to peruse – so visitors might want to plan their trip for a full day.

"The response from the public has been overwhelming," Havens said. "We've had visitors from all over the world. And students of all ages have come from as far away as Lawrence, KS, to experience it and to learn where American music was born in this state, in all of its different forms."

The blues was born on the Mississippi Delta, and the site of the GRAMMY Museum is a most appropriate location. It's just five miles from Dockery Farms cotton plantation where Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf and Pops Staples had lived.

The site is also located on the Delta State University campus, a school with just 4,000 students but offers a Bachelor of Science degree in Entertainment with 90 different majors. Students can minor in Blues Studies, which someday will be offered as a major, according to the Director of the Entertainment Industry Program, Trisha Walker, who played an integral role in the creation of the GRAMMY Museum.

"This is the academic home of the blues and all that surrounds it – heritage, foods, landscapes – everything that contributed to the blues," said Walker.

A native of Mississippi, Walker was a songwriter and entertainer in Nashville, TN, for 26 years before moving back home nearly a decade ago. Shortly after her return, she and civic leaders brainstormed the idea of building a music museum of some kind in Cleveland. They had a donor with artifacts, but that project didn't come to fruition. However, blues preservation advocate Allan Hammons was undaunted.

Hammons was the person behind the creation of the interpretive Mississippi Blues Trail which opened in 2006 and continues to grow. He was also the main visionary for the B.B.

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King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, which opened its doors in 2008 in Indianola, MS.

"If there is any one person who really helped get this vision to reality – a lot of people raised a lot of money, but in terms of the vision – I would point to Allan," Walker said. "He is tremendously creative."

Walker and Hammons started the non-profit Cleveland Music Foundation in 2011. Soon thereafter, they contacted the Recording Academy, also known as the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, the major music industry organization perhaps best known for its GRAMMY Awards.

"The GRAMMY people were impressed that there was a

group of civic leaders, county leaders and even people at the state level that wanted to do this," Walker said. "The Los Angeles museum was very interested in having a museum on or near a college campus, particularly one that has a recording program, and would let the state foot the bill."

Funding for the \$20 million museum was split almost equally from three sources: the state of Mississippi, Bolivar County and the city of Cleveland, and \$8 million from private donations.

"It makes sense to have it here because the Mississippi Delta is considered the birthplace of American music, and, of course, the Delta blues being the genesis of so many great forms of American music," Walker said. "Mississippi's Elvis Presley is the king of rock and roll, Jimmie Rodgers is the king of country music and the king of the blues, of course, is B.B. King."

The executive director of the GRAMMY Museum in Los Angeles, Bob Santelli, agreed. "You take the state of Mississippi out of American music history and you have a very large gap to fill," Santelli told the Associated Press, which also reported the museum could generate around \$20 million a year in tourist revenue to the region.

Dedicated to "celebrat[ing] the enduring legacies of all forms of music; the creative process; the art and technology of the recording process; and the history of the Grammy Awards," as stated on its website, the GRAMMY Museum encourages visitors to "explore the past, present and future of music, and the cultural context from which it emerges." 🎵



Mississippi and youth learn iconic dances in the interactive History of Dance exhibit Photo courtesy GRAMMY Museum® Mississippi, Photographer Rory Doyle