

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum is going strong, 15 years after opening

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[John Soeder, The Plain Dealer](#)



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Rock 'n' roll is, among other things, the soundtrack to several generations of teenage rebellion. Unpredictable. Unrelenting. And, perhaps at its best, more than a little uncontrollable. It makes you wonder: How, then, did the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum](#) end up so . . . *respectable*?

In the throes of its own adolescence, this Cleveland landmark is showing remarkable signs of maturity. The Rock Hall turns 15 this week. And there is much to celebrate. The not-for-profit institution is on solid financial ground, thanks to the establishment of a \$5 million endowment. Attendance is up. And an overdue redesign of the museum interior is right around the corner, while the hall's long-awaited library and archives are taking shape.

"We've managed to do incredibly well over the past few years," said Terry Stewart, president and CEO of the Rock Hall. "The museum is in better shape financially now than it has been in over a decade. We're very proud of that, and it allows us to take advantage of a lot of opportunities and understand where the museum can go in the future."

To mark its 15th anniversary, the museum will host a Rock Hall Ball on Friday evening, with live music by alternative-rock band Foxy Shazam, DJ Tommie Sunshine and soulful singer-songwriter Eli "Paperboy" Reed.

The party will be preceded by a VIP reception for U.S. Sen. George Voinovich. As mayor of Cleveland in the 1980s and governor of Ohio in the 1990s, Voinovich was instrumental in getting the Rock Hall built here. As part of the festivities, the museum is naming a gallery in honor of the late Leo Mintz, owner of Cleveland's Record Rendezvous store. Along with Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed, Mintz was a key figure in popularizing rock 'n' roll here -- and beyond.

15 YEARS OF ROCK

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Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and others rocked the old Cleveland Municipal Stadium with an all-star concert when the Rock Hall opened Sept. 2, 1995. Designed by world-renowned architect I.M. Pei, the iconic edifice overlooking Lake Erie cost \$93 million to build, with \$65 million coming from public sources.

Over the past 15 years, the Rock Hall has mounted major exhibitions covering a range of subjects, from psychedelic music to hip-hop to John Lennon. The museum has hosted lectures and appearances by the likes of Aretha Franklin, Al Green and Little Richard. And its award-winning education programs have reached tens of thousands of students every year, not only in Northeast Ohio, but elsewhere via distance-learning classes. As the hall has found its footing, it also has balanced a dual nature -- part tourism magnet, part cultural institution dedicated to the serious study of popular music.

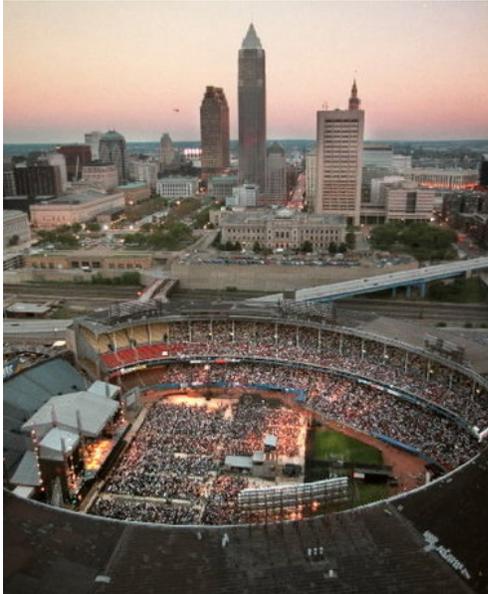
The Rock Hall has been successful on both counts, said Joel Peresman, president and CEO of the New York-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation, which runs the museum in conjunction with a Cleveland board. "It's wonderful to see the recognition that the museum has worldwide," Peresman said. "People know there's a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And they know it's in Cleveland. . . . It's really established itself as the pre-eminent place for the study of rock 'n' roll."

An immediate return on investment

A 2005 report by the regional development organization Team NEO estimated the Rock Hall's annual economic impact on Cuyahoga County at \$107 million, encompassing everything from dollars spent by museum goers on food, lodging and souvenirs to day-to-day transactions stemming from museum operations. That estimate likely still holds up today, despite the dated data in the Team NEO study, said Dennis Roche, president of Positively Cleveland, the city's tourism bureau.

"I'd be surprised if the number isn't higher," Roche said. "In the case of the Rock Hall, their estimates tend to be quite conservative. They've done a really good job of keeping their attendance relatively steady. "It's an amazing accomplishment, when you look at a project that cost the community less than \$100 million. They returned the investment in one year. Everything since then has been gravy, economically."

All told, the Rock Hall lays claim to pumping more than \$1.5 billion into Northeast Ohio's economy since 1995. It's probably time for a fresh economic-impact study, but the hall's estimates sound "reasonable," said Ziona Austrian, director of the Center for Economic Development at Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs.



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Sept. 2, 1995: The Concert for the Hall of Fame at Cleveland Municipal Stadium was part party, part paean, with generations of rock stars coming to Cleveland to play together, and celebrate the opening of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. By the time the final note sound at 2:10 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 3, 1995, 41 different combinations of artists had taken the Stadium stage, playing 68 songs over the course of six hours and 40 minutes. The all-star lineup included Bruce Springsteen, Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, James Brown, the Kinks, the Allman Brothers Band, John Mellencamp, the Pretenders, and Jackson Browne.

[Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 15th Anniversary: Concert Highlights gallery](#) (24 photos)

The Rock Hall and other public-private partnerships in downtown Cleveland, including PlayhouseSquare and the new sports venues built since the 1990s, have been critical to the local economy, Austrian said. "To make our downtown into a more livable and enjoyable place, you need public-private partnerships," Austrian said. "You need unique attractions to attract people, and the Rock Hall is definitely unique. You can't find it in the next city."

Cleveland, New York finally in tune

This month, the Rock Hall announced the establishment of an endowment with a \$5 million donation from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation. The money was raised from two superstar-studded concerts in October at Madison Square Garden, where Springsteen, U2, Mick Jagger and others performed to commemorate the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 25th anniversary. (This year marks the 15th anniversary of the museum in Cleveland, but the Hall of Fame began inducting honorees in 1986, years before its home was erected here.)

An HBO special of highlights from last year's anniversary performances recently won three Creative Arts Emmys. Proceeds from sales of a DVD set from the concerts also have been earmarked for the endowment.

"We now have the funding in place to make sure we're always at the top of our game," Stewart said.

An endowment has been a longtime goal for the Rock Hall, which until now has relied upon admissions and sales from the museum store for most of its operating revenues.

The hall reported operating revenues of \$38.2 million last year, up 43 percent from 2008. The increase included \$17.4 million in contributions to a \$35 million capital campaign that the museum launched in 2006 to raise money for its library and archives, the museum redesign and an operating reserve.

countries. Museum admission is \$22 for adults, more than double the \$10.90 charge when the hall opened. The hall has tried to court locals with admission discounts for Cuyahoga County residents and free special events.

The Rock Hall experienced its sharpest growing pains eight years ago, when the museum laid off 21 employees -- nearly one-fifth of its full-time staff -- as part of a \$2.4 million budget cut to compensate for depleted funds from national sponsorships. Today the hall has 110 full-time employees. Stewart, formerly a top executive at the Marvel Entertainment Group, took over the helm at the Rock Hall in 1999, bringing stability to an institution that had gone through a quick succession of four other directors since its opening. "Overall, we've done a really good job," Stewart said. "The exciting part is there's still a lot to be done."



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[Renovating the Rock Hall: Graphic](#)

More than just a pretty building

Plans for a redesign have been on the drawing board for years. The Cleveland firm Westlake Reed Leskosky took over the project in 2008, after the New York firm ESI Design came up with some preliminary ideas. Most of the renovations will be done in the Ahmet Ertegun Exhibit Hall, the museum's main underground showcase, named after the late founder of Atlantic Records and of the Rock Hall itself. A key goal is to reorganize installations to trace the history of rock 'n' roll in a more chronological fashion.

"Basically, we're trying to tell the story in a more linear way," said Jim Henke, the Rock Hall's vice president of exhibitions and curatorial affairs. "The way it is now, everything is in here, but you might have Elvis Presley over here, the roots of rock over there and something else on another side."

New displays covering Cleveland's music scene, Midwestern rockers such as Bob Seger and John Mellencamp and heavy metal will be installed in the main exhibit hall. The Rock Hall also will erect a new video wall that will show key moments in rock history. Construction will be done in phases, starting next month. Work is scheduled to temporarily stop next summer -- the warm-weather months are the busiest for Rock Hall -- then resume in the fall of 2011.

"We're trying to make it so there will be as little disruption as possible," Henke said. "A lot of the work will be done at night, when we're closed."

The goal is to have everything finished by early 2012, before the induction ceremony returns to Cleveland. Estimated to cost between \$5 million and \$6 million, the redesign encompasses the most dramatic physical changes at the Rock Hall since 1998, when the Hall of Fame chamber was moved from the uppermost floor to a circular wing jutting out above North Coast Harbor.

Making it easier for museum goers to find the actual Hall of Fame, where inductee autographs are etched in glass in a third-floor sanctum just past the museum cafe, is another priority. To that end, the exterior of the Hall of Fame section will be painted red and complemented with red carpeting and red signs to point visitors in the right direction.

Last October, the Rock Hall unveiled a revamped fourth-floor theater, made over with more than \$1 million from longtime museum benefactors Gregg and Madelyn Foster. The new Foster Theater features cutting-edge digital cinema equipment, which allows for 3-D viewing as well as live streaming of events.

Other technological upgrades are in the works, too. On the museum's second floor, new interactive kiosks will allow visitors to check out everything from one-hit wonders to all-time classic rock tunes. As part of the latter installation, the Rock Hall is expanding its list of "500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll," which has remained unchanged since the hall opened. Staffers plan to update the playlist with approximately 160 more songs, to reflect the past 15 years of pop-music history.

"Any institution needs to remain fresh and exciting," Stewart said. "This is a chance to realign the museum."

Library and archives to become a hub

The Rock Hall's library and archives were supposed to open to the public late this year, but the opening has been pushed back to May. Additional time is needed for organizing archival material and creating database catalogs, Stewart said. "We really want it to be in as good a shape as possible when it opens," he said.

The library and archives occupy approximately one-third of the new 75,000-square-foot Center for Creative Arts on Cleveland Community College's Metropolitan Campus. Through its capital campaign, the hall raised \$12 million (including a \$3 million pledge from the Rock and Roll

Hall of Fame Foundation) for its stake in Tri-C's \$35 million building. The college footed the remainder of the bill with state money. The hope is for the library and archives to establish Cleveland as a hub for the study of rock and related genres of popular music. The area designated for such a repository in the original blueprints for the Rock Hall never saw the light of day. It was appropriated for offices when the space-crunched museum opened.

The hall considered other options, including housing the library and archives in a proposed connector between the museum and the Great Lakes Science Center, before announcing its partnership with Tri-C five years ago. Ground was broken in October 2007 for the Center for Creative Arts, designed by the Cleveland firm of Robert Madison International. The college's side of the center opened last summer, complete with state-of-the-art multimedia facilities and classrooms. The Rock Hall signed a 50-year lease for its part of the building.

The archives will hold business documents, photographs, song manuscripts, posters and other items of historical interest. Already on the shelves are dozens of boxes from Ahmet Ertegun, including correspondence between the legendary music mogul and everyone from Mick Jagger to Henry Kissinger. The Rock Hall has obtained similar collections from other record-company executives, as well as from numerous artists, including Jim Morrison, Curtis Mayfield, Jimi Hendrix, Art Garfunkel and Eddie Cochran.

Visitors will be able to don gloves and examine items from the archives in a special library room. They'll also have access to music books, dissertations, periodicals, sheet music and extensive audio and video recordings, including footage from the Rock Hall induction ceremonies. "With the library and archives, we'll finalize that last crucial piece of our mission, in terms of the educational component," Stewart said.

A sour note in SoHo

Amid its mostly stellar performance of late, the Rock Hall has made the occasional misstep. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Annex in New York abruptly closed in January, just over a year after its grand opening. The 25,000-square-foot satellite facility in Manhattan's SoHo district had been touted as way to extend the Rock Hall's reach, generate additional revenue for the 150,000-square-foot main museum in Cleveland and ultimately drive traffic here.

S2BN Entertainment, a firm headed by Rolling Stones tour promoter Michael Cohl, was one of three for-profit partners that financed the \$10 million Annex. Jam Exhibitions and Running Subway, the production company behind the Broadway hit "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas," also had stakes in the venture.

Annual attendance at the Annex had been projected to range between 250,000 and 500,000, but visitors ended up staying away in droves. Still, it was a worthwhile experiment, Stewart said.

"We learned a number of things," he said. "One, don't open at the height of a recession. I'm saying that facetiously, but it's true. "At least now we understand that it can work. It was a great way to extend the mission of the museum, to generate revenue and to identify new board members and donors. It worked on many levels. It's just unfortunate that it opened at one of the worst possible times."

The Rock Hall hasn't ruled out annexes in other cities, Stewart said. "We continue to look at opportunities in other locations," he said. "We'll put into play what we learned in New York. . . . Our attendance [in Cleveland] rose while the Annex was open. As far as concerns that it would have a negative impact, it was just the opposite."

Rock 'n' roll is here to stay

Looking ahead to the next 15 years, Rock Hall officials envision no shortage of challenges and opportunities. For starters, they would like to see the fledgling endowment grow dramatically. "For an institution this size, it should be anywhere from \$30 million to \$100 million," Stewart said. The hall is finalizing a major gifts program to identify and court potential donors around the country and around the world "who associate themselves with this music," Stewart said.

While the 25th anniversary concerts were a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, the Rock Hall is exploring the possibility of other special fundraising events.

"The foundation is very interested in trying to create other events, whether they're concerts here in Cleveland or events around the country, to raise money for the museum and to attract the attention of potential donors," Stewart said. Those donors are by no means confined to the beleaguered music industry, which has been hammered over the past decade by diminished sales of CDs and concert tickets.

"We're reaching out to the finance community, the legal community and other communities -- people at large who love rock 'n' roll," Peresman said. "We're trying to show them that the Rock Hall isn't just a place where you can come and see Jim Morrison's Cub Scout outfit. We have a serious educational mission.

"We're taking steps to establish ourselves as a legitimate cultural museum and institution that's worthy of philanthropy. . . . We hope, at the foundation, that we're trying to lead by example." Peresman wants the museum's attendance to grow, too. "I'd like to see 600,000 to 700,000 people a year, in a few years," he said. "I want to see the strides we're making in terms of building awareness of the Rock Hall translate into more people coming to town.

"To do that, it's like any retail business -- you want to make your customer experience great, which is why we're doing a redesign. "We also have to look at the exhibits we're doing and step up things there, too. Do we bring in outside designers, people who have a different take on things, so we can add a little more zip to the layout of the exhibits?"

The hall's latest major temporary exhibit, "From Asbury Park to the Promised Land: The Life and Music of Bruce Springsteen," opened last

year and will be on view through December. A new exhibit is in the works for 2011, although the hall has not announced details. A connector between the Rock Hall and the Great Lakes Science Center remains on the hall's wish list of long-term projects, too. The additional space could include room for temporary exhibits, classrooms and even a destination restaurant, Stewart said.

For chief curator Henke, who joined the Rock Hall staff a year before the museum opened, seeing the hall come into its own has been gratifying. "We've accomplished quite a bit here," Henke said. "In this period when a lot of institutions are suffering, we're actually thriving. We've become a great asset to Cleveland."

And as far as the hall's partners in New York are concerned, the Rock Hall is one local icon that isn't going to skip town. "We're not moving to Miami," Peresman said. "We're here to stay. We're here to support the city. That's a goal of the museum, and that's a goal of the foundation. "We've taken great steps to have a great working relationship, and the results are starting to show."