

Event schedule – and visitor traffic – remains busy at NMM

By Travis Gulbrandson
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Throughout each year the National Music Museum (NMM) hosts a variety of events that allow the public to come learn about new acquisitions, see performances by various musicians, and just have fun, too.

A good example of this took place this past May, when the NMM commemorated the acquisition of a guitar played – and broken – by Elvis Presley.

For the event, a 1978 Harley Davidson Electra Glide 1200 CC motorcycle formerly owned by The King also was on display, courtesy of the Pioneer Auto Show in Murdo.

“It (was) simply a chance to celebrate the new acquisitions and let the public know they’re here, and have a little fun doing it,” said Cleveland Johnson, Ph.D., director of the NMM. “We took the Elvis theme and ran with it.”

Although the motorcycle was only at the museum for a day, the guitar – a 1975 C.F. Martin that Presley used in 29 concerts during the last year of his life – is now a permanent resident of the NMM.

Albeit a broken one. “This instrument ... was damaged in a freak accident onstage,” Johnson said in an interview earlier this year. “(Presley’s guitar strap broke, it slipped from his hands, a string broke, he was frustrated and he threw it up in the air.”

The guitar now has two holes toward the bottom that resulted from its fall to the stage.

“He couldn’t use it for the rest of the concert so he gave it away to a young lady at the front of the audience,” Johnson said. “It passed through any number of hands on the way to landing here, where it will stay.”

The Presley event took place the weekend of USD graduation this spring, and also served as a chance to help

introduce the rest of the NMM’s “celebrity collection,” which consists of instruments owned and/or played by Johnny Cash, Muddy Waters, John Entwistle, Chet Atkins and Bob Dylan.

Along with its instrument unveilings, the NMM also has regular performances by a variety of musicians.

Many of these come in the form of “Brown Bag Lunches,” which are held most Fridays during the school year and run from 12:05-12:55 p.m. in the Arne B. Larson Concert Hall.

However, the NMM does hold non-brown bag performances, too.

One of these took place in June of this year, when the museum was visited by artist and instrument builder Hal Rammel, who constructs his pieces out of materials not usually associated with music-making.

Rammel spoke during the opening reception for “The Shapes of Sound: Hearing with Your Eyes,” an exhibition of more than 40 unusual instruments.

One instrument Rammel played was called the “triolin,” a nail violin he built in 1985 using an old chair leg he found in a Chicago alley and wood from the bottom of a discarded dresser drawer.

“When I made my first nail violin, I didn’t want to make a circular box,” he said. “I thought a triangle was much more interesting. It was just a much more dynamic form.”

Nail violins create sound when someone draws a bow across the nails, which have been hammered into place on a wooden box.

Based on his work with the “triolin,” Rammel decided to invent an instrument using a similar style but that would make a louder sound.

That is when he began using amplified palettes, which use both wood and metal rods of different diameters and lengths to create varied sounds.



USD music major Wyatt Smith plays what may be the world’s oldest playable harpsichord at the National Music Museum during an event in September 2011.

(Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)



This 1976 Harley Davidson Electra Glide 1200 CC motorcycle was on display courtesy of the Pioneer Auto Show of Murdo at the National Music Museum to help unveil the new “celebrity collection” in May.

(Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)

The artist’s palette was a “natural form” in terms of instrument-building, Rammel said.

“It was perfect ergonomically,” he said “It’s been refined over centuries, and I wanted a handheld instrument. It’s also a really dynamic shape.”

The real treasures of the NMM are its classical instruments, some of which are also playable, as attendees learned in September 2011 during the unveiling of a harpsichord made in Naples, circa 1530.

The instrument may be the oldest of its kind that is still playable.

“Of the 16th-century harpsichords that I’ve seen, it’s in absolutely the best condition,” said NMM conservator John Koster. “There was really

very little to do, most of which was reversing some alterations that were done in the 17th century. The soundboard is perfect.

“The main thing I had to do was to make a new set of jacks, the thing that plucks the strings,” he said. “The original ones were missing, and the ones that came with it didn’t quite work. Other than that, it was really very minimal.”

Attendees got to hear the instrument played by USD music major Wyatt Smith.

Back in May, Johnson said events like these are a great way to increase museum traffic.

“Whether it’s a rare violin, or whether it’s a celebrity guitar, we are thrilled however a new visitor finds a way to us,” he said.

Expansion of NMM is a work in progress

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With holdings of more than 15,000 instruments, space has long been an issue for the National Music Museum (NMM).

A project to join the current museum facility with the South Dakota Union building next door aims to be the solution to this problem.

“The new complex will mean the NMM, founded 40 years ago, has finally come of age,” said NMM director Cleveland Johnson, Ph.D., in an e-mail to the Plain Talk.

The NMM was officially founded on July 1, 1973, and is housed in the old Carnegie Library building.

Renovating the South Dakota Union and adding a linking atrium would enable the museum’s collection to be housed under one roof for the first time.

“The SDU will be completely renovated for NMM use,” Johnson said. “It will be the real ‘workhorse’ of the three-building complex. The Union will provide storage for the complete NMM collection, it will house offices for the NMM staff and grad students (and) it will contain the NMM library, conservation lab, photo studio (and) workshops.”

The new atrium will be constructed in a contemporary style with an angular glass façade similar to other new buildings on campus. “Joining the two existing buildings of architecturally-disparate styles, the atrium will make its own statement, providing bright, welcoming space for NMM visitors,” Johnson said. “Appropriately, the atrium will serve as the new entrance for the museum ... and will be the central gathering point for individual visitors, as well as our many tour groups.”

“Besides the urgent and fundamental work of holding and displaying the museum’s massive collection, the expansion would be a bold visual announcement that we are a world-class venue – a

unique public experience,” added the NMM’s manager of communications, Patricia Bornhofen, in an e-mail to the Plain Talk.

Unlike the two older buildings, the entrance to the atrium – which will become the museum’s main entrance – will provide improved access for handicapped individuals.

It also will serve as another gallery, and include an expanded museum store and coffee shop, as well, Johnson said.

The concept designed has not yet been formally unveiled for the public.

“Our budget for concept design allowed for only a couple of artistic renderings, so it’s difficult to imagine what the final impression will be,” Johnson said. “Regular visitors to the NMM, however, quickly acknowledge the need for expansion, since only a small percentage of the collection – perhaps 8 percent – can be on exhibit at any one time in our current space.”

The budget for the actual construction currently stands at \$15 million, although Johnson said inflation may increase that number if the project draws out beyond five years.

The expansion project itself has been under discussion for more than a decade, although it didn’t always include the South Dakota Union.

On his retirement in 2011, former NMM director André Larson said, “I had never thought of the possibility of going west because the student center was there.”

However, if the building went east, it would eat into the museum’s parking lot. That’s why a link seemed like the right idea, Larson said.

Johnson agreed, saying, “What started out as a single room in the old library, and which gradually adopted and adapted additional spaces as it grew over the decades, the new NMM complex will finally give the museum’s jaw-dropping collection the space it deserves.”