



"I want children to see that *American Idol* is not all there is to the music industry," says Georgia Music Hall of Fame curator Joseph R. Johnson.

Georgia's Music Man

Curator Joseph R. Johnson loves to tell the state's musical story.

A high-energy, gregarious man by nature, he waits quietly, biding his time. Soon his patience is rewarded. "How did they make that?" the unsuspecting patron wonders out loud as she studies a display of antique musical instruments.

That's Joseph R. Johnson's cue. Eyes twinkling, the curator of music and popular culture practically bubbles with enthusiasm as he steps forward to answer her question. Later, he revs up a group of curious youngsters with the same unbridled eagerness.

Joseph never tires of sharing the inside scoop on the musical items and stories he's collected for more than a decade at the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. "As curator, I'm kind of an oddity in the traditional museum world," he admits with a chuckle. "I don't believe there has to be animosity among the primary roles of the museum—education; public tourism; and marketing, collection, preserva-

tion, and exhibition of artifacts."

He joined the staff in 1994, two years before the 42,000-square-foot showcase in Macon provided a physical location for the state's Hall of Fame, which was started in 1979.

Curious Curator

It pains him to think of the hands-off, stuffy reputation too many museums suffer—and too often deserve. He cites a colleague's comment about his

"I ask, 'What do you want people to know about you 100 years from now?'"

Joseph R. Johnson

decision to take a position at a popular museum. "Oh, you're going to go to one of those 'barbed wire and beer can' museums," the colleague said. Joseph chalked it up to general unawareness of the rich and diverse history of popular music.

"Popular music museums are in-

creasing in number around the country. They play a vital role in documenting and sharing America's rich music history," Joseph explains. "The Georgia Music Hall of Fame is a place for interaction and discovery—from artifacts. I get tired of the old-school mentality of museums and archives. It is not our goal to collect, preserve—and never let anyone see the item again."

The Macon-based facility shares the museum's materials with visitors.

"These items don't belong to the curator," he says of the more than 30,000 artifacts. He strides past costumes, instruments, stage props, and posters, which compete for attention with

hi-tech kiosks offering hands-on musical play. "We are the music museum for the entire state of Georgia," he continues. "It belongs to the people of Georgia. My job is to find ways to share more of this history with a variety of audiences. We can use and learn from the objects." ▶



Joseph strolls by a giant guitar from Travis Tritt. The Georgia performer used the prop at Nashville's annual Fan Fair autograph-signing event.

Homegrown Stars

People from more than 40 countries and all 50 states have come to see items that represent the Hall of Fame's famous inductees. That list includes more than 100 artists beginning with Ray Charles in 1979 and, just last month, the addition of Gregg Allman, Jermaine Dupri, Dallas Austin, R.E.M., and Felice Bryant. Visitors gawk at the personal effects of James Brown, Otis Redding, Brenda Lee, Trisha Yearwood, and Travis Tritt.

Joseph understands the appeal of the popular and rattles off some of the items that fill the bill: a yellow dress worn by the B-52's Cindy Wilson on an album cover; Kenny Rogers's duster from *The Gambler*; Chet Atkins's guitar; a colorful costume from Little Richard; Tommy Roe's belt buckle; and Jerry Reed's hat and vest from *Smokey and the Bandit*.

The curator is not immune to such stardust himself. "Travis Tritt, among others, has been wonderful," Joseph says, pointing to the gigantic glossy black guitar the performer provided via 18-wheeler. "He also gave us two performance outfits." Joseph chuckles as he recalls the museum's first encounter with the performer. Travis kept his promise to drop by the hall after a nearby concert—around

Outlet shopping evolved.

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More Than the Obvious

Much of the state's musical genius, from the famous to the obscure, finds representation at the museum. Here's just a sampling of surprises the museum's growing collection holds.

- a 1780 English square piano of the type that would have been used in 18th-century Savannah
- a rare 1891 five-string Gretsch banjo with an odd brass body
- 19th-century brass instruments from the 8th Regiment Civil War Brass Band in Rome
- materials depicting the classical music contributions of African Americans from Georgia



Phil Walden, founder of Capricorn Records, loaned this table and chairs, hand-painted with images affiliated with the Macon-based label.

midnight. "A big tour bus pulled up, and he and his wife stayed until 1:30 a.m.," Joseph says.

Another time, Mike Mills from R.E.M. showed up unannounced. Gregg Allman of the Allman Brothers Band popped in twice with no forewarning. On these occasions, the staff dutifully alerts Joseph. To build the museum's collection, "We're totally dependent on what the artists provide us," he explains. The music store helps. After visitors see artist memorabilia



and hear music in the exhibits, they can go straight to the music store and buy that CD.

Sharing the Spotlight

Joseph's mission moves beyond the famous, however. He also rescues from obscurity talented performers who never quite reached fame or those who were famous in their day but have been forgotten over time. "A person might ask if we have anything about so-and-so. If we don't, we learn more about another Georgia artist. If we do, many times we'll receive items for the archives," he says. "That's why I pushed for the Zell Miller Center for Georgia Music Studies, the museum's library and archive. It provides a place for

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left: Instruments from Georgia-based Fred Gretsch Enterprises remain on permanent display. Gretsch supports the museum annually and provides not only musical instruments for display but also valuable industry contacts.

Getting the Goods

In addition to politely stalking celebrities for Georgia Music Hall of Fame finds, Joseph scours antiques shops, flea markets, and garage sales. He surfs the Web and establishes ties to community historical groups and other museums.

"The museum primarily acquires items through donations from artists, visitors, and fans," he says. "We have older people who come and say, 'I've got this stuff and my kids are just going to throw it away. Would you be interested?' My job has been made easy because Georgians love their state and people have given us items. The museum has been very fortunate."

left: Edison sound-recording cylinders preceded flat discs and figured into a recent exhibit.

below: Costumes from Little Richard, Brenda Lee, Kenny Rogers, Ray Charles, and others crowd an archival storage room.



ongoing research and support materials."

When less-than-household names drop by and ask about inclusion in the museum, Joseph says, "I stress the archives. I tell them that the bigger mission is to document you and your music history. I ask, 'What do you want people to know about you 100 years from now?'"

He especially loves talking with young artists. "You never know, they could be the next big thing, and they're going to remember us."

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