

TRAVEL



A new shrine to Black music

What's the National Museum of African American Music doing in Nashville? We visited to find out.

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After several road trips to Nashville to see Tennessee Titans games, the Williams family from Madison, Ala., was excited to have something new to check out this summer: a museum that proudly and conspicuously stands out from all the other music attractions in Music City U.S.A.

"If Nashville is going to continue to be famous for music, then it shouldn't just be country music," Angela Williams said while roaming through — and rocking out to — the National Museum of African American Music with her son Caleb, 15, and husband, Masal.

Opened this past Martin Luther King Jr. Day to the tune of \$60 million, the NMAAM is the country's first major museum dedicated exclusively to Black music in America. What an important institution to envision.

And what a blast it turns out to be. Electronic interactive stations and hi-fi multimedia installations dot every room of the 56,000-square-foot facility, from one faux studio where you can write your own rough-and-tumble blues song to another where you can experience singing in a mass gospel choir.

"It really makes you feel connected to a wide range of different artists," Masal Williams said, minutes after the family had tried its hand at freestyle rapping. (Caleb still looked a tad embarrassed.)

Crashing the Music City party

It admittedly seems a bit awkward having the NMAAM in downtown Nashville. Either New Orleans or Memphis would have been more logical locations, given the far richer heritages of Black music in both of those Southern cities.

Nashville has more tourists and money, though. And anyway, there is also something kind of cool about the NMAAM butting in on the territory of the equally exceptional — but obviously far less diverse — Country Music Hall of Fame Museum just

three blocks away.

Charley Pride aside, you won't see much crossover between the two sprawling museums. And with newness and technology to its advantage, the NMAAM offers a much more interactive and outright entertaining experience than the country hall.

The museum is split into six main rooms, five dedicated to specific genres: gospel, jazz, blues, R&B and hip-hop. Rock acts are naturally dispersed through the latter three areas. (If there had been no Muddy Waters or Big Mama Thornton, there would be no Rolling Stones or Elvis Presley.)

The sixth room at the center of it all, called the Rivers of Rhythm, ties it all together alongside the context of American history — or, more specifically, the mistreatment of Blacks throughout American history.

This is where you learn that slaves from West Africa crafted a primitive guitar in the late 1700s called a goje, for instance. Displays also trace the impact the Civil War, Jim Crow and the Great Depression on up

to Los Angeles' riots and other calamities had in shaping the Black musicians who shaped American music.

Conversely, the hip-hop room — named The Message — goes back less than 50 years but is at once the most fun and maybe most revelatory section of the museum.

It colorfully recaps the music's roots in bringing levity and unity to the bleak New York City housing projects of the 1970s (sample display: DJ Kool Herc's Converse kicks and Technics turntable). It goes on to trace hip-hop's vast influence on pop culture since crossing over to MTV (look for plenty on Run-DMC here).

"I definitely learned a deeper appreciation of this music," said Mike Colton of Baltimore, who came to the museum primarily to see the blues exhibit but learned "it's all tied together."

Minnesota legacies

Minnesota is nicely represented in other rooms, though the museum is surprisingly

short on Prince (no pun). The same is true of Michael Jackson, so estate issues could be to blame.

However, Prince's Minneapolis cohorts Morris Day and the Time, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis are featured in the R&B room. Twin Cities ensemble Sounds of Blackness — which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year — also has a sizable spread in the gospel section, including a display with one of bandleader Gary Hines' white blazers emblazoned with musical notes.

"We are extraordinarily honored to have a permanent featured exhibit at the museum," Hines said. "Alongside Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong et. al, there could be no greater validation of the 50-year legacy of the Sounds of Blackness."

While Hines left behind a memento at the museum, everyone else can take something cool with them when they leave: a playlist of all the music heard throughout the museum.

Each entry ticket comes with an electronic wristband with your e-mail address embedded in it, which you can tap to various listening stations to select songs to stream later at home.

My post-museum playlist included everything from Depression-era tracks by Josh White and Memphis Minnie to funky 1970s jams by the Incredible Bongo Band and Lyn Collins to early hip-hop classics by the Last Poets and Kurtis Blow. Much more mainstream tunes are also available if, say, you haven't heard Whitney Houston or OutKast in a while.

There's plenty else to take away from the NMAAM, too. The museum vividly highlights how Black musicians shaped American music on the whole — yep, even including country. Maybe more important, it underscores how integral and meaningful their art was (and is!) in shaping and improving the lives of other Black citizens. Even "Tutti Frutti" carried a lot of meaning.

Amid the largely meaningless state of Top 40 country music in 2021, this seems like an especially valuable lesson to be taught right in the heart of Nashville.

National Museum of African American Music

Where: 510 Broadway, downtown Nashville.

Open: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Tuesdays.

Tickets: \$13.50-\$25, free ages 6 & under, nmaam.org.



Photos by JEFF WHEELER • jeff.wheeler@startribune.com

Interactive displays and multimedia installations dot the 56,000-square-foot National Museum of African American Music, top. Angela Williams and her son Caleb, 15, tried rapping along to a Kendrick Lamar song, above.

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