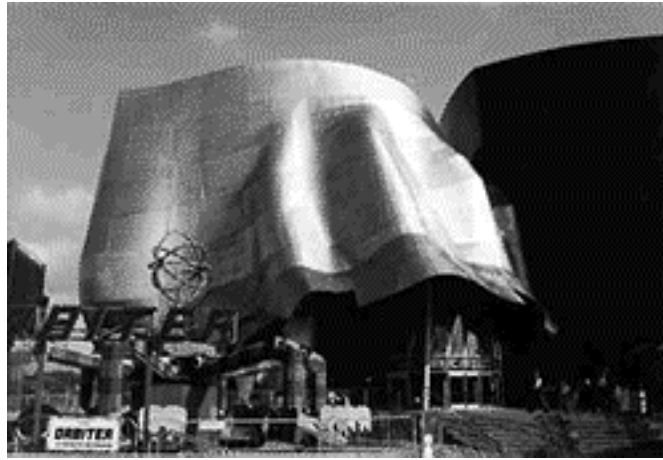


REVIEW ESSAY



The House that Jimi Built: Seattle's Experience Music Project

1. The Experience Music Project has rewritten the books on what a "museum" can be, largely by imagining a space and envisioning its mission in bold, exciting, and interactive terms. In fact, the EMP breaks up traditional notions of what a "museum" should be, much like Jimi Hendrix or Pete Townsend who broke up guitars, and much like Paul G. Allen, Microsoft visionary and the EMP's presiding guru, his sister, Jody Allen Patton, and Frank Gehry, the architect and design genius behind the structure, who based the actual design of this spectacle on an assemblage of broken guitar parts. But as Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile" put it

I'm standing next to a mountain
Chop it down with the edge of my hand.
I pick up all the pieces, make an island,
Might even raise a little sand.

Or as bardish Donovan sang, in a similar vein, "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." Indeed, the EMP celebrates the creative imagination which can take, say, the wreckage of a smashed guitar and, Phoenix-like, conjure up out of those fragments a surging new idea for what an exhibition can be all about. My hunch is that each word in this new phenomenon's name, Experience Music Project, was carefully chosen to evoke the experiential, the musical, the dynamic nature of it and all its holdings.

2. From whatever direction you approach, you first "experience" the EMP as a visually stunning conglomeration of domes, boiling and bulging up from the grounds beneath Seattle's Space Needle and adjacent to the Seattle Center amusement area. Designer Gehry literally drew his inspiration from a pile of guitar parts he had acquired from a Seattle guitar-maker. Each shape pays homage to the Fender Stratocaster, and each dome's color pays similar tribute to the colors of classic guitars: the dreamy blue of a Fender Mustang, the shimmering gold of a Gibson Goldtop, the fire of a red Stratocaster, and, perhaps the ultimate metaphoric tribute, the metallic panels nearly ablaze with "purple haze." For those architecturally inclined, the Gehry exhibit gallery inside documents the genesis of the EMP's design and construction, replete with commentary by Gehry and Paul Allen, images of Gehry's other accomplishments, his frenetic, early drawings of the structure, structural models and, quite wonderfully, a tribute to the workers and labor unions whose own creative labors made the EMP vision into a soulful reality.
3. The EMP's interior offers its own commentary on Gehry's dynamic vision. The "Sky Church," the complex's only rectilinear space, serves as a vestibule, a performance or event venue, and a vital, multidimensional light show with the solar images embedded within its floors speaking eloquently to the enormous computerized wall of light shows and video images, and to the pulsing, fragile textile pods, which float like jelly-fish above. The Sky Church realizes Jimi Hendrix's vision of a welcoming home for people of all varieties, a domestic embrace at once emotionally comforting and both visually and sonically exhilarating. Passing through the Sky Church, we encounter the "Roots and Branches" guitar structure, the real core of the EMP. Composed of 600 guitars and other instruments and designed by Trimpin, a local artist, "Roots and Branches," says the EMP's promotional literature, "represents the collision of forces that created rock 'n' roll." "Roots and Branches" quite jarringly represents the "Tree of Guitar Life," [pictured] perhaps the very tree from which the gods told Jimi not ever to pick one of his guitars. Ah, but Jimi didn't listen, and, like that old Edenic/Promethean tale told so many times before, Jimi's theft of "Fire" recast the musical and imaginative possibilities for the whole world.
4. Spinning off from "Roots and Branches," the EMP's galleries house its impressive collections. Nicely balanced in its visions, the EMP "Crossroads" areas pay homage to the local music scene in its "Northwest Passage Gallery", to the evolution of guitar design, technology, materials, and sounds in "The Guitar Gallery," to the whole range of popular music's evolution in "Milestones," and, to the Ur-

presence of Seattle and the EMP, Jimi Hendrix who gets his own gallery. How many guitars, records, portrait and performance photos, groovy outfits, manuscripts, contracts, and other static objects can keep the visitor absorbed? The EMP has thought long and hard about this question, that of the secret life of objects, and has dished up over 80,000 of the standard, and, in some cases, quite remarkable assemblage of artifacts from the history of popular music. Signed contracts by Hendrix for his Woodstock performance, and by Nirvana for their original recording deal; Bob Dylan's 1960 harmonica; Grandmaster Flash's original turntable; the mixing board from Electric Ladyland Studios; Elvis (Presley's) black leather jacket; Hank Williams's "jumbo" guitar; the Audiovox "Bass Fiddle ("the world's first electric bass"); stage apparel worn by Heart, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Queensrÿche, Hendrix; R. Crumb's original artwork for Cheap Thrills; Hendrix's smashed Monterey guitar, and handwritten lyric manuscripts by Hendrix, Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, Soundgarden's Chris Cornell; and The Presidents of the United States of America, Shock G, and Tupak Shakur all make serious claims to your attention. The Jimi Hendrix Experience's original instruments rose majestically on a platform and, by the sheer intensity of my own worshipful gaze, sank deeper within me than plain old "things" should be able to. The FBI's file from its two year investigation of the rumored "obscenity" of "Louie, Louie" both amuses and shocks with its testimony of human and financial resources squandered on some ultimate snipe hunt begun by a few Miami University students in 1963. Any one of the scores of guitars in the Guitar Gallery can soothe and stimulate the soul of the professional player or air-guitar fanatic.

5. But the EMP has jacked up the stakes for any such display of things with its innovative and surprisingly user-friendly MEG, a 6 giga-byte palm-pilot that currently contains more than fourteen hours of commentary on most of the gallery's objects, and comes included in the entry price. I got strapped into a comfortable holster and head-phone unit and rambled on my merry way. Pointing and clicking my MEG at many of the EMP's marked objects (designated by guitar pick icons) I got several minutes of historical commentary, interview segments, and other intelligent and interesting notes about the object in question. For example, to return to "Louie Louie" for a minute, one of the clickable symbols conjures up rock critic Dave Marsh's commentary on the song, including his famous assessment: "Three chords and a cloud of dust!" The MEG also, however, provides a hyperlink to information about Dave Marsh and his own critical project. If I wanted to learn about Hendrix's blues record album collection, I got the following information about his

John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, Elmore James, J.B. Hutto, and Junior Wells lps:

Hendrix was heavily influenced by these musicians and often incorporated their approach to the blues into his own music. Hendrix was especially fascinated by Muddy Waters, who throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s helped define Chicago's soulful, strutting, Delta-rooted electric blues sound with his hard-hitting vocals and fiery slide guitar. Said Hendrix of Waters: "I liked Muddy when he had only two guitars, harmonica and bass drum. Things like "Rollin' and Tumblin'" were what I liked, that real primitive guitar sound."

Or, for some information on the technological dimension of Hendrix's career, I discovered that

In 1963 Bob Hunter, owner of Market Electronics in Cleveland, Ohio, introduced an echo-creating device dubbed the Echoplex. The Echoplex became popular among guitarists because of its portability and functionality, offering reverb and echo controls, a playback foot pedal control, and the ability to record a 2-minute loop with or without reverb or echo. Another popular feature of the Echoplex was its "Sound-on-Sound" function. This function gave musicians the ability to layer, or overdub, multiple recordings on the same piece of magnetic tape without distortion.

The Echoplex screen features hyperlinks to Market Electronics, guitar accessories, and effects units.

6. Chris Bruce, the EMP's Director of Curatorial and Collections, was kind enough to find a few minutes for an interview during my second visit to the EMP. Granting that the EMP went out on a limb and, with the MEG, risked isolating visitors from each other and trapping them within the palm pilot world, Bruce elaborated:

The traditional wisdom is that such things take you out of your experience. What we've found is exactly the opposite; the videos and the palm pilot MEG facilitates getting people more deeply engaged with their experience of the artifacts and the stories here in a way that I've not seen before. It's very different, say, from wand technology. Somehow that ability to choose and really investigate on your own—that was very deliberate, that it would be self-directed and the visitor wouldn't have to follow any particular itinerary through the galleries.

My own experience confirms Bruce's assessment. You can ditch your MEG at any point during your visit, get another one later, and experience the Experience Music Project in any way you desire. Moreover, at any point during your MEG tour, the palm pilot technology enables you to "bookmark" any of the clickable features. Armed only with your ticket number, you can later access the emplive.com web-site

from the exhibition's own Compaq Digital Lab, or from your own home computer, and recover your roster of bookmarks with all their audio, video, and text information for later reference.

7. But the MEG represents only the tip of EMP's commitment to interactivity. And it is in their other attractions, the Sound Lab, the Performance Stage, the musical instrument platforms, the mixing board and turntable displays that I got to experience for myself the rush of creative activities. The mixing console enabled me to remix the Eurythmics "Sweet Dreams are Made of This" by experimenting with volume, equalization, panning and fading, and, when finished, to compare it to both the final and the penultimate version of the released song. At a DJ console I got to spin, scratch, and mix my own hip-hop hit. The Sound Lab provides various sonically isolated areas where I took virtual music lessons on the guitar, drums, and keyboard, with computerized instruction coaxing me along the learning curve until I actually played a 12-bar blues. As one of the EMP's fact sheets explains, "As the PC 'talks' to an instrument it can judge whether the visitor has hit the right notes. If the correct notes are not hit, the PC provides more practice time and will play an example over again, if the correct notes are played the PC moves forward." Moreover, whether experimenting in the Sound Lab or strolling before one of the gallery displays, I found that the quality of the EMP's audio systems, as well as their excellent isolation from each other, produced a superior sound, free from any muddying overlap.
8. But the EMP also features two other truly stunning features, an amusement park quality multimedia, simulation adventure which combines special effects, theatrical lighting, film, audio, video, computer graphics and a state-of-the-art motion platform. Once secure in our seats, we journeyed into the virtual world of rock and roll, currently on a journey to help two young musicians discover the heart of funk. The experience of the psychedelic vortex through which we flew en route to help secure the future of funk justified the price of admission alone! Currently featuring Funk Blast, which features Dr. John, Chaka Khan, George Clinton and Bootsy Collins, and the "Godfather of Soul" himself, Mr. James Brown reminding us to "Keep it on the One!", Artist's Journey will eventually enable us to experience other realms of rock history in a dynamic new way.
9. For those who crave the ultimate "On Stage" experience (or for families interested in the many ways in which the EMP is very kid friendly), you get to form and name your own band and perform The Troggs' version

of "Wild Thing" in front of a virtual audience of 10,000 screaming fans. After our combo strapped on a guitar, settled in behind our drum kit, fingered the keyboards, and gripped the microphone, the curtain opened and we blasted away with our own three chords and cloud of dust. We shelled out the extra charge for a poster featuring a photo of our EMP performance debut as Neon Fox Blood. As Chris Bruce describes the "On Stage" experience,

In some ways that is little more than cool karaoke, but I guarantee that the casual person who walks through and checks out that three minutes of fame, the next time they go to a concert, they're putting themselves on that stage differently than they could have before. From day one, Paul [Allen] said he wanted a place where people can experience what it is like to be on stage, because very few people get to do more than merely see luminaries on stage. The idea that you can be in the Hendrix gallery and be inspired by Jimi, and then have a space to try it out yourself, either by learning some guitar chords in the interactive teaching labs, or with the "On Stage" show is one of the EMP's great innovations.

The EMP combines a spectacular array of artifacts, sophisticated interactive technologies, and a stunning architectural home to create an attraction of deep interest to the seasoned lover of popular music as well as to children. It's a heady, dizzying, awe-inspiring, and fun tribute to creativity, not only a collection of relics from the past, but a beacon capable of illuminating, maybe even helping to create, the futures of popular music as well.

Admissions:

Adults ages 18-64: \$19.95

Seniors, Students ages 13-17: \$15.95

Military personnel: \$15.95

Children ages 7-12: \$14.95

School/Youth groups: \$5.00 per person

Artist's Journey Only (during the Winter): \$7.50

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