

# Hard Rock – branding Tahoe’s music lifestyle

By Scott A. Lukas

STATELINE – As someone who studies themed and immersive spaces from around the world, I have always felt that Tahoe (and its many consumer spaces) needs a theme ... besides itself. In this case, music is the theme of choice.



Hard Rock Hotel & Casino is redefining the South Shore.  
Photos/Scott A. Lukas

In so many ways, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino is an ideal addition to Stateline and Lake Tahoe. As a press release states, the \$60 million renovation “[of] the debilitated Horizon ... ushers in an improved property make-over and economic revitalization of Tahoe South and the Hwy 50 corridor.” The Hard Rock takes over for the Horizon, which had struggled with its identity late in its existence and which had itself been remade and rebranded from the iconic Del Webb’s Sahara Tahoe (and its Elvis glory) and the later Western-themed Del Webb’s High Sierra Hotel.

The lake, the mountains, and all of the natural beauty and activities that go along with the Tahoe lifestyle are wonderful and shouldn’t be downplayed, but relying solely on

these themes can be limiting. Newer events like SnowGlobe Music Festival remind us all that a community's identity is ever shifting and changes in line with what is happening within the community and outside of it. This, I think, is case and point for the excitement that we should have for the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino and its recent grand opening.

I would suggest that as a metaphor, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino represents the beginnings of a revitalization of the Tahoe region. The community is changing economically, demographically, and in terms of its tourist patterns, and certainly the gaming industry has undergone major changes that have been felt in Las Vegas, China, and right here in Lake Tahoe. The Hard Rock is a new direction and its major theme – music – could be seen (literally and metaphorically) as a source of great vitality for the region.



Elvis' connection to the area has not been forgotten.

It's with this theme of music that I began my experiential visit to the Hard Rock. In my research and consulting work on themed and immersive spaces, one of my first steps is to take an initial walk-through of a space in order to discover its key essences. Later, I often share these on my YouTube channel, which gives visitors the opportunity to join in the tour and to discover something exciting about the space.

I learned many years ago, while working as a trainer for Six Flags theme parks, that the first impressions a guest has of a

space are the lasting ones, so I try to capture my own impressions as a visitor would when visiting a new space like the Hard Rock. I am also a cultural anthropologist, so my insights are not just based on first impressions, but on years of research and study in the analysis, design, and operation of themed and immersive spaces.

So, here is my hybrid ethnography-tour that I recorded on Feb. 2, 2015.

Before I entered the Hard Rock, I had decided that I needed to survey the massive guitar that adorns the Highway 50 entrance of the hotel and casino. I had heard a great deal about the sculpture, which was created by Terrence Martin of Jagged Edge Metal Art of Sacramento. On first glance I think, "It's a guitar and, yes, guitars are heavily symbolic of music," but I begin to note some other features that are rather ingenious reflections of a number of metaphors. We have *music*, but it's amplified through the metaphors of the lake (with glass boulders backlit to appear like the water at night), the *remade* and *revitalized* (with its patina that looks like old lumber and a crazy quilt of hinges and other parts), and *change* and *vitality* (with the movement of the guitar around its space – which wasn't actually spinning during my visit).

What's key in my observation of these metaphors is how complementary they are. Most important is the fact that the guitar (and its representation as the Hard Rock brand) dialogues with the lake as it evokes its presence – which is just down the road – through the backlighting and a base made to look like a tree. As I walked past the guitar, it also occurred to me that having an iconic symbol like this one at the entrance is very important. So many cultures rely on such symbols and their related threshold spaces in order to create transformative experiences for those who enter those spaces.



The base conjures images of Lake Tahoe.



The guitar is multifaceted.



The guitar has elements from the Park family ranch in the Carson Valley.

Just entering the casino, I found a first dose of music memorabilia – a rather large case that features many items from the career of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. One of the things that has always struck me about the Hard Rock brand is how it uses music memorabilia to create atmosphere—an ambiance of the lifestyle brand that is music. This is certainly the case here in terms of how this aspect of the design is used to connote music as lifestyle.

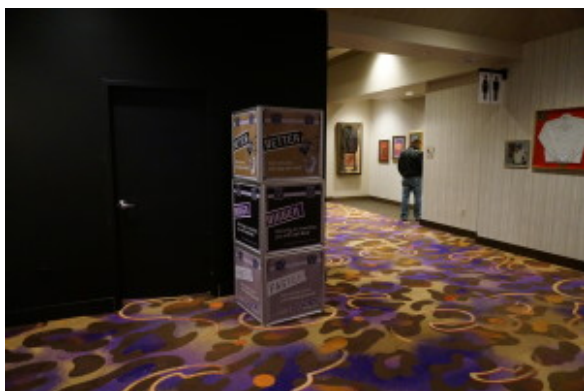
Just to the left, I notice the first of a number of restaurants – the Fire Break Kitchen & Bar. The Fire Break, in a bit of local homage, takes its name from a run at Heavenly Mountain Resort. Not unlike some of the indoor-outdoor concept restaurants and clubs on the Las Vegas Strip, Fire Break features interior and exterior dining areas and, appropriately enough, outdoor fire pits just beyond the iconic guitar. I was impressed to see the reference to the local and to snowsports, as I noted a number of snowboards on the walls and other depictions of the significance of snow sports in Tahoe.

As a metaphor, fire has multiple useful connotations that help establish links between Tahoe and the music lifestyle brand of Hard Rock. Fire is warmth, the cooking of comfort food, the playing of a guitarist who is shredding through a solo, and many other things.

Like other casino spaces, the perimeter of the Hard Rock includes the many restaurants and thematic content, while the interior features table games and slots. Wandering around this space, I just slightly thought of the casino space of the New York-New York in Las Vegas, only because I felt somewhat claustrophobic and missed some of the theming that makes the perimeter spaces shine. This is certainly not a fault of the Hard Rock as they were working with the space that remained of the Horizon.

Getting back to the perimeter area, I couldn't help but notice the many subtle nods to music theming. Guests may sign up for

a Backstage Pass, which was emphasized on signage that was made to resemble roadie crates and in many other spaces, such as the valet area, we see lamps that are also kick drums.



Memorabilia is everywhere.



Is it a drum or a lamp?

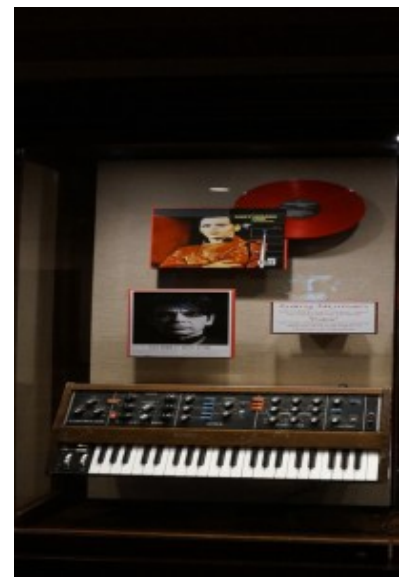
As we might expect, the music theming is carried beyond the physical spaces and into the website of the hotel and casino. The text "Start Me Up," by the Rolling Stones, is a link on the hotel and casino's website. "The Only Way to Rock Tahoe," a similar link, is connected to a Heavenly-Hard Rock package deal on the same site.

As a press release states, the theming at the Hard Rock is consistent with the idea of the "omnipresent soul of music," and I believe that this is a great way of describing how the design and memorabilia elements of the space are used to connect the guest to the ambiance of the lifestyle brand. A

number of critics of the general Hard Rock brand have missed this point in their claims that just staring at music memorabilia, artwork, and instruments will not make one a musician. The point of the Hard Rock, at least as I understand it, is to use the thematic elements that connote music and its lifestyle associations to immerse the guest within the space. Whether she or he is a musician is irrelevant as the spaces are all about the enjoyment of the brand and the lifestyle that is music. There certainly is a lot of memorabilia to appreciate at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino.



Chris Squire belongs.



Memorabilia is varied.

Being a prog rock and analog synth fan, I was taken with the

Chris Squire (of Yes) and Gary Numan displays. Certainly, one could spend the better part of a half-day going through the many examples of classic music represented in the cases at the Hard Rock. On so many occasions, while in a Hard Rock venue I am reminded of the space of a museum; of course, there are limitations in terms of the volume of information that is presented about any given artist or band in the hotel and casino's displays.

It's just past the Chris Squire display where I believe the Hard Rock truly shines. This is the space that includes the Oyster Bar, the chic-minimalist Center Bar, Fuel café, Vinyl (the entertainment space), the Hard Rock Store, and the hotel check-in area. There's a remarkable sense of consistency in the design elements that run throughout this area. We note some of the colors common to the Hard Rock brand (the purples and earth tones) and we also note additional design elements in chandeliers and carpet insets that reminded me of some of the upscale chic of the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas. This area also includes the important Elvis homage cases, which include everything from concert posters from the Del Webb's Sahara Tahoe days of Elvis, video of Elvis' family life, and information on Elvis' costumes. Again, we might see that the inclusion of these Elvis elements allows the Hard Rock to highlight both the rock theme and its connection to Lake Tahoe.

In addition to Elvis, we find iconic band and artist items ranging from Gwar, the Sex Pistols, Ramones, Foo Fighters, and many others. I cannot help but think that the selection of this diverse range of artists connects to the overall lifestyle philosophy of the Hard Rock brand. Many of us recall the popular Hard Rock "You Know Who You Are" advertising campaign that featured everyday people in business attire who, while hanging out with their families and doing domestic sorts of things, are shown to have an edgy tattoo peeking out from under the conservative business attire – the true rocker inner



soul of the guest.

I was reminded of both this campaign and the Hard Rock's "come as you are" and "be yourself" hiring and training philosophies as I noted the artists (perhaps) chosen for their attitude, hard edge, and non-conformist tendencies. A hidden metaphoric potential of these artists is this sense of the avant-garde and all its non-conformist possibilities – an irony, no doubt, as we are speaking of a highly popular corporate brand in the Hard Rock.



The lobby is full of mementos.



GWAR items at the Hard Rock.

Speaking of this last point, it would be very easy for us to scoff at a brand like the Hard Rock because of it merely being a brand, and a very recognizable one. Again, I would say that the Hard Rock has been misunderstood and what is offered to

the guest at Tahoe's version of the Hard Rock has been highly localized with the many forms of homage to the lake, the mountains, snowsports, and Elvis. As well, the metaphors that are present through the design and music lifestyle elements at the hotel and casino are very appropriate for both connecting us with the music brand and its relationships to Lake Tahoe. For so many reasons, I believe that music and its lifestyle associations are especially apt forms of theming for this latest hotel and casino in Tahoe. Lake Tahoe has a strong arts and music community which, I believe, could be even stronger with some of the potentials that we see in the Hard Rock's emphasis on music and lifestyle. And, there is something awkwardly cool about the fact that we can now all wear a "Hard Rock Hotel, Est. 2015 Lake Tahoe" T-shirt. But, beyond the gift shop, let me end on one final metaphor that I noted near the end of my visit.



Plenty of clothing to buy in the store.

Just across from the hotel's front desk area is a very iconic piece of music memorabilia – a glove once worn by the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. I couldn't help but marvel at this remarkable piece of music history which is made even more so in these years following Jackson's untimely death. I found myself, as I typically do in themed spaces, snapping many, many photos and I even found it necessary to capture a video of the glove – which moves in a circular motion inside a case – doing a complete rotation. Then, it struck me. In this one

piece –this iconic glove of Jackson’s – we have the most powerful and relevant metaphor of them all. This is *mana*. Mana is a spiritual concept from Polynesian culture that, though hard to translate, roughly suggests a power, prestige, or special presence that may be held by an object, artifact, place, even a person. For many people, Jackson represented such mana and the general inexplicable sense of awe that they encounter when listening to their favorite artist. With Jackson now gone, his glove is a remainder and reminder of a vitality that is still present with us today through this mana. For me, it is this object and its specific placement in the space that makes it the centerpiece of the Hard Rock. Its power and its specific ability to connect us with the likes of Michael Jackson, not unlike the other objects and displays within the hotel and casino, allow us to feel and experience something quite magical and transformative. This, the power of music and everything that it entails.



Michael Jackson's glove is prominently displayed.

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