News



Signage, left, and a display, right, at the new Museum of Christian & Gospel Music, Oct. 1 in downtown Nashville, Tenn. (RNS/Bob Smietana)

Bob Smietana

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Nashville, Tenn. — October 12, 2025

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The lobby of the new Museum of Christian & Gospel Music in downtown Nashville was filled with the sounds of drills, vacuums and other power tools recently as workers scurried to put the finishing touches on displays ahead of the grand opening a couple days away.

"Do I feel ready?" asked Steve Gilreath, the museum's bearded, jovial executive director. "No. But we'll be ready."

On Oct. 3, the museum, located a block from the famed Ryman Auditorium, opened to the public. The opening comes as Christian music is experiencing a resurgence, said Jackie Patillo, president of the Gospel Music Association. Worship music, she said, has been highlighted on TV shows such as "American Idol," and worship musicians were center stage at Charlie Kirk's funeral, televised nationwide. The GMA's annual Dove Awards show returned to Nashville's downtown Bridgestone Arena for the first time in decades on Oct. 7.

"I think that revival is in the land, and I think that's being proven by the surge of praise and worship," Patillo said.

Patillo said she began work on the museum four years ago, during what she called a tumultuous time in the Christian and gospel music industries. She felt Christian music needed a "stake in the ground" or gathering spot, and thought a museum might fill the bill.

At the time, she said, the GMA's Hall of Fame consisted of a website and a few cardboard boxes. Now, there's an 11,000-square-foot museum packed with artifacts — including a Johnny Cash family Bible, 200-year-old songbooks, a soundboard used to mix some of Amy Grant's early records and guitars from a host of artists. The museum also has an exhibit with the famed Christmas shoes, which inspired a hit song back in 2000 that crossed over into secular radio.



Steve Gilreath, left, executive director of the Museum of Christian & Gospel Music, and Jackie Patillo, president of the Gospel Music Association (RNS/Bob Smietana)

Another exhibit pays tribute to the famed Jubilee Singers from Fisk University, whose prowess in the 1800s helped give Nashville the nickname of Music City.

"When I walked in yesterday and there were archives in the cases, I cried," Patillo said. "This is the birthing of a vision, and to see it tangibly is amazing."

Patillo said the museum features a range of styles affiliated with the GMA, during an interview in a room full of dresses worn by singers including early Southern gospel star Vestal Goodman, Christian contemporary musician Sandi Patty, gospel singer CeCe Winans and Jenn Johnson, whose megachurch worship anthems include such songs as "Goodness of God."



A row of dresses is displayed at the Museum of Christian & Gospel Music in downtown Nashville, Tenn. (RNS/Bob Smietana)

Gilreath, who has a long history in the Christian music industry, hopes the $15 million museum will draw about 40,000 fans a year. He said the museum is designed to help visitors connect with the musicians and songs that shaped their lives. An exhibit called "Voices of Gratitude" allows fans to record a video thanking an artist or songwriter for a song that was particularly meaningful to them. Visitors can also record themselves singing along to one of their favorite songs. A prayer wall lets them leave a request for a team of volunteers to pray for them.



Staff check displays and complete exhibits at the new Museum of Christian & Gospel Music on Oct. 1, ahead of the grand opening in downtown Nashville, Tenn. (RNS/Bob Smietana)

Perhaps Gilreath's favorite item on display is a set of green iced-tea glasses featuring the faces of the Blackwood Brothers, a famed gospel group that began singing in the 1930s. The glasses were a promotional item for a flour company, placed in 20-pound sacks of flour. Gilreath is also fond of another surprising artifact, a Martin guitar that belonged to Keith Green, a legendary figure in contemporary Christian music who died in a 1982 plane crash in his late 20s. Green was known as a piano player but wrote his songs on guitar, Gilreath said.

When the guitar arrived at the museum, included in the case was a set of unfinished lyrics, which will now be on display at the museum, along with other artifacts from Green. “It’s such a great piece of history,” Gilreath said.

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Patillo said the museum aims to be a gathering space for the Christian music industry and its fans and will host concerts, panel discussions, songwriting clinics and events to celebrate new recordings. She hopes that even at a time when religion is declining in the country, the museum will showcase the spiritual power of music.

"Part of the goal with all of these wonderful stories and all of this great music is to bring hope and to renew faith and to declare the fact that God is alive and full of power, even today," she said. "So many have been raised in church and may not be going anymore, but some of the songs are the tapestry of their lives."