In most ways, the exhibition fulfilled its goals. By displaying the events side by side, the museum compelled visitors to think of them anew. The average museum visitor might already appreciate the seismic impact the six events had on our national psyche. The exhibition, however, focused attention on the immediacy of each event for the society of its era. Over one hundred years after the event, the exhibition enables us to see the murder of Lincoln in the same vivid Technicolor as we see 9/11.

While the choice of the events displayed was in keeping with the goals and resources of the museum, one does wonder about the criteria for inclusion in this exhibition. In many ways the exhibition was both personal and public (we all remember where we were when . . . and yet this memory is a collective one), and each individual visitor probably drew his or her own conclusions about the adequacy of what was included and what was left out.

The exhibition was ambitious, even in its limited scope and temporary nature. It asked important questions about tragedy and how a nation comes to grips with loss. The staff of the museum also understands that the answers will be slow in coming.

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Temporary exhibition, Oct. 11, 2002–April 10, 2003. 4,000 sq. ft. Michael Gray, curator; Carolyn Tate, designer; Justine Gregory, education head.

Curator’s tours, “Show and Tell: Creating Exhibits” family workshop, Vince Gill instrumental demonstration.


As the stars of country music are fond of saying, they owe it all to their fans. The same is true of the new Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, which must support itself essentially by packaging country music history in various formats and selling it to the genre’s fans. But since it moved to a new $37 million building in downtown Nashville, the museum’s necessary commercialism has led academic historians of popular music to worry that it may abandon its historical mission to focus on the more popular and profitable business of chronicling contemporary celebrities. A new temporary exhibition, “Treasures Untold: Unique Collections from Devoted Fans,” should allay some of those fears by departing from the star-driven narrative that dominates elsewhere in the museum and casting the spotlight instead on the everyday social practices that give country music its resonance.

Fans have used a striking array of materials to illustrate their engagement with country music, from rare stringed instruments to guitar picks, club journals to amateur discographies cataloging an artist’s entire recording career. One case displays sev-
eral examples of radio logs in which listeners listed and commented on each song played on the air by favorite performers, often over the course of years. Another display presents a remarkable assortment of props and promotional paraphernalia connected with the 1970s performers the Mandrell Sisters; table place settings from fan club parties, a supermarket cutout of Barbara Mandrell endorsing pantyhose, and a costume from the Mandrell Sisters’ television show are just some of the ephemera meticulously organized and labeled by Kathleen Betters and Robert Betters of Mechanicsville, Virginia.

“Treasures Untold” demonstrates that the documentary impulse is essentially a social one. These collections memorialized for their creators very personal experiences, but many of them also became ways to communicate with the artists who inspired them and with others who appreciated the same work. Ruth Thomason sent her logs of Bob Wills’s radio show to the western swing bandleader at the end of each year; Marion Hoffman corresponded with one of country music’s early stars, Vernon Dalhart, to compile a comprehensive discography of his work, and his letter of thanks is included in the display. Other material was generated for distribution through fan clubs and similar social networks. Jim Evans began as a collector, went on to found the posthumously organized Jimmie Rodgers Fan Club, and eventually played a pivotal role in creating the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Festival in 1953, one of the first national events celebrating commercial country music.

Since commercial country music was long considered unworthy of preservation, the record created by fans is vital to reconstructing the genre’s early history. Indeed, the kernel of the museum’s archive consists of copies of materials gathered by the Australian aficionado John Edwards. It is thus fitting that the curators have taken advantage of several features of the permanent exhibition to juxtapose collecting by fans with the historical work of the museum. As visitors approach the exhibition, they pass a large case featuring a collection of cowboy boots, sequined western suits tailored by Nudie Cohen, and other memorabilia amassed by the Grand Ole Opry star Marty Stuart. An accompanying video of Stuart talking about himself as a collector is a valuable framing device for the material gathered by fans, whose intentions and logic visitors must infer from the artifacts themselves. As elsewhere in the museum, viewers can look through a glass wall into the archives and studios where items from the institution’s vast collection are preserved or prepared for exhibition. Both elements help validate fan collecting as serious expressive and historical work.

The central weakness of the exhibition is one that it shares with the museum as a whole. Minimizing labels and signs, the curators rely heavily on the objects to tell their own stories. This approach makes plenty of room for shared interpretive authority and allows visitors to make personal connections to the pieces, but it does little to contextualize the collections in the broader framework of American social or cultural history. Practices such as logging radio shows, developing concert scrapbooks, and participating in fan clubs were common among fans of all kinds of music. They can tell us a great deal about the place of popular music in American life and about the changing nature of popular engagement with commercial culture. “Treasure
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sures Untold” misses an important opportunity to relate that story. Instead, as its title suggests, the exhibition presents the collections as unusual individual acts of devotion.

Nonetheless, by documenting and encouraging public involvement in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum’s historical mission, the exhibition shows that the museum can make the process of constructing history as enjoyable a form of entertainment as are the stories and icons it produces. An inventive educational program—including a family workshop on creating exhibits from personal collections of everyday objects—exemplifies the museum’s effort to serve as a local history museum with general appeal as well as the major national site for chronicling the country music tradition. If “Treasures Untold” is any indication, perhaps the museum’s commercial imperative and its historical mission can exist in harmony.

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