New Savannah museum tells the storied history of Gretsch instruments

November 16, 2021

That Great Gretsch Sound! museum display.

Public ribbon-cutting event on Thursday, Nov. 18, 12-2 p.m.

Drums, guitars, history, business and education have come together in a spectacular new interactive museum and exhibit in downtown Savannah that will pique the interest of any music lover.

That Great Gretsch Sound! museum is a new destination where Georgia Southern University helps tell the story of a family-owned company that is still regarded as one of the music industry’s most influential and innovative instrument manufacturers. The permanent display of music memorabilia, highlighting more than 135 years of Gretsch instruments, is featured in District Live’s new lobby and performance space on the banks of the Savannah River. The museum is the latest addition to the Plant Riverside District.
A public ribbon-cutting event to open the exhibit is planned for Thursday, Nov. 18, from noon until 2 p.m., as part of the grand opening of Plant Riverside District – Savannah’s Entertainment District. The celebration will include speakers, the Southern Pride Marching Band, live performances by ensembles from the Fred and Dinah Gretsch School of Music at Georgia Southern University, and an appearance by Freedom, the University’s live bald eagle mascot. The event will start with the Georgia Southern marching band marching down the riverwalk to the MLK park at Plant Riverside. Remarks will begin at 12:30 p.m., with the cutting of the ribbon set to happen at 12:55 p.m.

The That Great Gretsch Sound! exhibit space highlights some of the most popular and unique pieces of Gretsch’s historic catalog. The museum lobby features some of the most iconic instruments the company has produced, including the White Falcon™, the Chet Atkins® Country Gentleman®, a Brian Setzer Signature G6120 and a vintage 1963 Jet™ Firebird popularized by AC/DC’s Malcolm Young. In the District Live performance hall, visitors will be treated to a visual timeline that will allow them to explore the evolution of Gretsch instruments dating back to the 1920s. Approximately 100 guitars are on display in the exhibit, 48 of which were recently on display in Nashville’s Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

The That Great Gretsch Sound! museum was developed through a special partnership between the Fred and Dinah Gretsch School of Music at Georgia Southern University and The Kessler Collection.

In addition to the instruments that line the performance hall and upper section of the lobby, the museum features three sound dome displays with original videos that highlight Gretsch history, instrument production, the worldwide community of past and present Gretsch artists from Chet Atkins and George Harrison to Phil Collins, and the family’s storied commitment to music education. Several other display cases take guests on a visual journey from Gretsch’s beginnings as a local manufacturer of calf-skin drums, banjos and accordions to one of the most popular and sought-after producers of guitars and drums during the height of the rock ‘n’ roll era.

“This is a great example of Georgia Southern’s regional public impact mission and aligns with the community goal of Savannah being recognized as a sought-after destination location for music and entertainment,” said Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero. “This partnership is
just one example of the opportunities afforded to us through having the Gretsch name associated with Georgia Southern.”

The Gretsch family has long been involved in music education programs and lending their name and their history to Georgia Southern. The new museum was an appropriate way to honor the company’s legacy.

“We are so honored to be a part of the amazing exhibit within our community to showcase the powerful influence and legacy of music. Fred and I represent the fourth generation of the Gretsch family in the musical instrument business and look forward to the future generations of family leadership,” said Dinah Gretsch, executive vice president and chief financial officer of the Gretsch Company. “We are sure this legacy will coincide and align with the present and future vision of Georgia Southern University.”

The University established the Fred and Dinah Gretsch School of Music in early 2021 after the family pledged a generous monetary gift plus their Gretsch Collection of historic drums, guitars and company archives to Georgia Southern. While the school of music will now bear the Gretsch name, the company’s influence will be felt across the University’s three campuses and in several academic departments, the museums and the library. Georgia Southern will be able to catalog and display Gretsch’s storied instruments that tell a compelling story of musical history from American jazz to English-born rock, to popular modern worship bands in Australia.

Downtown Savannah is now helping tell that Gretsch story. The Gretsch museum includes Gretsch instruments and storyboards with QR code links to detailed narratives.

“We hope this new museum will preserve the long history and legacy of the Gretsch family and the Gretsch brand,” Dinah Gretsch said. “It is wonderful to share our history with the city of Savannah, the loyal Gretsch fans and all the tourists that will visit the museum.”

The museum’s artifacts were curated and installed by Aaron Phillips, Georgia Southern’s project curator for the Fred and Dinah Gretsch Artifacts Collection. Through his research to prepare the museum, he is confident that the Gretsch Museum will provide a unique musical experience.

“My goal was to create a space that is expressive, inspirational and true to the roots of the Gretsch family and community,” said Phillips. “I am in awe of how this turned out!”

Georgia Southern Provost Carl Reiber, Ph.D., said the new museum is another benefit to having the Gretsch name associated with the University.

“We have a long-term plan to tell the compelling story of music history in creative ways and also train students within a wide variety of academic programs to engage with a historic collection as it pertains to their field of study,” said Reiber. “The Gretsch name is known all over the world, and the Gretsches have been huge advocates for universal music education for decades. This museum is among the great opportunities that come with having the Gretsch name attached with our school of music.”
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