



EMP ROCKS SEATTLE: EXPERIENCE THE MUSIC

Seattle found itself in a media frenzy last summer when billionaire Paul Allen presented his exuberant Experience Music Project (EMP) to the world. Allen's interactive museum--an ode to guitar great Jimi Hendrix--awed, inspired and had many people shaking their heads in bewilderment over its twisted metal exterior. Some compared the architecture to a squashed tin can, but crowds still came by the

thousands to discover the music inside.

Daunted by press reports of waiting lines snaking around the block and back, at first I let EMP do its thing without me. Because I'm hearing impaired, the music world has gone by pretty much without my notice for the past several decades, although I admittedly rocked to Hendrix in person at the 1969 Newport Pop Festival.

Last month though, I had a great reason to explore EMP. I work for Eastside Employment Services, a non-profit agency in the Seattle area that helps people with disabilities find employment and supports them throughout their careers. One of our clients, 21-year-old Jenny Harris, had recently landed a wonderful job--her first--and she wanted to celebrate her prized first paycheck with a trip to EMP. Jenny, who has a developmental disability, was blessed with perfect pitch and thought it would be cool to be in a place that was totally music.

The initial tidal wave of visitors had receded, and a quiet EMP greeted the five of us: Jenny in her supercharged wheelchair; Bekki Redfern, Jenny's aide and navigator; Lisa Fox, Jenny's employment coordinator from Eastside Employment and a musician herself; me; and Rosie, my German shepherd hearing dog.

We found ourselves among those shaking their heads at the exterior design of EMP. World-renowned architect Frank Gehry, famous for his use of bold colors and atypical shapes, stayed in character when he molded EMP. Having more of a Bach personality than a Hendrix fetish, Gehry bought several electric guitars when he first came to Seattle and cut them into pieces to study their shapes, colors and textures. These elements were the beginnings of the structure that symbolizes the energy and fluidity of music--and possibly the electric guitars that Hendrix invariably smashed during each performance.

The first impression of the interior of EMP is one of high tech design and almost industrial

space. With few visitors at this mid-morning hour, it felt almost cavernous and strangely quiet for a venue dedicated to high decibel rock and roll. After navigating the ticketing area and having our hands stamped concert-like, we entered the celestial, 85-foot high Sky Church that broadcasts to the heavens on the largest indoor video screen in the world. This dramatic reception/performance area is named for Hendrix's vision of a Sky Church where all kinds of people--regardless of age, background or interests--could come together to appreciate music.

If the ADA had been written in the 1960s, Hendrix might well have added "regardless of disabilities" in his vision of Sky Church. From the very conception of EMP, access to all visitors was a priority. Nationally recognized accessibility consultant Kevin McGuire--who uses a wheelchair--was hired, and the designers and architects worked with the Seattle disabilities community to ensure easy access to all parts of the museum. However, as Facilities Manager Mike Allison said, EMP is a unique, one-of-kind "experience"--sort of a cross between a work of art and Disneyland--and accommodations are constantly being fine-tuned as the need becomes apparent.

As we were being fitted with a Museum Exhibit Guide (MEG), our personal listening device, I discovered the first area where that fine-tuning would be appreciated. I use an infrared listening system at home while watching television, so I assumed that MEG and I would get along just fine. MEG's voice, however, was so low that even with the volume at full tilt I was unable to hear her directions. According to Allison, the MEG system has since had an overhaul, and the results are helpful to both normal hearing and hearing impaired visitors.

After leaving the ethereal Sky Church, we went in search of decibels but were stopped short by an imposing two-story sculpture comprised of over 600 guitars and other instruments donated from around the country. This "Roots and Branches" tree of music really grabbed Jenny's attention, especially since 40 of the instruments were playing themselves. She declared it "awesome".

Still looking for some heavy-duty music, we continued to the popular Sound Lab on the third floor, which was easily accessible by elevator. Here, using interactive technology, visitors can learn to play electric guitars, basses, keyboards and drums, or even experiment with mixers and microphones. Jenny and Lisa, both excellent vocalists, went into a sound room for a duet, while Rosie and I headed for the drums, one instrument I figured I could hear. A computer equipped with speakers vocally leads visitors through the basics of playing the instrument, but since it lacked a closed captioning option, I was a little lost until the Sound Lab supervisor coached me on the finer points of thumping a drum. It was a kick really, although I'm not sure Rosie appreciated the unusual noise I was making.

All of us got together to try the Jam-o-Drum located in the center of the Sound Lab. A large table-like structure (at an appropriate height for those in wheelchairs) houses drums which use velocity sensitivity to measure the impact of our hands, creating larger or smaller graphics depending on how hard we banged on the surface. The graphics also moved in synch with our rhythm, creating a psychedelic aura in the dim atmosphere. Adding to my appreciation of the Jam-o-Drum were woofers embedded in the floor that send vibes right through your feet.

We moved from the Sound Lab to On Stage, a theatrical experience where visitors can sing and play guitar, keyboard or drums on stage--with lighting, background and even frenzied fans simulated to provide real-life quality. Jenny excitedly named her group "Jenny and the Girls," although Rosie and I opted to remain backstage due to the extremely high decibel level when things got rocking. Jenny headed up the band on the keyboard, Bekki wielded the sticks and Lisa took up the electric guitar for a 15-minute jam session. Although they received automated assistance on the instruments, they were actually able to create music and sing, while a digital camera snapped a shot to capture the experience in a color poster. After her moment of fame, Jenny came out of the soundstage glowing with excitement, declaring it the absolute, best experience ever. Her poster gets top billing in her family's living room.

Since she gets sick on "rides," Jenny decided to pass on Artist's Journey, the closest thing to a Disney-like attraction at EMP, but Lisa and I wanted to experience James Brown's Funk Blast video that we'd heard so much about. However, this is one area of EMP that doesn't meet federal guidelines for accessibility for people with disabilities, including those with service animals. Visitors sit buckled in on a state-of-the-art motion platform, and there's no way to secure dogs while the platform gyrates to music. There are transfer seats available for individuals using a wheelchair, but because of the simulated aerial acrobatics, they must have upper body control and be able to support themselves in an upright position. Pregnant women and people with heart and other conditions are also advised to skip Artist's Journey.

We lucked out though, as they made an exception and let me and Rosie peek through the curtains in the back of the room and watch not only the video but also the platform dancing around in the dark, swaying when James Brown swayed and bucking in reaction to heart-stopping sensory and lighting effects. From her seat center stage, Lisa found it engaging all of her senses; very funkadelic, like being in the front row of a great concert. Rosie, however, had a different reaction to Funk Blast. Normally very mellow no matter what the environment, she tried to head for the door several times when body shuddering vibrations and lightning-bolt visual effects ripped through the room.

After that sensory load we took a break for lunch at the museum's Turntable restaurant, which serves surprisingly upscale food ranging from a Lobster BLT Pizza to a Waldorf salad with shredded duck. However, the huge sandwiches with piles of fries seemed to get the most votes, and--while we didn't imbibe--we had fun with the creative cocktail names: Blue Suede Booze, Lovely Rita Margarita, Experience Citrus Project and Monkey Water for the kids. Our servers were great, swapping fashion tips with Jenny and sharing her excitement over the "Jenny and the Girls" poster.

We meandered the rest of the afternoon through Crossroads, where four main exhibits pay tribute to many Northwest artists as well as musicians from around the country. We learned more about the inspiration for EMP, Jimi Hendrix. An entire room is devoted to guitars and how the instrument evolved into the present day electric guitar. Allen has amassed over 80,000 artifacts, with 1,200 of them currently on display, including Hendrix's signed contract for his performance at Woodstock in 1969; Quincy Jones' original trumpet from his Seattle days in the 1940s; and song lyrics handwritten by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, circa 1988. The amazing costumes are here too: Elvis Presley's black leather jacket, Janis Joplin's floral bell-bottoms, Vivienne Westwood's punk

"bondage" outfit and Jimi Hendrix's orange velvet jacket.

Video displays flash everywhere in EMP--the massive screen greeting visitors in Sky Church, videos banked on the walls in Crossroads describing the creation of EMP and other displays, a roomful in Artist's Journey pumping you up for Funk Blast--but no closed captioning. When I asked Allison about this, he said they're still wrestling with some issues and that it's a challenge to integrate certain accommodations while maintaining the essence of EMP. "We don't have all the answers yet, but we are continually working on finding them."

We all gave EMP a thumb's up at the end of the day. Because the project speaks in so many ways--through color, motion, sight and sound--people can appreciate music here no matter what their disability. As Jenny will agree, it's an awesome experience. By Danielle M. Clarneau Danielle Clarneau is public relations coordinator for Eastside Employment Services in Bellevue, Washington and is also a freelance writer and editor. Rosie is her 24/7 assistant. danclar@eside.org