



## Music Wins Big!

Two of our region's casinos—Thunder Valley and Hard Rock—are attracting legendary acts at their new state-of-the-art venues.

Gloria Trevi performs at Hard Rock Live



A rendering of The Venue at Thunder Valley

BY CATHY CASSINOS-CARR

**C**an you say Eagles-Bruno Mars-Santana three times, real fast? If so, you've just announced the lineup of the blockbuster three-night grand opening on tap this month at The Venue at Thunder Valley, a brand-spanking-new, state-of-the-art showroom at the nearly 20-year-old casino in Lincoln.

If this sounds like déjà vu all over again, here's why: Just last June, another local casino—the Hard Rock, in Wheatland—swung open the doors of its splashy new venue, Hard Rock Live, with a sold-out show by pop phenom group Maroon 5.

Call it a trend, or don't. But having two new venues for live entertainment in the Sacramento region is good news—and for those who happen to enjoy gambling, well, call it a win-win.

### *The Venue at Thunder Valley*

When “Red Rocker” Sammy Hagar took his final bows after his show last October at Thunder Valley's outdoor amphitheater, it was the end of an era.

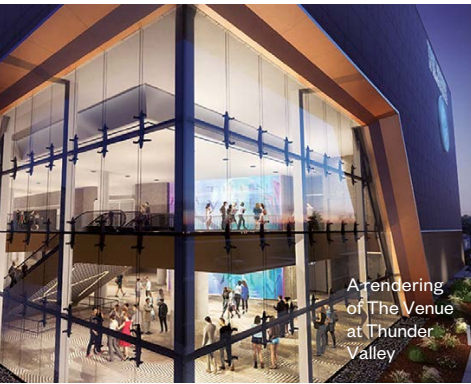
After 10 years and more than 275 shows, “the amphitheater is closed—the amphitheater is no more,” says Doug Elmets, spokesperson for Thunder Valley Casino Resort.

The new, fully-indoor Venue at Thunder Valley, scheduled to open Feb. 17 when it rolls out the red carpet for country-rock legends the Eagles, is a 150,000-square-foot, free-standing facility adjacent to the location of the former amphitheater. With 4,500 seats and cutting-edge sound and video systems, it is “an intimate setting offering a new level of entertainment,” according to Elmets. That it is a dedicated performing arts space differentiates it from other local casino-based venues, he says.

The new venue serves as a permanent replacement for the outdoor theater, which was “actually always temporary,” says Elmets. “We would erect it every year in the April–May time frame, and in October it would be deconstructed.” It was never an ideal scenario, as Elmets points out, and it presented two major drawbacks: Shows were held only part of the year, and mostly in summer, when scorching Sacramento temperatures could make things less than comfy for performers and patrons alike.

An indoor venue was the obvious solution. “We wanted to be able to provide entertainment year-round for our patrons,” Elmets says. “We didn't want to be restricted to summer only.”

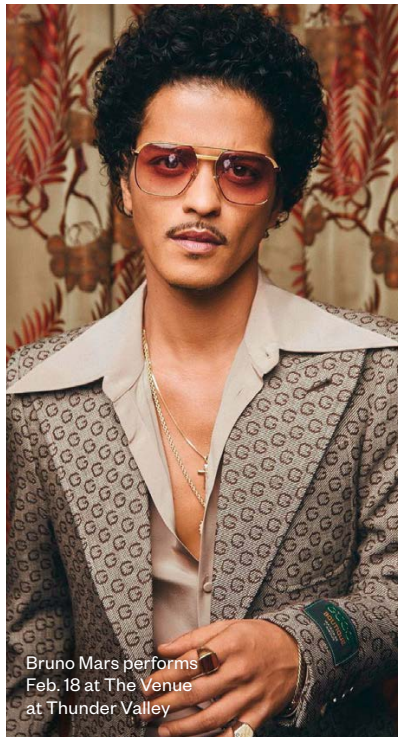
With a cost of \$100 million, the new venue was an expensive proposition. But as Elmets notes, it also put a lot of locals back to work. “Two hundred jobs were created for the construction of the venue, and new job



A rendering of The Venue at Thunder Valley



Anjelah Johnson-Reyes performs March 25 at The Venue at Thunder Valley



Bruno Mars performs Feb. 18 at The Venue at Thunder Valley



The Eagles perform Feb. 17 at The Venue at Thunder Valley



Hard Rock Live

opportunities are being created to meet the demands of the venue,” he says. “These are great jobs, living-wage jobs, with a full benefits package. It’s important to acknowledge that the money spent on the venue helps to boost the economy.”

For non-Thunder Valley employees and local fans of live entertainment, though, the burning question is: Will the mix of shows look different than it did when it was a partial-year, outdoor-only deal? Elmetts says yes.

As before, Thunder Valley will offer more than just music; sporting events and comedy will round things out. What’s different, Elmetts says, is that there is now an opportunity to raise the bar, and in a big way.

“The great thing now is that we’ll be able to get world-class entertainment, which is something that eluded us from time to time with the outdoor amphitheater,” he says. “Big-name entertainers like Bruno Mars, Eagles and Santana want to be in a venue that has state-of-the-art sound and lighting, not only because it’s more appealing to their fans but because the quality of their music is reflected better in such a setting.”

But big-name entertainment can also mean big ticket prices. When Thunder Valley’s opening weekend shows were announced, with price tags ranging from \$200 to \$500, the outcry on social media was loud. But, as Elmetts points out, that didn’t stop anyone.

The shows sold out—and quickly.

“There were literally people waiting in line for many hours to buy tickets for all three shows,” Elmetts says. “The proof is in the pudding.”

*Thunder Valley Casino Resort is located at 1200 Athens Ave. in Lincoln. For more information, including a calendar of upcoming shows, visit [thundervalleyresort.com](http://thundervalleyresort.com).*

## Hard Rock Live

Located inside the Hard Rock Casino in Wheatland, Hard Rock Live touts many of the same features as the soon-to-open Venue at Thunder Valley, including top-notch audio and video systems and an intimate setting (even more intimate, actually, with 2,500 seats). But it’s got one thing the others haven’t got: cool rock ‘n’ roll memorabilia—and lots of it.

It’s a Hard Rock, after all.

“Not only can you watch an incredible show, but you can wander around and look at all the great memorabilia,” says Randy Maddocks, director of entertainment for Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Sacramento at Fire Mountain (i.e., the Wheatland property). On display you’ll find everything from stage wear worn by pop divas Beyoncé and Katy Perry to an Elvis Presley jumpsuit, guitars played by such big names as Garth Brooks and ZZ Top, and vintage concert posters from iconic Northern California venues.

What grabs customers the most? “Our guests seem to spend a lot of time checking out our wall of tour jackets and the drum kits from Frank Zappa and Alex Van Halen,” says Maddocks.

My one test drive at the new venue—I saw the legendary Smokey Robinson there this past November—revealed it to be a modern, hip-looking space with clean sightlines and pristine sound. It’s a nice midsized room, large enough to draw top-tier entertainers but small enough that there’s no such thing as a nosebleed seat. According to Maddocks, no seat in the house is more than 140 feet from the stage.

“That, to me, is one of the biggest selling points of the room,” he says. “You feel like you’re right on top of the stage.” That view is enhanced, Maddocks notes, by three

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BY THE NUMBERS

SEATS:

**2,500** Hard Rock Live  
**4,500** The Venue at Thunder Valley

SQUARE FOOTAGE:

**65,000** Hard Rock Live  
**150,000** The Venue at Thunder Valley

COST:

**\$56 million** Hard Rock Live  
**\$100 million** The Venue at Thunder Valley

GRAND OPENING:

**June 3, 2022** Hard Rock Live  
**Feb. 17, 2023** The Venue at Thunder Valley

NUMBER OF BARS/CONCESSION WINDOWS:

**13** concession windows, **2** portable bars,  
**1** VIP meet-and-greet bar Hard Rock Live  
**22** concession windows and bars  
 The Venue at Thunder Valley

PARKING:

**Free** Hard Rock Live  
**Free** The Venue at Thunder Valley



Rock 'n' roll memorabilia at Hard Rock Live



Bill Maher performs Feb. 25 at Hard Rock Live



Gary Clark, Jr.'s recent appearance at Hard Rock Live

very large video walls. “To me, it almost feels like a small arena.”

For the ultimate experience, Maddocks advises scoring a seat in the upstairs mezzanine. “It has only about 250 seats and some of the best views and sound in the room,” he says.

In its brief time open, Hard Rock Live has already played host to some impressive A-listers, including guitar god Jeff Beck (who died in early January), “American Idol” alum Adam Lambert and comedy king Chris Rock. The lineup for 2023 includes old-school crooner Paul Anka and comedians Bill Maher, Brian Regan and Kathleen Madigan.

Maddocks says the entertainment mix moving forward will continue to be diverse—possibly more so than you’ll find elsewhere.

“We want to do the traditional casino-type shows—we had the Doobie Brothers and Bret Michaels, for example—and we’ll book all the classic rock and country we can,” he says. “But we’ll also entertain bringing in a Filipino show, or a Korean hip-hop group, or a Japanese punk band, things like that. And we’ve had a very diverse comedy lineup so far.”

Just don’t confuse the Hard Rock with that other venue down the road.

“People are still confusing us with the [outdoor] Toyota Amphitheatre, which is literally less than a mile away,” Maddocks says. “We’ve had people come to our venue and

say, ‘Hey, I’m here for Thomas Rhett,’ and we’re like, ‘That’s next door.’”

Both are part of the Live Nation Entertainment family, Maddocks notes. But they are totally separate venues offering markedly different experiences, including the not-insignificant fact that the Hard Rock is indoors.

“During the summer when it’s 115 degrees out, you can come here and enjoy an air-conditioned show,” Maddocks says.

In a place like Sacramento, this matters.

*Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Sacramento at Fire Mountain is located at 3317 Forty Mile Road in Wheatland. For more information, including a calendar of upcoming shows, visit [hardrockhotelsacramento.com](http://hardrockhotelsacramento.com).*

WHAT ABOUT SKY RIVER?

What kind of live entertainment is on tap at the newest casino in our region? At the time of this writing, Elk Grove’s Sky River, which opened last August, was featuring rock and country bands every Wednesday night in its gastropub, 32 Brews Street.

But what will happen next remains a question mark. According to Roni Phillips, Sky River’s director of property marketing, “There is no further information we can share at this time regarding future phases of development or expanded entertainment schedules.”

Sky River Casino is located at 1 Sky River Parkway in Elk Grove. For more information, visit [skyriver.com](http://skyriver.com). **IS**