

Review of “It’s Been Said All Along: Voices of Rage, Hope, and Empowerment”

Physical Exhibit: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland Ohio

Digital Exhibit: <https://www.rockhall.com/its-been-said-all-along>

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“It’s Been Said All Along: Voices of Rage, Hope, and Empowerment,” the newest physical and digital exhibit of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, uses the museum’s existing collections to craft a compelling exhibit inspired by America’s contemporary racial crisis. The Rock Hall, which opened in 1995 and which attracts a multiracial audience of young and middle-aged adults, consists of both a hall of fame and a museum focused on the history of rock music. The new exhibit features prominently in both the physical museum and on its website. Comparing the physical and digital exhibit highlights some of the comparative strengths and limitations of these two forms. While very similar in interpretation, the two exhibits differ in their use of objects, the amount of material they include, and the extent to which they encourage audience interaction.

Physical Exhibit Review

“It’s Been Said All Along” opened at the museum on July 25, 2020. The exhibit explores the role of rock musicians and rock music in protests against racial injustice. Created in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the massive protests it inspired, the exhibit historicizes the role of rock music and musicians fighting for social justice. As the exhibit’s introductory text explains, “Musical artists have channelled the power of Rock n’ Roll to respond to racism all along.”

This exhibit is located along three walls at the entrance to the Rock Hall’s core exhibit. A 5 ½ minute video plays on a loop on a short wall on the far right. That video provides the soundtrack for visitors exploring the rest of the exhibit, which is organized into three thematic areas: rage, hope, and empowerment. Each of the sections is interpreted through six to eight objects, as well as text and photos posted on the main wall. The exhibit also includes a dozen outfits worn by artists who used their music to protest racism and pursue social change. Two smaller display cases, one showcasing objects related to Bob Marley and the other focused on the 1972 Watts Arts Festival, sit in the center of the space.

Similar to the American Historical Association’s hashtag #everythinghasahistory, this exhibit insists that contemporary events and practices have historical precedents. While not stated directly, the exhibit also demonstrates that current events can shape the kind of work historians do. Beyond its core argument that rock musicians have long taken part in the fight for racial injustice, each section also offers its own secondary argument. The *Rage* section makes the case that anger is a legitimate response to racism and that music has provided artists a way

to give voice to their anger. The *Hope* section insists that music has offered a site for imagining different possibilities, for sustaining group identity, and for encouraging optimism in the face of challenging social conditions. The *Empowerment* section suggests that music has offered Black Americans a way to process their frustrations and to promote and sustain the struggle for social change.

The exhibit builds its interpretation through the use of objects, photos, videos, music, and text, most of which relate directly to specific songs or the artists who sang them. Objects include song lyrics; album covers; mementos (like Jimi Hendrix's guitar straps) and stage outfits. The exhibit also features pictures of artists taken by Black photographers, which it claims are important because they have largely been ignored as historical sources. The exhibit also contains a handful of objects that contextualize the sources related to music—the cover of a 1964 issue of *Sepia* magazine about civil rights protests, for example—but most of the contextualization is done by the exhibit text, which lays out the argument through quotations and short interpretive statements.

This is a small exhibit which is squeezed into an entry alcove and the physical environment is not ideal. Although the interpretation seems to suggest that viewers should start with the section on rage, most visitors started with the empowerment section because it is nearest to the video. The lighting is kept so low to avoid damaging the objects on display that the text can be hard to read. Audio from other parts of the Rock Hall can be heard in the exhibit space, which can be distracting. Because it is located right outside the main gallery, all museum visitors had to walk past this exhibit. But most stayed for no more than five minutes. With no docents and no interactive elements because of the pandemic, there was little opportunity for visitors to engage the exhibit except by reading the materials and watching the video.

While the objects related to specific songs and artists are valuable, this exhibit would be enriched by the inclusion of objects and videos that offer broader context, such as video clips of the civil rights protests, media coverage of police violence, or objects relating to the Black Lives Matter Movement. The design could be improved by moving the video to the wall nearest the Rage section, so visitors would be encouraged to move through the exhibit in a way that follows its argument. Interactive elements, such as stations where visitors could listen to different songs or watch the additional videos that are featured in the digital exhibit, would add to the experience. There should also be a section that encourages visitor engagement; visitors could be encouraged to leave comments about songs that have inspired them, for example.

Digital Exhibit

The digital counterpart of “It’s Been Said All Along” mirrors both the structure and argument of the physical exhibit. Its historical interpretation is the same; indeed the digital exhibit reproduces the main text from the physical exhibit verbatim. But the digital site offers additional audio and video content, draws links between material that reside in different

physical locations in the museum, and recognizes that it likely draws a significantly wider audience than the physical site.

The digital exhibit landing page features the exhibit logo and an opening statement that summarizes the exhibit's core argument. There are buttons that link to pages for each of the subsections on rage, hope, and empowerment, which encourage users to navigate the site in a particular order. The landing page also includes a virtual walk-through of the exhibit, although the application is hard to navigate.

There are some key differences between the physical and digital exhibits. First, while the digital exhibit includes the same video as the physical exhibit, the digital exhibit breaks the film into four parts and each shorter section is placed on the page that relates directly to that section (intro, rage, hope, empowerment). Visitors to the physical exhibit tended to watch the entire film before perusing the rest of the exhibit. Breaking up the film encourages the digital viewer to engage with the content differently from the start, by hearing the overview and watching the performances that relate to a theme directly before exploring the rest of the material.

Second, objects are much less important in the digital exhibit than they are in the physical one. While probably half of the objects are included in the digital exhibit, they are identified only with brief descriptors rather than the lengthier informative labels that appear in the physical exhibit. Moreover, users can't zoom on images in the object gallery, so textual artifacts that are legible in the physical site are not easily readable on the digital site.

The digital exhibit also includes a great deal of audio and visual material that is not included in the physical exhibit. Each subsection page includes four short audio recordings paired with specific photos that explain the context of the picture or give additional background to an artist's activism. Each subpage also features one or two short videos that add to the interpretation in the exhibit. In one video, Fantastic Negrito describes rewriting Leadbelly's "In the Pines," to reflect the political climate of 2018. In another, a curator explains how black artists have expressed hope through their music. Each page also highlights four or five artists mentioned in the interpretation and links to their Hall of Fame induction materials, which are in a different part of the physical museum. The curators of the digital exhibit have also created additional resources for visitors. The landing page links to a Spotify list featuring seventy protest songs, thus encouraging the visitor to continue engaging with the exhibit material long after leaving the site. The physical exhibit does not even mention the Spotify list.

Finally, the digital exhibit, unlike the Rock Hall itself, is free. Museum staff may hope that visitors to the digital site will be moved to visit the museum in person. But featuring this particular exhibit in free digital form is a way for the museum to reach a broader audience with a timely topic. The digital exhibit also seeks to reach a wider audience by including educational tie-ins aimed at teachers throughout the site.

The “It’s Been Said All Along” digital exhibit is easy to navigate and contains hours of fascinating audio and video material. The site does not allow you to interact with the exhibit’s creators (who remain anonymous) and does not encourage participation—like the physical exhibit, this version could be enhanced if visitors could leave comments and tell their own stories. It would also be helpful if the digital exhibit included the lengthier object labels that appear in the physical site and if users could zoom in on different artifacts.

But despite these limitations, both the physical and digital versions of “It’s Been Said All Along” demonstrate how a historical site can draw on its existing collections to speak to contemporary concerns and to tell relevant stories that highlight the connections between past and present.