

Funworld

# All the Midways a Stage

Using Live Music to Retain Guests

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At Tivoli Gardens, all of the outdoor entertainment is included with admission to the park. (credit: Tivoli)

Before theme parks and amusement parks, there were pleasure gardens where visitors gathered at gazebos, bandstands, and other outdoor stages to enjoy musical performances and entertainment. With the advent of rides, the pastoral gardens evolved into the modern parks we know and love. But the vestiges of outdoor entertainment remain an essential and beloved feature on midways.

## Concerts as a Draw

More than 175 years after Tivoli Gardens in Denmark opened its gates, entertainment still reigns supreme. Roller coasters and tower rides may punctuate the skyline of Copenhagen's urban oasis, but an ambitious schedule of live shows is an equally powerful draw.

"Outdoor entertainment is rooted deeply in Tivoli's DNA. It is one of our pillars," says Thor Feilberg, the park's head of music and entertainment.

Among its venues is the Pantomime Theatre, a classical, Chinese-style, open-air theater that features ballet, children's shows, and the "Commedia dell'Arte" presentations for which it is named. Built in 1874, the stage replaced the park's original Pantomime Theatre, which opened in 1844.

Headlining acts such as Gwen Stefani, Tom Jones, and Lauryn Hill draw as many as 25,000 people to the park's main stage for its Friday concert series. Feilberg believes the setting is as much of a draw as the performers.

"You're in the middle of Tivoli Gardens. You're in the middle of Copenhagen. You have the concert hall as a backdrop and the Nimb Hotel, which dates back to the early 19th century," he says. "It's quite amazing and unique. We are like a breath of fresh air in the city."

All of the outdoor entertainment is included with admission to the park. The concerts and shows are so popular, Feilberg says that they drive Tivoli's season pass sales. The passes, he notes, are common holiday gifts.

Feilberg and his team work with Danish and international promoters to book the outdoor shows, which include folk, world music, jazz, big band funk, and other genres, virtually every day from April through

September. They also stage entertainment-packed events such as “Greenland in Tivoli.”

## **Music in the Parks**

One of the major companies providing live entertainment for attractions in the United States is Windish Music and Productions. The company mostly develops resident shows for parks and attractions but also books major acts.

According to CEO Mike Windish, when considering where entertainment should be located, it’s important for an attraction to consider its goals. For example, Hersheypark presents music performances on a stage centrally located at the entrance to its popular Boardwalk area. The setting captures foot traffic passing through and provides value for its guests. But Hersheypark also wanted to bring some activity to The Hollow, a quieter area that park managers felt was underutilized. So Windish filled the area with strolling entertainers and music to draw guests into the space. Hersheypark also stages a small procession near its front gate later in the day to encourage guests to linger a bit longer before leaving.

## **Sweet Dreams**

Sometimes attractions come to Windish with fully formed ideas for its outdoor entertainment; other times, they turn to the company for creative concepts and turnkey solutions. More often than not, it’s a collaborative process with both sides working together to develop entertainment. Regardless of the process, it can be difficult to fill a park’s outdoor entertainment needs on short notice.

“I always like to say, ‘Yes, if,’ and try to make it work,” Windish says. The company has a huge



“Venom Festival” at the California Academy of Sciences features oversize animatronic animals in its gardens. (credit: California Academy of Sciences) database of musicians and entertainers to which it can turn. And every year, the company conducts auditions in several cities to recruit performers. According to Windish, parks should allow a full year to properly plan for major entertainment offerings.

Like Tivoli Gardens, the California Academy of Sciences is an urban refuge. Located in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, the academy’s outdoor gardens attract guests as much as its indoor museum and aquarium. So it’s only natural that the organization would present outdoor programming.

“It’s partly out of necessity,” explains Tiffany Zarem, the academy’s marketing director. The California Academy of Sciences welcomes 1.2 million visitors each year, but the moderate-sized indoor facility has limited capacity.

“To quite literally provide breathing room on our busiest days, we need to use the outdoor space. Plus, we’re all about inspiring people to appreciate the natural world,” explains Zarem.

After presenting a successful “Dino Days” event last year to help drive attendance for spring break, the academy followed up with “Venom Festival” this year. The event features live venomous animal exhibits in the aquarium and oversize animatronic animals in its gardens. Working with the same vendor that supplied the dinosaurs for “Dino Days,” the academy presents an emperor scorpion, a tarantula, a giant spider, and other creatures for visitors to ogle, take photos with, and, in some cases, climb on. It also offers a live bee colony, a children’s puppet theater, and an “Arthropod Opera,” among other features.

“The festivals really activate our gardens and give people an extra reason to visit in springtime,” Zarem says.

## **The Show Must Go On**

Because the rainy season is generally contained to the winter in San Francisco, weather is not much of a factor for the academy’s spring festivals. Other venues are not as fortunate. When it rains during Tivoli Gardens’ outdoor performances, the show goes on regardless.

“Just embrace the weather,” says Feilberg with Tivoli, explaining the park’s attitude.

With all of the ambient noise and distractions, outdoor entertainment at parks can be challenging. Windish says parks and performers should think of the performances as “catch-and-release.” That is, as opposed to a self-contained indoor show in a controlled setting that has an established beginning, middle, and end, outdoor

entertainment is more of a pass-through experience where guests may engage for a few minutes and move on.

“We tell our entertainers that they are going to feel like they are competing with roller coasters and funnel cakes,” says Windish. However, performers understand they are really part of the general ambiance and the overall experience. Instead of telling a standalone story, they are part of the park’s larger story.

“You’re helping to provide a heightened experience,” Windish adds. “It can be very rewarding and a lot of fun.”

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**Arthur Levine** covers the attractions industry for USA Today and authors Funworld’s “The Art of Attractions” column each month.