

Executive Profile: Hard Rock Live's Xavier Henry Talks New Bristol, Rockford Venues

RYAN BORBA/7:00 AM, FRIDAY, 04/25/2025/NEWS

While it's hard to match the splashy opening of the "Guitar Hotel" at its flagship property in Hollywood, Florida, which was just named Casino Venue of the Year at the Pollstar Awards, Hard Rock International continues to roll out new concert venues across the country, including new Hard Rock Live venues in Rockford, Illinois, and Bristol, Virginia.

"These two new properties that I just opened up have been well received by the local community and the industry," says Xavier Henry, who in June was named regional manager of booking and talent buying for Hard Rock International.

Based at the company's South Florida base, Henry oversees programming at Hard Rock Live Northern Indiana, Hard Rock Casino Cincinnati and the two new Hard Rock Live venues that opened toward the end of 2024.

With both new venues at multiple configurations and around 2,000 capacity, the new Hard Rock venues have made an immediate impact on their local markets, bringing talent to underserved markets and giving artists additional routing options while on tour. Recent shows at Rockford include Fortune Feimster (two nights), The Black Crowes, Teddy Swims, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts and more since opening last summer, while Bristol has hosted artists including Blake Shelton, Marcus King, Boyz II Men, Bush and many others since opening in November.



Xavier Henry, regional manager of booking and talent buying for Hard Rock International.

“They’re both kind of adjacent to major markets, so they’re far enough removed to piggyback off of those bigger markets but they’re also servicing areas that didn’t get the kind of entertainment that Hard Rock provides,” says Henry, noting Bristol’s location a little over an hour from Knoxville while Rockford is a similar distance from Chicago and Milwaukee. “All of our shows that we keep going up with are extremely well received, if you go through our socials and look at the reactions every week.”

Venue design is similar to other recently opened Hard Rock Live properties, including the one in Sacramento that went online in 2022.

Offering multiple seating configurations including general admission, the venues seek to offer an ideal environment for entertainment of all types as well as core casino content like standup comedy and legacy acts.

“They’re all roughly 2,000 capacity, it creates some kind of a circuit for bands, with similar venues, similar size, similar technical capacities,” said Olivier Berthiaume-Bergé, president and CEO of international design firm Scéno Plus, which has been involved in previous Hard Rock projects as well as Las Vegas theater venues such as Dolby Live at Park MGM, The Colosseum at Caesars Palace and Resorts World Theatre.

Along with ample space for artists and their touring parties, one constant at the Hard Rock Live properties is multi-configurable seating, allowing for not only different seating arrangements but rigging capacity to do shows in the round.

“In each of the venues, there’s 700 to 800 seats that are retractable,” Berthiaume-Bergé said. “Both Rockford and Bristol are fixed at the back, but that gives you the

ability to create a huge flat floor. You could do a big poker tournament, you can do weddings, boxing and MMA, basketball. You could do pretty much everything.”

Pollstar caught up with Henry to hear more about his role at Hard Rock and the new properties, with more already under construction in Ottawa, Ontario and near Bakersfield, California.



Hard Rock Live Bristol opened in November.

Pollstar: Your most recent gig was at Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando, Florida, but you’ve also spent time in the agency world. How’s it been switching over to Hard Rock International?

It’s been great for me. The team here is cool. Everyone’s very welcoming here. It’s one of those programs where, if you know what you’re doing, they put you in there and they say, “Go have fun” (*laughs*). That’s the environment I like to be in.

The content and environment must vary a little from the typical PAC.

That is true, at least when it comes to Broadway. The focus and goal of the content is probably something that’s a little different, but the general deal structure is probably the biggest change in adjustments to make. The casino world traditionally sticks to one kind of deal versus the rest of the industry. Hard Rock is in the process of changing that image, too, because casinos historically were always looked at as soft-ticket plays, but none of our venues are soft-ticket rooms. There’s nothing that makes us different from any other traditional venue, outside of some of them being attached to casinos.

Casinos can have a reputation for “overpaying” for talent to secure a good gamer turnout and to secure artists who might not otherwise play a smaller venue, which can mean higher ticket prices to help make up for it.

They hire great folks here, the model is built on a flat guarantee rather than the door for the most part, which does come with the tendency of paying higher amounts (up front), but thankfully that sets us up for the long run in controlling ticketing the way we’d like to, in certain circumstances. (My agency experience) gave me a great view of both sides of the business. I know what everybody really wants and needs, and I like to try to find that equal equilibrium in each deal.

At Hard Rock, we want to break the mold of the traditional casinos. Of course, there's those casino acts that are mainstays, the Paul Ankas of the world, and that definitely plays a role and we love to bring those acts, but we're not afraid to skew younger. I'm introducing different demographics into the, the room and the space and everything as well. We truly like to go after anything and everything that makes sense.

How do you fit into and communicate within the larger Hard Rock Live operation, which includes multiple properties across the country and globally?

Vice President of Entertainment Andrew Saunders really holds the realm on booking across the U.S. and North America. We talk fairly often in regards to what's coming through the Florida properties, and then I delegate through the non-Florida properties. We're in constant talks, and we love setting up tour deals where we can as well.



Hard Rock Live Rockford opened in June.

What's on the show calendar that you're excited about right now?

Old Dominion in Bristol. We're not afraid to do an arena-level act inside the room. They could easily do that room multiple nights over. Same thing in Rockford, we're doing Kevin Hart there as well. We're not afraid to go after it. I'm excited for Travis Tritt in Bristol, because it makes sense. Counting Crows. Specifically in Bristol I'm most excited for Old Crow Medicine Show, because they have a song that references Johnson City, right outside of Bristol, in the Tri-City area. I know that entire area is going to go crazy the moment they start singing that song. Half of Johnson City is going to be at that show (*laughs*).

