Simpsonville amphitheater draws big-name performers

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With legendary recording artists Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp scheduled to perform in July at Heritage Park Amphitheater in Simpsonville, the new musical venue is trying to recruit national acts in a local market that Greenville's Bi-Lo Center has dominated.

While Simpsonville pins its hopes on the $3 million amphitheater's ability to raise the city's status to a regional draw, the Bi-Lo Center's general manager, Roger Newton, said his venue has never been more successful at booking musical performers.

Newton said the amphitheater hasn't put pressure on the Bi-Lo Center, a sports and entertainment arena, and pointed to the record 30 musical acts scheduled to play the Bi-Lo Center this year.

"The numbers tell the story for us," Newton said. "We really haven't felt the impact from their presence in the marketplace."

Not only must the amphitheater compete with the Bi-Lo Center locally but also with regional amphitheaters and local and statewide arenas to draw acts to its stage, said Cindy Ogletree, the

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BI-LO CENTER

- Big name concerts over the last three years:
  - Trans-Siberian Orchestra
  - Keith Urban
  - Yolanda Adams
  - O'Jays
  - Charlie Daniels Band
  - Bow Wow
  - Elton John
  - Hootie & Blowfish
  - Gaither Homecoming
  - Tool
  - Billie Joel
  - Boston
  - The Pink Floyd Experience
  - Eagles
  - The Cheetah Girls
  - Blue Man Group
  - Alan Jackson
  - TobyMac
  - Janet Paschal

Upcoming performances

- July 17: Hank Willams Jr.
- Aug. 4: Demi Lovato
- Sept. 3: Jamie Foxx
- Sept. 4: Taylor Swift

Staff file

The Bi-Lo Center, a $63 million, 16,000-seat sports-entertainment arena, continues to draw big name musical acts with 30 shows scheduled this year.

Area music fans get new option



GWINN DAVIS / Staff

Simpsonville is betting its $3 million, 16,500-seat Heritage Park Amphitheatre can capitalize on its honeymoon period as the new musical kid on the block to become a major venue for outdoor touring acts.

HERITAGE PARK

The concert calendar over the years has included:

- Goo Goo Dolls
- Gov't Mule
- Gary Allan
- Pillar
- Superchick
- Building 429
- The Afters
- Natasha Bedingfield
- Montgomery Gentry
- Huey Lewis and the News
- Staind
- Seether
- Papa Roach
- RED
- Corey Smith
- The Voltage Brothers
- Mothers Finest
- Outlaws
- Firefall
- Crossroads
- Sister Hazel
- Foghat
- Catelinas
- Gavin Degraw
- Green River Ordinance

Upcoming performances:

- June 20: REO Speedwagon, STYX, .38 Special
- July 4: GSO Independence Day at Heritage Park
- July 29: Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp
- Sept. 12-13: Rockstock '09 music festival.



MUSIC

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amphitheater's general manager.

"I think that it would be very rare that we would be competing for the same artist, because most of the time that tour has already been routed as an indoor arena tour or an outdoor amphitheater tour," she said.

The 16,500-seat Heritage Park Amphitheater should be able to attract acts and audiences in the short term, but convincing artists and customers to return is where the real work begins, said Frank Roach, interim chair of the Department of Sport and Entertainment Management at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

"There's always a honeymoon period in any new market," Roach said. "The first couple of years, you sort of always get that honeymoon period bump where you're going to do a fair number of shows just for the newness. People will come just because it's a new experience."

But the amphitheater must be able to book and make money for acts to build its reputation as a worthwhile stop once the "honeymoon" is over, Roach said.

To do that, the venue must be enjoyable for customers, starting with the ticketing process, road access, convenient parking, safety, customer service, amenities on site and the ambience the venue creates, Roach said.

Nationwide, amphitheaters have taken off as the place to perform for summertime concerts, especially big-draw acts such as Jimmy Buffett and the Dave Matthews Band, but a dearth of young talent that prefers outdoors to indoors could shrink the amphitheater industry in the future, said Scott Knopper, contributing editor to Rolling Stone magazine.

"If you talk to a lot of people in the music industry, there are some concerns about the long-term future," Knopper said. "Are there any new acts that have popped up over the past five or 10 years that are able to do consistent amphitheater business? I could probably name five, but that's a stretch."

Over the past 5-10 years, the music industry has become tour-focused rather than counting on CD sales, contributing to the healthy current business for amphitheaters across the country even during the recession, he said.

"The majority of the top artists, and probably the majority of all artists, make their money off the road," Knopper said.

The Simpsonville amphitheater started to tap into the national tours this year even before the Bob Dylan announcement, with heavy-touring bands REO Speedwagon, STYX and .38 Special scheduled June 20, and local and regional events through the summer and into the fall, starting with a Greenville Symphony Orchestra July 4 concert and with the sixth annual 107-3 JAMZ/Bi-Lo Upstate Family Reunion July 31-Aug. 1.

Ogletree, the amphitheater general manager, said they are working to book some dates in October as well and want to book about 25 dates for next year.

The amphitheater needs to draw from a regional market, including Greenville, Columbia and Asheville, to bring an audience, but it draws a different type of act than the Bi-Lo Center, she said.

Knopper said amphitheaters and arenas don't usually put each other out of business. Amphitheaters' immediate danger comes from giant music festivals, which have gained popularity over the past few years and have drawn some bands off the traditional amphitheater circuit.

Simpsonville lost shows last season because the amphitheater wasn't finished until early July and even then, the site didn't have a ticket booth, which caused consternation for promoters, Ogletree has said.

Now with a new ticket booth, permanent concessions areas, air-conditioned restrooms, dressing rooms with kitchens, and a stage capable of handling the largest sound and lighting equipment, the amphitheater is ready for any acts.

City Administrator Russell Hawes called it an organic setting for an amphitheater, with close-cropped grass surrounded by trees inside Heritage Park.

When the city first discussed an amphitheater, it planned to build a 1,500-capacity site, but once it attracted Freedom Weekend Aloft, it decided to expand to 16,500-capacity and build a larger stage, Mayor Dennis Waldrop said.

Ron Geyer, ministry and cultural studio leader with Greenville architectural firm Craig Gaulden Davis, was a member of the team that designed the amphitheater with its signature opaque screen and constantly changing colored lights to make it stand out from other amphitheaters.

With what he described as a modest budget, the amphitheater is architecturally simple but could add amenities as it grows, he said. Most importantly, they paid attention to sight lines and provided enough rigging capacity for the largest acts, he said.

The amphitheater's size and proximity to Greenville and Clemson drew Bobby Collins, promoter for Charleston-based Spectra Records, to book the amphitheater for Rockstock '09, a two-day Woodstock-style festival scheduled for Sept. 12-13.

"I liked that it wasn't just on the side of the road but that there was a lot of area out there," Collins said.

Acts will flow to the amphitheater once the site handles shows and proves it can draw an audience, Ogletree said.

The Bi-Lo Center has proven that this market can attract audiences from the Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson-Asheville region, Newton said.

"This has always been a strong market," Newton said. "The venue is only as good as its last show, so in order to get shows, we have to have a good track record of selling tickets."