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# Music, comedians, football: What's next for Hall of Fame Village?



The Hall of Fame Village is evolving into a major entertainment venue in the region, attracting comedians, country and rock artists and pro football.

**Ed Balint** The Repository

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## Key Points

The Hall of Fame Village in Canton continues to book an array of events, including comedian Kevin Hart, Kidz Bop and the Zac Brown Band.

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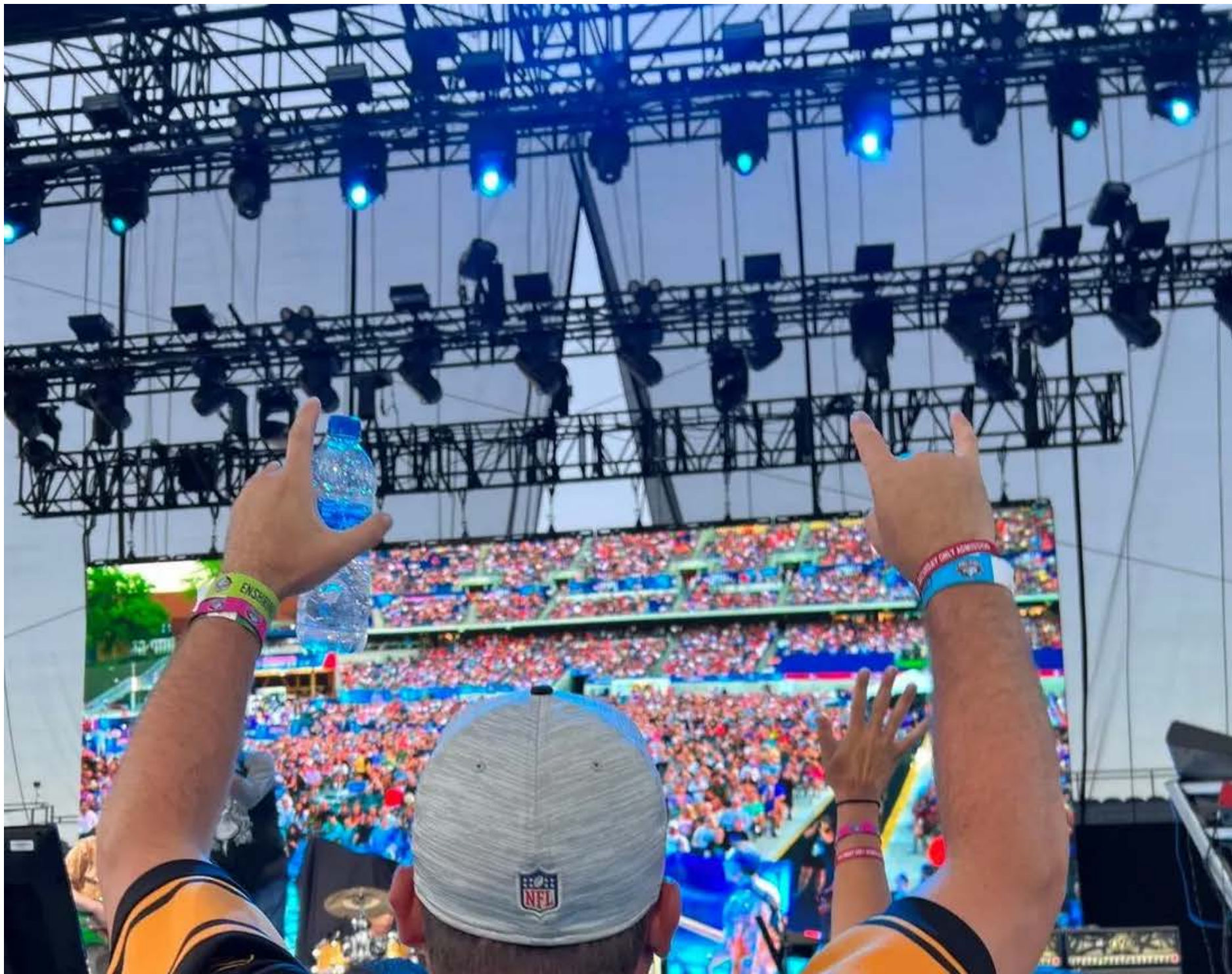
CEO Michael Crawford says the strategy is to diversify entertainment to attract different ages and fans.

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Music festivals and other new events are being considered for the HOF Village.

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**C**anton wasn't a place where Carl Applegate had expected to watch superstar comedian Kevin Hart perform. The 32-year-old Hudson resident was surprised the show was at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium at the Hall of Fame Village and not in Cleveland or a bigger Ohio city.



A fan enjoys the Donnie Iris concert at the Concert for Legends at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium.

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**What's next at Hall of Fame Village:** New tower drop ride coming. Brew Kettle and Topgolf opening soon

Video gaming tournaments have taken place at the stadium's club level. A dinner and show are set for next month featuring a magician and illusionist.

Variety doesn't end there, however. Events inside the Center for Performance dome have included a home and garden show and amateur boxing event. The North Coast Lacrosse Championship Tournament was played this month at the Hall of Fame Village Sports Complex. The Fantasy Football Expo is scheduled inside the dome for August.



USFL football is one of many events now taking place at the Hall of Fame Village in Canton.

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well as the ongoing construction of a football-themed indoor water park.

Meanwhile, USFL games will continue on weekends at Tom Benson Stadium into July when the spring pro football league's championship is played.

**Stark County summer event guide:** [Zac Brown](#), [Canton Music Fest](#), [Stark Pride](#), [Monster Fest](#), [Kidz Bop](#)

**Hall of Fame Village ferris wheel:** [Soaring 125 feet over Canton: What's it like atop the Red Zone wheel?](#)

And even more attractions and announcements are on the way. But this smorgasbord of good times also beckons the question: What's the Hall of Fame Village's strategy? And is the mix of entertainment intentionally diverse or random in an effort to find out what works best?

Michael Crawford, CEO and president of the [Hall of Fame Resort & Entertainment Co.](#), which includes the Village, said there's nothing haphazard about it.

Staging so many different events is by design, part of a strategy to attract varied demographics.

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**I think the approach is you want to have something for everybody.**

Michael Crawford, Hall of Fame Resort & Entertainment Co.

"I think the approach is you want to have something for everybody," Crawford said. "And that's certainly been our mantra as it relates to development of new assets, development of media content and gaming environments, and it's the same with programming.

"We've had comedic acts that I think are really fun and unique and hit a certain demographic, and we've had all different types of concerts," he said. "Some are country and some are rock and classic and modern, and so the idea in a venue like ours is we want to be able to bring entertainment that is appealing and attractive for guests of all ages. Family and non-family."

**Hall of Fame Village concerts:** Journey and Donnie Iris electrify stadium crowd with rousing HOF Fest show

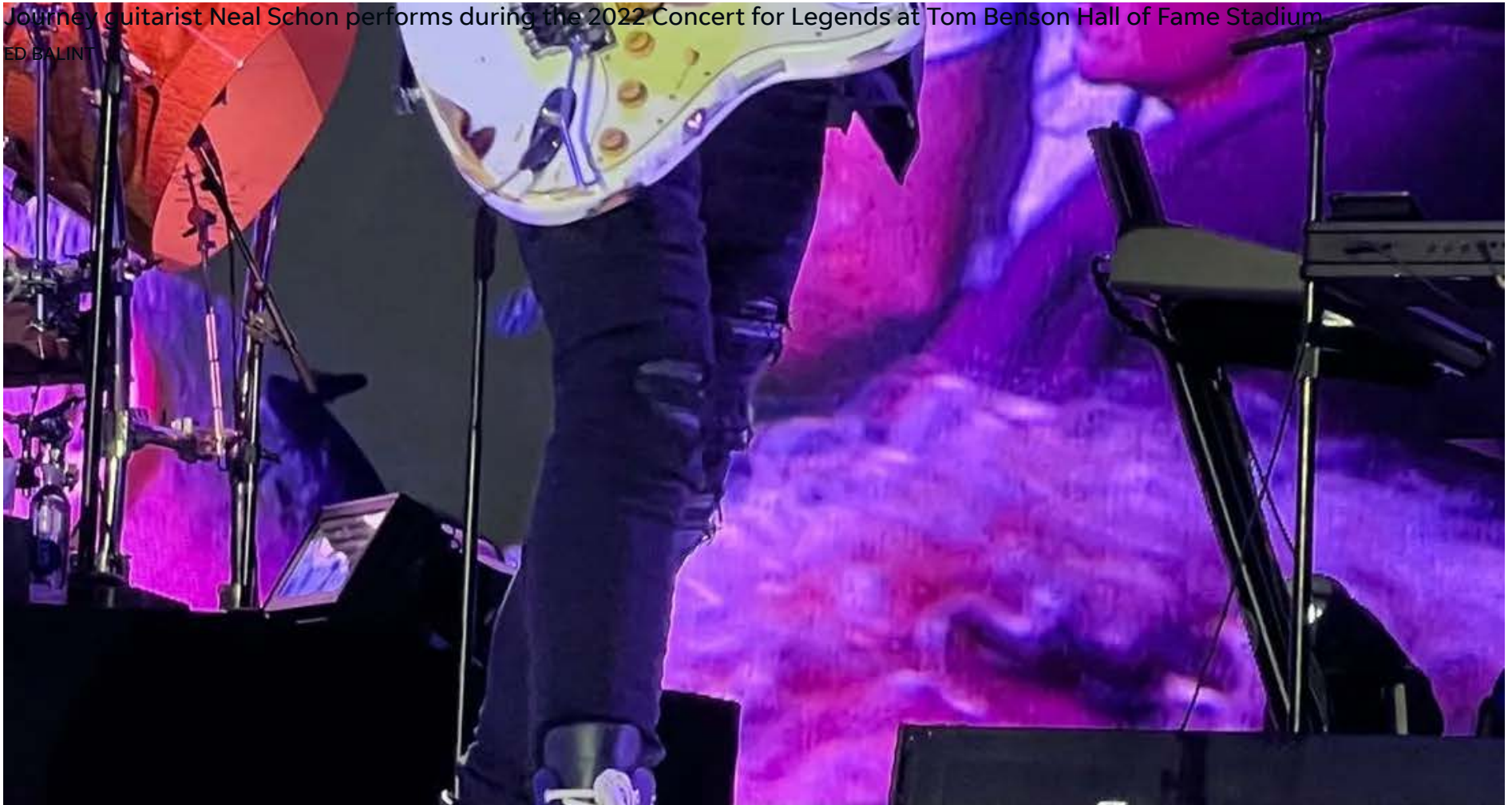
**Dave Chappelle:** Comedian gets warm Ohio welcome at HOF Stadium show in Canton

**Promoters, agents are calling the Hall of Fame Village**





Journey guitarist Neal Schon performs during the 2022 Concert for Legends at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium  
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New Jersey Generals player Cam Echols-Luper dives into the end zone for a second-half touchdown against the Pittsburgh Maulers at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium Sunday in April.

KEVIN WHITLOCK / MASSILLON INDEPENDENT

uning of those," Crawford said. And I'm excited about the opportunity and where it's going to lead us. I think in Canton that regional market can support many different types of sporting and non-sporting events, and I fully intend to take advantage of that."

## **Michael Petrochuk: 'Very creative and very forward thinking'**

Diversification is a positive and a way for the Village "to spread out risk (and) also a way that a business taps into new customers and new markets," said Michael Petrochuk, interim dean of The DeVille School of Business at Walsh University in nearby North Canton.

Mixing up events both small and big, from a St. Patrick's Day celebration inside the dome to this summer's Zac Brown Band concert, is "brilliant," he said.

"If you're known for being a one-trick pony, then sooner or later, you're going to run out of people to go to your museum, to go to your restaurant, to go to your gift shop," Petrochuk said. "But if you're diversified ... and you're very creative and very forward thinking, there's always going to be something new."

**'It could be a real destination spot across the country.'**



Donnie Iris and the Cruisers perform during the 2022 Concert for Legends at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium. This summer's concert will feature the Zac Brown Band during the Pro Football Hall of Fame Enshrinement Festival.

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The growing number of events, plus the other attractions, could lead to the Hall of Fame Village becoming a significant draw, said Petrochuk.

"I think (the Village) is really well positioned now to make a major impact in the entertainment business in Northeast Ohio and in the state," he said. "And I think it's moving toward the place where it could be a real destination spot across the country where people realize, 'Wow, I can go to Canton and do the other things, and then drive to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Amish country while we're there.'"

Football is what makes the Village unique as a potential tourist magnet, said Mark Bankert, assistant professor of sports management at Malone University in Canton.

"There is a great opportunity to build all these things around it," he said of using the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a centerpiece. "I know in Ohio we have the cold weather in the winter ... and some people might say, 'Yeah, in the winter it might be a little tougher sell to have some of those venues be an option,' (but) you have the dome, you have the Center for Excellence, the water park, the hotel that's going to be there, the shops and restaurants, and things that can go on in the winter months."

## **What's coming to the Hall of Fame Village next?**





The Hall of Fame Village is a football-themed entertainment campus built around the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton.

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Drawing big acts to a stadium is unique for a city the size of Canton, said Andre Payne, chairman of the business and technologies department at Malone University.

**USFL guide:** What to know before you go to a game in Canton

"I think given the Pro Football Hall of Fame's significance within the sports world, and really in pop culture in general, Canton is known ... worldwide," he said. "I think it only makes sense to expand on that and bring in some of the biggest acts in entertainment – it's a significant draw."

**Big acts in Canton are a 'huge deal.'**



The O'Jays perform last September at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium, an example of the variety of entertainment the Hall of Fame Village brings to the venue.

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Katrice Bigsbee, 52, of Canton, is among those already enjoying the blend of entertainment.

The events and restaurants on-site are a plus for Canton, said Bigsbee, who attended September's O'Jays and Gladys Knight concert.

"I also like the fact that there are some diverse entertainment (events) happening here," she said. "In the past, it appeared that the focus was mainly on country artists and rock artists (at the stadium). The fact that (the Hall of Fame Village) has hosted The O'Jays, Dave Chappelle, and ... Kevin Hart is a huge deal.

"... I don't recall events of this magnitude in the past," said Bigsbee of Canton. And it "sounds like great things are in the works."

**Does the Hall of Fame Village compete with Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse, Blossom?**



The USFL has increased its presence in Canton at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium. Both regular season and post-season games are being played at the venue at the Hall of Fame Village.

KEVIN WHITLOCK / MASSILLON INDEPENDENT

When asked about competing venues in the region, notably Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse in downtown Cleveland and Blossom Music Center in the Akron area, Crawford said the Village carefully considers what concerts and events it books and where it fits into the entertainment landscape.





Bankert, however, said it's likely going to take a few years to establish brand awareness to steadily pull visitors from near and far.

"I can imagine that the people who are just coming in, they don't have a great idea of what all is there," he said.

## **Music festivals being considered for the Village**





A large inflatable couch was a popular spot for selfies during a USFL game in late April between the Pittsburgh Maulers and New Jersey Generals at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton.

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Aaron J. Green, co-owner and co-operator of The Country Fest, already knows what it takes to establish an event that draws thousands of fans to Stark County annually.



Former Cleveland Browns player Frank Minnifield signs a miniature helmet for a fan during the USFL's regular season opening game at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium.

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The long-running, multi-day country music event at Clay's Resort Jellystone Park featured Morgan Wallen last summer performing in front of roughly 24,000 people.

**Country Fest:** Music festival grows from humble beginnings to 25,000 fans and major headliner Morgan Wallen

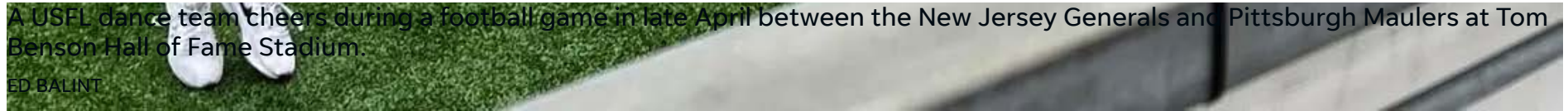
"We follow it pretty closely and watch all the different types of shows they book and when they book them (and the attendance)," Green said of the Village.

Green, however, said he and partner Joel Beichler don't consider the Village to be a threat and direct competitor.

"The experiences that they're providing are just a different experience than we provide," he said. "Ours is a little more stay and play and theirs is a little more like a single-day type of experience."

"The economic impact can be tremendous," Green said of the Village. But "I think they're going to be a few years away from figuring out what the best route to grow their live entertainment business is going to be, and hopefully, the time is going to come that we will help them find out."





## 'Certain bands ... are going to attract 4,000 fans or 10,000.'

Every concert or event doesn't have to be a sellout or near sellout at Tom Benson Stadium to be deemed a success, Crawford said.

Stage configurations can be tailored for smaller crowds. For example, although The O'Jays with special guest Gladys Knight drew several thousand fewer fans than the packed house for Journey, it was still a solid booking, he said.

**Michael Crawford:** [HOF Village CEO pens book about Disney work in Asia, how it prepared him for current role](#)

"Everybody who came just had a blast," Crawford said of The O'Jays concert.





A fan watches Gladys Knight when she opened for The O'Jays in September at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium.

BY BALTIMORE





Journey performs in August at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium during the Concert for Legends.

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