



# Performance is Key

Mark Birtha, president, Hard Rock Sacramento  
speaks to *Peter White* and *David McKee*







Hard Rock Café Center Bar

**H**ard Rock is one of the best brands in gaming, maybe \*the\* best. What differentiates it in a crowded casino landscape?

Hard Rock International is in the midst of unprecedented growth and is seeing significant expansion opportunities around the world in our casino, hotel, and café divisions. It is hard to believe the organization recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and yet the brand is fresh and the most in-demand it has ever been. But there are clearly reasons why the company has been and continues to be so successful.

First off everyone knows the Hard Rock brand, you see the logo on at least one traveller's shirt at every airport you go to and on TV whether it's Hard Rock Stadium or Formula One racing, or even online with Hard Rock Digital. The minute you say Hard Rock though, it conjures up an immediate visual and emotional connection to guests that is consistently positive and appreciated in a way few brands can deliver. In the casino space, we have a unique design and development process that creates the authentic Hard Rock "vibe" that can't be duplicated. From the color palette to the brand standards, the high-quality

finishes, the memorabilia, the music and energy, the physical properties we create are truly one of a kind, and elicit enjoyment from our patrons, and an immediate connection. And of course, we operate as a hospitality company above and beyond all else, which means there is a constant focus on delivering "authentic experiences that ROCK," which means high-quality products and services provided by band members who really value the work they do, and the opportunity to wow our patrons in their own unique ways. There is a continued emphasis on the details that goes into everything we do as an organization at all levels.

We have also been extremely focused on the evolution of the brand as a true entertainment provider. That means a focus on developing more of our media relationships and offerings, such as partnerships with companies like Lionsgate for films like *John Wick*, or amazing shows with musical legends like the Rolling Stones in intimate Hard Rock venues, and collaborations with other entertainment providers like Audacy and Live Nation. We have created new digital online platforms to deliver our content outside of our bricks and mortar establishments. The company has developed new



Rock Shop retail store

retail and food offerings with some of the most iconic people and brands in the world like Leo Messi, and Red Bull.

The other signature statement of Hard Rock is our commitment to “Take Time to be Kind,” our philanthropy. We are active at the corporate level down to each one of our over 200 locations around the world, giving back to those in the community. Our Hard Rock Heals Foundation connects with partner charities in our neighborhoods to support those in need, and this is something our employees relish and our “culture clubs” manifest every day.

At the end of the day though, it comes down to our people. Our team members create a culture that is unparalleled and has allowed the organization to not only endure but to continually get better over all these years. That is built on a platform of honesty and integrity, compliance, and an emphasis on the power of diversity, equity, and inclusion. “All is One” allows us as a brand to truly “Love All, Serve All” which ensures we are always focused on having the right people take care of our valued guests at every interaction. Hard Rock continues to invest in these spaces and that success shows.

#### **What have you learned from working with tribes after so many years in publicly traded casino and hospitality companies?**

I have been truly blessed to have had the fortune to work with Native American organizations during my 30 years in the industry. My first interaction with tribes was with the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Tucson, Arizona, as president and chief development officer for Casino Del Sol. I had the fortune of assisting them in building a \$100 million hotel and convention center expansion during the Great Recession, when nothing was being built anywhere in the United States in 2011. Hard Rock International is owned by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, so I have had the pleasure of interacting with Seminole leaders and members over the past nine years. Their story is truly remarkable and to see what they have achieved over the past few decades is nothing short of astonishing. They have worked closely with Jim Allen, our CEO, to not only continue to invest in and guide the evolution of Hard Rock International, but to change the face of hospitality around the world and tell their story along the way.

I now have had the pleasure of working closely with the Enterprise Rancheria Tribe here in Northern



California for the past five years. As employee number-one at Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Sacramento at Fire Mountain, I have been honoured to assist in bringing their vision to life and helping their members realize a dream that was over 20 years in the making. That is very powerful, extremely moving and extraordinarily gratifying to me to know that I was able to play a small part in changing the lives of thousands of people for the long term.

Oftentimes for the tribes, their investment is very personal and can take a lot more time, effort, and money to bring to fruition. They often start smaller in regional and local markets and expand their properties over time. There is usually a very long-term horizon in their strategic planning and execution. Decisions are made by tribal councils and general memberships that reflect what is best for their way of life, and the good of future generations.

**Tribes build for the long term. Are publicly held companies too focused on short-term events like dividends and quarterly profits at the detriment of their legacy?**

Working with tribes has a slightly different nuance from working with public companies and some of the largest hospitality companies in my past like Mirage Resorts, Las Vegas Sands or Marriott, and Starwood. Both spaces require us to meet financial and regulatory expectations, implement similar business and marketing plans, execute staffing, and human resources training, compensation, and benefits programs. Even the amenities, designs and offerings are comparable, whether commercial or Native American properties.

That being said, the vehicles are often times used differently and thus the vision and focus can vary. Public companies of course have shareholders and are dialed in to regular performance needs and often the proceeds are distributed via share buybacks, dividends, or continued expansion. Decisions may be made in a more short-term environment that benefit the company financially and that makes perfect sense in this space. Legacy is built over time and through vision and hard work; however situations can occur at any time that can alter the decision-making process in the commercial space, and result in much bigger or better outcomes that may not exist in the Native American gaming space. Thus, there are typically different sets of expectations in the two spaces.



Mark Birtha, President, Hard Rock Sacramento

The tribal space traditionally is building for the long term as these properties usually have unique sets of regulatory parameters and are not being built for resale purposes at future transaction multiples. More importantly, Native American investment is driven by the need to use their properties to empower their citizens, whether it be through employment, training or tribal-development programs or by funding health services, housing, education, utilities or other resources for their membership. We often have tribal members working at our properties building long-term careers or using our facilities as guests and proud owners. It is endearing to visit tribal reservations and see new buildings being erected, or public areas being cleaned and refreshed, and even Native American histories and languages being preserved through the success of the casino. This is a different sort of legacy built on a different set of criteria and expectations. Each are equally positive and driven from two uniquely different perspectives.



Wine Spectator Award-winning Council Oak Steaks & Seafood restaurant

**Philanthropy is an important part of the Hard Rock culture. What are some of your prouder achievements in that field at Fire Mountain?**

Philanthropy is extremely important to the Hard Rock culture and something I am very proud to say we have manifested through the Hard Rock Heals Foundation to the benefit of communities around the world. I truly believe our mottos of “Take Time to be Kind” and “Save the Planet” have allowed Hard Rock International to not only attract some of the best human resource talent in our industry, but also create long-term loyalty via our culture that benefits both our team members, and our guests everywhere we exist. It is no surprise to me that our employees are passionate about helping and contributing, and it is a cornerstone of our company’s success, and longevity.

Here in Northern California, Hard Rock Sacramento has partnered with the Enterprise Community Fund, the Tribe’s philanthropic arm, to invest in and enrich multiple charities across the region. In the four years since we have opened the doors, and even through a pandemic, the property has donated over \$3 million in charitable funds and in-kind gifts to members of the community. Recipients include civic programs like the Marysville Peach Festival, Yuba Veterans Stand Down, and the Flying U Rodeo stampede, to having a

Hard Rock room at the local Ronald McDonald House, supporting the K-9 Officers Association, United Way, Special Olympics, Make A Wish, Hong Kong Association of NorCal, and so many others.

Our signature program is Pinktober, where we as a company dedicate the month of October to raising funds through F&B, retail, and entertainment sales and events, and team member efforts to benefit awareness, research, and assistance for breast cancer. Here in Sacramento, we most recently donated \$160,000 in 2023 to the Sutter Health Medical Foundation, and they in turn purchased MRI and testing equipment that was sorely needed in their facilities. We have supported the local Adventist Rideout Hospital and the American Cancer Society with donations over the years as well. We hold an annual gala at our property that continues to sell out and grow each year, and our vendors and partners come together to put on an event that truly touches people lives on every level. It is moving, it is legacy.

**You have major, new competition in the Sacramento area. How are you maintaining player loyalty?**

There is no question that Northern California, and the Sacramento region in general, is a highly competitive





Hard Rock Sacramento Pinktober fundraiser and donation

market. Most recently we welcomed the Wilton Rancheria Tribe's Sky River casino to the area. We have been fortunate to have retained most of our customer base while at the same time growing our database even with the introduction of a new competitor here in the market.

First and foremost, the Hard Rock brand is a beacon and has a magnetic pull for guests to visit in the region, and even across the country. This allows us to drive a higher-than-expected portion of our business from outer markets like the Bay Area and even Lake Tahoe/Reno. Given we have a 169-room hotel and over 8,000 square feet of convention space, we are also able to differentiate our business segmentation, especially mid-week. Our new Unity customer loyalty program has allowed us to introduce this property to other Hard Rock guests around the world who benefit from using their points from spend at all our locations, which is a big competitive differentiator. Clearly guests have a rapport with our team members, and although they may try a new product offering, they have quickly returned to a place where they are comfortable, are provided high quality services and amenities, is safe and clean, and where they have built loyalty value over the years.

We have continued to expand and now have our

Hard Rock Live 2,500-seat entertainment venue that does over 80 events per year. We opened with Maroon 5 and have had incredible artists including Chris Rock, Smokey Robinson, Ali Wong, Nancy Sit, and Donny Osmond. We also built our Rocktane Gas station, the first on the West Coast, that sells millions of gallons of fuel per year. Our customer database benefits from these new amenities, and the continued investments the tribe makes to keep the property fresh and new. We have refreshed our gaming floor and repurposed areas of the building to create new amenities our guests have asked for like our Unity Retail Store, Bingo, and our new gaming Link Lounge 2.0.

**What lessons from your early tenures at The Mirage and Bellagio do you still use today?**

I started my formal career in the mid-90's in Las Vegas at The Mirage and it was like being a kid in a candy store. Vegas was on the cover of *Time* Magazine and you had all these new property openings happening and the market was just booming. Being a kid from a small town my eyes were wide open, and it was like drinking from a mega-fire hose, but I loved it. It was exactly what I wanted to do, and I cut my teeth initially in the food and beverage part of our business. I was fascinated by the size and scope of the business, and



YouYu Asian Restaurant &amp; Noodle Bar

the logistics alone needed to perform effectively, and efficiently were at a scale that dwarfed many of my college peers' roles at traditional hotels, restaurants, and hospitality operations. Resorts in Las Vegas did it all from gaming to F&B, entertainment, hotel, pool and spa operations, retail, meetings, and so much more. There was so much to see and learn that the career path, and opportunities in our industry seemed endless.

I was fortunate to work at some of the most dynamic and cutting-edge properties early in my career, and with some of the most profound visionaries, and leaders of the time. At The Mirage, I was quickly educated on Steve Wynn's passion for hospitality and the need to be in the details of everything that went into a guest experience. When I was the beverage manager there, I remember getting a call from him one day asking why we had a trash barrel sitting right inside the service bar, where a guest walking by could see it. Everything from the company logo to the property design to the number of pineapples and cherries in the garnish of a mixed drink was well thought out, and optimized to wow the guest. At the Bellagio, I was a department head and part of opening the iconic property. I remember them changing the flooring at the last minute before opening

because it was not correct. There was a level of detail never seen before, and a vision to innovate in a way nobody had really done prior with an art gallery, a lake with fountain shows, and seasonally changing gardens in a conservatory, along with master mixologists and iconic celebrity chef restaurants as well as a style of nightly entertainment that was ground-breaking. I remember watching the Bellagio fountain performance the day before we opened and thinking it would never be the same again after the doors opened. The need to constantly reinvent and explore new opportunities perfectly paralleled the mantra of "Think Different," which was right around the same time.

**Now that you're in partnership with Live Nation, what kinds of entertainment have you been presenting?**

We are fortunate to be partnered with Live Nation in the booking and operations of our Hard Rock Live Sacramento venue. In its first year, the venue did 88 total events featuring 20 different genres and had 34 complete sell-outs. It is a state-of-the-art, 2,500-seat, entertainment venue designed by Sceno Plus, with telescopic seating, acoustic paneling, intimate sky boxes, amazing music memorabilia and incredible sightlines. 2023 had a historic line-





Hard Rock Live Sacramento grand opening night

up featuring the hottest new artists like Sabrina Carpenter, Matt Rife, and Hardy, to icons and arena level acts including The Killers, Diana Ross, Sting, Pitbull, Sebastian Maniscalco, and Halsey. Thus, it's no surprise it was nominated for "casino of the year" at the 2023 IEBA industry awards, was named number-seven best casino with live entertainment in America by Newsweek, and was ranked the number-one performing music venue in California by size by Pollstar in 2023 and number-three in the USA. None of this success would be possible if it wasn't for the guidance and support we receive from Live Nation.

**If sports betting comes to California, what form do you hope it will take?**

As you can imagine, California could arguably be the biggest state in the U.S. for potential revenue in this space and our organization has a plan in mind should this be approved by the citizens in the near future. Enterprise Rancheria is in favor of having sports betting and online gaming available here in California. There were clearly a number of differing proposals on the ballot during the last election, and the various entities and tribes could not align on a singular program to support. But if sports betting and online gaming comes to California, it has to be done



Adam Levine and Maroon 5 open the Sacramento Hard Rock Live

the right way to the benefit of the tribal operators, and in a manner that provides the quality and protection users expect, and meets the appropriate regulatory requirements.



Four-star hotel bedroom

The good news for Enterprise Rancheria is that Hard Rock International already has a program in place in multiple jurisdictions. Our Hard Rock Digital platform meets all the appropriate requirements and offers a compelling, high-quality user experience in both spaces that can be immediately turned on should these games be approved here. We also have a plan for a brick-and-mortar offering at the property. Enterprise Rancheria has been actively present and involved in helping to shape the legislation and provide the proper vehicle for approval here in the state, and we hope this gets approved soon to allow us to continue to grow our business, and offer amenities our guests would enjoy.

**What other enhancements of the casino are you contemplating or have in progress?**

Enterprise Rancheria has a long-term, seven-generations vision that drives their planning for government, commercial, and community programming related to the casino and adjoining land around the current property. The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Sacramento at Fire Mountain has already completed its Phase Two expansion in less than three years since opening and has preliminary schematic plans for future proposed phases three to five. This would include expanding the casino games and

offerings including poker and sports betting. Future expansions could include an additional hotel tower, increased meeting space, more F&B outlets including a food court, a full-service spa, and a parking garage. In addition, the tribe has secured 40 acres adjacent to the property and that is being considered for future economic-development projects the tribe will manage, including utilities like solar, a travel station, and industrial development.

But when it comes to the seven-generations vision, Enterprise Rancheria has a much broader design and development goal. The casino currently sits in a unique, 900-acre, sports-and-entertainment-designated, masterplanned zone, with the casino and Toyota Amphitheater currently serving as anchors. This designation allows for the future development of sports, retail, dining, and entertainment amenities in the area that Yuba Sutter County and other Sacramento region inhabitants desperately need. Given the influx of people moving to the area, especially from San Francisco, and the fact that it is the state's capitol, Sacramento has become a hot zone for growth. Enterprise Rancheria intends to be a driver for determining what that future growth looks like, and a steward for the community and the tribe in ensuring that deliverable is met.