

Cheap Trick guitarist now a museum exhibit



AP Photo/Paul Jeffers

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Rick Nielsen is hardly a rock-and-roll dinosaur. He and his band, Cheap Trick, are still roaming the concert circuit this summer, both opening for Aerosmith and headlining their own gigs, including a stop Friday at the Illinois State Fair Grandstand (see ticket info below).

Yet, while he is far from extinct, Nielsen has joined a 66-million-year-old Tyrannosaur on display in a Rockford museum.

“The Burpee Museum (of Natural History) in Rockford asked if I would do it, and it’s going to be an eight-month project. It’s been amazing all of the things that have been happening,” Nielsen said.

The exhibit, titled “Rick’s Picks,” is billed as “a state-of-the-art multimedia experience” that will give visitors the opportunity to “step into the mind of one of rock ‘n’ roll’s legends.” It includes a collection of Nielsen’s guitars, tour souvenirs, stage wardrobe and a history of his career told through video, photos and other memorabilia. There will also be taped interviews with other notable artists — including Dave Grohl of the

Foo Fighters, Todd Rundgren and Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins — who comment on Nielsen’s career.

“All of these people that I know in the music business said they’d like to be involved with it. So it should be interesting. Hopefully we’ll have a concert there in January or February,” Nielsen said.

The Burpee Museum initiated the project, although Nielsen had a similar idea years earlier.

“I was going to open a restaurant/museum/hotel about five or six years ago. My collection was going to be a part of it, but the project was tied to a construction company that got hit by the economy, so that never happened,” he said.

His collection of guitars numbers around 400. Nielsen estimates that he’s owned more than 2,000 throughout his life. His father operated a music store, so he grew up surrounded by instruments, just not the ones that had captured his dreams.

“He didn’t have Gibson or Fender — only Martins, because he was more of an acoustic-type guy. And I wanted electric, so that’s how I started collecting guitars. But only used ones; I never bought new ones. People would trade their guitars in because they would never keep more than a couple,” Nielsen said.

The 65-year-old guitarist formed Cheap Trick in the early 1970s. Since that time, the band has given more than 5,000 performances, sold 20 million records and racked up 40 gold and platinum recordings. The band’s hits include “Surrender,” “I Want You To Want Me,” “The Flame” and “Dream Police.” Along with Nielsen, the band’s longtime members are Robin Zander on lead vocals, Tom Petersson on bass and Bun E. Carlos on drums.

For the past couple of years, Nielsen’s son, Daxx, has been sitting in for Carlos as the touring drummer. Despite growing up in a household filled with guitars, Daxx was classically trained as a pianist before making his way behind the kit as a self-taught drummer.

Cheap Trick’s last studio album was “The Latest,” released in 2009. There are plans to release a video of concert footage that was filmed in Europe, Milwaukee and Los Angeles.

“We did the Greek Theater in L.A. That was cool because we had a 20-piece orchestra. It was fantastic, fun stuff to do,” Nielsen said.

Cheap Trick/Night Ranger/Blue Oyster Cult/Georgia Satellites (rock)

- When: 5 p.m. Friday
- Where: Illinois State Fairgrounds Grandstand
- Tickets: \$35/\$30/\$25, available at www.ticketmaster.com or 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays at the state fair box office.

Night Ranger: The rock band had a number of 1980s hits, including “Sister Christian,” “When You Close Your Eyes,” “Don’t Tell Me You Love Me” and “Sentimental Street.”

Blue Oyster Cult: The band is a staple on classic rock radio with “Don’t Fear the Reaper” and “Burnin’ For You.”

Georgia Satellites: The band hit No. 2 on the Billboard pop music chart in 1986 with “Keep Your Hands To Yourself” and almost returned to the Top 40 with a remake of “Hippy Hippy Shake” in 1988.

