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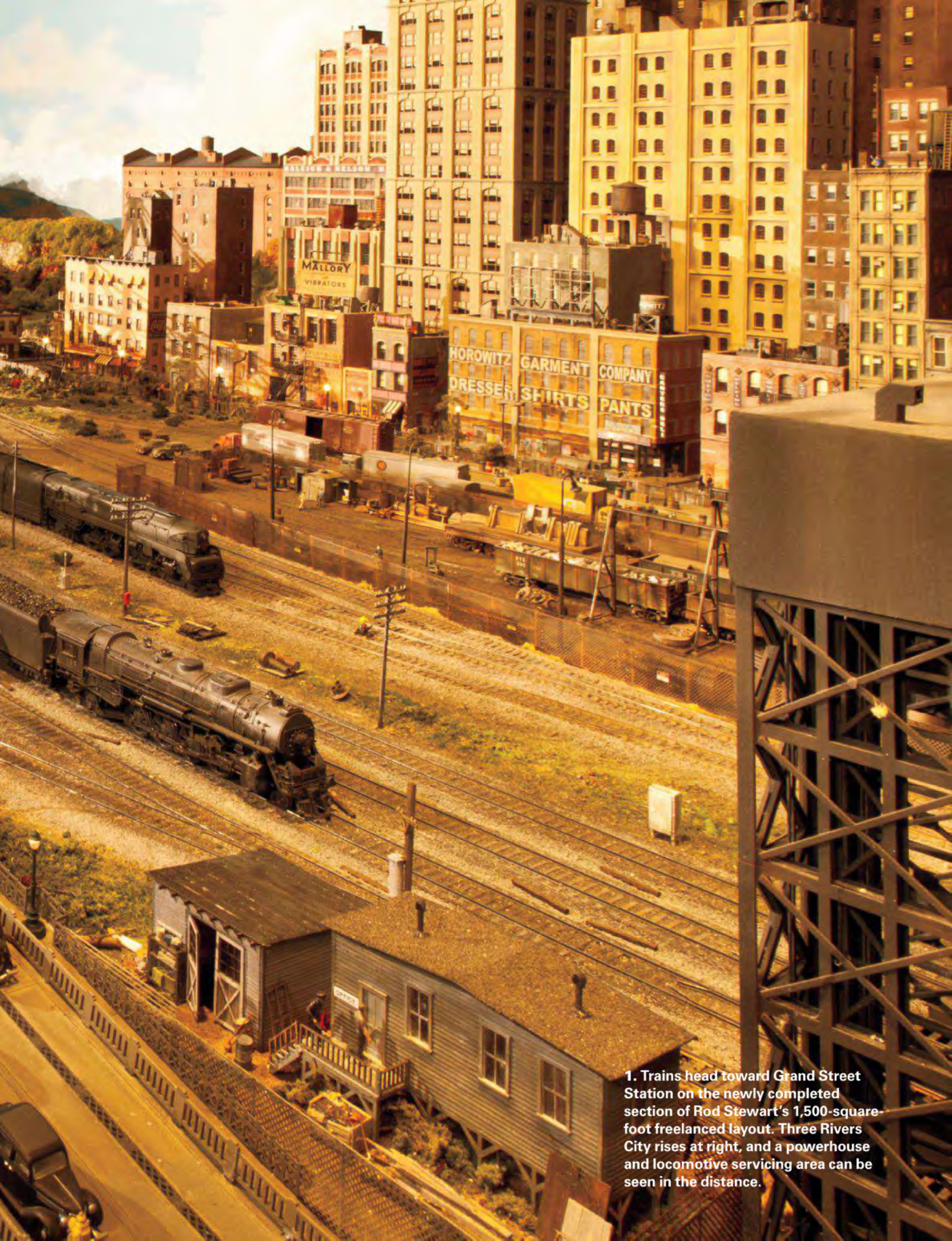
Vol. 81 • Issue 2

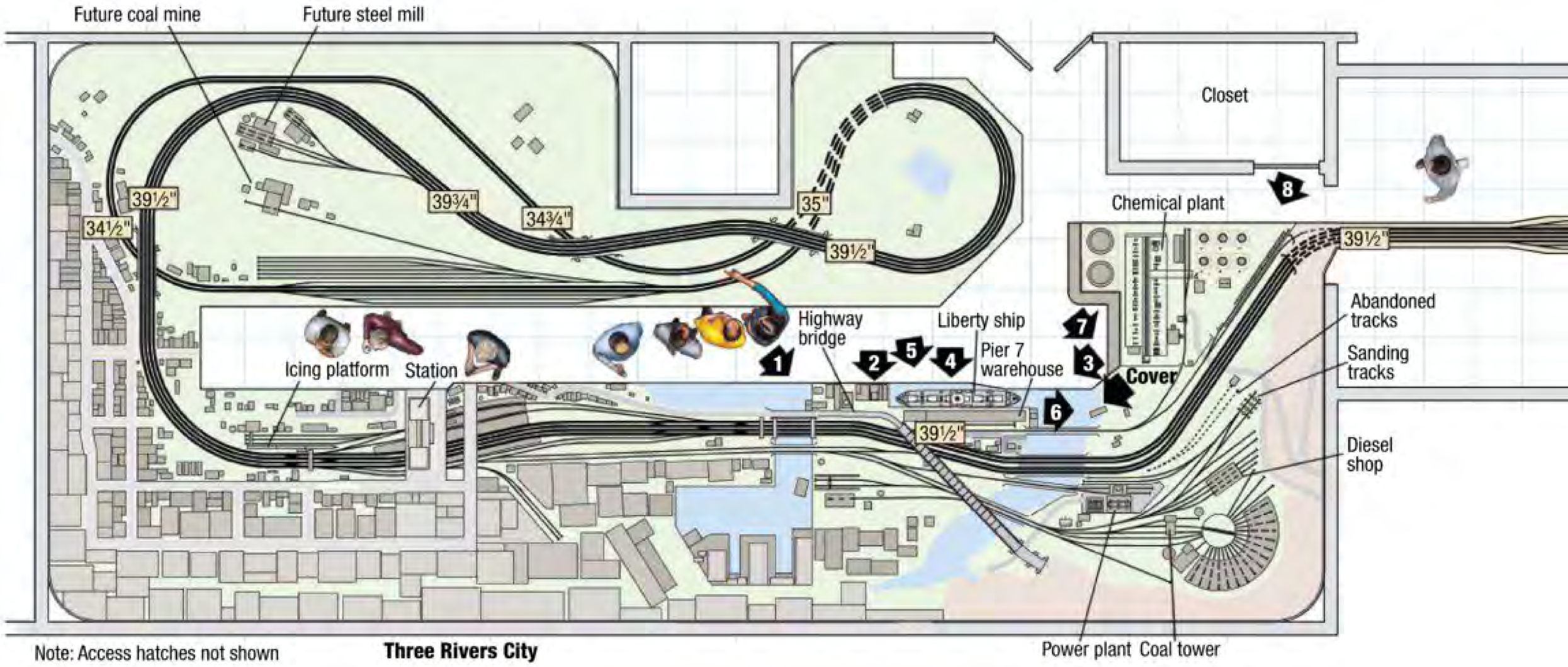
Rod Stewart reaches a milestone

The rock 'n' roller puts the finishing touches on his HO scale layout's city centerpiece

By Carl Swanson • Photos by Steve Crise



1. Trains head toward Grand Street Station on the newly completed section of Rod Stewart's 1,500-square-foot freelanced layout. Three Rivers City rises at right, and a powerhouse and locomotive servicing area can be seen in the distance.



Note: Access hatches not shown

Three Rivers City

2. Rod makes a point of including rooftop detail on all his structures. For reference he has assembled an album of photographs he has taken from various high-rise buildings looking down on the rooftops below. The name of the Corleone Olive Oil Co. is a reference to the movie *The Godfather*.

The layout at a glance

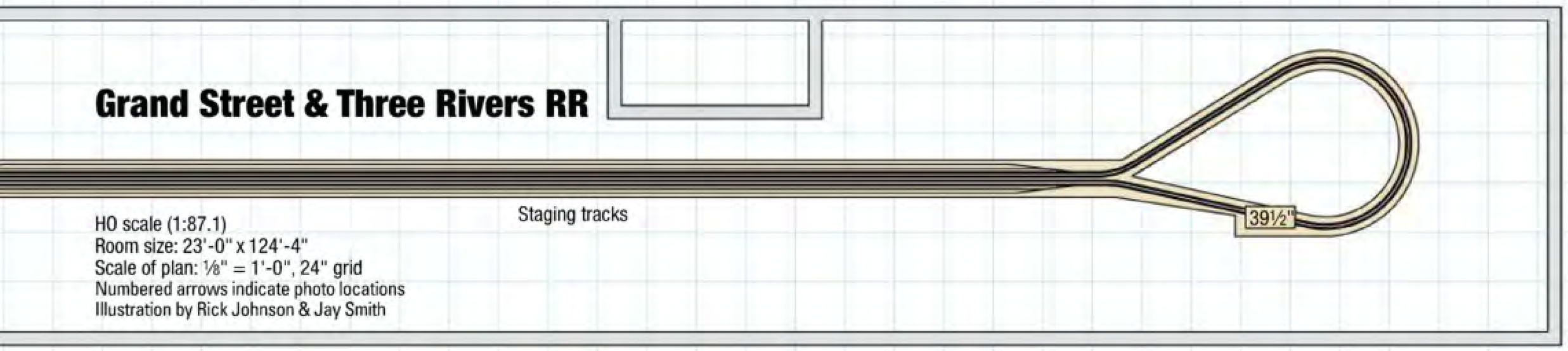
Name: Grand Street & Three Rivers RR
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: 23'-0" x 124'-4"
Prototype: New York Central and Pennsylvania RR
Locale: Pennsylvania
Era: mid-1940s
Style: walk-in
Mainline run: 900 feet
Minimum radius: 40"
Minimum turnouts: no. 6
Maximum grade: 3.5 percent
Benchwork: box grid
Height: 39½"
Roadbed: Homasote
Track: code 70 flextrack
Scenery: plywood table (city scene)
Backdrop: painted drywall
Control: Digitrax Digital Command Control

Three Rivers City dominates the third-floor train room of Rod Stewart's Los Angeles home. The bustling HO scale metropolis is six feet wide, 26 feet long, and contains hundreds of buildings, ranging from trackside switchman shanties to vast factories to row upon row of row of five-foot-tall skyscrapers. The product of 20 years of sustained effort, the city's recent completion marked a milestone in the construction of Rod's 23 x 124-foot Grand Street & Three Rivers RR.

The night the final touches were added to the city, Rod and layout helpers Nick Barone and Mike Cartabiano retrieved a bottle of wine stashed under the layout for just this occasion and toasted their achievement.

"It is stunning the way it all came together," the British rock star said. "It's turned out wonderful."

Remarkably, a large section of the city, about 64 square feet, has been completed in just the three years since *Model Railroader*'s last visit in 2010. The area includes a harbor scene, an expansive late steam-era locomotive servicing area, and a towering cliff made from stacked and carved blocks of white polystyrene beadboard covered with plaster rock castings. The cliff slopes down to a series of tree-covered hills that round a corner



3. Skyscrapers rise above the port of Three Rivers City as a New York Central passenger train glides past. Rod scratchbuilt the warehouse. Its external roof support trusses are made from a Walthers heavy-duty overhead crane kit.

and provide a three-dimensional backdrop for the roundhouse.

"Mike built that," Rod said, indicating the rolling scenery. "It's been good having him on board because that's something I'm not great at doing. I'm good with buildings and seeing where everything should go, but he did that sweeping mountain, and it's fabulous."

Looking over the city's hundreds of structures – some made from craftsman kits, many others scratchbuilt or kitbashed, and all carefully detailed, painted, and weathered – Rod's offhand comment that he is "good with buildings" seems an understatement.

Heaven in a touring case

Many of the structures were built a long way from the Los Angeles layout. An active touring musician, for many years Rod has traveled with large, carefully organized tour cases filled with kits, tools, and paints. He arranges for a separate room for modeling at the hotels along the way.

On tour, his daily schedule starts with a morning workout. After lunch, Rod heads for his improvised workshop and works steadily on his structures until 4 p.m., when he packs away his tools and heads for the concert venue.

His modeling time provides a much-needed escape from the pressures of the road. "For three or four hours a day I'm in heaven, absolute heaven," he says.

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4. The liberty ship *John W. Brown* was made for the layout by maritime modeler Fred Hutchins. It's docked at Rod's scratchbuilt Pier 7 Atlantic Avenue warehouse. It took Rod three attempts before he was happy with the warehouse.

An eye for scenery, and a confession

Although layout helpers Nick and Mike have worked with Rod for many years, they only recently learned he had been keeping a secret from them. It came to light after Rod, working alone one day, filled a box with assorted Noch ground cover material, "just a mish-mash of stuff, because you want a variety," and proceeded to scatter it around a newly placed building.

Rod said, "Then, the other night, I went upstairs to make a pile of rubbish – I've fallen in love with adding piles of railroad junk – and Nick said, 'While you're here, Rod, we have to tell you that every time you finish doing a bit of ground cover, we have to go in and redo it because it's red."

"I said 'What are you talking about?' I thought it was green. I really did. I had to get my wife to come upstairs, and said, 'Darling, look, this is what I'm using. It's a combination of a lot of different things,' and she said, 'Yeah, there's a lot of red in it.' "

"I had to sort of fess up," Rod said, and with a cheerful smile, added, "But I do pretty well considering I'm color blind." – *C.S.*

Like George Sellios, whose HO Franklin & South Manchester RR inspired Rod's own approach to model railroading (see "One book, years of inspiration" on page 53), Rod doesn't use an airbrush on his buildings.

"The great thing about using a dry brush and chalks is you can keep adding and adding until you get it right," Rod said. "I'm a firm believer in layers. I'm very confident when I look at a building and know I can start off by painting it a red brick color, add grimy black, add some grays and some rusts, and know it will get better and better."

By following this approach, he says, "You'll always get there in the end, as long as you don't overdo it."

The completion of Three Rivers City, coming as it did on the eve of Rod's

departure for a European tour, was bittersweet. "That section's finished, and now I'm going on the road and have nothing to do in the hotel rooms."

Urban renewal

When asked if there was anything on his layout he wishes he had done differently, he's quick to answer, "No. I'd have torn it out." Rod is highly critical of his own work, and ruthless in weeding out buildings that don't make the grade.

Rod said the buildings he's built but didn't place on the layout would fill a room. Even those that win a spot on the layout are subject to removal if he decides a newly completed model is a better choice for the space.

For example, he notes the Firestone skyscraper, shown on page 62 in the December 2010 MR. This structure, nearly as tall as an adult and built from 14 to 16 Magnuson resin kits, has now been replaced by an equally large structure. The original building was one of Rod's first efforts, while its replacement better represents his current skill level.

Rod builds his skyscrapers by laminating styrene wall and window detail on a core of medium-density fiberboard (MDF), an engineered wood product that has a smooth surface.

This makes Rod's tall buildings quite heavy, which is a special concern for a layout built in California.

"All the buildings are screwed down at the back, and all have C-clamps on them," Rod said. "If we ever do have an earthquake, I believe the damage would be minimal."

Rod said he always works with an idea in mind of how the finished building should look, but getting there can sometimes be a battle. For the large Pier 7 warehouse, Rod built and scrapped two early attempts. The third finally had the look he wanted.

The newly completed section of Three Rivers City also includes three custom-made models: the *John W. Brown*, a World War II liberty ship built by a master maritime modeler; an exact 5 x 6-foot replica of a 1940s chemical plant; and a massive highway overpass based on New York City's Queensboro Bridge.

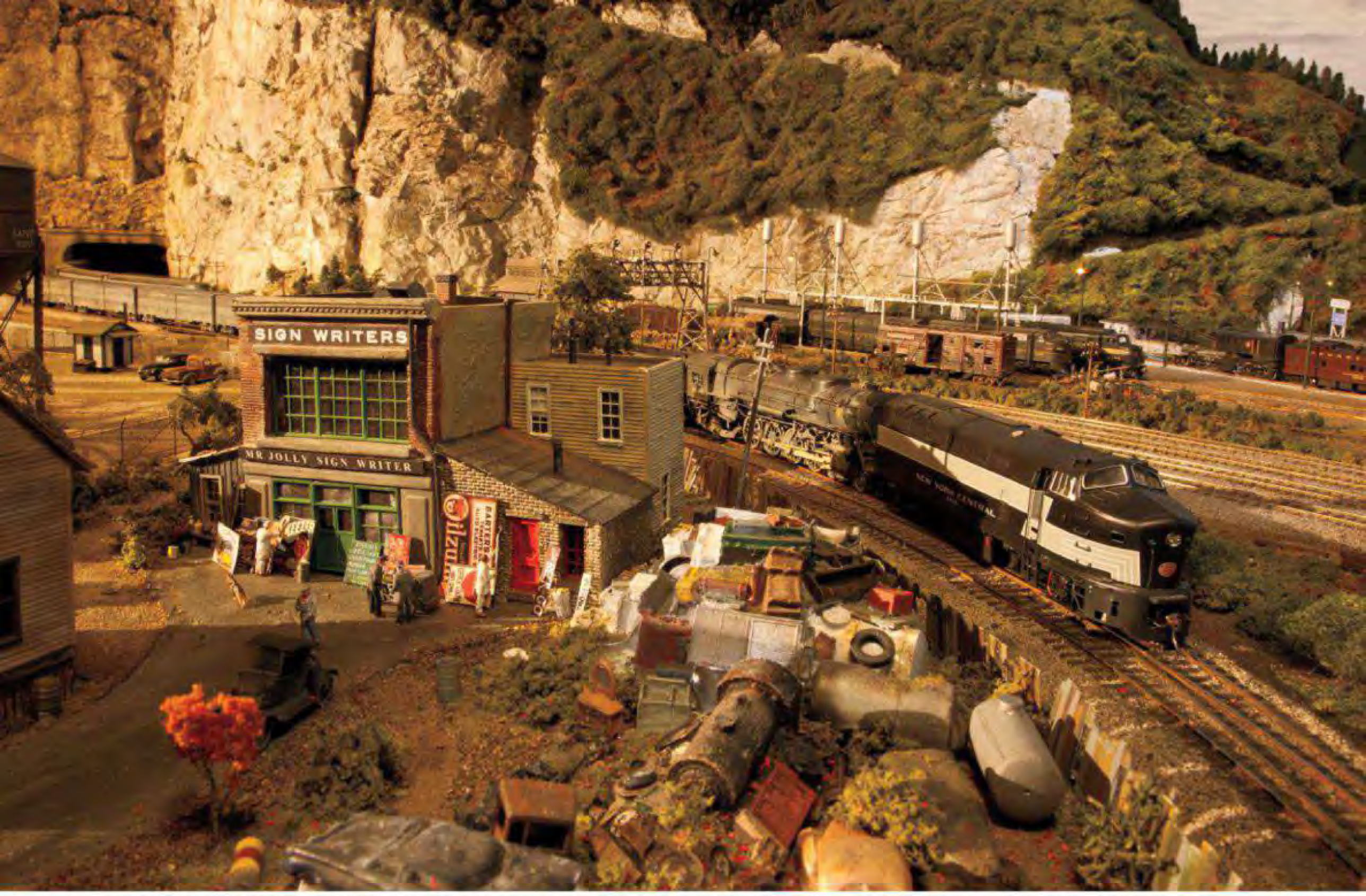
The bridge was made from laser-cut acrylic by Custom Model Railroads and includes curving approach bridges, a

One book, many years of inspiration

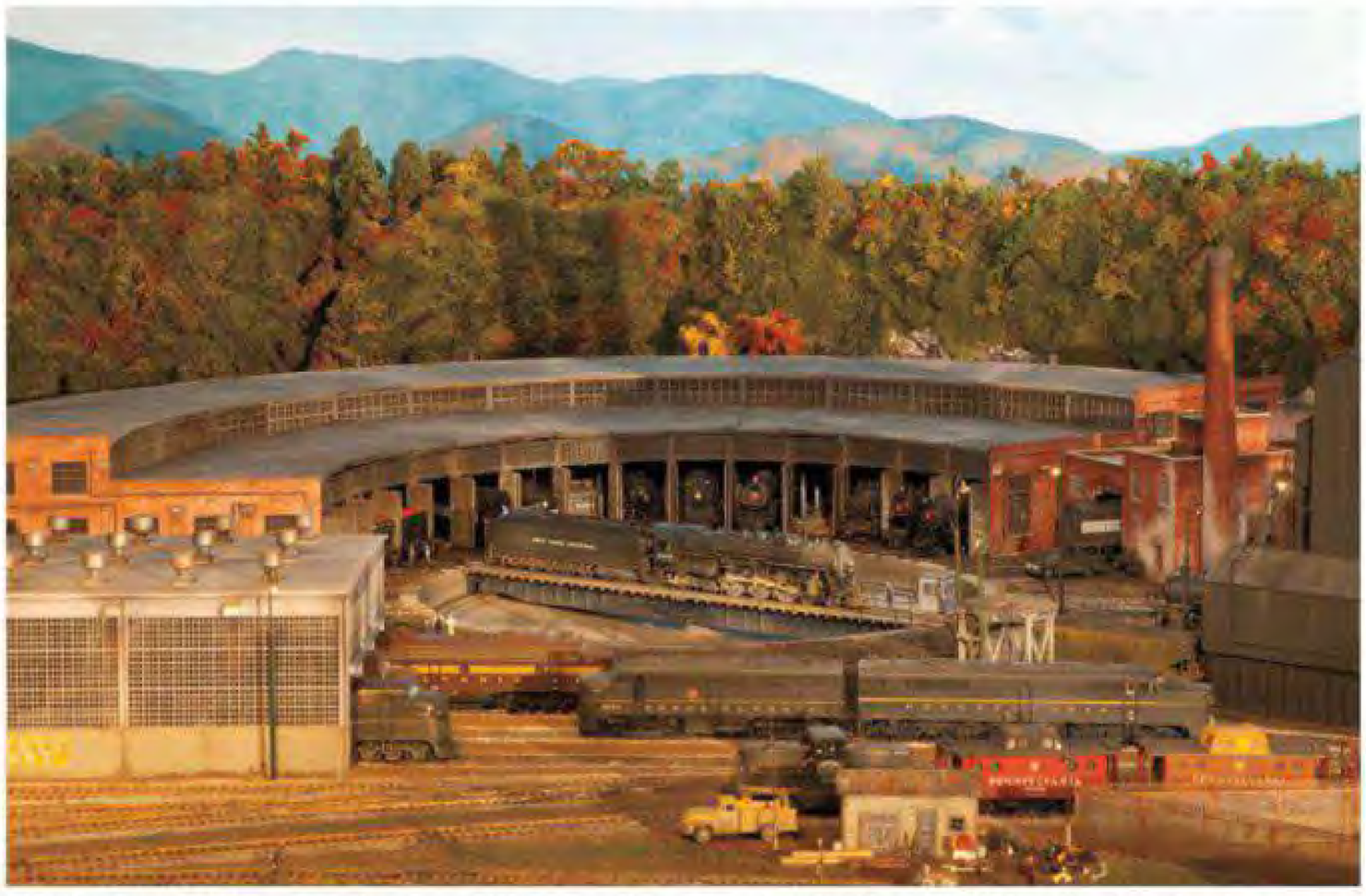
In early December, Rod visited the Franklin & South Manchester RR, built by New England modeler George Sellios. George's work is a continuing inspiration for Rod's own modeling, so much so that Rod keeps a tattered and much-read copy of Sellios' pictorial book, *The Fabulous Franklin & South Manchester Railroad*, on his breakfast table. Rod often pages through it, studying George's intricately detailed scenes.

"For me it's like going back and listening to Otis Redding and Sam Cooke. That book is my reference point. He is the master." Then, laughing, Rod added, "Can George sing? I hope he can't sing." – *C.S.*

5. One of the signature features of Three Rivers City is this highway overpass, made for Rod Stewart by Custom Model Railroads. More than 10 feet in length and containing more than 10,000 laser-cut parts, the bridge is based on New York City's Queensboro Bridge.



6. A brand-new Baldwin sharknose diesel comes to the rescue of a tired 4-8-2. In the foreground is a sign-painting business that reflects the close-up detail Rod likes to include in all his scenes.



7. The transition-era locomotive service area includes facilities for both steam and diesel. The base of the old water tank, replaced by a new one, still stands.

5-foot-long suspension bridge, and a 3-foot-long truss bridge. It has more than 10,000 pieces.

Nick and Mike provided CMR with a paper template so the piers could be accurately placed to avoid the track below. CMR assembled the bridge in its Baltimore shop, took it apart in sections, and shipped it to L.A. Remarkably, Nick said, not a single part was damaged in transit. However, gently maneuvering the delicate 10-foot structure into place without damaging it or the layout below proved to be a Herculean task that none of the three modelers care to repeat.

Sticking with a plan

Three Rivers City is the product of 20 years of steady revision and constant improvement, but Rod has never felt the need to modify the track plan. He drew it up in 1993 with the help of his friend, the late Malcolm Cullimore, a former roadie and fellow model railroader who became Rod's first personal assistant.

While finishing the scenery in the area of the new roundhouse, layout helpers Nick and Mike found they had room for an additional scene. They modeled an abandoned railroad bed, covered with weeds and rusty discarded railroad junk. Rod, looking it over, added one more touch at the end of the disused track: a small, ivy-covered shed.

"The shed had been made by Malcolm," Rod said. "I found it among all the buildings not being used, and I thought it would be lovely to give him a sort of shout-out."

The four-track, 900-foot main line is in place and operating on the Grand

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8. The four-track main is humming with activity as passenger trains curve between a sheer cliff, made from polystyrene bead board covered with plaster rock castings, and a chemical plant. The locomotive service area is in the distance.

Street & Three Rivers RR, and about 75 percent of the layout is scenicked. An industrial area, reflecting Pennsylvania's historic dominance in steel and coal, is planned for the last remaining section of the railroad. But before it can be built, Rod needs to create a transition between the city and industrial area and settle on a track arrangement. Only then will the footprint of the various buildings be known, and Rod will be able to start making structures to fit the space.

"We've got a lot of ideas we're kicking around, but the biggest problem is going to be getting from the city into the next scene," Rod said. "It's a difficult one, because the city got bigger and bigger and now it can't go any further – otherwise it will just be a city and no railroad. But we'll come up with something."

Rod expects the entire railroad will be complete in about three years. "What I'll do when it's all finished, I don't know. Maintenance and more improvements."

A modeler from the start

Although the Grand Street & Three Rivers is his first serious layout, Rod's interest in model railroading dates back to his childhood. The youngest of five children, he grew up in Highgate, North London. The windows of the family's home overlooked a railroad yard and the steam trains moving in and out of Euston Station. At age 7, his dad bought him a Hornby Tri-ang electric train set, which he would set up between meals on the family's dining table. A 4 x 6-foot layout followed a few years later.

In a well-known story, Rod asked his father for a wooden Tri-ang station for his 15th birthday, but was given a guitar instead. That guitar, Rod likes to say, worked out pretty well for him.

Rod's fans have now joined in the fun and continue to shower the singer with train-related gifts, most often railroad hats or big wooden whistles.

"They come up with boxcars painted with pictures of me, it's so cute," Rod said. "Some of them know what they're doing and give me lovely buildings, including pretty obscure ones from Magnuson Models."

He adds, "People are in such wonderment about it because its such a juxtaposition between rock 'n' roll and model railroads." MR

Meet Rod Stewart

Photo by Penny Lancaster

A Grammy Award-winning singer and one of the best-selling artists of all time, Rod Stewart, CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) has twice been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – once as a solo performer and again as a member of the band Faces. He continues to tour extensively and is a regular headliner at the Coliseum at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. His 2012 autobiography *Rod* debuted in top five of the New York Times bestseller list. In 2013, his studio album *Time* reached the top of the United Kingdom charts, his eighth U.K. number one album. He is married to fashion model and photographer Penny Lancaster.