

## The venerable and often maligned Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena will be gone very shortly.

No surprise, there. It's been a very long time coming. For years — decades in fact— it seems like the Arena was frequently spoken of in the past tense, even when it was alive and kicking. The venue equivalent of [Abe Vigoda](#), who passed not all that long ago, but had to have felt just a little uncomfortable had he overheard the many musings of “Is he still alive?” for years prior to his actual death.

But, while everyone was gladdened by the realization that Abe was still around (I can assume), for many years so many were impatiently waiting for the inevitable demise of the Los Angeles Sports Arena to finally become a reality.

Like politicians, who likely hoped that their legacy may someday be attached to something more *progressive* in its place. And athletes, who admittedly competed in conditions that had ceased to be commensurate with professional competition about the time the Lakers headed west to Inglewood. And even journalists who covered the exploits of those athletes.

As is often the case with the departed or soon to be departed, words of praise flowed fast and free for a while, before everything reverted back to its more customary silence. When it came time for the Arena's “closing ceremony,” from all appearances attendance was only marginally greater than for Eleanor Rigby's funeral. The ceremony was likely no more aggressively promoted, either.

The Sports Arena was a great old building. It deserved more respect during its lifetime and certainly a greater sendoff at its end. And yes, I say this without any sarcasm or irony.

**continued**

I spent nearly 20 years there, so I learned to appreciate its charms while having to see and deal with its shortcomings, firsthand.

Most of the staff I worked with have moved on, but if you were to ask them, one by one, which building they felt more attached to . . . the Sports Arena or the much more heralded and famous Coliseum (just a few yards away), I think a surprising number would likely respond with the Arena, though probably begrudgingly. Make no mistake — the Coliseum is and will always be truly impressive, but it's HUGE. Almost unknowable due its scale.



By contrast, we pretty much all knew every thoroughly worn inch of the Arena. It was “home” to nearly all of the staff every day.

For years . . . DECADES, in fact, the building survived mostly on a diet of events that, for the mainstream population, would generally have flown under the radar. Except for The Boss, of course. And it was felt by most with sway over its future that it was, in a sense, better that the Arena toil in obscurity in its waning days.

“Its days are numbered. Best not to let anyone get too attached.”

So much so, that when the Sports Arena's 50th Anniversary loomed just months out on the horizon in late 2008, instead of planning a commemorative celebration, the decision from the top instead was to do nothing at all — the rationale being that, if people got sentimental about the old building, someone, somewhere might protest its future demolition.

Less than a year later, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1960 Democratic National Convention (probably the most often cited event in Sports Arena history) was right around the corner. The same sentiments were echoed. No traction for any celebration of that event, either. The Convention would remain a proud bullet point in Coliseum/Sports Arena press materials and Kennedy's portrait would continue to grace the south lobby of the Arena, but best to leave it at that.

The building certainly did have its shortcomings, whether due to antiquated technology or just the passage of time and sheer wear and tear.

The archaic air conditioning system would fall hopelessly behind in even mildly warm weather. Powered by "swamp coolers" located upstairs in the ironically named "VIP Lot," the system would spray condensation over a surprisingly large radius when at full power, often causing event attendees to park and look skyward to see where the rain was coming from. Even the term "full power" was somewhat of a misnomer, as I can never recall a time when all four of the coolers were operational during my time there.

When Black Sabbath came to the Arena in September of 2013, the heat and humidity during the sold-out show was incredible. One patron, recognizing my employee ID badge, came up to me and showed me his iPhone app, which registered an interior temperature of 96 degrees and a humidity reading of 97. He seemed more proud than angry of having endured the experience.

After the show, when I approached Jake Berry, Sabbath's production manager for the tour, to apologize for the heat, he cut me off immediately. "Don't apologize. It was great. THAT'S rock and roll!"

Few would know better than he.

Not every flaw was as charming. As you'd expect, the plumbing that had served its purpose for more than five decades was far short of failsafe as well. During major events, we'd have to schedule a cadre of plumbers that would stand at the ready — like a pit crew— in the event a plumbing failure would occur. And, when event attendance hit 8,000 or so, which happened much more regularly than most people realize, failures DID occur. Often. And with unfortunate (and sometimes repulsive) consequences.

The permanent seats – more than 12,000 of them — never were replaced during the Arena's 57 years. Not as part of a plan, anyway. Countless high energy shows over the years took their toll on the seats (oddly, Slayer in 1991 being among the most injurious,

based on Arena folklore). It became a regular part of pre-event preparations to go through the *entire* house and give each seat a good pull and shove to see if it would hold up under 'enthusiastic' use.

Most did. Some didn't. All of them clearly showed their age with the house lights up, though. Fabric that faded far from its original color and padding that had long since been compressed beyond the point of performing any purpose. Essentially, you were sitting on a metal frame, which just happened to be covered with fabric. Worn, faded fabric.

And, of course, with the Arena residing in the middle of a public park, incursions into the building by dogs, cats, possums and various other animals were by no means isolated incidents. One year, when Stun Gun Productions produced Sony's annual E3 Press Event at the Arena, a couple of their staff members saw movement in the darkness upstairs at loge level. Because theirs was an event prone to espionage by bloggers anxious to leak information to the gaming public and thereby undermine the moment for a large corporation, they suspected an intruding blogger, but instead came across a tiny Chihuahua that had taken up residence in the building. Instead of demanding its ouster, they did the opposite — befriending the terrified dog, claiming it, getting it cleaned up at a local groomer and naming it, fittingly enough . . . Sony.

But, The Boss was right. It WAS the "dump that jumped." That quote has been repeated ad nauseam over the last couple of months in the face of the Arena's pending demolition, but it's actually an apt characterization of the Sports Arena's overall vibe in the *present* (soon to be past) tense. That the vibe was lightyears from what was intended back in 1959 when it was considered truly state of the art has been beside the point for quite a while now. We, as staff members, embraced the notion that we worked in service of a venue that was truly unlike any other. Both the good and bad that came with it.

While essential infrastructure like air conditioning and plumbing lagged ever further behind present day norms as the years went by, a surprising number of the venue's features were actually pretty timeless.

Because of its unique design, the Arena had a huge floor that was (and to this day still is) unequaled for both square footage and capacity anywhere around. In later years, floor capacity was usually capped at 6,500, as safety precautions have (justifiably) become more stringent over time, but earlier open-floor events often saw a lot more fans down there. Thousands more, at times.

It made for some very unique, high energy shows. During a Fall Out Boy concert, I remember walking behind the stage at street level to take some marketing photos and thinking that, with a full floor and sold-out house, the Arena on that night looked for all the world like a giant club with an arena perched on its shoulders.



The loading ramp was so wide that you could actually fit three semis side-by-side-by-side at the bottom. It might have seemed like overkill to some, but it's amazing just how fast a load-out can happen when a crew is anxious enough to get on the road. And while we didn't have the luxury of retractable seating at floor level, our staff became so experienced and skilled at their craft that they could remove a huge swath of seating for better access to the semis, using just manpower, mallets and ratchets, in about as much time as it took to drop the trusses to stage level to begin loading them out.

In later years, concert rehearsals became an ever-increasing staple on the calendar. Despite time having marched on and production values calling for ever more elaborate (and heavier elements), rehearsal managers were often impressed by the old building's ability to handle the weight of modern effects, admittedly with some temporary-but-fully-permitted reinforcement, as well as the clearance the venue offered in order to get these elements to their proper position to recreate the actual concert experience.

The Sports Arena could no longer BE the venue of choice for most top-tier touring acts, but it could sure simulate the venue of choice for top-tier touring acts.

It was almost entirely concrete, steel, terrazzo and tile. Indestructible, for the most part. And if damage DID occur, it had to be SERIOUS damage to be noticed, anyway. Usually, nothing that spackle, paint and maybe a drywall patch wouldn't solve. When a random utility cart would accidentally plow into a wall now and again, prevailing concern would almost always be more for the cart than the wall.

The Arena may have started life as the "must-play" venue in Los Angeles, but of course it didn't finish out that way. The Forum opened in late 1967 and would take the Lakers and Kings with it. The Arrowhead Pond (now the Honda Center) opened in 1993, the Staples Center some six years later and business certainly did erode over time. In a BIG way.



Photo by "Dick" Whittington

Having to survive on the venue's own revenue made for bolder decisions. Unlike many public facilities around the country even now, the Sports Arena never DID receive any taxpayer money (an important and yet often ignored distinction), so we didn't really have the luxury of being overly selective in our programming. There was no financial "safety net." If we were to fall (i.e. no longer make budget) we'd fall all the way to the ground.

The concept of “use it or lose it” operational budgets were something that we as staff members marveled at, but never got to experience for ourselves.

Springsteen would and did, of course, still play the building, and it still presented a good fit for shows like Green Day, the Killers, Daft Punk and a host of others, but over time, programming became anchored for the most part either by events that were well off the mainstream or for one reason or another, other venues didn't really want at the time.

I still remember the quizzical expressions I would get at industry events like the EAMC when responding to questions along the lines, “So, with Staples Center just down the street, what does your building do?”

Why, Cage vs. Cons . . . Midget Rodeo . . . the annual Lowrider Car Show. . . Rock en Espanol . . .

Not generally the usual staples in arena programming, and a far cry from concerts by household names and shows like Disney on Ice, Ringling Bros Circus and the WWE that once played the Sports Arena but now played elsewhere.

Cage vs. Cons? A full afternoon-into-evening's worth of Mixed Martial arts bouts pitting various law enforcement officers against former convicts. Seriously, that was the theme.

What could POSSIBLY go wrong?

During the course of the event, plenty did, though thankfully things could have been much worse. The promoter of the event had insisted repeatedly that his was an inherently safe event, as thousands of law enforcement officers would be turning out to cheer their brethren. They had already purchased tickets, he insisted.

It didn't pan out that way. The six or seven officers taking part in the color guard for the National Anthem made up the lion's share of law enforcement attendance. It was a pretty tense day, with the event punctuated in storybook fashion with a headlining bout that saw **Officer Ismael Gonzalez** knock his opponent out cold after having been fouled by him throughout the fight to bring the event to its conclusion.

Good triumphed over evil, if only for that night.

But for every difficult event or experience the Arena might have provided, there were many others that were simply unforgettable. Naturalization Ceremonies that ushered in a new life chapter for thousands of U.S. citizens. The emotional outpouring that came during the funeral services for the slain Department of Home Security officer, Gerardo

Hernandez. Pearl Jam showing that they were still at their absolute best, more than two decades after their ascendance. In earlier years, arriving at the building entrance at the same time as then-Clipper GM Elgin Baylor and getting the privilege to exchange a “good morning” with one of the greatest basketball players to ever put on a jersey, and who spent a good chunk of his career in that very building.

And, of course, The Boss.

Very soon now, a crew will come in, strategically place explosives and detonating devices, and do their job. Footage of the Arena imploding will likely be shown on various news outlets time and time again. And, after taking the necessary precautions to mitigate the substantial amount of asbestos that was contained in the building (the topic of a considerable amount of jokes among staff members), the resulting rubble will be hauled away to make room for the new soccer stadium.

Yet, even with the substantial amount of archived Arena history that exists, somehow I can't help but feel that while some history will be preserved, the moments themselves — the energy, emotions and experiences all those events created for so many people, for so many years — will just escape into the universe.

So many moments.

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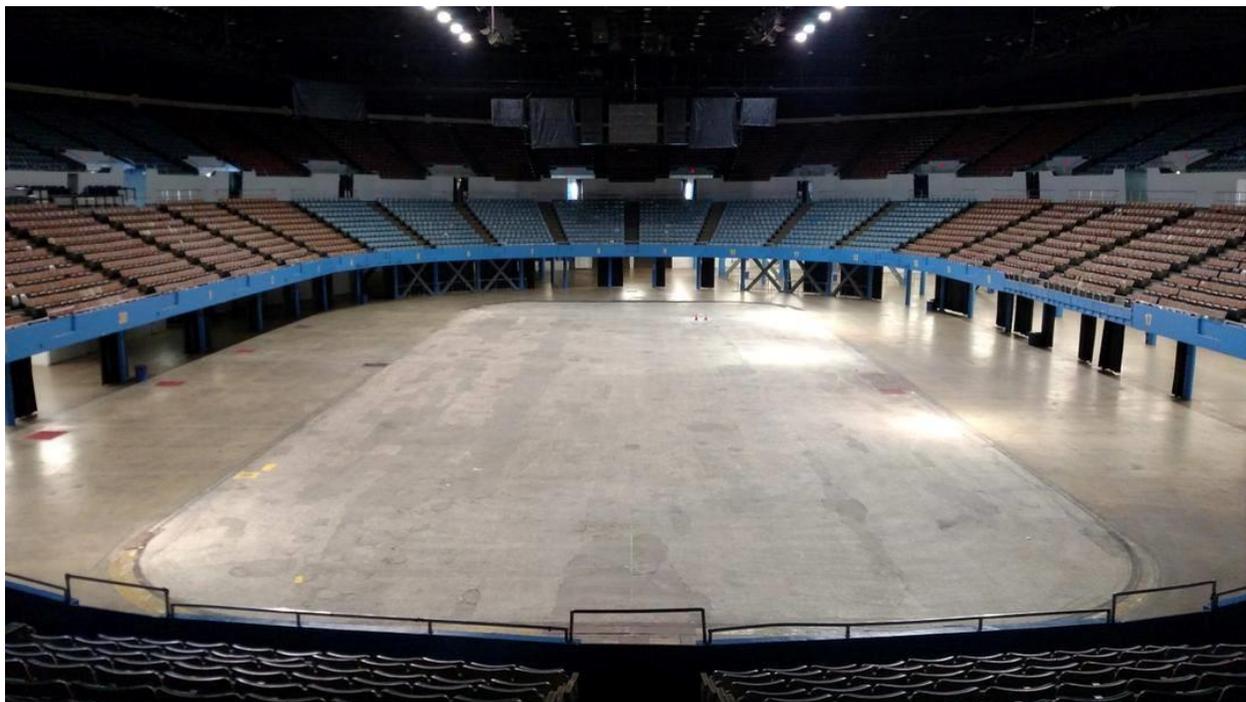




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