

LAWEEKLY

FREE

LIVE NATION'S CROWN JEWEL: HOLLYWOOD PALLADIUM REOPENS THIS WEEK

From Blue Eyes to Jay-Z, venue has played host to the history of American music

BY STEVE APPLEFORD

Published on October 16, 2008



Credit: Coe Architecture International

"Hey, dude," asked the young punk behind the wheel, "are you ready for a nonstop bop?"

Brett Gurewitz was barely 17 in 1979, and the only one with a car among his small circle of suburban San Fernando Valley punk friends. That made him the designated driver of the night, charged with picking up his friends for their first-ever road trip to the Hollywood Palladium, where the Ramones were set to deliver some real Blitzkrieg Bop across the ballroom's old dance floor. Gurewitz played guitar in a neighborhood band called Bad Religion, and Greg Graffin was the 15-year-old singer. Their group had never played a show, and they were two years from recording their first EP, but now they were en route to the fading Streamline Moderne dance hall of Sunset Boulevard, absolutely ready to watch a nonstop punk rock jamboree.

"I don't know if it was as magical as I remember it," says Gurewitz, now 46, who recalls the venue as "pretty dilapidated" even then — despite the red carpet and chandeliers — but still epic enough to make a lasting impression. "It's pretty cool when you get a few thousand punk rockers pogoing to the Ramones at the Palladium in '79. It's hard to describe how great that can be."

The Palladium has been that kind of room for music fans ever since its 1940 opening night, headlined by the swinging sounds of the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and a young Frank Sinatra. Actress Dorothy Lamour cut the ceremonial ribbon. The Rolling Stones were there in '72, and Bowie and Led Zeppelin gigged the same decade. Lawrence Welk taped his easy-listening TV variety show every Saturday night in the '60s. There were Grammy Awards and Emmy ceremonies, and a notorious brawl between punks and LAPD riot police in the parking lot after another night with the Ramones — and Black Flag — in 1984. Ronald Reagan and Phyllis Diller both walked the red carpet for gathered press and paparazzi. Maybe your parents met there. (Mine did.)

The Hollywood Palladium closed last fall after a series of concerts by the British romantic Morrissey, who had crooned there many times as a solo artist and with the Smiths. But the Palladium wasn't closing because it was doomed to the wrecking ball, even if its proximity to newly revitalized Hollywood made it a potentially lucrative development property. (The Hollywood Heritage preservation group has often warned of efforts to bulldoze it away this past decade.) The venue reopens October 15 with a performance by Jay-Z and his 12-piece band, unveiling an \$18 million renovation that preserves its sweeping, elegant lines while updating its sound and infrastructure.

The makeover is the result of new ownership (CFRI-NCA Palladium Venture, LLC) and a 20-year lease signed by concert promoter Live Nation, which aims to reposition the 4,000-capacity venue as a prime destination for top touring acts of all genres. The coming weeks will see the likes of Rise Against, the Roots and Gym Class Heroes, Flogging Molly, Mudvayne, Of Montreal and the Jonas Brothers.

They will perform at an historic ballroom created by architect Gordon B. Kaufmann (designer of the L.A. Times building and the Hoover Dam) and financed by the Times' then-publisher, Norman Chandler.

LAWEEKLY

FREE

"This is a great building. It means too much," says Rick Mueller, president of Live Nation California. "You can't rip buildings like this down." The Palladium has been repainted and recarpeted, its 11,200-square-foot dance floor resurfaced, the original chandeliers refitted, and several rooms reopened that have been unused for years. Under the guidance of architect Christopher Coe, the '60s-era plastic façade and marquee familiar to recent generations have been removed and the original 1940s grid design resurrected.

"It is exceptional," says Mike Buhler, director of advocacy for the L.A. Conservancy. "Rarely do you see an owner investing so much into bringing a building back to its original appearance."

Inside, there are now elevators to balconies on both sides of the ballroom, new access to the dance floor for disabled patrons, an \$800,000 air-conditioning system and several new bathrooms on both floors. The developer has raised the roof above the stage by 20 feet to create a new, reinforced-steel infrastructure to accommodate the heavy light and sound rigging demanded by contemporary acts.

New management means big changes. The room's historic problems with muddy sound are being corrected. And no longer will fans be lined up and virtually strip-searched at the door, with all cigarettes, lighters, lipstick, ballpoint pens, eye drops and other confounding forms of contraband dumped into trash barrels, says Mueller. "The sound sucked, and the staff were assholes. That's notorious," he says of the recent past. "We are definitely running a more fan-friendly environment."

Two weeks before opening night, the infrastructure upgrade was complete, but about 100 workers operated power tools or worked at repainting the walls their original green and tan, or attached doors and light fixtures. In the main room, it appeared to be snowing as a masked worker in a hard hat stood high on scaffolding to spray white sound-dampening material onto the ceiling. Two of the original chandeliers hung beside him, still covered in protective plastic.

Gurewitz has watched all this with interest as he passes by every morning on his way to Epitaph Records, which he owns. In the early '90s, Bad Religion became a kind of de facto Palladium house band, the local support act of choice for visiting punk, indie, alternative headliners. As their own popularity soared, Bad Religion hosted their own shows, recording a live DVD during a three-night stand there in late 2004. "The Palladium was like the Holy Grail, at least to me," Gurewitz says. "It felt like you'd really made it if you played there."

Flogging Molly singer Dave King was an occasional visitor by the early '90s, after arriving from Dublin, and saw some of his earliest L.A. shows there: the Damned, Rancid, PJ Harvey, taking in the scene, the big dance floor and the lingering glamour of the ancient building. "It's so Hollywood, isn't it?" King says with a laugh. "You can't imagine something like that being torn down and turned into a car park. It's really cool, you know?"