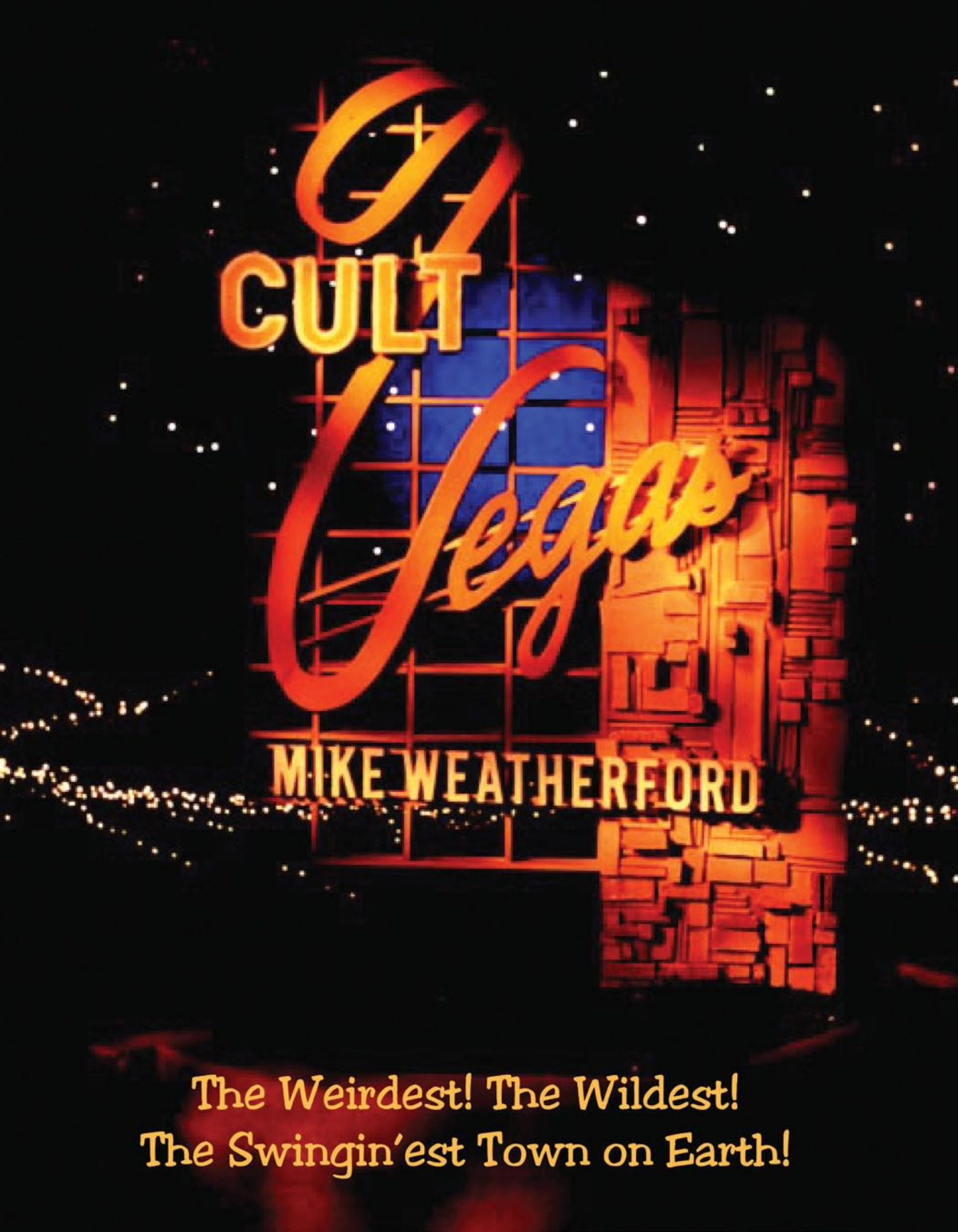
CULT
Vegas
MIKE WEATHERFORD
The Weirdest! The Wildest!
The Swingin'est Town on Earth!

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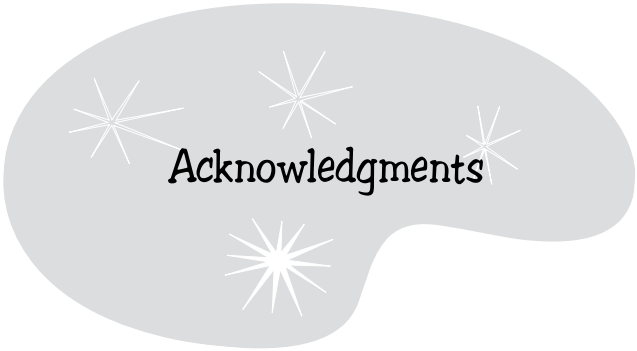
To Bill and the other Las Vegas entertainment journalists before me—both the legitimate and the less so—who captured some peculiar history and left a fun trail to follow.



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Mike Weatherford
September 2000

Cult Vegas Presents

Introduction

It's almost gone now, the old Las Vegas. What remains of it hides—sometimes in plain sight, sometimes under camouflage—trying to evade the heavy hand of progress wielding dynamite or a wrecking ball. Anyone who's visited Las Vegas in the past few years knows the story. The land has become too valuable, each square foot along the Strip too prized, for history. Every inch of space can be developed to the density of an urban skyscraper and crammed with more shops or slot machines—bad news for the tree-lined driveways, the two-story hotel wings, and the rolling lawns of the old Vegas. Names once synonymous with the city—the Dunes, the Sands, the Landmark—have tumbled in celebrated "implosions" staged for the amusement of giddy tourists and locals who've come to know the city too recently to feel any sense of loss.

The new Vegas is a vertical skyline of monolithic hotel towers and casinos mutated into shopping malls. Even some of the classic names that are still in business—Caesars Palace, the Sahara—have done their best to remove any vestiges of their old garden rooms or poolside cabanas in the name of bigger, better and newer. At this writing, the latest casualties were Caesars' Circus Maximus showroom—where the phrase "playing Caesars" was defined as having conquered a particular realm of show business—and the entire 50-year-old Desert Inn. Not that much of Wilbur Clark's original construction remained, but it still was nice to see the name.

Finding what remains of the old Las Vegas, places to stand and feel the physical history, takes some determination. There's the El Cortez casino downtown, where the original 1941 building still lies in front of a newer tower. Walk up to the second-floor barbershop, look out the window past the neon canopy, and imagine what Fremont Street must have looked like in the '40s. Or drive by the Moulin Rouge on Bonanza Road to see the rare example of a 1955 hotel preserved because its land did not become valuable on a street now patrolled by the homeless.

On the more inviting Strip, the first nine stories of the Riviera and the three-story room wings to the Tropicana were blended into newer construction. For a better feel of how things used to be, go to the south side of the Stardust and stroll the rectangle of two-story room wings surrounding the swimming pool from the old Royal Nevada. These remnants of the failed 1955 casino were annexed by the Stardust long ago, but they outlasted the Stardust's original motel wings, which were torn down in late 1999. Each downstairs room boasts its own sitting porch and French doors, serving as reminders of the oasis once found along a thirsty desert highway. And just north of the Riviera Hotel, behind an ugly strip mall facade, the Algiers Motel rests in most of its resplendent 1954 glory. For years you could peer through a chained gate to the north and see a real ghost town, complete with blowing tumbleweeds and buildings branded with Wild West names, such as Carson City and Dodge City. The room wings to the original Thunderbird Hotel, they were the oldest standing pieces of the original Las Vegas Strip. But they, too, have recently fallen victim to the wrecking ball so as not to sully the view from new luxury condominiums going up to the east.

With the original buildings disappearing fast, the rest of the old Vegas is all attitude. And that's most of what you'll be reading about here. Not Las Vegas the place, but Vegas, the state of mind. The Vegas that never went away, but faded in politically correct times only to resurface as a backlash to Big Brother telling you that you can no longer drink, smoke, or laugh.

This book being an entertainment history—and a fairly specific one at that—it's not the place to read a detailed history of Las Vegas. But a selective overview will help put some of the insanity that follows into context. I'll make it as simple as

The Dunes sign becomes a fallen giant in the wake of the hotel's implosion in October 1993. During the street party, thousands of people cheered as the hotel was brought down, launching the makeover of the Strip.

possible. Vegas, at least as it's discussed here, was born on September 4, 1951—the day Frank Sinatra came to town.

Before that, everything sort of set the stage. In 1907, the first electric lights (not yet neon) illuminated Fremont Street. A drilling company discovered that the sleepy railroad town rested on an underground water supply, reason enough to incorporate a city four years later. In 1931, the dusty valley was blessed with a Depression-busting project called Hoover Dam. That same year, Nevada eased its divorce laws and sanctioned wide-open gambling to sweeten the incentives for those dam tourists.

In 1941, the El Rancho Vegas became the first hotel to open along U.S. 91 to Los Angeles, now known as the Strip. It was soon joined by the Last Frontier. No matter what the movie portrayed, Bugsy Siegel did not get the idea to build the Flamingo by stumbling into a barren desert to be imbued with a divinely inspired vision. He was a gangster, not a visionary, or he surely would have tried to buy more of the surrounding land. But he and Meyer Lansky knew a good idea when they saw one. They rescued the financially stalled brainchild of Hollywood Reporter publisher Billy Wilkerson, after pulling a quick cash turnover on the El Cortez and trying unsuccessfully to buy the El Rancho Vegas.

The Bugsy movie was right about Siegel's cost overruns on the lavish project, which in late 1946 changed the image of Las Vegas from frontier gambling town to big-city sophistication. "The town has been converted to an opulent playground," Associated Press reporter Bob Thomas proclaimed after visiting the Flamingo on December 30, 1946. And Siegel did design his own suite in the Oregon Building so there would be only one way in, but several trap doors and hidden escape hatches

The Stratosphere towers above room wings from the 1948 Thunderbird Hotel. The oldest remaining pieces of the original Las Vegas Strip, the room wings met their demise in the summer of 2000.

out. That's why his still-unknown killer, believed to have represented his disgruntled investors, chose his girlfriend's more accessible bungalow in Los Angeles as the place to put a slug in the 41-year-old gangster's eye.

The Vegas-begins-with-Sinatra theory should be self-explanatory to all true believers and will be addressed in more detail in the Sinatra chapter. But one reason this theory rings so true is that Sinatra's takeover in the '50s coincided with two significant trends: the development of the Strip and the dawn of television.

The Strip was still not much of one, with only three places along the highway featuring nightclub entertainers when Sinatra debuted at the year-old Desert Inn. (Sinatra was competing with Rudy Vallee at the El Rancho Vegas that first engagement.) The Sands, which was to become Sinatra's home, did not open until December 1952. But when the Strip started to grow, it took off quickly: The Sands, Sahara, Dunes, New Frontier, Riviera, Royal Nevada, Hacienda, Tropicana, and Stardust all arrived between 1952 and 1958. All of them to some degree abandoned cowboy kitsch for the sleek supper-club architecture and atmosphere that Wilkerson's Hollywood crowd had come to expect in Los Angeles, not to mention in New York—Sands impressario Jack Entratter was imported from the famed Copacabana—Miami, and Havana.

But the little boomtown in the Nevada desert had the twin advantages of deep-pocket investors (regardless of where the investment money came from), who spared no expense to get big-name attractions into their casinos, and a proximity to "Television City" on the West Coast. As TV started to become a fixture in American homes, Las Vegas could promote its own neon mystique at the same time it capitalized on stars who were crossing back and forth between the nightclub and television worlds. Reigning names such as Danny Thomas, Milton Berle, and Red Skelton may be neglected in this book to focus on cooler characters, but they can't be denied their roles in building the city's importance and legitimacy.

Did I say "legitimate"? Such a (dirty) word would never have come up in the roaring '50s if it hadn't been for those comforting faces from the picture tube. The celebrated murders of Siegel and, later, Gus Greenbaum—who'd "rescued" the Flamingo after Siegel's death, then moved over to run the Riviera before his throat was slit in Phoenix—fueled the public's imagination about the organized crime figures behind the swanky casinos. James Bond's creator, Ian Fleming, wrote a series of travel essays in 1959 and 1960 (collected as the book Thrilling Cities) and calmly spelled it out for his readers: "Some of the hotels and casinos in Las Vegas are owned in a considerable proportion by gangster money. These syndicates, as they are politely named, are four—Texas, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago."

In truth, the web of ownership was much more tangled, and investigative journalists Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris attempted to sort it out in their landmark 1963 exposé, The Green Felt Jungle. "The big guessing game in Las Vegas is 'Who owns whom,'" they readily admitted. "Though there are many big hoodlums in Las Vegas operating openly as licensed owners in plush Strip casinos, there are many

more who operate behind legitimate or semilegitimate fronts. … It is a baffling and curious game that confuses police, the Gaming Control Board, and not a few casino owners along the Strip."

Business continued to boom, as evidenced by the hotel towers of the new casinos and hotel tower expansions to the older ones. Depending on how you view it, the best or worst thing that ever happened to Vegas was the vision of an entrepreneur named Jay Sarno. It was he who created the first "themed" casinos on the Strip, starting with Caesars Palace in 1966 and following it with Circus Circus in 1968. Until that point, any themes suggested by the exotic hotel names and giant neon signs stopped at the doorways of the interchangeable casinos. But the $25 million Caesars Palace made a real attempt—albeit a '60s bachelor-padified attempt—"to re-create the mood of the great 'Golden Age of Rome,'" as press releases touted the opening of the 34-acre resort.

Circus Circus was an omen in more ways than one. Memorably described by Hunter S. Thompson as "what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war," the big-top themed casino opened the door to Vegas as a place that even a fit parent would contemplate as a family destination. Not that the original notion of a "family casino" couldn't still be a little warped. An opening-week ad touted one of the games: "Hit the target and knock a nude girl out of bed and make her dance!" Kids shot water pistols at a target, trying to dump a bikini-clad babe from her perch. "Younger kids really liked that one," remembers Steve Izenour, an architect who crashed the grand opening while visiting Vegas on a field trip from Yale. "But I don't think it lasted very long."

Anyone who visits the Strip today might find it hard to believe that the International (now the Las Vegas Hilton) could actually open without a theme, other than its claim of being the largest hotel in the world, in 1969. However, it can be argued that the 1,500-room monolith might not have drawn so much attention if Elvis Presley had not put it on the map. The MGM Grand Hotel (now Bally's), which opened in 1973, was further architectural proof that the mob days had given way to corporate dreams of mega-hotels, though its Celebrity Room still relied on traditional headliners such as Dean Martin.

"Jumpsuit Elvis" straddled the line between the early social upheaval of rock 'n' roll and the Sinatra-era Vegas mystique that stood for a more subtle rebellion—a boozing, gambling getaway from the bland post-war responsibilities of raising families in the suburbs. Teen-age fans from Presley's breakthrough days were now, like their idol, on the far side of 30. Elvis was hip enough to lure this '50s rock generation to town, but not so hip as to seem completely at odds with the traditional headliners who still thrived here. He was backed up by an orchestra along with his rock band, and he favored current pop hits such as "Proud Mary," or show tunes like "The Impossible Dream," over his '50s rockabilly.

But of course it didn't last, and Elvis' tumble from "Comeback King" to bloated

self-parody paralleled the outside world's view of Vegas. The hotels continued to flourish as Howard Hughes and other corporate "big-picture" guys took control in the '70s, but hotel entertainment did not keep up as well. Rock and related pop music evolved from a social movement into an industry. Rock promoters were refining the new business of sports arena tours at the same time that the acts themselves were squeezing the nightclub entertainers out of the pop-culture limelight. Gradually, between 1968 and 1975, Vegas found itself pushed across the generational line that divides cool from laughable.

By the late '70s, Vegas icons such as Wayne Newton became the objects of a new humor honed by irony, as best summed up by Bill Murray's Nick the Lounge Lizard on Saturday Night Live—"Star Wars, nothing but Star Wars, if they should bar wars, let them keep Star Wars. ..." Without a new generation of headliner types to draw from, Vegas became an elephants graveyard of has-beens or dependable B-teamers. By 1988, the town was so unhip to touring rockers that Allan Bregman, then president of Caesars World Entertainment, lamented: "Sometimes you can't even get into the money factor. You never even get to that plateau. They just will not do it." This may not sound so bad until you realize that one of the acts that had to be swayed was the Beach Boys, who hadn't been a significant pop music force since the '60s. "They were very reluctant," Bregman said.

A random look at the showroom lineup in May 1982, the dawn of the MTV era, reveals the dog days of entertainment inertia. A couple of celebrated veterans, Sammy Davis Jr. and Shecky Greene. A quartet of younger but out-of-phase traditionalists—Robert Goulet, Crystal Gayle, Neil Sedaka, and Paul Anka. Two journeymen making valiant attempts to become homegrown "stars" in the Wayne Newton mode: singer Lovelace Watkins and female impersonator Jim Bailey (both of whom had been working the Strip for at least eight years). The rest of it was dinner theater comedies or showgirl revues, ranging from famous extravaganzas (Lido de Paris) to low-budget burlesque.

The salvation this time did not involve any single name such as Elvis—unless you count Walt Disney. The opening of the Mirage on Thanksgiving weekend 1989 returned the fantasy architecture of the hotel itself to the center of attention, more than any entertainer or attraction within. Self-styled visionary Steve Wynn wisely restored some of the Strip's faded luster by steering the Mirage away from old casino clichés and embracing a colorful tropical motif. A year later, the Excalibur, a crackerbox purportedly resembling a castle, revived the theme concept for the family crowd. The idea was that if all the other casino interiors were interchangeable, maybe you'd go out of your way to see a few suits of armor and a puppet show.

This trend of the casinos themselves replacing celebrity names on the marquees reached its apex in late 1993, when Circus Circus finished a fully functional pyramid called the Luxor and Wynn opened Treasure Island, complete with a full-scale pirate battle out front every 90 minutes. The Strip had become "a kind of sentimentalized

Disney World," observed architect Robert Venturi, who has studied Las Vegas since the late '60s. Venturi co-authored the 1972 book Learning From Las Vegas after helming an expedition of Yale School of Art and Architecture students, who studied the commercial strip as a social phenomenon. But 25 years later, he found that the motels and gaudy road signs that were "designed essentially for connecting with a moving automobile in a hot desert" had evolved into "a kind of Disneyland where you're walking through a scenographic, a kind of stage scenery where you're on the stage."

> "I remember when Las Vegas was dirty and sleazy. Now it's just cheesy."
>
> Chrissie Hynde
> 1994

The Strip now sports a hotel fashioned after the New York skyline directly across the street from the Lego castle Excalibur. The visual contrast can be found nowhere else, but both hotels are still more theme-park fantasy—trying to give gambling a wholesome facelift—than the unique piece of Americana that Vegas embodied in the '50s. "It's kind of ironic that in a way [the Strip] is becoming less radical, even though in some ways it's more spectacular," Venturi says.

After the Mirage, the whole city just exploded. The Yale architects and students were drawn to the Strip in 1968 because it was an extreme and isolated example of that automobile-age phenomenon known as the commercial strip. "At a certain level [Vegas] was unconscious architecture," said Learning From Las Vegas co-author Denise Scott-Brown. "That doesn't mean that architects didn't design it … but the overall that was so wonderful hadn't really been thought through."

Now, the corporations have seen just how many hotel rooms can be crammed onto each lot fronting the Strip. The accountants deem anything less than 3,000 rooms an inefficient use of the land. The grand old Sands was blown up and replaced by the Venetian, a Y-shaped knockoff of the Steve Wynn resorts across the street. You can imagine hearing Venetian owner Sheldon Adelson saying, "Wynn got his, I want mine," as he signed the Sands' death warrant to make way for his copycat. Later, the Aladdin's implosion showed how ridiculous all this destruction has become: The Aladdin's hotel tower was built in 1975.

The happy accident that was Las Vegas is now "large and mass-produced and thought through to the very last inch," notes Scott-Brown. "It's part of the largest building scale that society manages." The urban density now forms an uneasy alliance with the return of "class" to the Strip. The new wave of projects—chief among them Wynn's Bellagio—takes its design from upscale Mediterranean resort-hotels. But the Bellagio aspires to a taste level that seems at odds with the hotel's overwhelming size, not to mention that instinctive compulsion of a Vegas casino to go over the top. At the very least, however, the new century found Las Vegas well on its way to shedding the last of its old image as a polyester sea of nickel-chipping seniors and trailer trash.

In fact, it's safe to say Las Vegas is fun again. That much must be freely admitted, especially by an author who covers entertainment for the city's morning newspaper. Toward the end of the '90s, the Strip was pulling in young, attractive people in a way that didn't seem possible 10 years earlier. Try to get past the modern-day fixation on logos and franchising, and it's possible to imagine the relatively cozy Hard Rock Hotel as being what the Sands was in the late '50s—attuned to the pop culture of its day and packed with well-dressed, well-heeled, beautiful people.

Entertainment in the new Vegas has made peace with the modern music industry by opening venues—the Hard Rock and House of Blues, and arenas at the MGM Grand Hotel and Mandalay Bay—to host touring concert acts. And, since rock 'n' roll lived long enough to have a history, the old headliner rooms finally have a new wave of aging has-beens—Huey Lewis, the Moody Blues, and so on—to step into place for today's graying boomers. Finally, there are those Vegas stalwarts, God bless 'em, who simply refuse to go away until time snatches them away: Sam Butera, the Treniers, Don Rickles, Tom Jones.

> "I remember when Vegas was called an elephants graveyard. I remember when all the acts who now play the Hard Rock said they wouldn't find themselves in Las Vegas. It's silly. ... We're past that stage where we make that comparison and put people in little boxes."
>
> Tony Orlando
> 1996

The sin, if there is one, is that the Strip is not that much different now than, say, the theme meccas in Orlando, Florida, or the CityWalk at Universal Studios in California. There's more to do, but less that's unique. No matter what becomes of the town, this book is a reminder that Vegas has always been about change. You can't stop it, so get out of the way. But it's impossible to completely snuff out the feeling that underneath its corporate, homogenized veneer, the Strip is still a little bit nuts.

And perhaps that old spirit just can't be extinguished. Time can take away the entertainers who put the town on the map, and the forces of so-called progress can blow up the fondly remembered places. But they can't take away the warped thrill of Vegas as long as true believers hold their shot glasses high and keep their cigarettes burning as brightly as the irrepressible souls who await them in the rest of these pages.