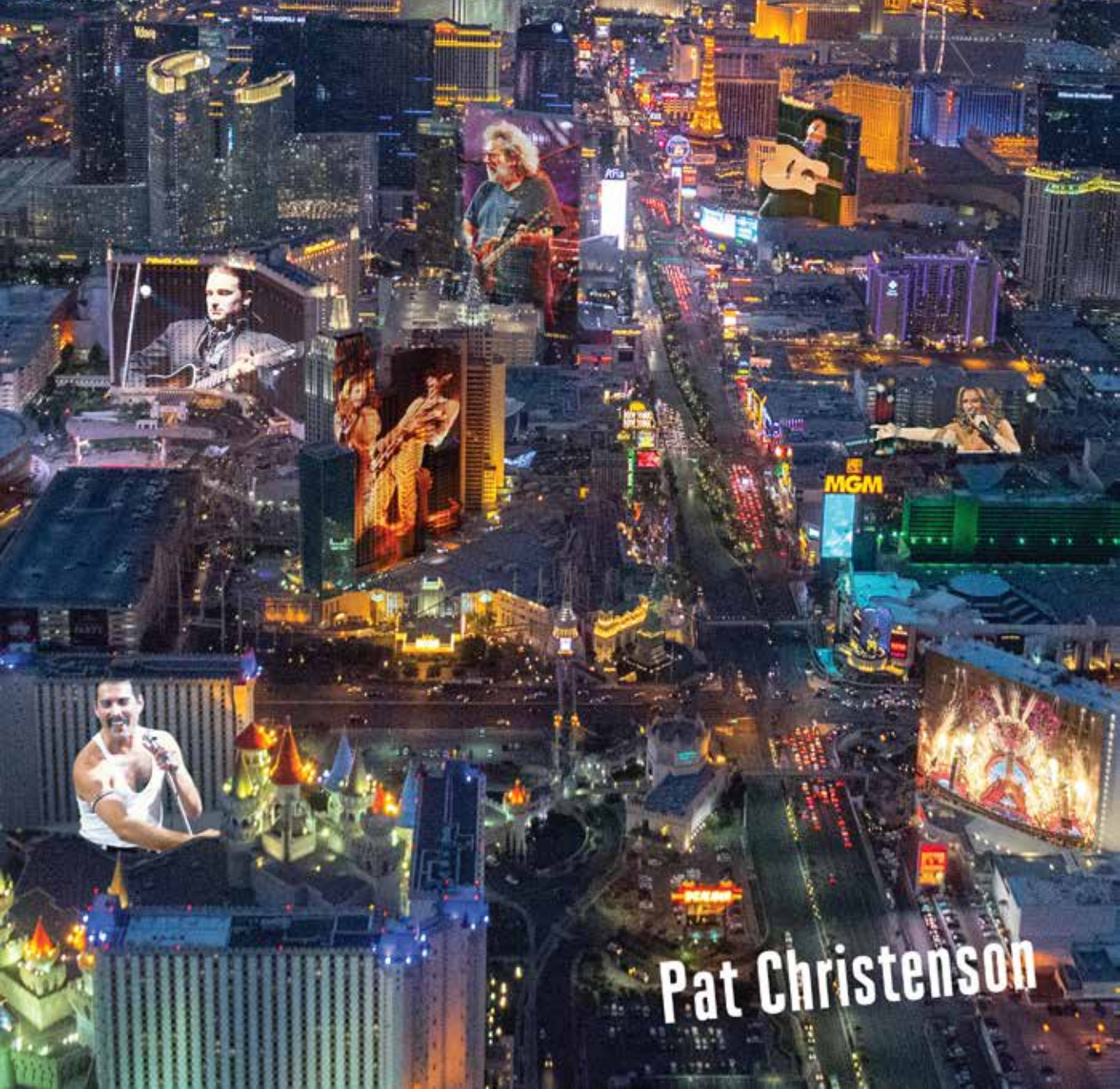


ROCK VEGAS

Live Music Explodes in the Neon Desert



Pat Christenson

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EXCERPT

In 1986, the Grateful Dead had been playing the Aladdin Theater for the Performing Arts in Las Vegas for five years. Bob Barsotti, who produced the Grateful Dead shows for promoter Bill Graham, described the first year they performed. After the shows, the fans made a beeline for the casino table games: “It was a sea of tie-dyed Deadheads.” The next year when the shows ended, the fans were shown directly to the parking lots. It became the policy for all rock shows at the Aladdin.

My trips to the Aladdin became annual events in which I asked Bob Barsotti the same question: “Are the Dead ready to graduate to the biggest building in the market, Thomas and Mack Center?” The band was very particular about the venues where they performed, usually choosing to underplay the market. Still, considering their popularity, we be-



above: It was a tradition that each opening act play at least one song with the Grateful Dead. In 1991 that was Santana.

lieved Thomas and Mack would be the next logical step. Unfortunately, they found it cavernous and sterile.

But then, in the late '80s, the Dead were having a hard time finding venues to play in Los Angeles. Many of the band's problems were caused by Deadheads overrunning commercial sites near the venues. They camped on private property, relieved themselves in the open, littered, set fires, and created traffic jams.

That gave us the idea to pitch the Sam Boyd Stadium. Bill Graham was skeptical, but he sent a production crew down to Las Vegas to check it out. They were immediately entranced by the contrast of the mountainous terrain surrounding the venue. In addition, the location, eight miles east of the Las Vegas Strip, separated the Deadhead scene from the city.



above: The Dead played to 14 sellouts at Sam Boyd Stadium, eight miles from the neon of the Strip.

The most tickets the Dead had ever sold for a show in Vegas was 7,000, for one night at the Aladdin. For the Sam Boyd shows to make financial sense, they'd need to sell out two 30,000-seat performances, nearly 10 times the previous sales. Unfortunately, Vegas' overall concert track record wasn't much of an endorsement: The biggest concert up until that time had sold 15,000 tickets. But Bob Barsotti had a good feeling about the stadium. He just had to convince Graham and the band.

He suggested the shows be first on the tour and announced before any other dates on the West Coast; no shows in L.A. or San Francisco

were scheduled until months afterwards, so Barsotti believed the fans would travel. He also cited the lure of Las Vegas and the propensity of Deadheads to flock to unique destinations.

Both Graham and the band thought he was nuts. The Dead weren't willing to take the risk. They did, however, offer a compromise: The guarantee had to be 50% higher than normal.

Graham had a lot of confidence in Barsotti's instincts, and the shows would definitely attract the Deadheads. But how many? Traditionally, the Dead didn't have opening acts. A bit nervous, Barsotti convinced Graham to add Santana. The day the 60,000 tickets, at \$23.50 apiece, went on sale, they were gone by noon.



AC/DC, TMC, 1986



left: Guns N' Roses, TMC, 1992 — right: Bon Jovi, TMC, 1987





The phenomenal Claw that traveled around the world to stage U2's 360 Degree tour included a stop at Sam Boyd Stadium in 2009—attended by former president Bill Clinton.

"Music gives soul to the universe,
wings to the mind, flight to
the imagination, and life to everything."
—Plato

"Music breaks down
the barriers people erect."
—Pete Townsend

"Music is escapism,
because life is so damn hard."
—Bob Lefsetz

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