

(S4,E16) Praise Be to the Las Vegas Sphere

Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine, briefly, that you are in the desert. You have been wandering, but not lost. You are searching. As night falls and the temperature drops, a calmness washes over you and you feel at peace. You know that it will be time to rest soon, but you must find it first.

In the distance you see a glow begin to emerge and take shape. You feel a lightness in your chest. It is almost time. You begin to speed up, your ambling stroll shifting into a jog and then a sprint, legs pumping in time with the beating of your heart. The horizon rises up to greet you – soon, you will be there.

Finally, the glow becomes solid. There it is. Fully formed. The Orb – mystical luminance warming the cockles of your still-racing heart, ripples of light dancing across your retinas. You can rest your weary mind now, for the message has been delivered. The Orb has spoken to you, like the whispers of angels in your ear. You weep, for finally you know. Trolls 2: Band Together is in cinemas November 17.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today, I'm thinking about the Las Vegas Orb.

If there's one thing I love it's the

monuments that crumbling empires build for themselves, and ever since the Orb – or as it's formally known, the Sphere at the Venetian Resort – went live as a permanent fixture just off the main strip in Las Vegas, I have not been able to stop talking about it. And my friends are getting sick of me. Which is why I have a podcast – you're coming on this journey with me!

So, if you've gotten to this point and you're like "what is she talking about?" I beg of you, take a pause and google 'sphere Las Vegas' and indulge in this very silly visual. If you don't have time for that – here's the short version. In 2018, the Madison Square Garden Company and Las Vegas Sands Corporation broke ground on a new project. These are development companies doing what development companies do, and as such it probably wasn't news to anyone outside of Las Vegas. But the project entered the mainstream consciousness on 4th July 2023, when someone finally hit the on switch for this bad boy. Suddenly, there was a giant spherical structure wrapped in screens, ablaze with animated fireworks to celebrate the public holiday illuminating the Las Vegas skyline.

It's difficult to emphasise how much this thing sticks out on the landscape, but its like... a multi-story office tower high and

completely lit up with curved screens. Following its initial cute little fireworks display it went on to show hyper realistic images of the moon and an eye. So essentially, you could be driving to work one evening, going to deal blackjack, when suddenly an eye almost as tall as the casino you work in could emerge from around a corner, dwarfing your tiny car, and then, by some horrifying accidental synching of animation, it could follow you along the overpass like some omnipotent God suddenly very concerned with the sin of your day job.

The digital realm was full of ominously phrased headlines like "Sphere alight for first time", "The Sphere is here" and "The Sphere can be bizarre or sublime". Twitter – I'm not calling it X – had a field day, photoshopping their own images onto the orb and swearing loyalty to our new LED overlords. But to what end? The sphere is here, yes, but to do what? Be bizarrely and sublimely alight? What does it do?

This part was initially unclear to me, because when the sphere was first lit up, I saw one headline and some video and refused to any further reading. I wanted to approach the Sphere like a 16th Century peasant – that is, allow myself to bathe in its glory, maybe weep a little, and then sacrifice myself at the altar of its eternal mercy. Then I showed a friend, and they were like "yes, but why?" When I refused to look it up, they searched for themselves. And lucky for me and my desire to return to my potato farming peasant roots, the website was sort of ominously blank with no indication of what purpose the sphere was serving. Then, a week or so into its initial lighting,

the sphere was transformed into a basketball promoting the NBA, and we all sort of just assumed that it was for really expensive billboard advertising.

But as of September, the Orb has moved from being officially lit to being officially open and we finally know that it is a 112m high and 157m wide concert venue, wrapped in 54,000m² of LED screens on the outside, and filled with an 18,600-person capacity auditorium that also features a wraparound LED screen and a bunch of 4D stuff for an "immersive concert experience". As an aside, recently I accidentally attended a 4D screening of Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning Part One. By 'accidentally' I mean I knew that it was 4D, but didn't fully understand what it meant. If you're unfamiliar with the concept of a 4D film experience, the cinema is equipped with motorized seats that move with the action on the screen and air and water puffers to spritz you whenever the movie shows water or a breeze. Sound good? Well, what followed was 2 hours and 43 minutes of my friend and I being violently tossed back and forth every time Tom Cruise took a hit to the face. I'm not sure if you've spent a lot of time with the Mission Impossible franchise but one of the core tenets is Tom Cruise's character Ethan Hunt being repeatedly clobbered in the face by larger adversaries until he makes a last-minute comeback. Whoever saw Mission Impossible and thought "The people need to literally feel the magic here" needs to suffer the same neck injury I did after almost three hours of being thrown around like a ragdoll.

Anyway... the Tom Cruise of it all aside, you might be wondering how such a

spectacular venue chose to make its grand opening. Which artist did they secure to make a statement fit for the great and mysterious Orb? What angelic chorus could possibly be gracing the serene curve of the great sphere? If you said, "A 25-concert residency from ageing Irish rock band U2, in which they play the entirety of their 1991 album, Achtung, Baby! (arguably, not even their best album), without their regular drummer who is off having surgery", then you would be correct. And why wouldn't you say that? It's the obvious choice, right? This explains why I (and presumably you) heard nothing about the impending opening of the Orb. We are so far outside the target demographic for Orb-based residencies that they seem to appear spontaneously from the digital ether, like the withered hands of The Edge reaching across time to remind us of when Apple forcibly uploaded a U2 album to our iTunes libraries. I don't even really know what my first choice would be to put in the Orb, but I can tell you that U2 and Achtung, Baby! are so far down the list they barely even register. But alas, because I am not in charge of Orb-based bookings (my new dream job), everyone under about 45 is being haunted by Bono against their will.

But look, to be fair, the inside of the Sphere actually looks extremely cool – basically all the screens on the outside are sort of mirrored on the inside, meaning that you can do hyper-realistic displays similar to what you would do on the outside. It's actually how I ended up deciding to write an episode about the Orb – I saw a series of videos from the concert where the screens were made to look like you were coasting above the

clouds at sunset, or like there were bugs lined up uniformly across the outside of the Sphere. Unfortunately, those images were attached to a Tweet that said, "failing empires simply don't build things like this", which is incredibly funny to me because buddy let me tell you, that is exactly what failing empires do. Welcome to the collapse of America. It's being rung in by the Irish getting funky in a desert Orb, as God intended.

But I began to wonder how much it would cost to build a perfect Sphere wrapped in LED screens in the middle of the desert. The answer is "Just, so much money." Before I kick off, much of this timeline comes from the diligent reporting of Richard N. Velotta for the Las Vegas Review Journal – he seems to have worked the Orb beat for basically its entire development. Like I said at the beginning, this project was announced in early 2018, and ground was broken at the end of that same year. It was initially projected to finish development in 2020 according to early announcements, though these were later pushed to 2021 in the same year. The projected cost wasn't revealed until 2019, when the Madison Square Garden Company, or MSG Company, advised shareholders that it would cost around \$1.2billion to construct. Now, that's already a massive outlay of money, but the Company was expecting it to become their busiest venue, outstripping their namesake venue in New York. At the time, MSG Company President, Andrew Lustgarten, advised that not only were the company going to provide Las Vegas' roughly 40 million annual visitors with a new experience they were also going to "create unprecedented opportunities for companies to engage with a very

valuable audience, which we anticipate translating into meaningful high-margin sponsorship revenue for the company". That's corporate for speak for "large, fancy billboard".

In February of 2020, the company announced that the cost could be expanded to \$1.66 billion, to accommodate some design changes. At this point, the developers were already around \$250 million in the hole, but were confidently telling shareholders that they could deliver savings. In the background, the company was in the process of transporting the world's 4th largest crane – a Demag CC-8800 crawler crane for all you crane-heads out there – across the ocean from Belgium to the build site. It was so big another crane was required to construct it over the course of 18 days. Unfortunately for both companies, just as the crane was up and running, early 2020 heralded in a pandemic and unrelenting global chaos (which is now completely over and with no lingering side effects... phew!) and by the end of March, the whole operation was shut down because of supply chain issues. Opening was pushed to 2023 and the delays meant that the out-of-control inflation we're all having to live with right now hit the build hard. Combined with a further expansion of project scope, the budget ballooned out to its final resting place of \$2.3 billion. With every announcement the stock price for MSG Company dropped and they recorded net losses in the tens of millions throughout 2021 and 2022.

\$2.3 billion is an absolutely exorbitant amount of money that makes the Sphere at the Venetian, Vegas' most expensive structure. To contextualise that, the most

expensive structure prior to this was the \$1.9 billion Allegiant Stadium. But it's also a football stadium and the national popularity of the NFL meant that it wasn't entirely privately funded, with portions of the money coming from county taxes in and around the build site. As a large stadium, Allegiant can also be farmed out as a concert venue for the biggest touring acts around. K-pop juggernauts BTS, for example, performed to around 200,000 people there and pulled over \$35 million. They're big numbers that underpin an existing, consistent revenue stream from the NFL.

In contrast, the Orb, and its eternal ethereal glory, is multiple companies throwing money at the wall and hoping it sticks. It is purely a concert/ "experience" venue – so there's no sporting revenue, meaning that it has to make its money entirely from concerts, advertising and "experiences" in whatever form those might take. On top of that, the large, curved LED screens mean that anyone who wants to play the venue and make it a worthwhile show has to work with a specific studio team, known as Sphere Studios, run by the same company, in order to put a show together.

In and of itself, the setup of Sphere Studios is a nightmare of additional money outlay. The studios opened in Burbank, California in mid-2022, and involved the construction of a quarter-scale prototype of the Las Vegas Sphere in order to conduct test screenings. According to the Hollywood Reporter, CEO of MSG Entertainment, Jim Dolan, said that production of anything for the Sphere (and for any future spheres) would take place at the Sphere Studios in Burbank.

In order to get a decent picture going on the mass of screens, they had to basically invent a new type of camera. They've also had to change the way they record audio, because the acoustics in a big dome shape are apparently difficult enough without the added complexity of doing the type of experiential 4D shit that they're trying to get going in there. Don't ask me to get any more detailed than that because I'm not a scientist and I could not tell you how or why those things are true, but there's a design lab in Germany employed by Sphere Studios who could.

So, with the \$2.3 billion, plus everything else involved with making the offsite studio team, how the hell is MSG Company going to make their money back? Well, the Sphere at the Venetian intends to host about 6 residencies a year from various musical acts who are willing to get on board with this enormous outlay of cash. In the downtime, they want to have a semi-permanent display happening so people can come through and absorb the experience of the Orb without having to outlay for a residency ticket. Plus they're exploring a bunch of different commercial partnerships and charging for the advertising on the outside. Inexplicably, all these avenues have led them to a U2 residency, and Darren Aronofsky for some reason. That's right – I just know that you, like me, heard 'big orb in a desert' and thought "This needs the Irish and the guy who directed Requiem for a Dream and psychological horror film Mother!" God, we're so in synch with the developers of the Sphere at the Venetian. We should oversee programming for the desert Orb, I think we'd be great at it.

Anyway – as mentioned, whole situation

made me do math, so prepare for some numbers, baby! So I did some research into ticket prices for the show, which turned out to be surprisingly difficult because of the nightmare that is Ticketmaster's dynamic pricing. But it appears that they started at the \$140 mark and then became \$300 almost immediately due to 'demand'. As of writing, the cheapest was sitting at \$400 and the most expensive was sitting at almost \$1,500. Now, simple division-wise, the Sphere would have to sell 1,533,000 of the most expensive seats to break even. With an 18,600 capacity venue, that's a mere 82 sold out shows. But of course, that's not actually what the number is. Leaving aside that not every ticket is going to be \$1,500 and not every show is going to be sold out, MSG Entertainment has paid U2 \$10 million for their residency. That figure alone isn't insane in the realm of Vegas residencies – Celine Dion was paid \$681 million for hers – but the second part of the deal is insane. MSG has guaranteed 90% of ticket sales to U2. They're keeping concession stand purchases, but I doubt anyone is spending \$1,500 apiece on drinks for the evening. Or maybe they are. Maybe I'm just not as rich as the average U2 fan. But essentially, MSG isn't making any money on this run of shows. Which is crazy considering how much they're currently out for the build alone.

Of course, U2 can't play every night, so they've also hired renowned film maker Darren Aronofsky to make an enormous feature film called Postcards from Earth. Shot in 18K resolution – a thing that literally didn't exist prior to this film – it will reportedly play to 10,000 people five times a day, paying around \$50 a head. Or like... try to, I guess. Now, ignoring

the fact that this reminds me of the giant IMAX screen that inexplicably exists in the Blue Mountains, that replayed a plane ride over the Three Sisters 3 times a day to no one, I cannot imagine corralling 10,000 people a day to do anything, let alone see a movie.

Now, it might sound like I've taken a weird turn into being the sort of person who cares about a company going bankrupt, but I promise that's not it. In every interview with the people constructing this monument in the desert, they keep promising that this is a long-imagined future of entertainment, as though the yearning for the Sphere was something that existed inside of us all along and they were simply realising our dreams. And all I can think is, "Is it?" I keep coming back to crumbling empires and the concept of bread and circuses. 'Bread and circuses' refers to superficial appeasement of the masses through their most base desires – food and entertainment. But where is there to go in pursuit of better and more perfect entertainment to distract from the ever-expanding garbage fire of climate change, fascist creep and geo-political conflict. Now, I'm not a huge U2 fan, but one of the reasons that they're doing Achtung, Baby! is because their original tour for the album, called the Zoo TV Tour, was actually a massive multimedia nightmare with screens everywhere. It was a commentary on media desensitisation and disparate media programming that at one point featured a livestream from Sarajevo which was in the process of having the shit bombed out of it. I do think it's telling that the band's longtime stage designer, Willie Williams initially thought the show was a terrible idea because the spectacle

of the multimedia experience that had made the original show so unique was now ubiquitous, and doing it on that scale defeated the artistic and political point of the original tour. Whatever they're doing in the Sphere loses any edge it had because it's literally just entertainment "revolutionised". Buy something at the snack stand and you've got your bread and your circus. The world can't get you.

I am biased because I genuinely believe being in the cinema to be a perfect experience – a large beautiful face on a screen is like god to me – but for all of our technological advancements, what counts as entertainment hasn't actually changed that much. People like to be told a good story, they like to see people play music and have a boogie, they like an emotional core. What they don't necessarily like is a venture capitalist coming in and reinventing the wheel every three minutes. When I saw Mission Impossible in all the horror of 4D, in between getting my shit rocked, I kept thinking, "Why would anyone want this?" People weren't sitting around their campfires, being like "I just feel like I would understand the experience of the knight in battle better if someone stabbed me with a really big sword right about now." Which leaves me with my final thought: What does our desert orb bring us, but a shiny distraction and a reminder to drink Coca Cola?

Well, that was my episode on the Las Vegas Orb. I'm not going to lie, I was ready to swear fealty to the Orb. I still might to be honest. I'm a 16th Century potato farming peasant at heart and it is simply so large and full of mystery. If you would like to join my Orb based cult and



**help me ring in the future of total and
all-consuming entertainment talk to me
about it next time you see me at the pub!
Peace!**

This episode premiered on 1st November 2023.

**Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson
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Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

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