



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Jim Morrison and the Alexandria Arena

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Image: The Alexandria Arena. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The former Alexandria Arena was an enormous Quonset-styled yellow brick and concrete art deco structure located at 801 N. St. Asaph St. in Old Town. On top of its front entrance was a sign in red letters that spelled out “Alexandria Arena.” The building itself cost more than \$1 million, and was opened to the public on the night of Tuesday, November 23, 1948.

Primarily used as a roller skating rink, local music promoters began using the building in the 1950s for sporadic big band or country music concert performances, citing its abundant floor space as its most attractive feature. The building was demolished in 1987.

Local radio stations began using the Alexandria Arena in the 1960s as a venue for rock ‘n’ roll concerts, an ideal setting given its local fire code limit of 4,000 people. Notable headline acts were Peter and Gordon, the Beach Boys, the Strangeloves, the Yardbirds, Neil Diamond, the Count Five, and on August 18, 1967, The Doors.

DJ Jack Alix from local station WPGC organized The Doors’ performance as part of a “Flower Power Hour” competition for 12 local rock bands. That night was the only recorded time that The Doors played two concerts in the same night. It was also the only time that Jim Morrison returned to Alexandria as the lead singer of the band. Morrison graduated from George Washington High School in 1961, left for Florida soon after graduating, and according to biographer Mark Opsasnick, only returned to Alexandria professionally on this one occasion.

Even before the concert started, Morrison was reportedly in a bad mood. He had gotten into an argument with his bandmates, which necessitated WPGC sending a driver to pick up Morrison by himself while the rest of the band traveled as planned from Annapolis. In one account, the driver said that he had to stop at a liquor store and buy two bottles of Jack Daniels on the way to the arena.

The adjectives used to describe Morrison’s performance in his return to Alexandria span a spectrum from “visibly intoxicated” to “mesmerizing.” Whatever substances were in his system did not prevent him from giving his former hometown the complete performance. This included extended versions of “Light My Fire” and “The End,” after which he threw a cymbal into the crowd and cut the forehead of a young female fan.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

As Alix tried to wrestle the microphone away from him, Morrison yelled, “Hey Alexandria!” and raised a middle finger to the audience as he left the stage. While he never performed in the city again, Morrison’s bandmates Ray Manzarek — who passed away in 2013 — and Robby Krieger performed hits by The Doors at The Birchmere in 2012.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.