



Opera House Historical Summary

Opera House Overview

Recently marking the 75th anniversary of its inaugural performance on April 21, 2009, the newly christened Peabody Opera House owns a vivid history with its next chapter about to be written.

The Opera House and its 3,500-seat main theater were completed in 1934 as part of the Municipal Auditorium complex that included the 9,300-seat Convention Hall that later became known as Kiel Auditorium. Construction on the Convention Hall was not completed until 1936. Designed by architects Louis LaBeaume and Eugene S. Klein, construction on the Municipal Auditorium began in 1932. The Opera House is all that remains of the original complex and extends south approximately 250 feet, where it meets Scottrade Center, the arena completed in 1994 that replaced Kiel Auditorium. Its facade extends 322 feet along Market Street frontage on the Memorial Plaza as part of St. Louis' most significant grouping of civic buildings.

The Opera House features six to seven venues, including an ornate main theatre with approximately 3,500 seats and a two-story front lobby (constructed entirely of Tennessee and Ste. Genevieve marble), four small side theaters or halls (with a capacity of up to 700 seats each), an exposition hall, basement restaurant/bar space, offices, dressing rooms and other support spaces for the facility. During its height of activity, the Opera House attracted the world's finest performers — concert artists, Broadway shows, plays, dance companies, symphonies, blues, jazz, country-western, rock, grand opera and light opera. It also presented several Veiled Prophet balls, choral pageants, civic events and traveling exhibits.

Origin of Design

Inspiration for the design of the Municipal Auditorium was born out of the City Beautiful movement that reached its height of popularity in America with the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. The City Beautiful movement sought to use beautification and monumental grandeur in cities to create moral and civic virtue among urban populations. With the entrance to the Opera House as its focal point, St. Louis' Municipal Auditorium was the perfect embodiment of that movement. The glorious classic architecture of the Opera House features eight Corinthian

columns adorning the front of the building, flanked on either side by sculptured panels entitled “Discussion” and “Recreation,” with inscriptions by Carl Schurz and Woodrow Wilson, respectively. The building’s signature is the two 10-ton limestone Missouri bears which crouch on pedestals guarding either side of the entrance.

It was during the period of civic optimism brought on by the construction of the World’s Fair grounds that a trio of prominent architects convened in 1904 for the formation of the St. Louis Public Buildings Commission. They were tasked with developing a plan to replace the city’s aging civic buildings and produced a report that became the model for future designs to reshape the urban fabric of downtown St. Louis.

The model for St. Louis’ Public Building Group Plan first incorporated the construction of a Municipal Auditorium in 1919 when the City Plan Commission stated the need for a versatile town hall able to be utilized as a city hall, theater, offices or arena. St. Louis voters cleared the way for this plan in 1923 when they passed what was the nation’s largest bond issue to date, generating \$87.4 million for the project that included \$5 million for the Municipal Auditorium.

While the City Plan Commission continued to develop the design and layout of its new public building group, the city did not purchase its first parcel of land on the two blocks dedicated to the auditorium until 1927, a deliberate process that lasted until February 1932. The total cost of the site was more than \$1 million dollars for 25 separate land purchases. Construction of the Municipal Auditorium officially began in August 1932.

An Instant Classic

The Municipal Auditorium was inaugurated on April 21, 1934, with a production of *Aida* in the Opera House. Giovanni Martinelli and Elizabeth Rethberg of The New York Metropolitan Opera (The Met) starred in the performance conducted by Gennaro Papi. The Opera House would become a regular stop for the touring company from The Met. A production of *Aida* had previously inaugurated another St. Louis performance venue, the outdoor Municipal Theater (The Muni) in 1918.

The performance of *Aida* was the seminal event of a two-week celebration to dedicate the facility in April of 1934. The fanfare surrounding the opening of the Municipal Auditorium helped the venue gain immediate recognition as the undisputed center of performing arts in St. Louis. The fortnight celebration included a Festival of Nations presented by the International Institute and concluded with the first annual National Folk Festival at the end of April. The National Folk Festival would return to the Opera House in 1947 and 1948. All told, more than 100 performances, festivals, parades and celebrations from April through June marked the opening of the Municipal Auditorium.

While the Convention Hall side of the venue staged the largest productions, it was the Opera House that saw the predominant use in the early days of the Municipal Auditorium. One historical record indicates that 16 of its first 21 productions took place in the Opera House.

The first year of the Opera House also featured a fall season of elaborate grand opera performances in October followed by a visit by the famed Ziegfeld Follies in November.

The Opera House welcomed its first primary tenant in its first year when it became the home of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO) in the 1934-35 season. SLSO was founded in 1880 and today is considered the second oldest in the nation. Prior to moving to the Opera House, SLSO previously called the Odeon home. With a seating capacity of only 2,000, the venue was insufficient for accommodating the large concerts with celebrity soloists that were common during this time of prominence for the symphony. At the time of its completion, the Opera House was larger than New York's famed Carnegie Hall and other known renowned halls in major American cities. The Opera House is the Symphony's only home from its first 80 years still standing today.

SLSO called the Opera House home from 1934 until moving to its current space, Powell Symphony Hall, in 1968. During that time the symphony experienced a rise to national fame under the direction of conductor Vladimir Golschmann. SLSO performed for a national radio audience on NBC several times during its inaugural season at the Opera House. A 1951 Human Rights Day celebration involving SLSO, and including celebrities like Rex Harrison and Jose Ferrer, was also broadcast nationally from the Opera House.

The War Years

In 1943, the Municipal Auditorium complex was re-named in honor of former St. Louis Mayor Henry W. Kiel after his passing. Kiel had championed the passage of the \$87 million bond issue in 1923 during his tenure as Mayor that lasted from 1913 to 1925. Construction on many of the projects made possible by the bond issue did not begin until near the end of his term and, like the Municipal Auditorium, most were not completed until after he left office.

Kiel Opera House had an active life during World War II, hosting shows, concerts, and U.S.O. dances. In the 1942-43 season, the Opera House hosted 272 events while the convention hall received little use. And while grand opera was absent from the local entertainment scene during the war, the St. Louis Light Opera Guild staged regular performances in the Opera House. The *Student Prince*, starring New York tenor Donald Gage, on May 7-8, 1946, was one such performance. The St. Louis Light Opera Guild presented a second season in 1947.

Perhaps the most historically significant event to ever take place at the Municipal Auditorium was a speech by President Harry S. Truman on October 30, 1948. The nationally-broadcast speech was the last on his whistle-stop campaign tour to win re-election of the Presidency. Truman's speech holds a special place in the history of the Opera House as the venue's most famous event to take advantage of the shared stage of the Opera House and Convention Hall, allowing him to speak directly to audiences in both venues at the same time.

In with the Old, In with the New

Beginning in the 1950s, rock concerts and touring stage shows joined the regular rotation of performances at Kiel Opera House. Grand Opera returned to the Opera House in 1952 with The Met's traveling presentations of *Aida*, *Carmen*, *La Boheme*, and *La Traviata*. The Opera House and The Muny in Forest Park are St. Louis' only remaining theaters associated with grand opera during its period of prominence before World War II.

One of the most unique and star-studded performances in the history of the Opera House took place June 20, 1965, when Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr. organized a benefit concert for Dismas House, a national halfway home for convicts. The event was held in the main theater of the Opera House, but the overflow audience also filled a dozen halls nearby where tickets had been sold for viewing rooms where the concert was broadcast on closed circuit television. It was the only time the Rat Pack's famous Sands show was televised. For the final number of this concert, Johnny Carson – the event's master of ceremonies – joined the group on stage. Backing the Rat Pack for the performance was Count Basie's Orchestra, under the direction of Quincy Jones.

Beyond the Rat Pack, dozens of world-renowned performers played shows at the Opera House between the 1950s and 1980s. The luminaries of American music and comedy included: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Louie Armstrong, Bob Hope, Carol Channing, Katherine Hepburn, Johnny Cash, Danny Thomas, Guy Lombardo, Red Foxx, Paul Anka, Mary Martin, Tony Bennett, Eddie Arnold, Bette Midler, Perry Como, Jack Benny, Judy Garland, Benny Goodman and his orchestra, Steve Lawrence and Edie Gorme, Fred Waring Chorale, Liberace and Hank Williams, both Sr. and Jr.

During that time period, several Broadway touring shows passed through the Opera House as well, including: *South Pacific*, *King and I* with Yul Brenner, *Coco*, *Unsinkable Molly Brown*, *Best Little Whorehouse*, *My Fair Lady* with Rex Harrison, *Hello, Dolly* with Carol Channing, *The Wiz*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Hair*.

The Opera House became a home for popular music during the second half of the century. Rock n' Roll, R&B and pop artists such as Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Neil Diamond, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Bob Dylan, The Doors, Jimmy Buffett, Peter Gabriel, Angel, Billy Joel, The Eagles, and Bruce Springsteen took their turns headlining the venue for sold-out shows in the intimate Opera House. Rock concerts ended up being banned from the Opera House for a period of time following a 1972 performance by Emerson, Lake and Palmer that resulted in several thousand dollars worth of damage to the theater by unruly fans.

The most famous rock show ever staged at Kiel Opera House ranks as possibly the most anticipated concert in St. Louis history. On July 6, 1978, the Rolling Stones sold-out the 3,557 seats in the Opera House in 75 minutes after a one-time radio announcement on two St. Louis radio stations at 11 a.m. The concert held on July 11 was not a money-maker, producing a little more than \$35,000 in ticket revenue, but the fervor created by the sudden announcement and small venue created an pandemonium around the event unparalleled in St. Louis history.

During the venue's later years of activity, renowned dance troupes were brought to the Opera House by Dance St. Louis. Performances by the Joffrey Ballet, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, Kansas City Ballet and Merce Cunningham were just some of the world's greatest dancers who graced the Opera House stage.

One of the most common uses of the Opera House was the graduation ceremonies of local high schools, colleges, and professional organizations. Historical records have estimated that more than 400,000 high school, college and professional students graduated from the stages at the Opera House and Convention Hall.

End of one Era, Start of Another

On May 4, 1991, a performance by the St. Louis Philharmonic marked the final event held in the Opera House to date. The Opera House was closed on May 7, 1991. After several false starts and numerous attempts by various parties over nearly two decades to reopen the building, financing was completed in June 2010 to pave the way for SCP Worldwide and Tom Stillman in alliance with Optimus Development to renovate and reopen the Opera House. Today, it is known as the Peabody Opera House, thanks to a naming rights partnership with Peabody Energy, and an entire community looks forward to its reopening sometime in the fall of 2011.

Opera House Event Timeline

1932

November 2 Cornerstone of Municipal Auditorium – Convention Center and Opera House placed by Mayor Victor J. Miller and Board of Public Service Director E.R. Kinsey

1934

April 21 Opera House inaugurated with performance of **Aida**; Giovanni Martinelli and Elizabeth Rethberg of The New York Metropolitan Opera starred in the performance conducted by Gennaro Papi

Late April First annual **National Folk Festival**

November **Ziegfeld Follies** performed at the Opera House

1943

March 26 The Municipal Auditorium was renamed Kiel Auditorium in honor of former Mayor Henry W. Kiel

1946

May 7-8 St. Louis Light Opera Guild performance of *Student Prince* starring New York tenor Donald Gage

1947

May 13th annual **National Folk Festival**

1948

May 14th annual **National Folk Festival**

October 30 Speech by President **Harry S. Truman** in which both sides of the Kiel Auditorium stage were open so he could deliver his speech to audiences in the Opera House and Convention Hall

1951

January 2 City sponsors free St. Louis Symphony concert to promote the SLSO

December 10 Performance by bass-baritone singer, **William Warfield**

December 18 *Globe-Democrat* Christmas Chorale Pageant

1954

April *Globe-Democrat* presented the **National Folk Festival**, featuring cultural performances and exhibits

April First appearance in St. Louis by **Pete Seeger**

1963

March 29 **Ray Charles** and his Augmented Orchestra plus the Singing Raelets

1964

December 1 **Dave Clark Five**

1965

June 20 **Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr.** organized this performance by the **Rat Pack** as a benefit concert for the Dismas House, a halfway home for convicts

1966

March 11 **Bob Dylan**

1968

April 28 **Cream**

1970

January 16 **Neil Diamond**

October 24 **The Grateful Dead**

1971

January 24 **Neil Young**

May 19 **Emerson, Lake And Palmer** with **Mott the Hoople**

1972

TBD A performance by English rock group **Emerson, Lake and Palmer** was marred by several thousand dollars in damages to the Opera House that resulted in rock bands being banned from performing at the Opera House for a period of time

July 9 **The Rolling Stones**

October 11 **David Bowie**

1973

February 18 **Leo Kottke**

October **Bette Midler**

October 13 **The Eagles w/ special guest Dan Fogelberg**

1974

TBD **Leo Kottke**

January 18 **Joni Mitchell w/ special guests Tom Scott and LA Express**

February 2 **Harry Chapin**

March 28 **Emerson, Lake And Palmer with Livingston Taylor**

May 24 **Jesse Colin Young w/ special guest Billy Joel**

June 10 **David Gilmour**

1975

March 1 **Ozark Mountain Daredevils w/ special guest Head East**

October 22 **Rick Wakeman w/ special guest Gentle Giant**

October 30 **Shawn Phillips w/ special guest Hall & Oates**

November 21 **Ozark Mountain Daredevils w/ special guest Brewer & Shipley**

December 19 **Barry Manilow**

1976

April 4 **Return to Forever** featuring **Chick Corea, Stanley Clark, Lenny White, and Al Di Meola**

October 17 **George Benson** w/ special guest **John Klemmer**

1977

February 18 **Jeff Beck**

March 4 **Seals & Crofts**

March 22 **Outlaws** w/ special guests **Sea Level** and **Horslips**

March 28 **Jimmy Buffett** w/ special guest **Marc Jordan**

March 30 **Peter Gabriel** w/ special guest **Mark Almond Band**

April 1 **Journey** w/ special guests **Montrose** and **Van Halen**

April 7 **Jesse Colin Young** w/ special guest **Leon Redbone**

April 9 **Greg Allman** w/ special guests **Booker T & the MGs**

April 19 **Return to Forever** featuring **Chick Corea, Stanley Clark, Lenny White, and Al Di Meola**

August 23 **Emerson, Lake And Palmer** with **Journey**

September 23 **Michael Stanley Band**w/ special guest **Mama's Pride**

September 28 **J Geils** w/ special guest **Rare Earth**

September 30 **Harry Chapin**

October 9 **Thin Lizzy** w/ special guests **Graham Parker** and **Rumour**

October 20 **Charlie Daniels Band** w/ special guests **Grinder Switch** and the **Henry Paul Band**

November 4 **Dolly Parton**

November 6 **Steve Martin** w/ special guest **John Sebastian**

November 11	Hall & Oates w/ special guest Eric Carmen
November 13	Billy Joel
November 18	Ram Jam w/ special guests UFO and Mark Farner
December 1	Golden Earring w/ special guests Rex and Law
December 9	Gino Vannelli
1978	
February 11	Nazareth w/ special guests Wet Willie and Sammy Hagar
February 18	Gary Wright w/ special guest Missouri
February 20 and 22	Angel w/ special guest The Godz
February 23	Gordon Lightfoot
March 1	Emerson, Lake And Palmer
March 17	Grover Washington Jr.
March 22	Outlaws
July 11	Rolling Stones w/ special guest Peter Tosh
July 25	The Kinks w/ special guest Blondie
August 17	Little River Band
September 4	UFO and Cheap Trick w/ special guests Savoy Brown and Kim Simmonds
September 14	Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers w/ special guest Walter Egan
September 20	Martin Mull
November 1	Stephen Stills (Postponed)
November 7	Chuck Mangione
November 14	Jesse Colin Young w/ special guest Jack Tempchin
November 25	Bruce Springsteen

1979

- February 9 **Harry Chapin**
- March 6 **Elvis Costello and the Attractions w/ special guest Rubinoos**
- March 10 **Outlaws w/ special guest The Godz**
- March 23 **Cheech and Chong**
- April 6 **J Geils w/ special guest Granati Brothers**
- April 8 **Stephen Stills w/ special guest Irakere** truma
- April 12 **Roxy Music w/ special guest The Atlantics**
- April 23 **Charlie Daniels Band**
- May 1 **Judas Priest w/ special guest UFO and Off Broadway**
- June 20 **Cheap Trick w/ special guest Graham Parker and Rumour**
- July 26 **Blondie w/ special guest Nick Lowe's Rockpile**
- August 7 **The Cars**
- August 23 **Michael Stanley Band**
- September 2 **Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes** headlined a benefit concert for Muscular Dystrophy w/ special guest **John Cougar**
- October 3 **Kenny Loggins w/ special guest Sniff N' The Tears**
- October 4 **Jean-Luc Ponty**
- October 6 **Dire Straits w/ special guest Ian Gomm**
- October 19 **Billy Thorpe w/ special guest Gamma and Ronnie Montrose**
- October 29 **Robert Palmer**

1980

- January 12 **Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers w/ special guest Fabulous Poodles**

February 12-13	Valentine's Day Massacre: Rush w/ special guest Max Webster
March 15	Jefferson Starship
March 17	UFO w/ special guest Blackfoot
March 26	Performance by Utopia , featuring Todd Rundgren , was recorded for the King Biscuit Flower Hour syndicated radio program aired by 250 radio stations around the country
April 23	Pat Travers Band
April 24	Harry Chapin
May 15	Triumph
May 24	Englebert Humperdink
June 5	Genesis
August 9	Robin Trower
August 15-16	Santana
September 12	Eddie Money
September 18	AC/DC w/ special guest Troupe
September 20	Kinks w/ special guest John Cougar
October 7	The Cars w/ special guest The Motels
October 17-18	Bruce Springsteen
1981	
February 26	Nazareth
June 5	Rodney Dangerfield
July 14	Utopia featuring Todd Rundgren
August 12	Tom Petty
August 28	Allman Brothers w/ special guest McGuffey Lane

September 2-3 **Little River Band** w/ special guest **America**

September 5 **Shooting Star**

September 16 A much-anticipated bout between **Sugar Ray Leonard** and **Thomas Hearns** was broadcast live via closed-circuit television from Las Vegas to the Kiel Opera House with \$20 admission

November 21 **Nazareth**

1982

April 18 **The Boston Ballet** performed Don Quixote starring **Rudolf Nureyev** in a benefit for the Arthritis Fund

May 7 **Rodney Dangerfield**

June 27 **Cheap Trick** w/ special guests **Krokus** and **Saxon**

October 7 **The Go-Go's**

1983

March 11 **Adam Ant**

June 30 **Miss Universe Pageant**

September 27 **Iron Maiden**

November 20 **Cheap Trick**

December 4 **Stray Cats**

1984

May 21 **The Clash**

1986

February 7 **Stevie Ray Vaughan**

August 23 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

October 12 **R.E.M.**

1987

August 28 **Y&T**

October 16 **State Ballet of Missouri**

December 19 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

1988

November 5 Ballet performance by **Rudolf Nureyev & Company**

December 17 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

1989

April 15 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

November 11 **State Ballet of Missouri**

December 16 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

1990

July 7 Kiel Center Redevelopment Corporation was formed

August 18 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

December 15 Logan College of Chiropractic Graduation Ceremony

December 27 St. Louis Aldermen approve plan to demolish the Convention Hall side of Municipal Auditorium, replacing it with 18,500-seat Kiel Center

1991

May 4 **St. Louis Philharmonic** Orchestra performance of Take Your Seats is the final performance at Kiel Opera House to date

May 7 Kiel Opera House closes