

CONCERTS AT BARTON COLISEUM

Play it Loud



OLD STATE HOUSE
MUSEUM

Barton Begins

El Dorado oilman Col. Thomas H. Barton led a campaign to build an indoor arena in Little Rock following a string of bad luck for the Arkansas Livestock Show Association (ALSA). Heavy rains flooded the fair in 1938, a massive fire damaged the cattle barn and rodeo stadium in 1941, and the military took over the fairground in 1943. Col. Barton was the founder and longtime president of the ALSA. The Arkansas State Legislature and other investors provided funding and the ALSA made plans to build two cattle barns, two dairy barns, one pig barn and a rodeo arena.

Construction began on what is now known as Barton Coliseum in 1947. Barton is located on the site of the modern-day Arkansas State Fair complex, just off Roosevelt Road in Little Rock (Pulaski County). Construction delays, including a shortage of cement, did not stop the ALSA from using the incomplete building. By 1949, the arena was ready for its first fair rodeo however, disastrous weather caused delays and low turnout. In 1949, a crane fell through the roof and caused new delays. The roof was made with Arkansas aluminum, and once finished, Barton Coliseum was the largest single-span aluminum-roofed structure in the country. Col. Barton invested more money into the building by installing flooring for basketball games in the 1950s.

The arena was completed and dedicated in September of 1952 and aptly named the T.H. Barton Coliseum. The final cost of the structure topped \$1 million. Local newspapers described the building as “the finest arena in the South.”

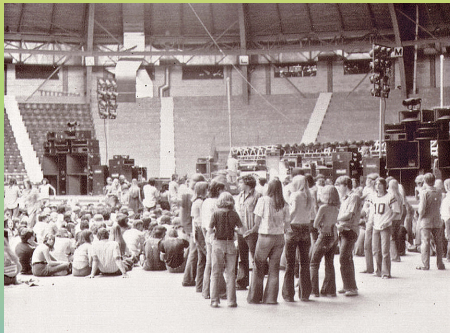


Although built as a rodeo arena for the Arkansas State Fair, Barton Coliseum has hosted high school, college and professional basketball games, a local ice hockey team, concerts, circus performances, ice skating shows, wrestling tournaments, monster truck rallies, beauty pageants and much more.

Music at Barton

For many Arkansans, Barton is remembered most vividly for its concerts. Hundreds of shows took place starting in the 1950s, continuing to the present day, featuring local, national and international artists playing pop, rock, country, bluegrass, gospel, metal, alternative, disco, rap and rhythm and blues.

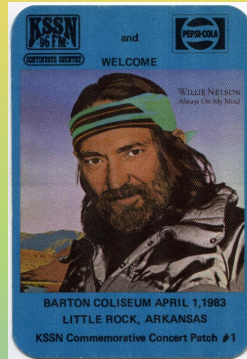
During the 1950s and 1960s, concert promoters put together performances featuring some of the largest acts of the day. Barton Coliseum was a prime venue for these spectacular showcases. For example, one such show, April 21, 1961, featured Fats Domino, The Shirelles, Chubby Checker, The Drifters, The Shells, Ben E. King, Bo Diddley, Chuck Jackson and Paul Williams and his Show of Stars Orchestra. One of the first large-scale, stand-alone concerts took place in



Left Top to Bottom: Aerial shot of Barton Coliseum, 1954; Interior Barton Coliseum, 1950; Official Guide to the 13th Annual Arkansas Livestock Show and Rodeo, 1952; Arkansas actress, singer and songwriter Dale Evans, with husband, actor and singer Roy Rogers, c. 1950s. Above: Fans gather on the coliseum floor for Uriah Heep concert, 1974.



Above: Sam and Dave Review and Dance Show concert poster, 1963.
Below: Ike and Tina Turner Revue concert poster, 1972.



Left: Willie Nelson Commemorative Patch, 1983;
Below: Fleetwood Mac marquis, 1977.

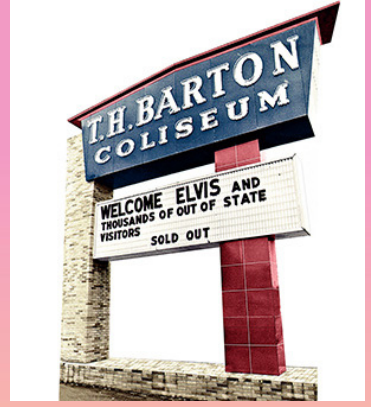


November 1953, when the Sam and Dave Review and Dance arrived to perform at Barton Coliseum.

During its heyday, Barton hosted hundreds of the biggest shows from every sector of the music business. Country acts were a staple of the Barton lineup, but rock groups ruled in the 1970s. The Coliseum welcomed a variety of performers ranging from AC/DC to ZZ Top. In 1972 alone, The Allman Brothers Band, Chuck Berry, Elvis, Merle Haggard, The Jackson Five, Charlie Pride, Lawrence Welk and Tammy Wynette all appeared live. Elvis performed at Barton on April 17, 1972, and the show was completely sold out. Fleetwood Mac performed at Barton in 1974 and 1977. Lynyrd Skynyrd was scheduled to perform a sold-out show at Barton Coliseum in late October 1977. Sadly, the band's plane crashed two days before the Barton show leaving three members of the band dead and the remainder seriously injured.

During the 1980s, many of the hottest hair metal bands visited Barton Coliseum. Groups like Bon Jovi, Cinderella, Def Leppard, KISS and Poison, who were selling out shows all over the world, visited Arkansas to perform at Barton. A number of noteworthy pop stars performed at the Coliseum including Elton John (1982) and Prince (1988).

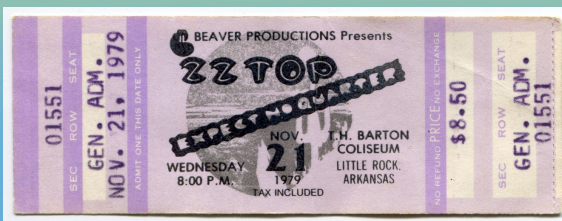
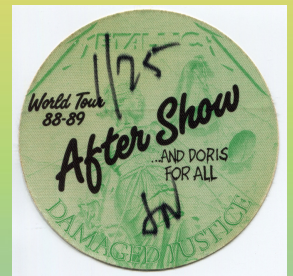
In addition to attracting concertgoers of all ages, the show tickets were extremely affordable – sometimes selling for as little



Above: Elvis marquis, 1973. Tickets \$10.; Guitar signed by Styx, 2015.

Below: Backstage pass Metallica's "Damaged Justice" world tour, 1988; Prince 1999 album, Barton performance 1998.

Left Center: ZZ Top "Expect No Quarter" tickets, 1979;



as \$4 in the early years. At maximum capacity, Barton holds 10,195. During the 1970s, there were pushes by stadium staff to keep the concerts safe. New regulations were added to limit smoking in the arena and keep people mostly in or near their seats. Although the venue's acoustics and air conditioning were not ideal, it did little to inhibit concert attendance at Barton.

Arkansans at Barton

Many Arkansas musicians and movie stars performed at Barton Coliseum. These shows were dominated by country performers like Jimmy Wakely, born in Mineola, one of the first cowboy singers and movie stars; Gail Davis hailed from Little Rock and played Annie Oakley on TV; Dale Evans, raised in Osceola; Conway Twitty, born in Helena; and Tracy Lawrence, raised in Foreman, who appeared most recently at Barton in 2019; Johnny Cash, born in Kingsland, performed at Barton Coliseum three times during his career. Black Oak Arkansas performed six times at Barton during their career. Other acts with ties to Arkansas who performed at the arena include Brooks & Dunn, Dunn was raised in El Dorado, and Point of Grace, formed while in college in Arkadelphia.

Into the Future

In 1999, Alltel Arena, now Simmons Bank Arena, opened across the river in North Little Rock. The venue offered larger performing spaces with modern amenities. Barton Coliseum continues to host performances and as of 2012, almost 1,700 major concerts from bands ranging from country western, to rap, to R&B, to soul, to heavy metal, to beach rock have graced the stage of this historic site.



Top to Bottom: Signed Travis Tritt acoustic guitar, 2014; Black Oak Arkansas self titled album, 1971; Aerosmith souvenir poster, 1997; KISS performed at Barton 1976 for the tour of "Destroyer."



Special thanks to Bob Cochran, Tom Wood and Doug White for their help with this exhibit and to the Arkansas Farm Bureau Foundation who donated to this project.

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