

BY JESSICA GRAVES

an encore worth waiting for

WAR MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM TURNS 75

In Fort Lauderdale, where the skyline shifts as quickly as the tide, few landmarks endure the test of time. Yet, for 75 years, the War Memorial Auditorium has stood firm, a witness to the city's growth and evolution. Nestled in Holiday Park, she has seen Fort Lauderdale transform from a quiet town into a bustling cultural hub. And now, after a \$65 million restoration led by the Florida Panthers, the old girl is ready for her next act.

When the War Memorial Auditorium opened in 1950, Fort Lauderdale was a sleepy town of 36,000 residents. Against the backdrop of post-war America—where Walt Disney's Cinderella charmed audiences and the first modern credit card hinted at new possibilities—the War Memorial Auditorium rose in Holiday Park as a tribute to Broward County's military veterans.

From its inception, the auditorium was alive with activity and energy, hosting performances by legends like Buddy Holly and Luciano Pavarotti, boxing matches with Sugar Ray Robinson, and even Christmas pageants complete with camels wandering nearby Holiday Park. Over the decades, it welcomed beauty pageants (of the human and canine variety) and political rallies for presidents like Nixon and Reagan.

But like any long-serving city servant, time began to take its toll. By the early 2000s, the auditorium's paint was peeling and her roof sagging as its facilities struggled to keep pace with modern demands.

Enter the Florida Panthers. In 2023, under the leadership of Army veteran and owner Vincent J. Viola and team president Matt Caldwell, a decorated officer from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Panthers unveiled an ambitious restoration plan.

"This project was about more than restoring a building," Caldwell explained. "It was about preserving a legacy. The War Memorial Auditorium is a monument to the sacrifices made by so many for our freedoms, and we felt a deep responsibility to honor that history while also creating something vibrant and meaningful for the community today."

While she's been outfitted with cutting-edge amenities, the War Memorial Auditorium remains deeply rooted in her original mission. Her memorials—including the bronze soldier statue and the U.S. Merchant Marine monument—have been carefully restored, ensuring that her role as a tribute to veterans remains at her core.

The project, executed in four phases, began with transforming the hockey operations space for the Panthers. Then came the public opening of the Baptist Health IcePlex, featuring two NHL regulation-sized rinks—one for the Panthers and one for community use. The Federal, a full-service restaurant and bar with a patio overlooking Holiday Park opened next. Finally, the historic concert hall restoration in partnership with Live Nation as a 3,400-capacity venue, will be ready for a new era of entertainment.

On January 21, 2025, Grammy-winning artist Melissa Etheridge will welcome audiences back to the Auditorium with the first public concert in over two decades. Her performance will kick off an exciting lineup that includes acts like Wallows on February 24 and The Driver Era on March 7. Plans to feature artists spanning genres from EDM, Latin, and Rock to Pop and Country aim to appeal to the diverse musical tastes of all South Floridians.

For more information visit: ftwarmemorial.com
Tickets are available through SeatGeek.com or at
the auditorium's box office.



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Photo courtesy of History Fort Lauderdale (circa 1960)

“WE’RE CREATING A SPACE WHERE HISTORY, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE INTERSECT,” EXPLAINS CALDWELL, “AND WE’RE EXCITED FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER OF ITS STORY.”

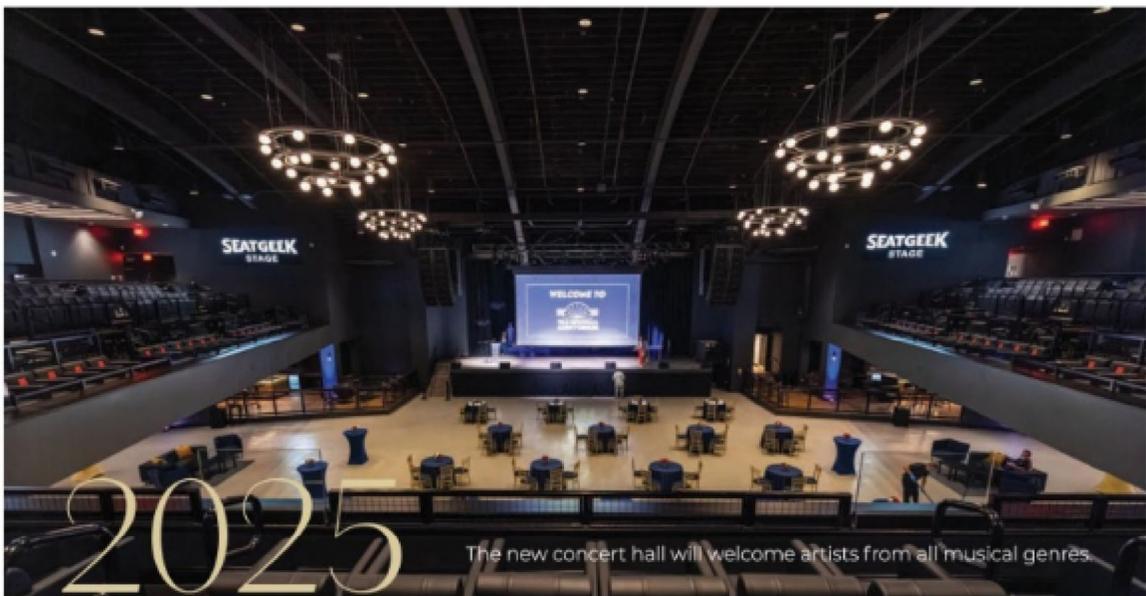


Photo courtesy of the Florida Panthers

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