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Yankee, Shea stadiums bid farewell

N.Y. landmarks prepare to face the music

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ

The Yankees' ancestral home at 161st Street and River Avenue in the Bronx will take centerstage on Fox Tuesday night for its fourth and final All-Star Game at the House that Ruth Built.

Rolled up in all its lore are decades of memorable movie shoots, national TV events and record-breaking concerts that helped define two of Gotham's storied ballparks, 85-year-old Yankee and 44-year-old Shea, both of which will be razed at the end of the season. Hollywood has fancied Yankee Stadium since two comedies lensed there in 1928.

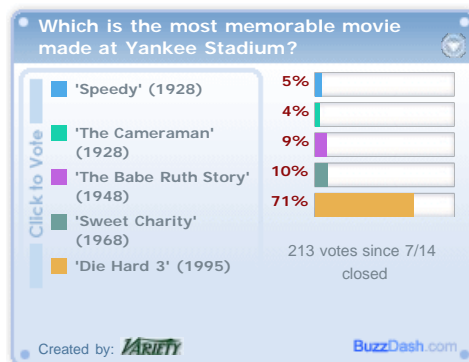
In Harold Lloyd's "Speedy," his last silent, the comedian plays a cab driver on a frantic mission to deliver Babe Ruth to the stadium. And in "The Cameraman," Buster Keaton contested a one-man baseball game in the big ballyard in the South Bronx.

Plenty more shoots followed, from "The Babe Ruth Story" and "Sweet Charity" right on through "Die Hard: With a Vengeance" and "Anger Management."

Many of the film images that stick in the collective mind are ones that were not, in fact, shot at Yankee Stadium. Case in point: "Pride of the Yankees," arguably the most famous sports biopic.

Its famous scene of Gary Cooper as doomed slugger Lou Gehrig declaring himself "the luckiest man on the face of the Earth"? A soundstage.

"They did use establishing shots of the famous facade but that's really it," said Sam Goldwyn Jr., whose father produced the film. To save on travel costs, the final scene was lensed on the MGM backlot using "plates," an early version of the green screen. The old Wrigley Field in Los Angeles doubled as Yankee Stadium, perhaps karmically setting the stage for the Dodgers decampment from Brooklyn to Chavez Ravine.



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Rock promoters will undoubtedly book the Mets new Citi Field for a concert in the coming years, but that stadium will have big shoes to fill in music circles.

The Beatles famously performed twice at Shea Stadium, once in 1965 and again in '66. The August '65 show was the first concert to be held at a major outdoor stadium and set records for attendance and revenue, proving an outdoor concert on a huge scale could be successful and profitable.

What followed was a Shea history steeped in music. Yankee Stadium may have played host to Johnny Unitas, popes and Nelson Mandela, but Shea profited from Grand Funk Railroad. The band's 1969 show, with opening act Humble Pie, sold out faster than the Beatles and almost became a live concert movie with Albert and David Maysles directing.

But the film never materialized. "It was a shame," Albert Maysles said. "There was lots of contention among the band ... all sorts of infighting, and they never ended up letting us release it."

But the show was a huge hit and the doors flew wide open to the biggest acts of the day: Jethro Tull in '76, the Who and the Clash in '82, Simon and Garfunkel in '83, the Police (for their first retirement show) that same year, the Rolling Stones in '89, and Elton John and Eric Clapton in '92.

The stadium even hosted a showbiz wedding of sorts in '87 when Marvel Comics rented out Shea for the nuptials of Spider-Man and Mary Jane. But the final concert at Shea will go to a local boy made good: Billy Joel is set to play what the Piano Man has dubbed "The Last Play at Shea."

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