December 20, 2024 / One year of Sphere

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Funky Dogwalk>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The first thing you need to know about The Sphere in Las Vegas is … don’t call it that.

SCORING OUT  
  
SEAN: It’s “Sphere”. Not “The Sphere." Lose the “the”.

SCORING BACK IN

SEAN: But everyone calls it “The” Sphere, so we will, too.

The Sphere opened just over a year ago. They said it would be the future of entertainment. And some people go and really do feel that way.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Look how cool that is!!!!!*

SEAN: But others, including those of us at *Today, Explained*, are wondering if this whole operation is sustainable.

So on the show today, we’re gonna look back at one year of the Sphere. From Bono to Phish to Dead and Co. to the Eagles. To that documentary that Darren Aronofsky made. To the upcoming EDM New Year’s Eve rave that they’re throwing. And we’re gonna ask whether this really could be the future of fun or … maybe just another Las Vegas bust.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* talked to a whole bunch of people about their experiences going to shows at the Sphere. And that is what you’re about to hear:

JEN CHANEY (*New York Magazine* writer): It's funny because obviously Vegas is famous for glitz and lights and flashy stuff that's designed to catch your attention. And at first, when I… before I had seen it in person, I thought, ‘Well, this is just going to feel like a heightened version of that.’ But it it looks like a spaceship landed in the middle of, of Vegas. Like, it's just wild looking. And they do so many fun and creative things that they project on the outside of the Sphere. I mean, sometimes they do commercials and advertising, which I get. But like, I think the first time I saw it was when they had like a cute, like, kind of cartoon face that would, like, change its expressions.

SCORING SNEAKS IN <Easy Shopping>

SFX –– INSIDE THE HALLWAY (A LITTLE ECHOEY, CROWD)

NICK PAUMGARTEN (*New Yorker* writer): The first part of the experience is making your way from the Venetian along this long corridor – skyway to the actual, you know, the base of the Sphere. There's different sections of that. But one of them is this sort of seemingly-endless carpeted hallway that I remember as being sort of red and gold, like, you know, like the Kremlin or like one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. You know it’s sort of garish, sort of ugly, endless every 40 yards to your right is another convention hall. The scale of it is bizarre. And you're in this river of other people…

KATIE BAKER (*The Ringer* writer): And I just remember on the first night this like extreme nervous energy among everyone, like just no one knew what to expect. And what was really cool about it is that, you know, in the Phish world, there's people that have been to, like, hundreds of shows. And this was the first time for everyone, including the band.

SCORING OUT

SFX – OUTSIDE (IN A PARKING LOT, CROWD IS STILL THERE)

NICK PAUMGARTEN: But it spills you back outside. So suddenly you go from being in the air-conditioned Saddam Hussein palace out onto this, you know, 110-degree hard-pan asphalt lot…

KATIE BAKER: …where I was surprised by how it looked up close. It almost looks like a giant Lite-Brite, it's like these kind of pretty big single, like lights and pegs kind of coming out.

NICK PAUMGARTEN: My sort of engineer boy brain was sort of going, going into overdrive. Like, how how does that work? That's amazing. Look at that. Look at that.

SFX – IN LINE (CROWD, BEEPS LIKE SCANNING TICKETS)

SCOTT WRIGHT (Spheregoer): My first impression walking in there was how were they going to get all these people through these lines fast enough to actually make the show? And I mean, within 10, 15 minutes, everybody was through.

SCORING <Ether Voices>   
 SFX – IN THE ATRIUM (BIG CAVERNOUS SPACE, CROWD STILL THERE)

JEN CHANEY: But then, once you’re actually inside… I apologize for using, like, sci-fi metaphors, but it really does have that feeling like it's… just the way it's lit. It's kind of like dark, but there's things are kind of glowing. There's escalators that take you up to the higher levels. There was ambient music that's like a special U2 mix that they had made that was kind of playing in the, in the lobby area.

ALAN ROSENTHAL (Spheregoer): So when you first enter the lobby and get into the foyer, there's a bunch of animatronic robots that are interactive that you can speak to, ask questions and they'll respond.

*<CLIP> AURA THE ROBOT: Welcome to Sphere!*

SCOTT ZELLNER (Spheregoer): They’re humanoid; they look a little bit like C-3PO, maybe. You could try to start a conversation with one and it would kind of answer based on whatever information was pulling, it could – it could get your name, which is kind of eerie.

<*CLIP> AURA THE ROBOT: Hello, Grace. Are you graceful?*

KATIE BAKER: We've all heard the surveillance stories of a lot of the venues, especially the… the Jim Dolan ones. And, you know, there was certainly that feel to it, too. Like the the staff was extremely attentive in, in a way that I've never really felt like at any big event like that. But you also just got the sense that, like, you were being watched everywhere you go. <laughs>

SCORING OUT

SFX –– STILL CAVERNOUS SPACE + CROWD

NICK PAUMGARTEN: Then you go inside. And it's also beautiful to behold inside because it's the, you know, the Sphere at rest prior to the show it has had this sort of it projected onto the screen, you know, an illusion of the armature of the building.

SCORING <Mississippi Half-Step Uptown Toodleoo – Dead & Company>

SFX – LIKE A MEMORY

DAVID LEWELLYN (Amanda’s dad): And when the show started, the inner workings of the Sphere looked like it was starting to open. What looked like the Sphere opening stopped at the lightning bolt, which is a a symbol, a Grateful Dead symbol.

NICK PAUMGARTEN: But what really happens, I think it's the second song, if I remember correctly again, that where the where the suddenly they… it cracks open, you know, the armature disappears and you're, you know, you're outside their old house, that old Victoria and then, the camera – or, the or the perspective – slowly pulls away from the house and goes into the air, you know, like a balloon or a or a helicopter. And you slowly pull away from the city of San Francisco, above the peninsula, over the Bay, you can see. You know, the fault lines and the hills and you can identify if you've ever lived there as I have, you identify where you lived, where you went, you know, which parks you went to, where your friends live, where your friends lived, and then, you know, and then it winds up delivering you into space.

DAVID LEWELLYN: And then the first thing that hit me after that was… the International Space Station flying by.

SFX – SPACE STATION GOES BY (BIG WOOSH)

DAVID LEWELLYN: And it made a huge noise and, and it really startled me. And I said, wow, this is really ... this is just amazing. This whole venue is just amazing.

NICK PAUMGARTEN: Probably half a dozen times I felt – I don't think the phones worked in there. I can't remember – But I felt like I wanted to tell everybody, I know you have to come check this out.

SCORING CHANGES TO <Bootsinator – APM>

SFX – LIKE AT A CONCERT

KATIE BAKER: I would say the band was like, you know, 5-10% of, of my visual field. That's probably even high, like 5%, you know? And the rest is the screen.

ALAN ROSENTHAL: So Phish’s visuals were a little more out there, if you will. They were… they were pretty wild.

KATIE BAKER: One was, like, a puppy, except it was giant. It was like a King Kong-sized puppy just licking, the screen of the sphere. So like, just imagine like a tongue dragging. Like, I felt like I was trapped inside a marble and a dog was, was licking me. I was like, ‘What crazy mind came up with this?’

ALAN ROSENTHAL: And then a third type of visual, and I noticed this more with the Dead than with Phish. There are more traditional visuals where it was just like… the band. So it was just either just a static shot of the whole band on the stage and playing or maybe close ups of a couple of musicians. So those were fun and they were nice. But also I've seen – I know what those guys look like. So, you know, it was fun and nice to have, but I really enjoyed the scenery and the new stuff more.

SCORING OUT

JEN CHANEY: You know, you're not in the real world, but every other thing that's happening to your senses is telling you that you're wrong and that you actually are in these sort of worlds that they're creating. And they're like…

SCORING <Where the Streets Have No Name – U2 (LIVE)>

SFX – MEMORY

JEN: …there's a moment in U2’s set where they do “Where the Streets Have No Name” and they have like a sun rise and it kind of continues to rise and eventually set by the time the song is done. And I knew I wasn't out in the desert under a blazing sun, but my brain didn't really comprehend that. Like it felt like you were. That's where you were.

WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME OUT

SCOTT WRIGHT: So I would definitely caution anyone that's prone to motion sickness to maybe take some Dramamine or something beforehand. I'm personally prone to it. So I, I came prepared, fortunately, but I definitely felt the impact of it.

KATIE BAKER: One thing that was fun, you know, as I get it, becoming an older lady, I like to sit down at concerts a lot. And it's a great place to sit at a concert because your actual chair has like haptic feedback, you know, it's like a gamer chair. It was really cool to hear some of the songs and like really feel the beat and to also just like, you know, feel like really be getting good sound. A lotta times you go to concerts and by virtue of where you’re sitting you get really weird echo, or something sounds tinny or whatever it is…

VARIOUS SOUND DESIGN

ALAN ROSENTHAL: At Phish, we'd be up there, they'd be rocking out, jamming. We're all dancing, having fun. And then all of a sudden you'd hear like a tom-tom drumming sound like it was straight above you or a couple of keys from the piano that sounded like was coming from a corner and everyone kind of look up and look over there while that that sound was happening for five seconds, then it would go away. We were all kind of look at each other and say, ‘Hey, did we just hear keys coming from straight above– Did you all hear that, too?’

DAVID LEWELLYN: One thing about the Sphere venue is that it's a lot more controlled than a normal Dead & Company experience would be. There were some people smoking, but not as many. It was not… Like, I've been to shows where you couldn't see the stage cause there was so much smoke in between you and the stage that it was hard to see.

KATIE BAKER: …very different than, like, a Madison Square Garden Phish show where, you know, you come home smelling like an ashtray, or yeah. <laughs> There was sort of a classy feel to it. You know, everyone was kind of on their best behavior …

SCORING <Arise! Arise!! Arise!!!>

NICK PAUMGARTEN: I think this idea of the immersion that it represents… I do think that that's the future of entertainment. But I'm afraid what I really fear is that the real future is sort of each of us plugged into our own individual virtual reality feed, whether it's with goggles or glasses or even whatever brain projections we can, you know, we can projected onto the inside of our eyeballs, if that makes any sense, without having to go anywhere or be with other people. And we just going to, you know, will be, you know, as as Father John Misty put it, you know, making love to Taylor Swift in the Oculus Rift, you know, and everybody will have their own individual curated fake reality, you know, it will be like the Matrix will just be like floating in our in some sort of weird amniotic state and feeding our minds with whatever entertainment we want. I mean, we're kind of halfway there already, but I so I, you know, I'd be happy if the sphere was, was as dystopic as it got, you know. But I fear that's not the case.

ALAN ROSENTHAL: I don't think it's the future. I think it's now. I think it's the best… I haven't been to every venue in the world, but I can't imagine there's a venue right now that delivers a better live music experience than Sphere.

DAVID LEWELLYN: And if this even progresses and gets better and better and better, I don't know how it could get any more intense <laughs>

KATIE BAKER: I don’t know that I would say… I mean, I don't think they're necessarily making money, nor who knows when they ever will. So in that sense, I don't know that it's the future, but I think if you’re a band, it should be one of your goals or one of your stops.

JEN CHANEY: My concern about the Sphere is just the way that they're booking it. So far there have been four bands: U2, Dead & Company, Phish and then the Eagles. And I'm like, Can you guys book *anyone* that didn’t exist until after 1990? Like, they just haven't done anybody a little bit younger. And I don't know if that's a calculated decision because they feel like older people are maybe more willing to spend disposable income on this experience and a whole trip to Vegas. But I really think they need to get some other kinds of flavors in there.

SCORING CHANGES TO <Funkyzeit>

SEAN: That was Alan Rosenthal, Scott Zellner, Scott Wright, and Commander David Lewellyn. And also *New York Magazine*’s Jen Chaney, *The Ringer*’s Katie Baker, and *The New Yorker*’s Nick Paumgarten, who have all written great dispatches from the Sphere. Go read them if you’re thinking of going yourself!

The Sphere was supposed to be the future of entertainment. Why they keep booking your dad’s favorite bands, when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: Josh Kosman’s beat is business at the *New York Post*, which somehow makes him one of the foremost authorities on the Sphere in Las Vegas.

JOSH KOSMAN (*New York Post* reporter): <laughing> Well, we're sort of a national paper – not sort of. We’re a national paper. And certainly media and entertainment are important to us. And James Dolan, Jimmy Dolan owns The Sphere and Jimmy Dolan also owns the New York Knicks and New York Rangers and is quite an iconic – and somewhat disliked – New York figure. So he makes it interesting for us.

SEAN: We asked Josh to tell us how the Sphere came to be.

SCORING <Vegas Baby>

JOSH: This has been Jimmy Dolan's dream for several years, perhaps 5-10 years. He is very into music. He plays in a band.

*<CLIP> KNICKS OWNER JAMES DOLAN: This next song is the title song of our record, and it is called BallyHOO. <duck>*

JOSH: In fact, he opened for the Eagles at one time.

SEAN: Hm!

JOSH: People who know him would say that his true love is music, perhaps more than even owning the sports teams.

*<CLIP> DOLAN: <duck> And so I am now going to make a Ballyhoo! For! You!*

JOSH: So he's had this idea of this one-of-a-kind, technologically-advanced Sphere for a long time. He thought it would cost $1 billion to build. It ended up costing $2.3 billion. It was a big, big cost overrun. And that really begins the interesting story of the Sphere, because his dream, to a degree, has been realized. Within a year, the Sphere is quite iconic. From a technological perspective, it largely works. People are wowed by it. Yet he has not figured out how to make money. In fact, he's losing quite a bit of money on the Sphere.

SCORING OUT

JOSH: The problem is, it's very hard to make money off concerts. Um…

SEAN: Hm. Taylor Swift just made $2 billion!

JOSH: <laughs> Well, Taylor's the performer. It's not hard for a performer to make money. It's hard for the arena to make money.

SEAN: Mmmmm.

JOSH: So not just here, really at any big arena, the artists will make anywhere from 80 to 100% of concert revenues. Then, the arena itself might make money off parking, which there's not much here at the Sphere or merchandise. And here the added problem is U2, for example. It cost them more than $10 million to build a technological set that would match the music because there is no other arena like the Sphere.

SEAN: Mm.

JOSH: So Dolan agreed to pay more than $10 million to produce their show. Then during their show itself, U2 made roughly 90% of ticket sales.

SEAN: Hm!

JOSH: That's not leaving a lot left over. And that's a real problem because the real way Dolan makes money is these movies. Those he can make money off of. But the concerts, not much.

SEAN: But it's funny you say that because I was in Vegas for a weekend where there weren't any concerts. There was just this movie, this sort of, you know, climate documentary made by Darren Aronofsky. And I couldn't find, you know, reviews from movie critics, probably because they couldn't all make it to Vegas. But you could find reviews from people who went to see it and they were scathing reviews.

JOSH: <laughs>

TYPING SFX

*<CLIP> VEGASVACAYGAL: It is simpl[y] not worth the money.*

*<CLIP> LORDWARG: It’s 2024. I’ll need more th[a]n mountain visuals to be impressed.*

*<CLIP> CAMERON LAWS: The film itself is indescribably bad. I feel entitled to compensation at this point.*

SEAN: It did not, it did not scream, ‘This is the future of the Sphere’s business model.’

JOSH: No. And the, and the problem is these movies cost a lot to produce because you're producing them for this one-of-a-kind Sphere. So they're about to spend – or they're spending – about $80 million on remaking *The Wizard of Oz*.

SEAN: Wow!

JOSH: So it is the original *Wizard of Oz*. It's not a new version. It's the original. And they're shortening it to 80 minutes, but it costs $80 million. So you have to sell a lot of tickets to make up the $80 million. Now, the plan was they were going to build this first Sphere in Las Vegas and then have satellite Spheres in places like London. That didn't work.

*<CLIP> FOX 5: Plans for a Sphere across the pond have dried up…   
<CLIP> ITVNews: London Mayor Sadiq Khan has rejected plans to build one in Stratford, saying it’ll cause too much light pollution.*

JOSH: So they've just sold their first satellite sphere in Abu Dhabi.

SEAN: Hm!

JOSH: Because the idea is you could take one of these movies that you've spent $50-100 million producing and you could – you have it in your Sphere, but now you can sell it in another Sphere. And then you can start making money.

*<CLIP> DOLAN, FOX 5: We would love to build in other places, and that is our plan, is to build in other Spheres. The, uh – love to build one in New York…*

JOSH: But the whole concept is based on multiple Spheres, And the issue has been everyone can look at this and say, ‘Hmm. Cost you 2.3 billion to make and you're not making money in Las Vegas – Why would *I* do that?’

SEAN: <scoff>

JOSH: So Abu Dhabi *has* stepped forward. But they have been it.

SEAN: Getting back to the concerts for a second here, it feels like it's the concerts that are really going to excite people.

JOSH: That’s true.

SEAN: People travel to see Adele, to see Katy Perry, to see Bruno Mars and Anderson .Paak. They don't travel to Las Vegas to watch a depressing nature documentary. Sorry to keep harping on Darron Aronofsky's poor movie–

JOSH: <laughs> He’s an artist, Sean!

SEAN: <laughs> He's an artist! I keep forgetting that. For a while there, the Sphere was in talks to host Beyoncé. This is the kind of big ticket item...

JOSH: Yes.

SEAN: …that would bring people to Vegas for – who knows, a year, two years – over and over again to see Queen B. And then it fell apart. And instead, you've got these like boomer acts over and over. No, no disrespect. Love some Eagles songs.

*<CLIP> THE EAGLES: Take it eeeeeeeeasy.*

SEAN: Is it not working out for Jimmy Dolan to attract younger artists?

JOSH: Well, it's an issue.

SCORING <Spider Trap>

JOSH: So it depends on who you speak to why this is happening. Beyoncé was clearly in talks. We reported at the *New York Post* that Beyoncé wanted at least a few weeks of rehearsal time. But she's Queen B. She wants those few weeks and she's going to want them when she wants them. Well, Dolan has three to four movies showing a day. He wants that money. So he did not give her the couple weeks of rehearsal time she wanted because that would have meant lost revenue for Jimmy Dolan.

MINI SCORING BUMP

JOSH: There are people you speak to around this who are concerned about that.

SEAN: Hmm.

JOSH: You want the Sphere to be hip, to attract a younger audience, and it hasn't really happened.

MINI SCORING BUMP

JOSH: One of the challenges is it is a roughly 18,000 seat arena. So you need an artist that will at least come close to packing that arena. That, that does limit you. There are plenty of interesting artists that can pack a 10,000 seat arena. And not only does it need an act that can pack an 18,000 seat arena, because you have to create a special performance for this space – and that takes money and time and effort – you need an artist who's willing to come there for 2 or 3 months at least, or longer…

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Is there a third option here that we haven't discussed? Is is there something other than Beyoncé or let's say some super successful custom movie that they run on the nights they don't have shows that can keep this place not only, you know, around, but thriving?

JOSH: Well, they were hoping to have conferences there during the day which would raise some money.

SEAN: Huh! Oh, gosh. That sounds so boring! I’m sorry! <big laugh>

JOSH: <big laugh> Well, you and I might find it boring, but I'm sure you could put on quite a presentation.

SEAN: ‘We built this legendary venue that you can see from space. Anyway, here's – here's a PowerPoint.’

JOSH: Right? ‘Here's IBM.’ So that is one way to generate money. They were hoping, certainly, for a sponsor. They don't have a sponsor. So they are hoping by this point you would have ‘Federal Express’s The Sphere”...

SEAN: <laughs>

JOSH: …or whoever it would be. They're looking for a price that is similar to a top sports arena in the country. They haven't found it. What they have been able to sell is ads on the Exosphere, the outside of the sphere. The financial performance of the Sphere: they lost in the quarter ending September 30th, they lost $117 million. That can only happen for so long.

SEAN: The Sphere was promised to us as the future of entertainment. And I know we've been laughing a little bit here, but, you know, that sounds pretty cool. And when I've seen the thing in person, which I have a few times, it looks pretty cool. And when I see people experiencing it, they seem to be having a great time. I have a friend who goes to a lot of shows and he went and he said it was the greatest thing he, he's ever seen – Phish at the Sphere. But does this feel like the future of entertainment or does this feel like, like IMAX ultimately, which is like a thing people do sometimes when they feel like it, but it hasn't really become the standard even though it’s great?

JOSH: Well, that's a great question, Sean. And I think we're at an inflection point. And I think what makes the Sphere such an interesting story is that on the one hand, it's worked. You know, like your friend said, that Phish concert was the most amazing concert he said he's ever seen. And it's Phish! I shouldn't say that.

JOSH AND SEAN: <biiiiig laugh>

SCORING <Stone Sober>

JOSH: So it's kind of this dilemma that I think Dolan is facing right now of, ‘I have this amazing arena, I have this amazing facility, but I don't know how to make it – forget profitable, I don't know how to even make it viable.’ You know, a typical arena of 18,000 people. You could throw sports teams in there. You can't have sports teams here. The UFC held an event there that they say they they they generated 22 million in revenue. So it was a success. But they also say they'll never come back. You know, they've said that publicly. So, obviously, it wasn't too much of a success.

TINY SCORING BUMP

JOSH: So do I think it has a chance? Yes, because it is an amazing facility. So do I think it has a chance? Yes, but if you look at the stock price, you look at the market cap, it's less than 2.3 billion, significantly less. It's telling you just market investors are telling you this is this is a failure. Yet it is really iconic. Now, if you think of Las Vegas and you [say], ‘Give me – you know, knee jerk reaction – give me three iconic things in Las Vegas, three iconic venues.’ This is probably one of them.

SEAN: Yeah. I love a mixed bag.

JOSH: Yeah, this is an interesting mixed bag. And how Dolan pivots will be a really interesting question.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Josh Kosman, *New York Post.* Pura vida.

Thanks to Annie Phillips and Cameron Laws for their help with today’s show, which was produced by Amanda Lewellyn, who had a pretty good time at the Sphere when she went this year. With her dad.

Amanda was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd.

This was *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]