

THE LAST SEASON



THE LIFE AND DEMOLITION OF BALTIMORE'S MEMORIAL STADIUM

A DOCUMENTARY BY

CHARLES COHEN & JOSEPH MATHEW

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SYNOPSIS

The Last Season-The Life and Demolition of Memorial Stadium, demonstrates the power that one building had over the people of Baltimore.

As major sports stadiums disappear from America's landscape, cities are losing much more than structures that stand for their teams' glory years. Vanishing are the emotional centers for a working class culture that thrived in the United States during the mid-20th Century. Nowhere was a stadium more vibrant than Memorial Stadium.

The Last Season explores the emotional ties and the family history that evolved in these stands for almost fifty years; and how a generation marked its mortality with the passing of its landmark.

Built in 1954, Memorial Stadium was the home to the Baltimore Colts, one of the founding dynasties of the National Football League and The Baltimore Orioles, a home-grown powerhouse baseball team of the 1960s and '70s.

Despite lacking the architectural cache of a Wrigley Field or Fenway Park, Memorial Stadium endeared themselves to Baltimoreans much the same way Brooklyn once embraced their "bums" the rest of the world called, The Dodgers.

But with the advent of Camden Yards, which set the standard for the current trend of new-old ball parks, and the coming of the Ravens football team, Memorial Stadium was doomed. And yet, although people accepted the stadium's demise, thousands came back



for municipal sales to buy old wooden seats and contemplate, the passing of “The World’s Largest Outdoor Insane Asylum.”

From the beginning, filmmakers Charles Cohen, a free-lance reporter, and Joseph Mathew, a free-lance photographer, were not interested in putting together a sports nostalgia piece. Instead, they saw these sales as an entree into a blue collar culture that once thrived around this landmark and now languishes in a city that is slowly being gentrified.

Cohen and Mathew anticipated finding rich vein in a city that’s already well known for its eccentric passions thanks to John Waters and salt of earth roots as told by Barry Levinson. But what Cohen and Mathew didn’t plan on was being sucked into a year long odyssey. Out of nowhere came a desperate and forceful political move to save the stadium that went from the streets to City Hall to the State House and into the courts. Then came the year long spectacle of the wrecking ball and the daily pilgrimages of construction site onlookers.

But the most surprising turn came at the very end of the demolition process when all that remained of the stadium was one last section, known as the Memorial Wall. After five months and \$750,000 in tedious salvaging efforts, the city abandoned its preservation stance and tore down the dedication to America’s war dead. Three months after 9-11, a whole boulevard of rush hour traffic slammed on the breaks when off came the wall’s famous stainless steel slogan: “Time Will Not Dim The Glory of Their Deeds.”



Ninety hours of footage has produced a cast of characters that include fans, old ushers, ball players, demolition workers, politicians, neighborhood activists, journalists, veterans and kids.

The result is the 70 minute documentary that for a lack of a better description is a cultural ethnography slyly told with fast edits and a diverse sound track, much of which came from local musicians. One moment *The Last Season* plays like a music video, the next it bristles with the grit of guerilla journalism.

There are no academia-types holding court in front of their bookshelves in this documentary. No statistics or sports greatest memories. Not even a narrator. Instead the story is relayed from one person to the next, creating a contemporary oral tradition forming right before the viewer's eyes. The story goes from a cremation ceremony in the stadium's ruins to a gonzo sports fan conjuring up the spirit of the stadium on a busy street; from still shots of the demolition to a child's eye view of his family history lost in the wreckage.

By mid-point in the documentary, the viewer sees that *The Last Season* is much bigger than a story bemoaning the loss of an old stadium. The location may be Baltimore, but the documentary captures the persistent American habit of abandoning its past in the pursuit of progress. Just about every city and small town has had to watch a Memorial Stadium get demolished, making *The Last Season* an American story.*



A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Much ink and footage has been spent psycho-analyzing how baseball, football and stadiums hold a central place in American culture. *The Last Season* is able to cover a lot of ground without making big statements.

Shot, edited, written, and directed by newcomers Charles Cohen and Joseph Mathew, the 70 minute documentary captures the almost ritualistic reaction to the demise of Memorial Stadium. The film captures a steady stream of onlookers during the year and half that the wrecking ball swung, creating a time lapse view of a city wrestling with its blue collar past. Emotionally *The Last Season* avoids the melancholy quagmire that could come with a documentary about the demolition of a landmark.

Instead, the filmmakers constantly vary the mood and perspective with a cast of characters that include fans, ball players, demolition workers, politicians, neighborhood activists, journalists, a historian, an architect and a cab driver once famous for leading 50,000 fans to a rollicking boil.

In short, *The Last Season* is a cultural ethnography slyly told with fast edits and a diverse sound track, much of which came from local musicians. One moment *The Last Season* plays like a music video, the next it bristles with the grit of guerilla journalism. This hit and run documentary bypasses a narrator to make way for Baltimoreans to piece together an oral tradition one story at a time. All the while viewers feel like they are sitting off camera, sharing the filmmakers obvious joy of discovery.*



THE MAKING OF 'THE LAST SEASON'

There was really no plan to make this documentary. It all started as a test run for Joseph Mathew and Charles Cohen, who during a chance meeting talked about the potential of digital journalism.

Cohen was a writer looking to break into a new medium. Mathew was a still photographer looking to break in his new camera and Final Cut Pro editing suite.

To test the working chemistry and the new gear, they opted to take the camera down to the old Memorial Stadium where everything from urinals to clubhouse benches were being sold off to make way for demolition.

They figured it would be a no pressure day, guaranteed to attract some characters with stories to tell. What they didn't anticipate were the thousands of people ringing the stadium in the early morning drizzle. Mathew and Cohen weren't out of the car before realizing that they had stumbled upon a phenomena unfolding right before them.

"Even though the sale were a huge deal, there was a feeling of abandonment there, like when you happening upon a yard sale full of stuff, and realize its the leftovers from someone's family," said Cohen.

In fact, Memorial Stadium's role as the city's communal cozy backyard couldn't be overstated. For starters, Baltimore's legendary love affair with The Colts, the foundation of Barry Levinson's movie Diner, is still being dispensed to the younger generation almost 20 years after the team left the city for Indianapolis. But Baltimore also embraced their Orioles, which was a homegrown dominating force for three decades.



The story's end of an era significance was obvious for Cohen who grew up in Baltimore, but Mathew, who grew up following cricket in India, also recognized the rare view of American culture.

But the real allure that pulled this photographer and writer team into a no budget, Don Quixote documentary-maker's quest was that the story was unfolding as they were shooting. The filmmakers became the ravenous followers of events, devouring each plot twist. And the story of Memorial Stadium could turn on a dime. The foregone conclusion of the stadium's demolition suddenly morphed into a comeback story about community empowerment and daring politics. Finally, even when the governor declared that the stadium had to come down, Mathew and Cohen knew they would have to cover the wrecking ball until its final swing. But even they didn't anticipate the surprise that awaited them.

"If I thought about the future when I began making this movie, it would never have happened," Mathew said.

With no budget, no crew, no experience (not even a film class between them), Mathew and Cohen kept their focus on the Memorial Wall dedicated to American fallen soldiers that was originally supposed to be spared. The monolith seemed to grow in significance as the stadium disappeared around it. Then came 9-11 and the wall's slogan, "Time will not Dim The Glory of Their Deeds" had renewed meaning on this thoroughly abandoned landmark.

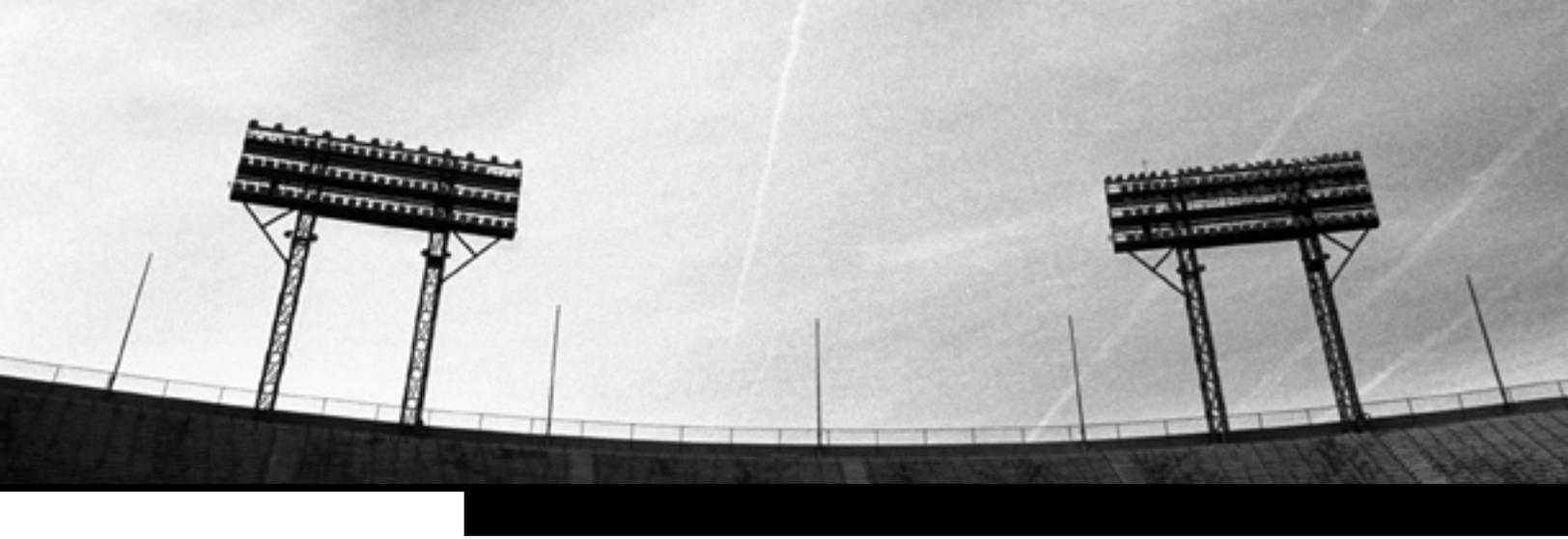


The tag team documentary makers also challenged themselves by tracking down reclusive athletes to talk about the stadium and then using restraint in not allowing their fame to dominate the documentary. Mathew and Cohen's adventures led them to being driven around on the back of a tractor by football Hall of famer Art Donovan, who dispensed his knowledge over kosher foods and football. They also befriended a fan sporting a Fu Manchu carefully wrapped in Oriole Orange, who showed off his house with pictures of Malcolm X and Cal Ripken Jr. posted side by side.

Much of Mathew and Cohen's inspiration was cultivated during the bunker days editing on Final Cut Pro.

"For me especially, the editing process was constantly amazing," Cohen said. "I've been so use to the isolated life of writing, sitting home before the computer trying to cobble words together to form images and now here we were writing with pictures."

Cohen and Mathew shared editing duties from logging the footage to laboring over each cut, building the story shot by shot, scene by scene. Such a process became a challenge since they were still tracking the story. The old adage "it ain't over until it's over" rang so true when the foreman of the demolition crew tipped them off that the final Memorial Wall dedicated to war dead was coming down on a quiet week between Christmas and New Year's Eve.



Not only did the documentary makers have an exclusive video of the entire event, but Mathew and Cohen realized that they just may have a lost culture preserved on tape. Suddenly they carried a sense of curatorship for not only the people of Baltimore, but also for the nation, which faces similar progress versus preservation issues daily.

They felt a responsibility to create a documentary that plays to sports fans, history buffs and just those who would appreciate the haunting desolate beauty of the demolition of an icon. This was the people's story and the people should relate to the documentary.

In this spirit, Mathew and Cohen aimed to preserve the drama of field reporting. They skipped on a narrator and propelled the story with those interviewed, making the viewers more like witnesses. Meanwhile the music, which is problematic for documentaries claiming objectivity, was used not to exaggerate the ethos of the moment, but actually to contrast the mood of the scene, creating a safe distance for the viewer.

In the end, *The Last Season* stands not only as a movie about a stadium, but it also provides a unique look at preservation issues that is as fun to watch as it was to make.*



DIRECTOR'S BIO

Charles Cohen is currently a freelance writer, with past contributions to the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, Reuters and The Christian Science Monitor and People Magazine. His articles about Baltimore's off beat history and unsung characters appear regularly in the Baltimore City Paper and have been published as a book called "Charmed Life."

A native of Baltimore, Cohen grew up going to Memorial Stadium. While he would never call himself a sports fan, he is a faithful backer of the Orioles and The Colts and has recently found much solace in The Ravens.

Until taking on "The Last Season," Cohen had no video making experience, but he has watched thousands of hours of television and movies.*

Joseph Mathew is a freelance photojournalist and graphic designer based in Baltimore. Trained as an Economist, he decided to follow his life-long dream of a career in photo and video journalism after coming to the U.S. in 1995.

Even though he's never been to a game at Memorial stadium, he now considers himself a better fan of the Orioles and Ravens than his local partner, Charles Cohen.

The Last Season is Joseph's first venture. He is also currently working on a documentary about a halfway home in Baltimore.*

CITY OF BALTIMORE

1954

DEDICATED BY

THE MAYOR AND THE CITY CO
AND THE PEOPLE OF BALTIMO
IN THE STATE OF MARY

CREDITS

Written by: Charles Cohen

Editing: Charles Cohen/Joseph Mathew

Camera & Sound: Joseph Mathew

Photo Animations: Joseph Mathew

Stills: Charles Cohen/Joseph Mathew

Archival video footage courtesy of:

The Babe Ruth Museum, Baltimore.

Archival stills courtesy of:

The Special Collections,

University of Maryland Libraries

Music by:

The Almighty Senators

Yo La Tengo

The Hula Monsters

John Jackson

Christopher Rischard & Hakim Morsli

Billy Kemp & John Thomakos

Link Wray

Matthew Walther & Phipps Clinic

Steve Steckler

Original Sins

Special appearances by:

Johnny Unitas

Brooks Robinson

Art Donovan

Gino Marchetti

Elrod Hendricks

Rick Dempsey

Mike Flanagan

Pat Kelly

Scott Mcgregor

Wild Bill Hagey

Mayor Martin O'Malley

William Donald Schaefer

Rev. John Sharp

Tyler Gearhart

Janet Marie Smith

Rafael Alvarez

Anna Mae Becker

Jessie the fan

Steve Mulewski

Ted Patterson

Mary Dawson

Carrol Brown Sr.

Birdman