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Jimmy Buffett and Gloria Estefan to share memories of the Miami Marine Stadium

By Howard Cohen
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Patrick Farrell / Miami Herald File

The Miami Marine Stadium, festooned in graffiti and trash, in a 2006 photo, 14 years after Hurricane Andrew battered the concrete venue.

Two South Florida singing icons, Jimmy Buffett and Gloria Estefan, are teaming up to help save one of their favorite venues: the Miami Marine Stadium.

The Coral Gables Museum, which is now running Concrete Paradise, an exhibit devoted to the 50-year-old architectural gem on Biscayne Bay on Virginia Key, plays host on Jan. 9 to a fund-raising gala. The pop stars will sit for a conversation moderated by NBC 6 anchor Jackie Nespral and dish their favorite memories of performing at the open-air, waterfront stadium that fell victim to Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Buffett, who in 1986 released *Live By the Bay*, his first home video, from a concert shot the previous year at the stadium, will close the evening with a short acoustic performance accompanied by a steel drum player.

No doubt, memories of a Friday night summer rain storm that sent Buffett scurrying to his sailboat docked by the stage, or the Saturday night celebrations at the second show — Parrotheads diving off of their boats sans parrot-head gear or much else — will filter into the conversation.

On the menu? Margaritaville and mojitos, cheeseburgers in paradise and paella — two items apiece to represent the South Florida superstars who came to national prominence in the 1970s and 1980s by singing from stages like the Marine Stadium's floating dock.

The exhibit, which runs through Jan. 13, and the Buffett-Estefan soirée, “means great exposure for the museum and for our exhibit on the Marine Stadium,” said Gables Museum director Christine Rupp. “The whole idea is to get people her to understand the stadium’s history and social significance and why it should be saved.”

The Marine Stadium was designed by architect Hilario Candela, a 28-year-old Cuban immigrant, and opened Christmas week in 1963. After Andrew, the battered hulk faced demolition. But the site, deeded to the city of Miami by the Matheson family with the condition

that it contain an entertainment complex, gained supporters with the formation of the Friends of the Miami Marine Stadium who push for the restoration and reopening of the distinctive, all-concrete stadium.

In addition to Buffett and Estefan, powerboat races, and Toni Tennille singing standards with the Boston Pops at a Fourth of July celebration, the venue once put entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. and President Richard Nixon on the same stage together during the 1972 Republican National Convention.

In July, the city of Miami Commission gave the Friends two years to raise the estimated \$30 million it would cost to restore the stadium that now has become a canvas for graffiti artists and photographers.

In October, American Express donated \$80,000 to underwrite an engineering study of the pilings that bore into the bay's waters and support the stadium's concrete grandstand, a first step toward possible renovation. Proceeds from the January shindig will benefit the National Trust for Historic Preservation's work to restore the stadium and the Coral Gables Museum where the ongoing exhibit functions as a promotion to save the venue, said museum director Christine Rupp.

The exhibit, divided into four parts, takes a look at the Marine Stadium through multimedia, including a set of original bleachers. The \$200-per-person gala, which will only sell 300 tickets, will feature more than Buffett and his acoustic guitar.

Look for Candela, now 78, to celebrate the stadium's possible rebirth amid the strains of the singers' signature hits, Margaritaville and Conga.

"He's having a ball with this whole thing," said Rupp. "This was his project and he has seen it abandoned and has seen the new inspiration from the graffiti artists and photographers and now, hopefully, he will see it restored."

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