



USA

# CAPITOL RECORDS BUILDING

An iconic LA building that's more than the sum of its parts

WORDS: Marina Kay

LOS ANGELES  
34.0522° N  
118.2437° W

Those familiar with spycraft might put their skills to good use when next in Los Angeles. Driving towards Hollywood on Highway 101, you'll spot a stacked cylindrical building topped by a blinking beacon. That's the iconic Capitol Records tower whose flickering red signal taps out the letters H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D in Morse Code.

Established in 1942, Capitol Records opened its LA headquarters in 1956, and in a city not unused to steamrolling bricks and mortar towards an ever-brighter future, the building has stood the test of time. Here, the first base of any record label on the West Coast, is where the talents of Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Barbra Streisand were honed.

During the tower's design phase, it was referred to as "Project X in the Welton Becket Associates [architectural] office because it was top secret", explains Alan Hess, architect and contributor to the book *75 Years Of Capitol Records* (Taschen). "Capitol did not want word to get out about their new headquarters until they were ready to announce it," he continues.

That the building looks like a giant stack of shellac records – not to mention its 90-foot rooftop spire resembling a phonograph needle – apparently comes down to sheer coincidence, as even the young architect responsible for the design, 24-year-old Lou Naidorf, was unaware of his client's identity while carrying out the project. Naidorf's decision to work with a circular form was actually dictated by a tight budget that called for cost and space efficiencies. Even he was dubious about the final result, describing the tower's form as "bland" with "the proportions of a Campbell's soup can".

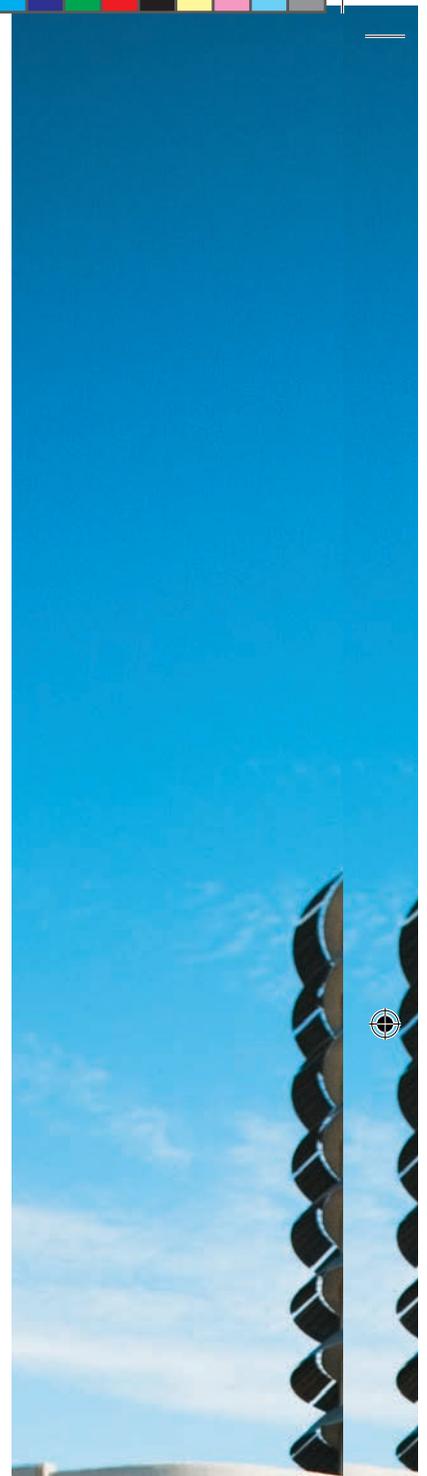
Despite such a polarising opinion, the public took to the tower. Perhaps that Warholian aspect helped to cement it as a Los Angeles architectural icon, a close second to its slightly more popular neighbour, the Hollywood sign.

Ringed by offices, the 13-storey building is rooted in three recording studios, situated on the ground floor. "Of the two main recording studios, one remains in original condition as an example of High Modern design. The other was remodelled a few decades ago, with the original Modern design replaced with dark oak wood features," explains Hess. The studios are connected to echo chambers, designed with the help of jazz guitarist and inventor Lester William Polsfuss, better known as Les Paul. Located 30 feet underground, they feature "seven layers of wall and floors floating on asphalt-impregnated cork to eliminate all vibration", per Capitol Records co-founder Glenn E Wallichs. Sound is fed from the studios to the echo chambers, lined with just microphones and speakers. "It's capable of producing a reverberation lasting up to five seconds," writes Taschen contributor Sean Wilentz. The chambers reroute the enhanced sound directly to the mixing boards up in the studios, where sound engineers can adjust the effects as they like. These studios set the industry's gold standard.

Frank Sinatra held the first recording session in 1956 – not as crooner, but as conductor to the orchestral *Tone Poems of Colour* album. Since then, plenty of voice-overs, jingles and sessions have been held here, including *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely*, which the singer considers his "best recorded work".

## ICONIC

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DISPATCH

## ICONIC HOLLYWOOD

Three stylish examples of historical cool in LA



1

### The Hollywood Roosevelt

This stunning Art Deco hotel has undergone a recent renovation that takes it back to its Hollywood heyday. Marilyn Monroe used to live here, while the renowned Tropicana pool was designed by David Hockney.

7000 HOLLYWOOD BLVD



2

### Frolic Room

Frolic began life as a speakeasy in the 1930s. Howard Hughes purchased the Pantages Theatre next door in 1949, which would go on to host the Oscars until 1954 – with Frolic being the official afterparty.

6245 HOLLYWOOD BLVD



3

### Musso & Frank Grill

A legendary restaurant that still offers a real glimpse of old-world Hollywood. Regulars have included Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin. Order a chicken pot pie and the M&F martini for the full experience.

6667 HOLLYWOOD BLVD

### MAKE LIKE MORSE

Tap out Hollywood like the Capitol

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✈ Emirates operates a daily service to Los Angeles with the Airbus A380.

But for many, however, the building means more than just music and glamour. It's a sign of comfort and familiarity. As the singer Beck explains in the forward to the Taschen book: "As a kid, whenever we were returning from some far-flung part of the city in the back of a gas guzzler on a hot smoggy day, I can remember the Capitol Records building always signified that we were almost home, and that our interminable, screenless, seat-beltless, air-conditioningless ride was coming to an end... when I see the Capitol building, I am home." ✂

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