Vin Scully: The Voice of Los Angeles

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Vin Scully
The Voice of Los Angeles

ELLIOTT J. GORN AND ALLISON LAUTERBACH DALE

This chapter combines history and memoir. The authors are both historians and both grew up in Los Angeles as Dodgers fans. Gorn followed the team in the late 1950s and 1960s. Lauterbach Dale became a fan a generation later. With the realization that the voice of Dodgers announcer Vin Scully was their common tie to Los Angeles, they decided to write about his importance to the city.

“A good evening to you wherever you may be.” The familiar voice almost sings out of the radio, embracing listeners with the warmth of a soft Los Angeles evening. For more than sixty years, the same greeting has welcomed Dodgers fans to pull up a chair and listen to a baseball game. The man behind those words, Vin Scully, is more than just a well-loved sportscaster. He is the voice of L.A.

Born in 1927, Vincent Edward Scully grew up in the Bronx listening to sportscasters on the radio, a career that was barely as old as he was. He took up broadcasting while a student at Fordham University. After graduation, he briefly worked for WTOP in Washington, DC, announcing news, weather, music, and occasionally filling in on the sports desk.¹

Scully’s professional breakthrough came on November 12, 1949, when he was just twenty-two years old, thanks to Brooklyn Dodgers’ announcer Red Barber. When Barber needed someone to call the University of Maryland–Boston University football game at Fenway Park for CBS Sports Radio, Barber remembered the red-headed kid he had met months before.

A version of this essay originally appeared in Daniel A. Nathan’s Rooting for the Home Team: Sport, Community and Identity under the title “The Voice of Los Angeles” (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 125–38. It is reprinted here with minor editing changes and a new conclusion.
Scully assumed that he would have a press box from which to do the play-by-play, so he left his coat in the hotel room. But on that frigid November New England night, he was relegated to the roof with nothing but a table and a microphone. Scully never complained. Barber heard the story later and was impressed with the rookie's professionalism. When Ernie Harwell left the Dodgers' broadcasting team two months later, Barber once again thought of Scully.²

"I had a feeling for years," Barber later wrote in his autobiography, "it was like a woman who has never had a child. I guess I had never gotten over my early ambition to teach. I always had the dream of taking an untutored kid who showed some promise and of putting him on the air for what he was, a neophyte learning the trade. Scully was a perfect choice." Barber went on to note, though, "Whatever made him the fine broadcaster he is, he had when he started."³

Scully joined the Dodgers at spring training in Vero Beach, Florida, in March 1950. More than sixty years later, he is still with the team, the longest tenured announcer in American sports history. When Scully began his career with the Dodgers, sportscasters had been doing regular live coverage for scarcely twenty-five years. Scully, in other words, has been at it for well over two-thirds of sports radio's existence.

Over the course of his six-decade career, Scully has worked in three home stadiums, for five Dodgers owners, during twelve US presidencies, and under eight Major League Baseball commissioners. Dodger Stadium, opened in 1962, is now the third-oldest Major League ballpark (behind Fenway Park and Wrigley Field), and Scully has announced fifty seasons from it. Already a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, the Radio Hall of Fame, and the American Sportscasters Association Hall of Fame, he is a four-time national sportscaster of the year, an Emmy Award winner, has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and was elected the American Sportscasters Association's "Top Sportscaster of all time."⁴

While he is the last to flaunt his celebrity status, Scully understands the great platform afforded to him. "Our job is to help people escape, to help them forget their troubles," he once explained.⁵ He frequently reminds listeners that they are doing just that. In the fall of 2008, when the California hillsides were once again ablaze, he told fans that baseball was but a child's game. And like he did throughout Korea, Vietnam, the first and second Gulf Wars, and after the World Trade Center towers crumbled, Scully always made it clear that the
game was a healthy, even necessary diversion from the real business of life, but a diversion nonetheless.

With a strong sense of perspective—of history—Scully emphasizes to listeners that baseball is a special little world, fascinating to be sure, but not to be overvalued. For example, during an otherwise unremarkable game against the San Diego Padres on June 6, 2010, Scully reminded the audience of life beyond the baseball diamond. Never straying from the task at hand, calling the game, Scully went on to tell the story of D-Day: "Oh yeah, you could just sum it up and say, 'oh sure, Allied Forces invaded Normandy.' There is so much more—as Troy Glaus checks in, Ely's pitch, fastball inside, ball one. First of all, D-Day, the 'D' in front of Day doesn't mean anything. It just meant the day of a military operation—the 1-0 pitch on the way, outside—and it used to be D-Day for any military operation but as the years have gone by when you say 'D-Day,' they're talking about this day in 1944. The 2-0 pitch fouled away..."

This is one of the reasons Scully is so successful. Because he eschews hype and bluster, we come to trust him. Scully treats his listeners like adults who understand that the game is a fair-weather pleasure, a moment of grace in a hard world. He doesn't lie to us with apocalyptic intimations of sports' importance. He never exaggerates, either factually or emotionally. The game is enough, the game is the thing, the game unfolds like a nice leisurely story, told by a man who sees it all and speaks it in the cadences of summer.

More than anything, Scully is a storyteller. There is the story of each at bat, merging into the larger narrative of the game, the statistics (Scully's legendary pregame preparation assures that the right statistics are always at hand) that give the still longer view of the season, one of the hundred seasons that preceded it. Scully's flow of words is the flow of baseball history, the fan's history, and against that backdrop—the tale of the player who spent seventeen years in the minor leagues before his call-up, or of the one whose grandmother raised him and watched him pitch a perfect game, or of the players from the far corners of America and the globe, now on the field with the game on the line—he embeds each day's new stories.

Above all—magically, mysteriously—Scully's voice creates a bond of intimacy and community between himself and the fans. Maybe all sports broadcasting strives to accomplish this merging of the personal with the communal, and maybe other broadcasters pull it off sometimes, but Scully has done it for generations.
That closeness became especially visible in the early 1960s. We think of how wired we all are today, but before smartphones and iPods, there were transistor radios. In Los Angeles, one of the most striking things about these portable sets, beginning just a few years after the Dodgers came to town, was how many fans brought them to the ballpark. “The transistor radio was probably the greatest single break that I had in Southern California,” Scully once said. “It enabled me to talk more to the fans—and to elicit a response.”

But it wasn’t just the number of fans who listened; any home radio could do that. When the Dodgers built their new stadium at Chavez Ravine and put together a contending team, the club also secured a loyal fan base. Thousands of fans brought their radios to every Dodgers game. Scully’s voice literally echoed throughout the ballpark in the 1960s through the 1980s. Enough fans still bring radios that you often get his running commentary of the live action on the field. This is a metaphor for Scully’s place in Los Angeles—the individual radios merging their sound into one big voice, pervading the ballpark, pervading the city.

Angelenos’ sense of civic identity resonates with Scully’s voice, because some of their most powerful memories are associated with that sound. Scully himself has said, “One of the nicest parts of my job is to have someone come up to me and say, ‘When I hear your voice, I think of nights in the backyard with my mom and dad.’ It’s a wonderful feeling to be a bridge to the past and to unite generations.” Always humble, he’s quick to add, “The sport of baseball does that, and I am just a part of it.”

It is all about baseball, of course, but in Los Angeles, fans know the game through his eyes, his word-pictures, his voice, and it is the voice of intimacy. When Scully described the anniversary of D-Day above, he began, “I don’t want this to be an intrusion, but I think we’ve been friends long enough, you’ll understand.” And we do. That is why a 2010 Los Angeles Times poll found that Scully was tied with former mayor Tom Bradley as the city’s most admired citizen of all time.

Many die-hard fans still bring Scully to the games. The rest of us tune in on TV, in the car, and, increasingly for displaced Dodgers fans, online. With the advent of satellite radio, Vin has developed even more of a following. “One of the things we hear from our listeners is how much they love being able to hear Vin Scully,” notes David Butler, director of corporate affairs for XM Radio. “Many of them are people who may have seen him on TV or who are baseball fans who have heard about the legend of Vin Scully but had never had the luxury
to hear him call a game on the radio.” For Los Angelenos spread across the world, online broadcasts offer the ultimate connection back home, whether they are on a military base in the Middle East, in an easy chair in New York, or in a college library in the heartland. Distance need not separate Dodgers fans from the team or city they love. Vin welcomes them back to both. He is attuned to how scattered his audience is, but he also knows that his voice brings them all together. That is his most important role.

Maybe most striking, in a city that routinely destroys all sense of tradition and history, that embraces each postmodern moment as distinct from the last, Scully is all about continuity. For half a century, Los Angelenos have always been able to count on four things: smog, traffic, seventy-degree winters, and Vin Scully. We mark time and the big moments by memories of his broadcasts. Fifty years isn’t a long time in the course of human history, but for a town like Los Angeles, it represents the deep past. Not just longevity, but Scully’s devotion to baseball, made manifest in his formidable knowledge of the game, matters here, too. He has occasionally announced other sports during his career, but not often. Angelenos’ loyalty to Scully was reinforced by his loyalty to baseball.

The children of immigrants from eastern cities, of dust bowl refugees in the 1930s, and of midwesterners whose opportunities on the land closed down as farms consolidated, must have heard him as a voice from home. But others too—African Americans who came from the South in search of equality, jobs, and schools for their children in the 1940s and 1950s; Asian immigrants and their descendants for whom midcentury California began to fulfill earlier promises; Mexican American kids whose parents sought fresh opportunities for their families—all had some familiarity with baseball, but came to think of it as quintessentially American. Scully’s easy presentation of the game was tied up with the promise of California life.

Even in the ultimate polyglot city, Scully’s voice crosses neighborhood boundaries. In East LA, Gil Reyes, who trained tennis star Andre Agassi, learned English over the radio: “I had a little transistor. KABC every night. Vin Scully was my English teacher.” Writing in the Los Angeles Times columnist Hector Tobar lists “appreciate Vin Scully” as one of his ten keys to being a “true Angeleno,” and Tobar adds, “drop Scully’s name into a conversation, and it will instantly identify you as a real Angeleno.” Another Dodgers fan who calls himself “Roberto” named his website VinScullyismyHomeBoy.com. A Chinese American blogger, who once taught a constitutional law class at a juvenile detention facility, recalled: “During one of my classes, a Mexican
student quipped that though there is tension between blacks and Mexicans on Los Angeles' streets, the one person both groups would unite to defend would be 'the Dodgers announcer.' Scully has such unquestioned respect among people of all races because it is unquestionably evident he respects everyone.\footnote{14}

Los Angeles was the first American city to have Major League Baseball games announced in Spanish. Jaime Jarrin, himself a Hall of Fame announcer and a fifty-year veteran of LA Dodgers broadcasts, has a wide following among Spanish speakers, not just in Southern California but in Mexico too. Still, the children of immigrants—the kids we grew up with and now their kids—listen to Scully.\footnote{15} Without wishing to dismiss the nostalgia many people have for the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Los Angeles version of the team meant at least as much to the civic identity of the booming new megalopolis as it did in Brooklyn. Every tear shed by a Brooklyn fan watered Angelenos' sense of their town as a big, wide-open place, no mere stepchild to the East Coast. Suddenly, when the team came to LA in 1958, it was a major league city. This was not just a metaphor—we were becoming major league in every way, and for half a century, Vin Scully's voice reminded us that America's best was moving west.

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Elliott recalls: One of my earliest childhood memories is of being at the old Coliseum for a Dodgers game in 1958, the team's first year in LA. I don't recall who the Dodgers played or if we won, I just remember being there. And I remember that a year later, in October 1959 when I was eight years old, I must have been listening to the game at school—it seems amazing that they allowed me to—because my third grade teacher, Mrs. Friedman, let me announce to the class that the Dodgers had just won game six of the Series, making them World Champions. Even then I knew, because I read the backs of my baseball cards, and because our neighbor was from Brooklyn, that that Dodgers came to us with a glorious past. Living gods—Hodges, Snyder, Furillo, Podres—strode the field.

Hearing Scully's voice is also among my earliest LA memories. In the late 1950s, I'd fall asleep with the Dodgers game coming lightly over the radio. Even as a kid, it was impossible not to recognize how good Scully was because the Dodgers had two broadcasters, Scully and Jerry Doggett, the latter perfectly competent at calling the games, but even to a nine-year-old's ear, Doggett was
workmanlike, nothing special. The idea always was to stay awake through his innings to get to Scully’s.

Maybe it was the radio still murmuring as I slept that indelibly planted Scully’s voice in my brain. Radio was everything back in the Dodgers’ first couple of decades in LA. The team owner, Walter O’Malley, was convinced that television would kill attendance at the games, so he only broadcast nine games a year on TV, those three 3-game sets they played each season up in San Francisco against the Giants at Candlestick Park, where sometimes the fog was so thick you thought there was something wrong with your television.

It is amazing how powerful the memories are, not so much for the details, which are few, but for the emotions: Winning discount tickets for good grades (a promotion the Dodgers ran year after year in cooperation with the L.A. schools), going to beautiful new Dodger Stadium, which opened in 1962, with my brother and my father, hearing that same voice in the ballpark that I heard at home, and realizing that it was because of the thousands of fans who brought transistor radios to the game. Often in the evening I would go over to my friend Gary White’s house, and there in his living room, Mrs. White stood ironing the next day’s clothing for the family, always with Vinny’s voice pouring out of the radio. He was with me also on many weekend afternoons as I did gardening jobs around the neighborhood. Those were the years of Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale, of Maury Wills and Tommie Davis. Town and team were in love, and Vinny was the matchmaker.

Most vividly, I remember my father and I pacing the living room, listening to the ninth inning of Koufax’s perfect game against the Chicago Cubs in 1965. What made it so memorable was less the game itself than how Scully spoke, never fast or overheated, but relaxed and conversational, yet building tension all the way. This is how he announced the early moments of the ninth inning in what is now an iconic broadcast (note to reader—you have to hear this; it is all about sound, so read it aloud):

... Here’s the strike one pitch to Krug, fastball, swung on and missed, strike two. And you can almost taste the pressure now. Koufax lifted his cap, ran his fingers through his black hair, then pulled the cap back down, fussing at the bill. Krug must feel it too as he backs out, heaves a sigh, took off his helmet, put it back on, and steps back up to the plate. Tracewski is over to his right to fill up the middle, Kennedy is deep to guard the line. The strike two pitch on the way, fastball, outside, ball one. Krug started to go after it and held up.
... One and two the count to Chris Krug. It is 9:41 p.m. on September the 9th. The 1–2 pitch on the way, curve ball, tapped foul, off to the left and out of play. ... There are twenty-nine thousand people in the ballpark and a million butterflies. ... Koufax into his windup and the 1–2 pitch, fastball, fouled back and out of play. ... And it begins to get tough to be a teammate and sit in the dugout and have to watch. Sandy, back of the rubber, now toes it, all the boys in the bullpen straining to get a better look as they look through the wire fence in left field. ... One and two the count to Chris Krug. Koufax, feet together, now to his windup and the 1–2 pitch, fastball outside, ball two. A lot of people in the ballpark now are starting to see the pitches with their hearts. ... Two and two, the count to Chris Krug. Sandy reading signs, into his windup, 2–2 pitch, fastball got him swinging ... Sandy Koufax has struck out twelve. He is two outs away from a perfect game ... 16

I left Los Angeles in 1969, but I carried on as a Dodgers fan for twenty more years. I'd listen to games or go to Dodger Stadium on trips home to visit my family. I was back in California in 1988, living up in the Bay Area for a year, and there in October were my Dodgers, seemingly overmatched in the World Series by the Oakland Athletics, a team with some fine pitching and a couple of scary hitters, Mark McGwire and Jose Canseco. With great good fortune, Scully was doing the national broadcast that year. So there I am, lying on the floor of my dingy little Palo Alto apartment, watching game one on a twelve-inch black-and-white TV. I had little hope. The Dodgers' lineup was truly mediocre, especially with the heart and soul of this team, outfielder Kirk Gibson, hobbled by a hamstring pull in one leg and a torn-up knee in the other. Scully had announced before the game began that Gibson would not see action that night. Orel Hershiser led a very tough LA pitching staff, but he didn't start the first game, and Tim Belcher, who did, gave up a grand slam in the second inning to Canseco. Somehow, though, the Dodgers hung in.

Bottom of the ninth, 4–3 A's, and one of the toughest closers in the game, Dennis Eckersley—the Most Valuable Player of the just-completed American League Championship Series—on the mound. Eckersley got two quick outs, and Dodger Stadium grew deathly quiet. But then outfielder Mike Davis worked the count for a walk. The pitcher was due up next, and no one was on deck. To everyone's amazement, Gibson—who had spent the whole game in the training room but had suited up and come to the dugout for the ninth—grabbed a bat
and limped to the plate. He fouled off two, and you could see him wince as he tried to drive the ball with his legs. But he stayed alive, fouled off three more pitches and took three balls for a full count. Eckersley’s ninth pitch to Gibson was a slider, maybe a little further inside than he wanted, and Gibson reached out and flicked it toward right, much harder than it first appeared.

“High fly ball into right field . . . she is . . . gone!” And then Scully didn’t say a word for half a minute as the crowd went wild and Gibson gingerly jogged around the base paths. Scully only broke his silence as Gibson hobbled across home plate into the arms of his teammates: “In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened.” There was no grandiosity in his tone but humor, the humor of recognizing that life sometimes plays a little trick then chuckles at our surprise. Scully capped it all with this benediction: “You know, I said it once before a few days ago, that Kirk Gibson was not the Most Valuable Player, that the Most Valuable Player for the Dodgers was Tinkerbell. But tonight, I think Tinkerbell backed off for Kirk Gibson.”

One last thing about that moment. When Gibson hit the homer, after a moment of blinking incredulity, I was screaming along with those fans in Dodger Stadium. Screaming until I realized that the apartment building where I lived had gone dead quiet. Of course. I was just across the bay from Oakland. My enthusiasm in that neighborhood was not appreciated.

I never moved back to Los Angeles, and I’ve since switched my allegiance to other teams. I tried being a Cincinnati Reds fan when I lived there in the early 1990s, but it never took. Something about that bland town and soulless Riverfront Stadium kept those good and exciting Reds teams from capturing my imagination. Then I became a Cubs fan, an addiction to failure that I still fight. I love Chicago, but whatever it is that goes on in that yuppie hell known as Wrigley Field, it isn’t baseball.

I often go back to LA because my daughter lives there. There is nothing like hearing Vinny still calling games. I’m not a big fan of Southern California, but his voice somehow captures what is best about the place, the ease and flow of outdoor living, the beauty of mountains and desert and ocean. There is grace in Scully’s cadences, just as there is grace in that mellow landscape in the twilight glow.

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Allison recalls: My love of the Dodgers and Vin Scully is not a fleeting affection. I am, in fact, a fourth-generation Dodgers fan. My great-grandfather, Max, loved 'Dem Bums when they still played at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn.

He stayed loyal when the team moved west, introducing my grandmother to Dodgers Blue. After her, my uncle, and finally my little brother and myself, took up the Dodgers legacy. While the Dodgers have changed stadiums and uniforms, lineups and locales, two things have remained constant: Vin Scully and my family’s loyalty to the team. Though I never met my great-grandfather, he knew, as I know, the sound of Vin’s voice.

So it is against the backdrop of his broadcasts that my family knows Los Angeles. My aunt was literally born to the sound of his voice. A doctor who brought his addiction to the game into the delivery room caught her. My grandmother, of course, didn’t mind.

My grandmother would later introduce me to Vinny, too. As a four-year-old, I stood in her kitchen, braiding challah for Shabbat dinner, Scully’s voice ever-present in the background. Long before I understood baseball, I knew the sound of his broadcasts, the soundtrack of my childhood. While my grandmother passed away over sixteen years ago, when I hear Vin call a game, I’m instantly transported back to her yellow kitchen. With his help each season, my love of my grandmother and of baseball renews itself over and over again. Years later, sitting in the library reading for my PhD exams, I was still listening to Vinny. The online archive of games kept a constant stream of his trademark anecdotes and stories streaming to my ears.

Although Scully has helped me mark several key milestones in my life, his broadcasts often serve as events in and of themselves. You remember where you were when Kennedy was shot, when the World Trade Center towers fell, or, if you’re my mother, when Diana and Charles got married. Baseball fans have their own memorable moments: when Buckner missed the ball, when Larsen was perfect, when Gibson went yard (all of which Scully announced). Vin’s 1965 play-by-play of Sandy Koufax’s fourth no-hitter and only perfect game is one of those moments. You remember hearing that kind of extemporaneous poetry.

I was eleven in 1994. In the car on the way home from a Red Sox game at Fenway Park, my uncle and I got to talking about Dodgers baseball. Though he had moved to Boston years before, my uncle remained a loyal Dodgers fan, even naming his golden retriever after the team. The conversation inevitably turned to Vin Scully. In the days before Internet broadcasts, my uncle had no
way of listening to games on a regular basis. When I asked how he coped, he quickly popped in a cassette tape.

"Three times in his sensational career has Sandy Koufax walked out to the mound to pitch a fateful ninth where he turned in a no-hitter. But tonight, September the ninth, nineteen hundred and sixty-five, he made the toughest walk of his career, I'm sure, because through eight innings he has pitched a perfect game . . . ."

And so Scully and Koufax together began the ninth inning. As the Boston skyline passed by, my uncle and I traveled in time, transported back to the Chavez Ravine, the timeless broadcast echoing in the night air.

Even though I knew how the game turned out, I listened with bated breath. "Two and two to Harvey Kuenn, one strike away. Sandy into his windup, here's the pitch: Swung on and missed a perfect game!"

Then the best broadcaster in sports did what only he could do: he went silent. For thirty-eight seconds, all we heard was the roar of the crowd. Vin let the audience tell the story.

Almost thirty years after that broadcast, my uncle and I were united around the radio. A moment my uncle had first shared with his mother, my grandmother, we had made our own.

Koufax's perfect performance was matched by Scully's call. That play-by-play is iconic in Los Angeles, and some even consider it a work of baseball literature. As sportswriter Dave Sheinin once observed, "To hear Scully call the ninth inning . . . is to make a baseball writer contemplate a career as a roofer. Off the top of his head, without the benefit of a delete button or an editor, Scully composed one of the most gorgeous pieces of baseball literature you will ever encounter."18

While several other broadcasts stand out, I remember best those I shared with my family. As a kindergartener, I got to stay up past my bedtime to watch the first game of the 1988 World Series against the Oakland A's. By the ninth inning, Vin was in charge of the television play-by-play. I sat on the couch next to my father and listened to Scully tell us that Kirk Gibson, the 1988 National League MVP plauged by leg problems, was nowhere to be found. Gibson, it turns out, was watching the broadcast from somewhere in the Dodgers' clubhouse while he underwent physical therapy. Legend has it that Vin's observation about Gibby motivated the ailing player to get in the game.

We all watched as Gibby wobbled to the plate. Once he was in the batter's box, Vin, as nobody else could, noted how he was "shaking his left leg, making
it quiver, like a horse trying to get rid of a troublesome fly.” The count got to three balls, two strikes. And then it happened. Gibson launched a long fly ball just over the right field wall, then he limped around the bases, pumping his fist. While I was screaming, Vin was silent, once again letting the crowd tell the story. And then, perfectly, “In a year that has been so improbable . . . the impossible has happened!” It is impossible for Dodgers fans and Angelenos to recall the home run without also hearing Vin’s voice, it is played so often in Los Angeles. And I couldn’t not tell it again in these pages.

Twenty-one years later, I sat in the nosebleed seats with my little brother on opening day 2009. My brother clutched his transistor radio (my gift to him for his recent birthday) as we watched the pregame festivities. The Dodgers honored Scully’s sixtieth season with the team by asking him to throw out the first pitch (that day we all learned that he is a southpaw). After the ceremonial toss, Scully addressed the fans. “I have needed you a lot more than you have needed me,” he told them. I’m confident that all fifty-six thousand fans disagreed with his assessment. And then, like he does before every broadcast, he almost sang the words, “It’s time for Dodgers baseball.”

The 2011 season was Vin’s sixty-second with the Dodgers. For the past few years, he has signed a series of one-year contracts, each time renewing fan loyalties to the Dodgers. Before the 2010 season, however, we got a major scare. That March, one night during spring training, headlines flashed across the Internet announcing that Scully had fallen and hit his head. The news couldn’t come fast enough as the City of Angels collectively held its breath. He was, to all of our relief, okay.

The incident was a reminder of the octogenarian’s mortality. With each one-year contract, we count our blessings that we get to experience another Scully season, but for how much longer remains unclear. And when he does finally retire, it seems likely that many fans will cut their ties to the team. People move on, find other passions, look to other sports. Scully keeps fans coming back to the Dodgers, at least as much as the other way around. More, much more, without quite realizing it, his voice has become one of those markers of place. Like the sign up in the hills that reads “Hollywood,” like the first glimpse of the ocean as you approach Pacific Coast Highway, the timbre and rhythm of Scully’s words say, “Welcome to Los Angeles.”

* * *
If you grew up in Los Angeles then moved away, especially a generation or two ago, you had to get used to people looking at you and saying, “Huh? LA? No one grows up there, they just move there.” One friend actually loved watching others react when he told them he was a fifth-generation Angeleno (he lives in Virginia now).

Why is that? LA has been America’s second-largest city for decades, and yet there is something inauthentic about it in our imaginations, as if having roots there was impossible. Of course Hollywood has everything to do with this. Anywhere else in America, the word “industry” conjures images of factories, of hot, cacophonous mills where men pour steel or pound cars together, of women sweating their lives away in textile mills and garment shops, of immigrants and minorities doing the work that the native-born shun, of blue-collar workers either exploited by their bosses or defiantly organized into powerful unions.

But in Los Angeles today, “the industry” means just one thing: the film and entertainment business, whose productions are mere light and sound, fleeting, weightless, insubstantial. We were wrong. It turns out that all of those mines and mills and factories were chimerical. Commercials, television shows, movies, reality TV, the whole image-driven world: That is what’s real, that is what lasts. US Steel: Gone. GM: On life support. Pixar: Thriving.

Los Angeles has always seemed to be in the grip of centrifugal forces. Sleepy towns wake up as booming suburbs, whole nations of immigrants pour in, new freeways slither over dry riverbeds. With Angelenos spending so much time in their cars, with new exurbs impossibly far from downtown, with so many immigrants busy becoming new Americans, it makes perfect sense that one of the things holding the town together is a voice on the radio. For more than sixty years Scully’s has been the voice of LA. And for those of us who no longer live there, what could be better than flying into LAX, renting a car, heading out the 405 freeway, scanning the radio band, and up pops Vinny, still where he’s been all these decades, welcoming us back to Dodgers baseball.

Even though we can’t imagine the Dodgers without him, he has never ever been a homer like the late Harry Carey, so full of a hypocrite’s devotion that he could love both the Cubs and the Cardinals. Nor was there ever in Scully’s delivery even a trace of that horrible apocalyptic tone we’ve come to associate with the likes of Bob Costas or Marv Albert, as if they were announcing a Soviet invasion of western Europe. No, Scully is perfect for the Southland, because his voice resonates with that easy, flowing ideal of Southern California life.
Scully’s persona comes through not in the cheap, overheated, and patronizing tones so common to sports announcing. On the contrary, it’s his devotion to his craft—to getting the story right, giving us key statistics, filling in with the back-stories, building drama with his poetic rhythms—that tells us he is LA’s own. We love him because, in a city filled with outrageous self-promotion and continual self-regard, here is the real deal—an oasis of understatement, of substance, of art. All elegance and ease and seeming effortlessness, perhaps he is best thought of as a performance artist, without a hint of the pretentiousness that phrase sometimes conjures.

One last thing. Scully has done it in a town dedicated to being forever young. Los Angeles is all about youth, appearances, pleasing surfaces. The town is a living denial of age, of generational continuity. And yet there is Vinny, his shock of red hair now feathered with white, doing his job for more than six decades, offering the city nothing but continuity across generations and ethnic groups and neighborhoods. His are among the better angels of Los Angeles’s nature.
Postscript

The 2016 season marked the sixty-seventh and final year Vin Scully invited us all to pull up a chair because "It's time for Dodgers baseball." Before the first pitch on opening day, just outside the ballpark on the newly named "Vin Scully Avenue," the team kicked off a season dedicated to celebrating and thanking Scully. Don Newcombe, who pitched on Scully's first opening day in 1950, was there. So was Sandy Koufax, whose perfect game in 1965 was immortalized by Scully's words. So too was Clayton Kershaw, another brilliant southpaw and the face of today's Dodgers. Master of Ceremonies Al Michaels concluded the festivities with the words, "And now, all Vinny has to do is go to work!"

As in each of the sixty-six prior seasons, go to work he did. By some blessing of fate from the baseball gods, there was a player on the field that day named Socrates Brito, a rookie center fielder for the opposing Arizona Diamondbacks. And so, effortlessly woven into the day's story of strikes and balls, line drives and double plays, Scully told us about the great Greek philosopher from millennia ago, the old man who came down to us as the voice of ancient Athens.

That's one of the keys to Scully. It isn't just the longevity of a gifted announcer. Scully always brought the past into the present, made it alive for us. Stan Kasten, the Dodgers' president, reflected on the historical treasure that is Scully. "Now here's the thing," he told the New York Times, "Branch Rickey, before he was an executive, was a major league player. He broke in with the St. Louis Browns in 1905. So Vin Scully has discussed baseball with major leaguers who were here from 1905 through yesterday, O.K.? Who can do that? No one. There's one person on the planet. It's Vin Scully." Scully didn't just know Branch Rickey (and Bill Veeck and Jackie Robinson and the rest); he kept them alive for us.

There are new voices behind the microphones for the Dodgers and Dodgers fans still tune in each night. But Scully will never truly be replaced. And when games are dull or the score lopsided, many of us will sneak away to the audio archives and listen to the real master, his voice and the games he called and the stories he told more alive than ever.
LA Sports

Play, Games,
and Community
in the City of Angels

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