

JUST IN
JERSEY

PINBALL PARADISE

BY HUNTER HULBERT

Every week, Paul Robinson can't wait for the moment that makes him feel like a kid again.

After trekking 90 miles one-way from his apartment in Holmes, Pa., he parks along picturesque Ocean Avenue in Asbury Park and heads straight for the boardwalk. He listens to the waves, the squawks of the seagulls, the hum of human chatter, then finally — the sound he's come for faintly emerges.

Piiiiing!

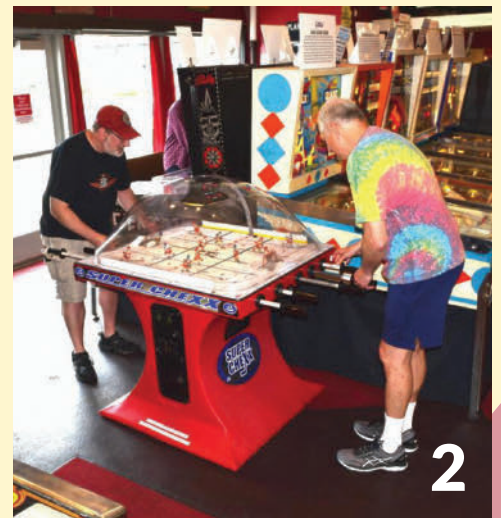
The noise grows louder as he gets closer.

**Ping...
clack.
Ping, ping
... clack,
clack.**

As he turns the corner and passes through double doors, there it is: A wall of pinball machines decked out in all their vintage glory, with frenetic lights, funky music and flashy cartoon characters — the bells and whistles he loves. He steps up to one of his favorites, the 1967 "Melody" machine, coils back the plunger and starts pressing those flipper buttons like there's no tomorrow. With each ring-a-ding-ding, he bounces back to the fond memories of his childhood.

"I played pinball all the time as a kid," Robinson said. "If I got a quarter from my grandparents, I'd go to the corner store in South Philly, put the quarter in (I could play five games per quarter) and start playing. I've been playing pinball since I was 7 or 8 years old, and they still have machines in here that I played when I was a kid. It's awesome."

Robinson's perspective is a common sentiment among those who visit this blinking blast from



IN ASBURY PARK, A NOSTALGIC BLAST FROM THE PAST AWAITS ALONG THE BOARDWALK



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

1

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT:
The Asbury Park arcade brings joy to people of all ages.

Photos 1 and 2 courtesy of Silverball Museum Arcade

2

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Bubble hockey is one of several arcade staples that keep visitors sticking around.

3

LEFT: Frenetic lights, funky music and flashy cartoon characters are all part of the vintage charm of Silverball.

Photos 3 and 4 by Joseph Murphy

4

BELOW: The Silverball collection isn't just impressive for its mesmerizing visuals and size, but for its variety.





LEFT: Around 180 games are available for play at a given time at the Silverball Museum Arcade. Of the 180, about 140 of them are pinball.

BELOW: The 1967 'Melody' game is a favorite among the older crowd, as it conjures childhood memories.

Photos courtesy of Silverball Museum Arcade



the past, the Silverball Museum Arcade. It's an attraction in every sense of the word, a magnetic place with literally nothing but fun and games, plus a little history along the way. From the old-school pinball memorabilia on the walls to the historical placards placed over each machine to the nostalgic clings and clangs that call out at every corner, every inch is packed with signs of a bygone time.

Thanks to Silverball, that era looks to remain alive for the foreseeable future.

"I think what's special about this place is that we're reintroducing something that might've become obsolete. We really are opening people's eyes to these great, great

games," said Patricia Barber, senior vice president of Silverball Museum Arcade. "Every age — from little kids that are 7, 8, 9 years old to 80 — run in smiling, and they don't want to leave. That's the biggest comment we get from people is that they didn't realize how much fun playing these games would be."

Like its neighbors — The Stone Pony, Wonder Bar, Convention Hall — Silverball has become something of an icon in Asbury Park over the years. A glance at its Wall of Fame showcases the many famous faces who have tried their hand at becoming a pinball wizard: Bruce Springsteen, Danny DeVito, Ivanka Trump, Gaten Matarazzo and the rest of the

cast of "Stranger Things," the list goes on. People even clamor to have their weddings and exchange their vows in the company of these classic machines. (Wedding receptions typically happen twice a year.) But it didn't always have such a showy reputation.

Silverball got off the ground in 2009, ironically, in a basement. Co-Founder Robert Ilvento and his business partner, Steve Zuckerman, decided to display their combined collection of vintage games in the back room of a record store along Cookman Avenue at a time when Asbury Park was only beginning its transformation into the seaside gem it is today. As the town grew, so did



LEFT: Air hockey is a familiar activity for the younger patrons of Silverball.

BELOW: Silverball Museum Arcade is an attraction in every sense of the word, a magnetic place with literally nothing but fun and games.

Photos courtesy of Silverball Museum Arcade



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Silverball, and what started as a modest museum of less than 100 games in a basement has expanded to around 600 games (though not all of them are on display at one time) within its beautiful location along the boardwalk, steps from Langosta Lounge. Who says pinball is out of style?

"One of the neat things here is that young people, teenagers, tweens, they don't want to come in," Barber said. "They think, 'I'll be bored,' and honest to God you can't drag them back out because, once they play something that is tactile, they're using hands and their body to lean into it, and it's not just pressing a button and staring at a screen. The kids really enjoy it, and one of the cool things in recent years is that college-aged and younger adults are starting to come in here and play the games."

The Silverball collection isn't just impressive for its mesmerizing visuals and size, but for its variety as well. Barber explained that it's a "marriage of old and new," with timeless classics like "Frogger," "Mr. Pac-Man" and "Ms. Pac-

Man," "Subway" and "Knock Out" (from 1950!) sitting alongside newcomers such as Jersey Jack's "The Hobbit" (2016), "Pirates of the Caribbean" (2018) and "Toy Story 4" (2022). Other arcade staples abound, too: air hockey, basketball, Skee-Ball, shooting games, even Jumble Bowler from the '60s.

While its vintage character remains untouched, recent upgrades to the venue completed this year include a more expansive area for game play, a separate party area with a private room and an expanded café offering an assortment of boardwalk fare, from thin-crust pizza to fries to funnel cakes. The improvements are intended to continue fostering a love that visitors, like Robinson, and so many others have for this pinball paradise.

"You know how some people say Disney World is the greatest place on Earth? That's the way I feel about this arcade," Robinson said. "There's no other place like it."

When you experience this awesome piece of Americana, don't forget you can only find it ... **Just in Jersey.** ❖

KNOW

Before You Go

Keep your quarters: Visitors pay a one-time fee for access to all the games. The cost is \$10 for 30 minutes, \$15 for 1 hour, \$17.50 for 6 hours and \$20 for the day. VIP memberships are also available starting at \$60 per month for individuals and \$120 per month for families. Call 732-774-4994 for more information.

Silverball Museum Arcade is located at 1000 Ocean Ave. N., Asbury Park, N.J. 07712. Hours of operation are from 10 a.m. to midnight daily.