

## Neon (introduction to BBC Radio 4 programme)

The Americans haven't just got neon rats. They've got neon cats, hats, and bats. Probably even neon gnats. They've got everything from neon cacti to crucifixes. There's a neon Mona Lisa in LA, where else? And, in Las Vegas, there's even a neon graveyard.

Neon's nocturnally splashed the American Dream across the continent since it arrived here in the 20s. And it may have just become an octogenarian, but, after more comebacks than Sinatra, it's still bewitching the night skies, all the way from the City of Angels to the City that Never Sleeps.

Like the movies, neon has had its x-rated moments, its B-movie era, flickering above derelict motels on windswept interstates, but also its grand premieres and show-stoppers. In some ways it's an unlikely star. It's a colourless inert gas. But if you link it to a transformer and bombard it with electrons, it glows bright orange. Neon tubes can also be coloured with phosphorescent powders. And the metamorphosis of neon tubes into words or symbols is, to this day, done by hand. So it's pretty weird stuff. A hand-crafted gas that alchemises the American landscape as soon as dusk falls...