


LIVE MUSIC GETS SMALLER

Proliferation of mid-sized venues creates opportunities for sound, lighting and video.



The trend toward high-quality live sound is moving into mid-sized music venues, presenting myriad opportunities for systems integrators.

BY DAN DALEY

The burgers and beers may seem the same at many live music venues in cities around the US, but the sound and lights are getting better. That's the collateral benefit from some tectonic-sized paradigm shifts in the music business that are now taking place. And, although it's making the local heroes on stage at the growing number of mid-sized music venues that are mushrooming around the country happy, it's also a trend that AV systems integrators will want to be aware of, as the trend toward high-quality live sound moves into music's trenches.

Background

First, some background. At the turn of the century, the music industry entered a declining phase that's still

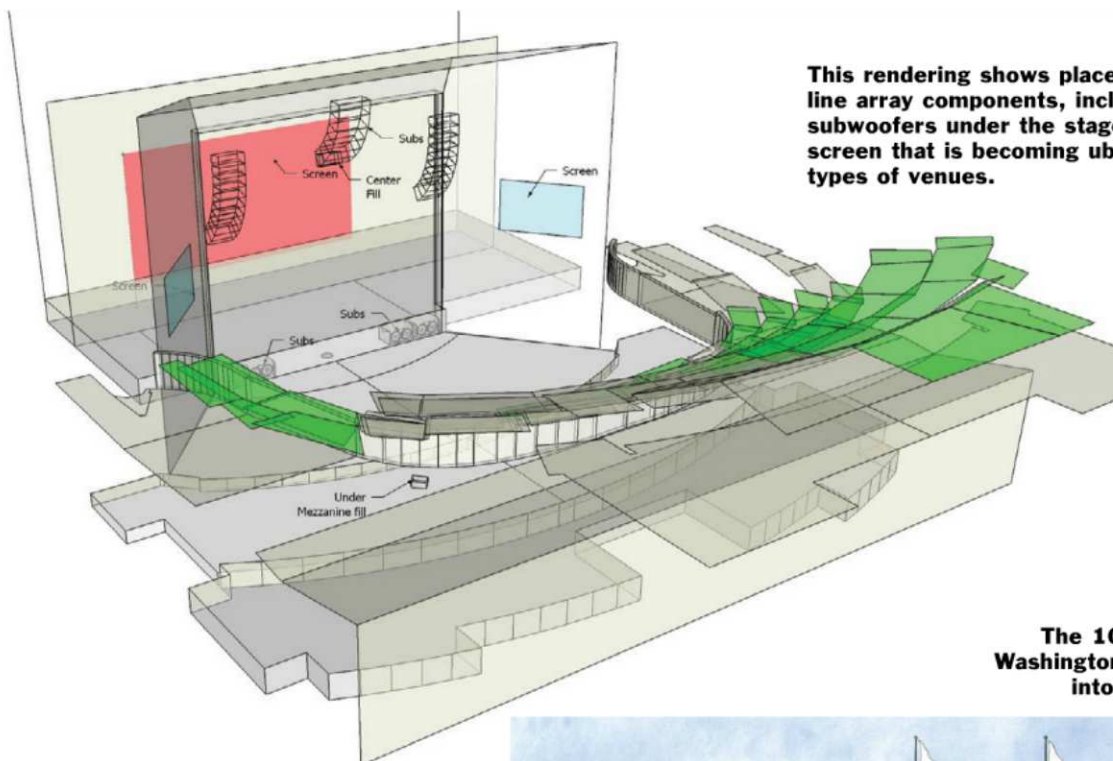
ongoing. In 2010 (the last full year for available numbers), overall album sales, including albums and track-equivalent album sales, declined 9.5% over 2009 and were down by about 50% from a decade earlier. And while CD sales continue to decline further, digital sales have slowed down to a crawl, with barely 1% growth from 2009 to 2010. Prerecorded music—the core product of the entire music industry—has lost its luster in the age of digital availability.

However, during what has come to be known as music's lost decade, live music revenues have increased steadily, with worldwide live music/concert revenues between 2006 and 2011 rising to \$23 billion (projected) this year from \$16.6 billion in 2006, according to

eMarketer. In other words, the main source of revenue for the music industry shifted from the CD, which artists would mount expensive and extensive concert touring to help sell, to the touring shows themselves.

During the mid-1990s, the business hub of the music industry moved away from what had dwindled to four major record labels (all of which underwent some type of sale or restructuring in 2011) and what have become the two dominant entities in the live music space: Live Nation and AEG Live. From the start, these music giants focused on large venues such as stadiums and arenas (Live Nation was a spinoff of Clear Channel Communications in 2005, its existence heavily predicated on the former parent company's out-

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This rendering shows placement of the line array components, including the subwoofers under the stage, and the video screen that is becoming ubiquitous in these types of venues.

The 100-year-old Howard Theater in Washington DC is undergoing renovation into a 980-seat live music venue.



door venues).

And here's where it gets really interesting: Live music revenues have also slowed in the last two years, sliding 15% alone last year, according to industry trade Pollstar, with high ticket prices in the face of a persistent economic slowdown cited as a leading cause of lower ticket sales. The upshot of this, however, has been a strategic repositioning away from arena-sized touring and on to night-after-night gigs at mid-sized (500 to 1200 seats) club venues.

For instance, Live Nation in 2007 took over the venerable rock club Irving Plaza in Manhattan, in the process revitalizing the equally venerable Fillmore franchise that it attached to it. A year earlier, Live Nation acquired the House of Blues chain of music clubs. Not to be outdone, in 2007, AEG Live bought two high-profile Seattle clubs: the 1147-capacity Showbox at the Market, and the 1511-capacity Showbox SoDo. Since then, both mega music promoters have continued to acquire or secure the rights to exclusively book dozens of additional mid-sized venues, in the process also raising the quality bar for sound, lights and video across this growing swath of the live music landscape.

Increasing Number

The increasing number of mid-sized clubs sprouting across the US is vying to attract artists for whom a hit record is now defined as sales of as few as 50,000 units in the fragmented context of Music Industry 2.0, said Toffer Christensen, vice president of talent at the Blue Note Entertainment Group, whose club holdings include the venerable Blue Note jazz club, BB King's and the relatively new HighLine Ballroom in Manhattan, as well as new clubs just opening in Baltimore MD, Richmond VA and Washington DC. "What's driving all of this is that the

arena act era is over and the indie music business is all about many more artists in many genres who need more venues scaled to the sizes of audiences they're typically drawing, so these 500- to 1200-seat mid-sized clubs make sense," he explained.

So much sense that there's arguably been a bit of a bubble developing in many markets, which might have had one or no clubs of this type as little as three years ago and now have multiple venues, such as Baltimore, where The Blue Note Entertainment Group's newly opened Baltimore SoundStage will compete with clubs including Ram's

Head Live, Sonar and the Otto Bar. And that newly fostered competition has put a premium on sound, lights and video systems.

"Artists know they now have a choice, and the quality of the sound and lights goes into their decision-making process as to which club to choose in each market," said Christensen. He added that video wasn't even on the map for mid-sized clubs as little as a few years ago. "Electronica [music] is huge now. Without video, it would be a guy standing on stage with a turntable, and that's not terribly exciting," he said. "So video systems are part of the technology mix now."

Rider-Friendly Systems

The rider is the addendum that music artists attach to their performance contracts with venues. When arena rock was ascendant, riders focused on issues such as cleanliness of power, load-in accessibility and green M&Ms in the dressing rooms. As music moves into the mid-sized venue era, artists are expecting more in the way of installed systems, limiting the amount of gear they have to carry on the road.

"The house equipment lists send a signal to bands about how seriously to take a particular venue," said Amit Peleg, owner of AV integrator Peltrix. "It assures them that a venue is at a certain operational level."

What makes a rider-friendly music club these days? Digital FOH and monitor consoles, for starters. Desks like the Yamaha PM5D and the Avid Venue 48 have become the norm for 500 to 1200 seaters, as have provisions for both floor wedge and in-ear monitoring. Music pays more attention to low frequencies these days, so PAs require lots of subs. Video—almost unheard of in mid-sized clubs even five years ago—is now becoming a requirement, with artists routinely traveling with laptops and flash drives loaded with their own effects and graphics.

"Demand is pretty much even these days between projection screens and LED display panels," said Peleg. "The artists are driving the technology evolution of this market."

—Dan Daley

Sound Is Still The Bottom Line

Sound is still the core system for any music club at any level. The renovated Howard Theater in Washington DC, a 100-year-old recital hall being remodeled into a 980-seat live music venue that's scheduled to open in April 2012 and is part of the Blue Note Entertainment Group's holdings, is putting more of a system in than one might have expected of this type of venue in recent

years. A JBL Vertec line array is configured with two arrays left and right, consisting of 10 VT4888DP-DA mid-high boxes flanking a center cluster made up of two VT4887ADP-DA boxes underneath six VT4880ADP-DA subwoofers to cover the club's mezzanine level; an additional four ASB7128 subs are on the floor. A dozen wedge floor monitors are fed from eight channels of a Yamaha PM5D-RH digital monitor mix console; another PM5D-RH is used for FOH duties.



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Amit Peleg, owner of Peltrix, the suburban New York City integrator that designed and installed the sound system at the Howard, said that creating a PA system to accommodate shows that in an earlier era would have been performed in larger concert halls and arenas for today's mid-sized club meant some adaptations.

"We didn't have the space for a separate amp rack room for all of the amplifiers, so all of the [main system] speaker cabinets are self-powered," with a small amp room for monitor and floor-mounted subwoofer amps, he explained. This was a solution that added to the system's cost but was



The beefed-up systems in the new generation of mid-sized music venues will offer so much-needed ROI, by allowing the rooms to be used for other applications, such as a mayoral fundraiser here at the Baltimore SoundStage.

HOWARD EQUIPMENT

AUDIO

- 1 Aphex CDR 320Ds stereo compressor, leveler, limiter
- 1 ATI MCDA-112 master clock
- 20 BL VT4888DP-DA main left/right arrays w/AES/EBU module J
- 2 Crown CTS2000USP4CN pro power amps, under-balcony, lobby
- 2 Crown I-T12000HD floor subwoofers
- 9 Crown I-T5000HD monitor wedges (8 mixes + reference mix)
- 1 dbx 1260 zone processor
- 1 dbx 4820 FOH processor w/isolation transformers
- 4 JBL ASB7128 floor subwoofers (front loaded)
- 2 JBL Control 28T-60 speakers, lobby
- 2 JBL CS7315/64-DPDA-CGMP dance fills
- 2 JBL CS7315/64-DPDA-CGMP side fills
- 1 JBL VP7215/64DPDA self-powered drum mix top
- 1 JBL VPSB7118DPDA self-powered drum mix subwoofer
- 13 JBL VRX915M 15" driver monitor wedges
- 2 JBL VRX928LA under-mezzanine fills
- 6 JBL VT4880ADP-DA arrayable subwoofers
- 2 JBL VT4887ADP-DA Center fill w/AES/EBU module
- 1 TASCAM DV-RA1000HD pro CD/DVD recorder
- 1 TASCAM HD-R1 solid-state recorder
- 2 Yamaha PM5D-RH mixing consoles

VIDEO

- 1 Analog Way EKS400LE video processing switcher
- 1 Analog Way RK300 video processing switcher controller
- 1 Atlona HDR16X16S HDMI matrix switcher
- 1 Crestron CP2E control processor
- 1 Crestron TPMC-4SMD 4.3" wallmount touchpanel controller
- 1 Crestron TPMC-99" touchscreen desktop
- 1 Da-Lite Cinema Contour 27½"x15½" custom screen w/frame
- 2 Da-Lite DaSnap Wraparound 81"x142" custom w/frame
- 2 Samsung ME40A 40" LED monitors
- 2 Samsung ME55A 55" LED monitors
- 2 Sanyo PLC-HP7000L 7000 lumen projectors, 1920x1080
- 1 Sanyo PLC-XF47 15,000 lumen projector, XGA
- 2 Sharp LC-70LE734U 70" LED LCD monitors
- 1 Vaddio 999-5700-000 camera controller
- 3 Vaddio HD-20 pan/tilt HD cameras

List is edited from information supplied by Peltrix.

necessary to keep the overall system competitive in the expanding area club market. "It wasn't economical, to say the least," he offered. "But the range of shows that they plan to book here makes the technical parameters more demanding than they would have been. The other benefit it provides is that we get to have precise control over each speaker separately as opposed to having a few speakers grouped together with an external amplifier."

Video System

A sound system of a type more often found in larger concert halls is matched by a three-screen video system that, as Toffer Christensen mentioned earlier, is still a novelty in a mid-sized club setting. A pair of 142x81-inch Da-Lite Da-Snap projection screens are hung on either side of the stage, flanking a third 27x15½ Da-Lite screen fixed on the rear wall of the proscenium stage, used for effects and for graphics displays for corporate and political events.

Two Vaddio 20HD PTZ cameras are focused on the stage; two video switchers (a Smart-AVI HDR16X16S HD matrix switcher and an Analog Way EKS400LE production switcher) and cabling provisions for up to five more cameras in addition to the three already installed give the club extended media capabilities, while a Crestron control system is programmed to let the box office teller open the venue in the morning to sell tickets with basic lighting and background music or let the house staff max the systems out fully.

"That's another challenge of this new generation of music clubs," said Peleg, noting another opportunity for integrators. "They have to serve as many options as they can, to help pay for the cost of more sophisticated systems: In addition to music, a club in a government/business-heavy area like this needs to be able to host other types of events, and the AV has to be able to handle it."

That same mandate has resulted in upgrades to the sound and lighting at existing Blue Note Entertainment Group venues, including the HighLine



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—AMIT PELEG, PELTRIX

Ballroom in Manhattan, where Peleg is installing Elation 7.6-mm-pitch LED panels that will be configured as screens and used for displaying images and as lighting, as well as additional three-way full-range enclosures installed on the opposite side of the room, allowing it to be turned from a sit-down music venue into a dance club. "The strategy is to make every club as flexible as possible," he said, noting that the club invested in custom collapsible furniture to allow the room to be flipped from listening mode to dancing in as little as 10 minutes.

SoundStage

LEDs figure largely in this new iteration of live music venues, as do another new wrinkle in music venue logistics: the presence of an actual lighting designer on the design and

operations team. LD Clyde Johnson III was part of the group that designed and built Baltimore SoundStage, which opened in September in the city's downtown area and holds 500 seated patrons and 1000 in standing-room configuration.

"That's something you've never seen: hiring a certified lighting director for a mid-sized music club," he said. But it's directly attributable to the increased level of competition building up in this sector: Johnson noted

that SoundStage is across the street from the Live Nation-owned Power-Plant music venue. He said the competition extends to club technicians warily checking out each other's systems, plotting to keep their clubs one step ahead of the others in order to lure the best-selling bands as they pass through their markets.

"I definitely recommend that club owners shoot higher these days in terms of the sophistication and performance of their lighting and other systems," he offered. "What we're trying

to do is recreate the experience of the large concert hall in a smaller space. That's what will attract the best bands and keep the audiences coming back."

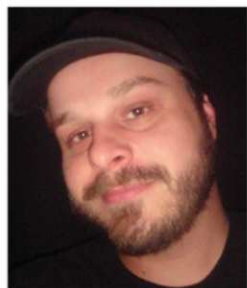
Lots Of LED

To accomplish that, Johnson specified a lot of LED, which he said allows him to pack more lighting into the same amount of space and using the same amount of power as conventional fixtures. "You don't always have a 400-amp system to plug into, but even a pretty standard electrical grid at a typical club will handle most moving-head LFD systems," he said, including the Martin 101 and 301 moving-head fixtures he installed at SoundStage. To emulate the excitement of a large PAR 64 array, he's using smaller but more numerous light fixtures of all types, with many hung behind the stage and moving in circular patterns to enhance the kinetic experience from the audience perspective.

LEDs are more flexible: "LEDs make for easy color wash changes and let us shift the feel of the venue quickly," he said, noting that, in its first week of operation, SoundStage hosted not only country, rock and rap artists, but a press conference with the city's mayor and Maryland's governor on the stage. This underscores the need for clubs to be multipurpose, and less expensive to buy and operate. "LED is definitely more bang for the buck, which makes using more fixtures more affordable."

Budgets Are A Factor

Budgets are a factor in the new music industry and the mid-sized music club shares some traits with the Generation Xers who are a prime target audience for them: They're both expected to do more with less. Paul Dorin, production manager at SoundStage in Baltimore, managed to cobble together what he estimates is a \$300,000 PA system for a fraction of that cost by repurposing a JBL system taken from one of the ownership's shuttered dance clubs in the same city, along with some newly purchased components. VRX932 drivers and SRX728 subs compose a flown stereo curvature array that's buttressed by a new VRX 928 fill speaker;



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—LD CLYDE JOHNSON III, BALTIMORE SOUNDSTAGE

the entire system was also tuned using version 7.0 of SMAART acoustical analysis software.

"What makes the system different is that it's divided into six zones, something that typical club systems don't use for music," said Dorin: the left and right main hangs, a mono sub cluster, the front fill, a VIP and the delay area under the mezzanine.

Nonetheless, many live music clubs will have to do double duty, such as The Beachum in Orlando FL. The Prohibition-era former theater was known as dance lounge Tabu but was converted last year into a live music venue. But on weekends, it reverts back to a Tabu-like incarnation and its liquor sales soar, helping subsidize the live music business during the week.

Tough Market

"Orlando is a tough market; we're surrounded by theme parks that have a lot of A-List clubs inside them," said Jeff Kenny, owner and designer at

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Heavier than Gravity, which designed and integrated the sound and lights at The Beachum, which holds 1250 people.

That meant a sound system that can accommodate extra low end. A stereo PA system features seven EAW KF740 enclosures on each side, supported by eight EAW SB1002 subwoofers arrayed in a mono block below the stage, four EAW JF80Z compact loudspeakers as lip fills on the stage and four EAW

MK5396 two-way trapezoidal loudspeakers for mezzanine and upper-balcony fills. A pair of EAW UX8800 DSP processors is used on the main systems and delays, while two more are used on the monitor mix. The system is powered with Powersoft amplifiers.

Kenney, who doubles as production manager of The Beachum for regional promoter Insomniac Events, said the capital cost for a live music venue can be as much as five times what he'd spec for a dance club. "You have a lot of other components, from mic stands to monitors," he added. But at least having a dance club-rated sound system gives him sufficient low-end firepower, something he stated is chronically lacking in the last generation of live music clubs.

"Electronica is huge in Europe and Asia, but it's just breaking this year here," he suggested. "That's going to be the future of these kinds of clubs in the US: more subs, for dance and for live music, and more video." ■

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