

IT TAKES A TEAM TO BUILD A VENUE...

The New Joint at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas was very much a collaborative effort.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA EVANS

By Bill Evans

In the months before this venue opened, I posted a blog on ProAudioSpace about “iconic” venues that are all too often all rep and no substance. In other words, they may be famous but they sound like crap. And I must admit that part of what had driven it was a show I had just seen at the old Joint at the Hard Rock. In fact, it was one of two closing performances with a big rock band that made their name in the 1980s.

I have loved the “vibe” of the Joint since I first saw Little Feat there in the 1990s and I am not the only one, as everyone from the Stones to Bowie to Aerosmith to the Eagles and too many others to list graced that famous stage. But all the while us in the live audio tribe were pretty unanimous in our dislike of the sound.

So when we found out that they were not just doing a new install or “fixing” the room but spending some \$60 million on a whole new Joint with state-of-the-art sound, we were hopeful. Word that the rig would be all d&b made it seem even more real, and when we found out that it had been designed and built by theater specialists Sceno Plus (The Canadian firm responsible for some of the best-sounding rooms around — including the Coliseum at Caesars, which has hosted Celine Dion, Elton John, Bette Midler and Cher, plus a ton of one-offs in its fairly short history — we knew something special was afoot.

How did they do? I got a call from a local stagehand friend who was on the first load-in for the Killers for opening night, and he raved about how much better it was than the old venue. What would have

been a good six-hour load-in was done in two. I was at the opening night and (aside from the FOH mixer going way too loud—up to 120 A weight at FOH) it sounded great. Even coverage. Plenty of low end, even with the subs flown to preserve sightlines. The audio difference between the final show in the old Joint and the first night in the New Joint was nothing short of stunning. And now every sound guy we talk to is almost salivating at the idea of getting in there and making the Joint sing.

But, lousy sound or no, the old Joint had a vibe that was unmistakable. And, sure, Sceno Plus could do great theaters, but could they do one that *felt* like a rock club? To get the answers we spoke to designer Ben Panaccio and director of technology Normand-Pierre Bilodeau from Sceno Plus, as well as Hard Rock VP of Entertainment Paul Davis (see sidebar, facing page).

FOH: How did Sceno Plus approach design and construction and tech, keep-

The audio difference between the final show in the old Joint and the first night in the New Joint was nothing short of stunning. But what about the vibe? Could Sceno Plus come up with something that felt like a rock club?

ing in mind that you were doing a modern multi-purpose theater that had to feel like a rock ‘n’ roll club?

How did you decide what constituted “vibe” and needed to stay versus what could be changed or thrown out?

Ben Panaccio: What creates a vibe in a theater has a lot to do with the venue / stage relationship. The more intimate is the room, the closer the relationship between the spectator and the performer will be. Obviously, the venue is not very small, since we needed to crank the total capacity up to 4,000 people, however we managed by working with the proportions to keep the same feeling as the Hard Rock fans used to get in the old Joint.

The new Joint called for a flat floor area as large as possible, while keeping good sight lines, to accommodate general admission as well as other type of configurations such as sports events, etc. That helped to fulfill the floor with 3,000 people right next to the stage, driving energy to the performers.

Also, we wanted the bands to be surrounded by their fans and furthermore, the

fans to be able to see each other. That was made possible by adding (in addition to the balcony) the side balconies. The emotional charge that the crowd is generating creates then the firm impression that everyone is living a very special experience. A vibe is born...

Normand-Pierre Bilodeau: Vibe is mostly volume/proximity and of course intimacy of the room (minimum reverberation time) plus you want to be able to feel like you are close to the artist (and vice-versa) without compromising comfort, hence the large video screens on both sides.

How do you keep the vision intact as the project moves forward and day-to-day compromises and “value engineering” become a fact of life?

Ben: You can value engineer a lot of things in such a project as long as you keep the design intent integrity. We did compromises on finishes and “back of house” areas but never gave up on venue proportions, sound systems and room acoustics. All the players were driven into this direction and ultimately, we all hit the right target.

Normand-Pierre: By making the right choices, for example, we could cut on the rigging systems, since there will be mostly touring bands already well equipped that will come to the venue, but for the sound, we wanted to make sure the speakers would be powerful enough, permanently placed and of the highest possible quality so that all the guest bands would adopt the system...which on the long run will be part of the sound signature of the Joint. *continued on page 22*



Although the room can accommodate 4,000, it was designed to bring performers and fans together.



Sound designer Ben Panaccio, left, with Normand-Pierre Bilodeau, director of technology, Sceno Plus.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SCENO PLUS



Permanent speakers were a priority to ensure that the sound in the venue would be consistently good.

THE HARD ROCK TEAM

Along with designer Ben Panaccio and director of technology Normand-Pierre Bilodeau from Sceno Plus, FOH spoke with Hard Rock VP of Entertainment Paul Davis about the New Joint.

FOH: How long have you been with the Hard Rock?

Paul Davis: Since February 2007.

How long have you been involved with The Joint project?

From my first day on the job.

How did you come to work for the Hard Rock?

When Morgan's Hotel Group purchased the property from Peter Morton, they brought in a new resident, Randy Kwasniewski. We were introduced through a mutual acquaintance. I am a native to Las Vegas and have been in the market pretty much my entire career.

What other places have you worked?

MGM Grand (1993-1998); Mandalay Bay Arena (1999-2003); Dodge Arena in Hidalgo, Texas (2003-2004); Planet Hollywood (2004-2007).

What was your involvement in making sure the new Joint had the same "magic" as the old one?

It was really on the designers to do three things: One was to maintain the heritage look and feel of the original venue. The other was to do so while ensuring first-rate, arena level production capabilities. Lastly was to add the VIP element that we have on the entire second level with the luxury suites and tables for guests who want to purchase a higher-end experience. Our team made sure the operational flow was accurate and weighed in on the elements that enhance the rock 'n' roll vibe.

Were you involved with Sceno Plus? The contractors?

Chas and I met with the architects (Klai-Juba) and Sceno Plus on a regular basis. We had *carte blanche* to make tweaks, changes, and recommendations and they were very receptive. The result was a venue that is incredible artist and tour friendly; more than any other venue I am aware of. It was a great team effort.

What part did I play? On the front-of-house side, making sure that the venue could deliver the right experience to the guests. On the back-of-house side, making sure that the flow of the production manager's day was as perfect as possible.

When you spoke to us on the media walk through you were adamant — as the designers were — showing off the "multi-use" aspect; that this venue could be used for many things but it remained at heart a rock 'n' roll venue.

It is a concert venue, first and foremost. Second to that, we were very cognizant of our desire to host MMA and Boxing events — which we are doing. Lastly, the venue works very well for private functions but those tend to bend around the venue design. At the end of the day, though, it's all about concerts — not rodeos, ice-skating, or truck pulls.

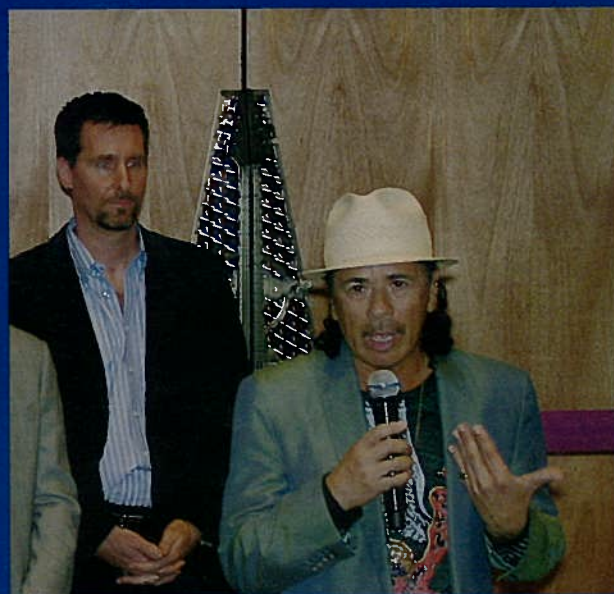
How did you make sure that vision and passion was carried through the entire process?

The entire team was very passionate about the process and in agreement on what needed to happen. There is a rock 'n' roll heritage on the property that people either get or don't get. We all drew off of past experiences and were not afraid to speak up. No one person drove the process. It was a true team effort. Our president, Randy Kwasniewski, was incredibly supportive and trusting. He made it clear two years ago that we had no room or reason to complain about anything once the venue was completed. It was made clear that it was all on our shoulders, which was fine with us!

There are inevitable compromises that have to be made on a project of the scope of the Joint. Some call it "value engineering." How did you ensure that those compromises did

not affect the "soul" of the venue?

We chose our battles. On the customer side, we did not compromise on acoustical quality and sightlines. Of all those, I would say acoustics won the day. The venue sounds absolutely unbelievable, which really needed to be the case. On the back of house side, we made sure the functionality was there (load-in/load-out, production office amenities, etc) and that the artists would feel comfortable and maintain an appropriate sense of security and privacy.



Paul Davis at the opening of the New Joint with featured artist Carlos Santana.

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The venue is built with a large flat floor design to accommodate both music and sporting events.



Despite its multiple uses, Hard Rock VP of Entertainment Paul Davis makes it clear that the space is, first and foremost, a concert venue.

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When it was all said and done, do you feel like you succeeded?

Ben: The time will dictate if we did succeed. If this venue gets the same vibe that the touring acts loved within the old Joint, we will then succeed twice as much since the room has now the acoustics that is needed for Rock 'n' Roll...

Normand-Pierre: Success will be defined by time. If you define success by reaching your goals, then we are almost there (value engineering etc...) but if you measure success with the reaction of the ownership, the public and/or the artists, then we exceeded all expectations and we are proud to say that this is, today, one of the best venues in the USA.

What was the biggest challenge that had to be met?

Ben: Time and money! The client wanted to accelerate the construction completion two months faster in order to reduce the downtime between the old Joint demolition and the new Joint opening! Then the first show was announced...When you come from the show business industry, you know what it means...The show must go on!

Especially during these difficult economic times, leading a project to its completion phase is quite a challenge. Luckily, this rock 'n' roll-oriented concert venue was a key within the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino \$750 million dollars expansion project. There was therefore a tight but secured budget to work with throughout the design and construction phases.

Normand-Pierre: Keep the soul of the old joint, get rid of all the annoying elements (lack of space, problems of access etc...) and put all the comfort of today's technology in equipment and architecture to the service of the artists and the patrons for a *higher* experience.

What was the biggest payoff?

Ben: I guess there is nothing like having the room for the first time packed with an audience. It's always like the first time... What pays also is how the stars and technical crews like to get there. If they feel comfortable and happy and technically supported, it's almost tangible on stage and at the end, the shows are simply better!

Normand-Pierre: Seeing the first few shows but feeling like the joint has been there forever. Let's call it a *Millésime*. FOH

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