

High Technology in Low Places

By: Dan Daley

It was Garth Brooks' first big hit;
now it's his first big club

For most of the years that Nashville has traded on its status as Music City, the home of country music, visitors would pile into tour buses to drive by homes of the stars. Now, the stars are returning the favor, bringing their eponymously named juke joints and bars to the city's already-cacophonous Lower Broadway strip, letting patrons walk (increasingly unsteadily) between them, with the gift shop usually located conveniently near the door. Within a short walk, you can now visit estab-

lishments owned by (or at least licensed through) Blake Shelton, Miranda Lambert, Eric Church, Luke Bryan, Big & Rich's John Rich, Jimmy Buffett, and others (including, soon, for some bizarre reason, Jon Bon Jovi), whose recordings, seeping through doorways and trickling down from rooftop bars, provide the street with a constant, jangling underscore.

In March, Garth Brooks joined the fray, in typical Garth fashion: large and loud, but tastefully so. His Friends In Low Places Bar & Honky-Tonk occu-

pies the entire five levels of one of the brick-faced, turn-of-the-century row buildings that line the street, right next to Ernest Tubb's erstwhile record store and across the street from Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, both Nashville icons of an earlier era. Brooks' venue is named for his 1990 hit "Friends in Low Places," which won the Country Music Association's Single of the Year award and garnered a Grammy nomination, setting him on a decade-plus-long journey to the top of the country and pop charts. But it was Brooks' live shows, often with his wife Trisha Yearwood—who brands the kitchen of the new venue—that defined his career, with the club's namesake tune always the closer or the encore. Some of the singer's longtime associates, who helped create the audio, video, and lighting elements of those shows, have made them present in Friends In Low Places Bar & Honky-Tonk, if you know how to look and listen.

Tour sound

While Yearwood's recipes bring the down-home realness to the place, the venue emphasizes a rare kind of technical authenticity, with most of its audio, video, and lighting supplied by the same brands and vendors Brooks has used on the road for years, including Clair, Bandit Lites, and Moo TV. "If you know how a Garth Brooks show sounds, you'll find it pretty familiar-sounding in here," says Joe Anderson, the systems designer from Clair Global.

The 55,000-sq.-ft. venue is outfitted with an L-Acoustics A Series PA system designed and installed by Clair Global, and a DiGiCo Quantum 225 console at the front of house, with a



The brick-faced, turn-of-the-century row buildings that line the Lower Broadway strip now host many joints owned or licensed through big-name country stars.

MADI-ready MQ-Rack stage box. The sound system design accommodates the long rectangular spaces of the neighborhood's vintage interior architecture. Flanking the stage on the left long wall are two A15i Focus enclosures over a single A15i Wide speaker, and another hang of one A15i Focus over two A15i Wide speakers, which provide coverage to either side and in front, toward the main floor and the balcony (carved out of what was once the second floor).

The design challenge was to provide even and consistent coverage to both levels. To keep the volume reasonable but still impactful, fourteen X8 speakers are installed as balcony underfills, each powered by one of the 16 channels of an LA7.16i amplified controller, with the remaining two channels used to power X8 speakers in the club's elevated VIP areas on the main floor. "That way, we could tailor the sound to what was exactly needed in each zone of the area under the balcony," Anderson explains. In addition, two KS21i subs are mounted behind the A15i hangs, along with four KS28 subs in custom-constructed 4'-deep cavities below the stage and the VIP areas, which give those areas significant LFE impact without rattling the seats. Onstage, performers will (if they follow Brooks' well-known preferences for wedge monitors over IEMs) find Clair 1AM speakers and a Clair drum sub.

Acoustically speaking, the space had an inherently challenging characteristic: a relatively short throw from the stage to the opposite parallel wood-covered wall, whose natural reflectivity could have induced significant flutter echoes. The solution isn't immediately obvious unless you have a plumb line handy from the balcony: The opposite wall was toed outward at the bottom slightly, but enough to direct the sonic energy downward and away from the center of the room.

Like Brooks' shows, though, the music doesn't stop there. The rooftop bar has a left-right sound system



The club's balcony was carved out of what once was the building's second floor.

comprising an A10i Focus over and A10i Wide and one KS21i sub on either side; a nearby bar area is covered by eight X8 speakers with SB10i subs, all powered by LA-4X amps. "The challenge for the rooftop bar, where they'll have a lot of DJs working late into the night, is to have impact without getting too loud," says Anderson, expressing some rare restraint for what the UK's *Independent* newspaper dubbed "the noisiest city in the US." "One of our mantras at Clair is not to be loud for its own sake. It has to sound good, not just loud." This is accomplished largely by relying on the subs for impact, which allows the roof to keep the overall volume level lower. "What we're trying to do is elevate the production-value level of the entire sound experience, to make it closer to what you'd expect from a concert rather than a club," he says. This is achieved, he explains, by using more LFE to add punch at an overall lower volume level, then using an analysis of each area's first-impulse responses and, finally, gain-shading the volume at the edges of each zone. "That evens out the tonality of the entire system while still giving you that low-

end kick," he says. Sound travels throughout the venue's multiple levels via a distributed system; on the third level, it uses Tannoy CMS 803DC PI 8" full-range ceiling speakers and CMS 1201 SW in-ceiling subs.

Working with friends

Friends In Low Places Bar & Honky-Tonk rolled out in stages. The club had a soft opening, with a show by Brooks and his band, on Black Friday last November. "The first two floors were finished first, and the club could have shows there on the weekends while we completed the upper two floors and the roof," explains Dan Heins, the account executive with Clair Global Integration who oversaw the venue's audio, video, and lighting installation, but who also has the insight of having mixed Brooks' front-of-house sound since 1989. This arrangement worked well through the club's grand opening over three months later. It was a nearly complete renovation, but Heins points out a few items that were left in place from the building's previous incarnations, such as the soundproof windows on the third floor, which harken back to its time as the Paradise Park Trailer



A sign directs patrons to the rooftop bar.

Resort, a cheekily named boutique destination hotel that kept the din of Lower Broadway out of its 20 guest rooms. That area is now intended for private events.

While Brooks carries Clair's Cohesion PA system and a Yamaha RIVAGE front-of-house console on tour, Heins says both the L-Acoustics PA and DiGiCo mix desk are good choices for this club space because of their technical capabilities and their form factors. He notes that the A Series gets its full-range array into a curve compact enough to not cause sightline issues in a tight space. The Quantum 225, whose front-of-house position needed to be moved to one side due to space and seating requirements, can stay close enough to give the mix engineer a good sonic picture of the performance. "I'm happy that I got to work with the people at Moo TV and Bandit Lites for this," he says. "We've spent a lot of years on the road together and getting to work together

again locally is a real joy."

Lighting For iPhones

David Butzler has been Brooks' lighting designer since the singer's second tour; he is also a close associate of Bandit Lites, which honored Butzler for their 30-year connection in 2022. The new club was still a bit of a stretch for Butzler, who had to design the venue's lighting both for its interior geometry as well as its moment in the social-media epoch, taking into account Brooks' deal with Amazon Prime for occasional streamed shows from the venue.

"It used to be about lighting a stage for a performance, but today it's about lighting a stage for everyone's iPhones," says Butzler, who came up the lighting ladder starting in clubs in and around his St. Louis hometown. "So, you're lighting for color correction, for the huge video screen in the room. We pretend in a sense that we're [lighting] for video because, with

all the iPhones out there, we are."

Butzler's usual practice in concerts is to establish areas onstage for different elements of the performers—the singers, the band, etc.—that he refers to as "contamination-free zones": areas that are key-lighted and color-balanced, and where no other light goes without also being color-balanced. That's not as easily attained in the tighter confines of a club environment. For Friends In Low Places, he relied heavily on various CHAUVET Professional COLORado LED wWshes, in some instances mounted to the balcony handrail, to achieve an entente between what the audience sees with the naked eye and how it will look through an Apple phone camera.

"It's as though you're doing television all the time," he says about the tectonic shift that has put millions of near-broadcast-quality cameras into the audience, whether they're in a football stadium or an intimate club. "As an LD you really don't watch the actual stage—you watch your monitors instead. You check the intensity and the color correction. We used to light for the audience; now we light for the lens because video, cell phones, and social media have become so important. So, this changes the definition of what works and doesn't work in concert lighting. I mean, over-lighting looks great when you're seeing a concert live, but then look at it on video and it's [not]. We also have to consider how a backdrop will look on video now. I do that in everything because of the iPhone."

On Nashville's Lower Broadway, the show never really ends: tourists and other visitors meander in and out of the strip's bars virtually all day and all night long. (By state law, bars and restaurants must stop serving alcohol by 3am and can start serving again at 8am during the week, 10am on Sundays.) That nearly 24/7 schedule means that the time-of-day and zone lighting used for multi-use spaces like restaurants is as important as concert-

type illumination here. Where a ChamSys MagicQ MQ250M lighting console fits the budget and needs of the performance area, the rest of the venue is divided into zones managed by a Lutron controller preprogrammed by Terry Thomson, president of Audio Video Resource, a Seattle-area AVL integrator focused primarily on residential work, who had done some lighting control for one of Brooks' residences in Oklahoma. At Friends In Low Places, Thomson installed a Lutron Homeworks QSX processor, which can be easily operated by the bar managers, for the Ketra light fixtures he specified for the restaurant's non-performance lighting.

"The Ketra lights are programmed to adjust throughout the day to provide a natural ambient atmosphere, automatically dimming from mid-day 3,000K down to sunset 1,800K for dining," Thomson says, and then down to what the lighting techs have dubbed "Garth Blue" when the music starts. They also connect with the COLORados, which were chosen in part because of the nature of the downtown environment: The fixtures, which have a 50,000-hour rating, will be used nearly 24/7 and will have to be replaced more often, Butzler contends, making less-costly models a better choice.

"I'm not the full-time lighting director there, but I've given them the tools they need for music and mood," he says. "They have color on the console and the different levels of intensity that I have set up for that along with the video director. If they choose to use that, then they're going to be color-corrected for video. If they choose to [light the] spectrum of color [for the audience], they'll be able to do that for the live crowd. Whatever they think works best at the moment, they'll be able to do."

Getting the picture

In mid-sized clubs like these, sightlines are usually not a problem, given the proximity of the stage to the audi-



For stage lighting, Butzler relied heavily on various CHAUVET Professional COLORado LED Washes, in some instances mounted to the balcony handrail.

ence. But Friends in Low Places takes that one step further, with tightly pitched LED screens backing and flanking the stage, and more on the walls following the stairs up to the balcony. "There's an upstage wall and two side screens, right around 120' wide and maybe 25' to 30' high," says Alex Ford, technical project manager for Moo TV, which did the venue's video systems and infrastructure design and installation. "Each one of those screens is a 4K raster with 2.5-mil pixel pitch."

In addition, a bespoke Moo TV media server drives the three 4K screens for the stage and can PIP them as needed, part of a "sports-bar mode" for the main room that can tile up to ten different sources on the upstage wall, with as many as 36 including the side LED panels, using ATS Pro tiles. (Nashville is called Music City but with the NFL Titans, NHL Predators, and MLS Nashville SC as home teams, it's also a huge sports destination. "It's AV at a sports-book level," says Travis Walker, Moo TV's general manager.)

The big challenge for that much video that close to the audience—"In

some cases, they can touch the screen; the farthest you could be away from one is probably 30'," Ford estimates—is getting the resolution tight enough to be visually coherent and keeping the latency as low as possible. With some of the LED screens as tight as 1.5mm, the resolution is incredibly sharp, even close up. Latency took a bit more effort.

"We went with a 10-bit workflow on the whole system, and all the LED screens are wired in a low-latency mode, which nobody ever does," explains Walker, noting the use of a ZeeVee ZyPer4K encoder in the system. "It takes a lot of care to do it that way, but we're basically within a frame or two of delay on the whole system. It is very, very fast, which is what we strive for in our touring systems, as well. We took the expertise that we've learned from doing stadiums and arenas and clubs and theatres for the last 30 years and brought it to Broadway."

As with the sound and lights, the video installation extends throughout the venue, with plenty of 55" and 65" Samsung flat-panel displays at bars on the main, third, and rooftop floors. It starts early: The venue lobby has a life-sized statue of Brooks, ready-

CLOSE-UP: NIGHT LIFE

made for Instagram selfies and surrounded by a pair of 1.5mm screens that create a 90° backdrop using an epoxy-covered COB LED tile designed to be smooth to the touch. “It feels like glass when you touch it, and it’s made to withstand really high impact,” says Ford. “People can go and take pictures; they can literally run up to it and touch it and lean on it.” Much of the lobby is a 1.9mm video wall, creating a pre-experience as evening crowds line up to enter. Also on the main floor is a Garth-merch store, where a 40’-long, 10”-high scrolling 3.9mm ribbon inside the store and a 10’-by-10’ 2.6mm display seen through a window facing Broadway are both connected to an 8K BrightSign digital signage player and the main video server. Upstairs, at the Oasis rooftop area, are six 65” outdoor-rated flat panels in the indoor bar area, four facing inward and two facing the open area. “It is,” says Walker, “a lot of great AV stuff packed in there.”

Friends In Low Places is also a club masquerading as a television production studio. It has the ability in-house to do a seven-camera shoot, with three Panasonic AW-UE150 PTZ cameras that are capable of 4K (though currently running at 1,080p), joined by four Marshall CV355 POV cameras, all managed by a Barco E2 screen-management system and LightWare MX2 24-by-24 HDMI router. Other broadcast-production gear includes a Blackmagic 40-by-40 12G SDI router and a Blackmagic ATEM 4 M/E Constellation production switcher. “We definitely built it knowing that it’s a bar and restaurant that has to run a TV show, so all of the back-end infrastructure is designed the way a TV studio would be,” Walker says. “For instance, we have a massive 174-point fiber patch bay down in the basement where we can take signals via fiber from pretty much anywhere in the building and send it anywhere else in the building and ingest to and from out of the system to tie in TV trucks. Plus, there are two redundant dark-fiber links, provided by AT&T, so we can



The upstairs bar.



Gear on the roof includes, from CHAUVET Professional, eight COLORado 1 Quad Zooms, 25 Outcast 1L Beams, 23 Outcast R2X Washes, 12 STRIKE Array 2Cs, and four Color STRIKE Ms. Gear from ADJ includes six 15 HEX BAR IPs and eight 7P HEX units. Control is by a ChamSys MQ70.

shoot video to news networks or broadcasters straight from the facility. No bar ever had anything like that.”

This is Moo TV’s first Broadway bar, but the company has been Brooks’ video partner since it his fund-raising concert for Nashville after the 2010 flood, setting out on tour with him a few years later. “We’ve been with him

ever since,” Walker says. “I haven’t done the math, but there’s a good chance we have more pixels than Bridgestone Arena right next door. We also have more LED and more functionality, video-wise, than any other bar on Broadway.” And just to be sure, he adds, “There’s not one even close.”