

A Club By Any Other Name...

Audio renaissance at Avalon Hollywood

By Daniel Keller

It was the best of halls; it was the worst of halls, a grand Spanish Colonial-style theater that has been through many incarnations since opening in 1927. Now in its latest form as Avalon Hollywood, a club offering both live and dance music, it began life as the Hollywood Playhouse, built in the heyday of Tinseltown's vaudeville era.

In 1942, the Playhouse became the El Capitan and converted to a radio studio theater, and then with the advent of television in the 1950s, legends like Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong and Judy Garland graced the (again) re-christened Hollywood Palace's stage for many of TV's classic shows including the *Texaco Star Theater*, *This is Your Life*, *The Lawrence Welk Show*, and the epony-

mous *Hollywood Palace Variety Hour*.

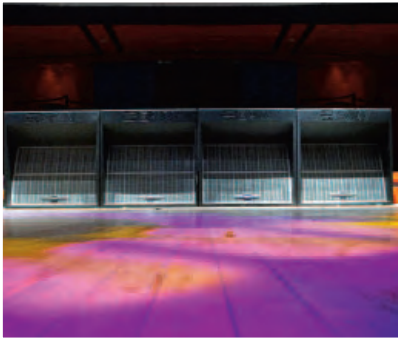
Resurfacing again in the late 1970's as a rock club, the venue endured a revolving door of concert promoters for the next two decades. Though it played host to famed artists like the Clash, Prince and Nirvana, a level of prestige derived of its heritage never happened.

This changed recently when club entrepreneur John Lyons undertook the venue's restoration and resurrection, and Avalon Hollywood was born. Lyons, who with Isaac Tigrett and Dan Akroyd created the original House of Blues (HOB), is one of few club owners who can also lay claim to being a legitimate sound and lighting designer. (For many years, he's run his own sound company, Moon Lighting.)

Over a decade later, Lyons and Tigrett are no longer involved in the institution they created (though Akroyd still sits on the HOB board of directors), but the ideas they set forth remain a cornerstone of the chain's success. And Lyons has brought some of the same philosophy to his current ventures.



The Avalon in full-swing, with plenty of loudspeakers blanketing the space thanks to two systems. The live system's line arrays flanking stage left and right virtually disappear.



Four of up to 16 subwoofers that can be activated at one time. At right, the relocated FOH mix position on the floor makes for a more ideal listening environment for system engineers.



Lyons' latest endeavor had its beginnings in his native Boston, where he and his brother Patrick created the original Club Avalon in the early 1990s. A chance meeting with Ken Berger, then-president of nearby Eastern Acoustic Works (EAW), led to a discussion about the need for loudspeaker systems designed specifically for dance clubs.

Lyons interfaced with the EAW engineering team, providing a detailed outline of the physical and sonic characteristics meeting his criteria, and the Avalon (also known as DC Series) of loudspeakers was born. Boston's Club Avalon has gone on to develop a reputation as one of the city's premier nightspots.

It was a natural evolution for the Avalon name to expand to other cities. Along with partner Steve Adelman, Lyons scouted locations in both New York and Los Angeles, in the latter case settling upon the Hollywood Playhouse.

FAMOUSLY BAD SOUND

The venue was a particular challenge in that it had a history of sonic issues. "It was a famously bad-sounding room," Lyons recounts, "known more than anything else for how bad it truly sounded." Over time, the hall's acoustical signature had been subjected to a succession of poorly thought-out schemes, which caused more problems than they addressed.

The room originally was very well

designed from a classic live perspective. The original curvilinear surfaces and acoustic treatments were such that an unamplified voice on the stage could be heard from any seat in the house.

The problems came with the addition of amplification and loudspeakers, with no one ever bothering to address what had now become a problem – the hall was too reverberant. Every bit of energy from the sound system made it to every part of the hall. And over the years, successive owners/management had attempted to correct the problem by putting more and more sound in the room. All of the extra "stuff" exacerbated the problem.

"Just walking in I could pretty much instinctively tell where the problems were and what needed to be done," Lyons says. "I had some RTA measurements done to confirm what I was hearing, and it turned out we had a 3.8-second reverberation time. I needed to get that down to around 1 second before going any further with the system design."

A healthy application of K-13 acoustic treatment to ceiling and upper walls served to break up most of the standing waves, with acoustic baffling behind the stage's rear curtain helping eliminate "slap-back" into the room. "There was nothing particularly magical about what was done. We basically used materials we'd worked with in other rooms, identifying the

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areas and surfaces that needed to be addressed. The end result was a world of difference."

With the acoustics under control, it was time to design dual sound systems that share a few elements. However, one system is specifically tailored for live pop/rock/blues performance and the other for dance applications.

IN WITH THE NEW

Lyons' previous work with EAW made the company a logical first stop, and he focused on the company's KF Series line array platform to support concert acts. "We went with line arrays because we recognized that even with the improved acoustics, there needed to be control over the steering of the output," he explains. "The KF Series offers two low-frequency sections and a low-mid section on the side that can be effectively steered with the use of a sufficient amount of digital processing."

The arrays, flown stage left and right, each include four KF760s

(three-way, long-throw with 80-degree horizontal dispersion) and two KF761s (also three-way, but shorter throw and 100-degree horizontal dispersion) per side.

"We wanted to go into the project with loudspeakers that had the best chance of addressing the problem, rather than trying to take something more generic and work backwards. The KF line array was a relatively new product, but we felt we could make it work in this room," Lyons says. "By 'toeing' the arrays slightly inward, we've been able to cover the room and the balcony while keeping most of the energy concentrated on the people rather than bouncing off other surfaces."

The "inherited" system that came with the venue offered racks of mostly Crest 7000 Series power amplifiers, running bridged mono mode. This package was retained but beefed up significantly with three additional racks of Crest 9000 Series, which are now called upon to do the heavy lifting with the main arrays. All loud-

speakers in the venue are processed with two BSS Soundweb units, one master and a slave, with about a two-thirds of this DSP power applied to the live system.

Another facet that needed addressing was the front-of-house mix position as well as the console. A 60-channel Midas Heritage 3000 now resides in a new dedicated position in the middle of the main floor. "The original club's FOH position had been located up in the balcony. I don't know what they were thinking," Lyons sardonically notes.

MAKING LIFE EASIER

What about the low-end? Live and dance systems share a portion of this facet, with two EAW DCS2 dual-12-inch-loaded subwoofers to the left and right of the stage, on the deck. Another 12 DCS2 subs are positioned in groups of four around the main floor. The dance floor loudspeaker complement is filled out with six flown DC1 horn-loaded main loudspeakers distributed around the room.

On many nights, a live show's end signals a changeover from one sound system to the other, a process that can be done via a couple of presets established in the Soundweb drive rack at FOH in less time than it takes for the audience to shuffle out and the punters to file in.

The sonic improvements at the venue were joined by an aesthetic makeover just as drastic. The exterior façade, stage décor and fine old architectural crown moldings, buried under years of inelegant makeovers, were painstakingly restored, and after several months (and significant expense), Avalon Hollywood opened its doors.

"Over the years I've learned that once you get the room's acoustics right, all you need is great sounding boxes, plenty of amplifier horsepower and a good desk – it's all downhill from there," Lyons concludes. "I really wanted to do everything I could to make it a good experience for the audience. I'm a big believer in starting off right – it just makes everyone's life easier." ■

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