

Positively Bleecker Street

By: David Barbour

A storied Greenwich Village nightclub is re-invented with an innovative format and sound system

It wasn't terribly so long ago that Bleecker Street was one of the most happening streets in New York's Greenwich Village, lined with venues that provided a launching pad for most of the important names in pop music and comedy. Also on the same street, the Circle in the Square Theatre helped give birth to the Off Broadway movement. Around the corner, a little thing called *The Fantasticks* ran for upwards of four decades.

Nowadays, Bleecker Street is more for the tourists, kids from NYU, and anyone else looking for evidence of yesterday's cultural ferment; that could change, however, thanks to the opening of Le Poisson Rouge, an entirely unexpected concept in nightlife, which, if successful, could shake things up considerably in this storied neighborhood. Aside from its unique programming concept, this new-wave nightclub comes with an equally cutting-edge sound system—including what is billed as the first surround sound installation ever conceived for a club.

A historic location

Le Poisson Rouge is located in the former Village Gate, a duplex nightclub/cabaret that was open from 1958-96. As owned and operated by Art D'Lugoff, it played host to many musical greats, including Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, and Dizzy Gillespie; among other things, it was the site of Aretha Franklin's New York debut.

A number Off Broadway shows played the Village Gate as well, including the notorious 1967 satire *MacBird!*, *National Lampoon's Lemmings* (starring the young Chevy Chase, John Belushi, and Christopher Guest), and the original production of *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, which lasted for 1,847 performances.

The Village Gate closed its doors in 1996, and, in a true sign of the times, part of it was converted to a CVS drugstore. The lower portion reopened as a short-lived club called Life, then was reinvented as the Village Theatre; among its few bookings were two shows—*Love, Janis* and *Dream a Little Dream*—which celebrated the kind of musical stars (Janis Joplin and The Mamas and the Papas) for which Bleecker Street was once well-known.

Now it has been taken over by David Handler and Justin Kantor, who have rechristened it Le Poisson Rouge, a dramatically different approach to New York's nightclub scene.



PHOTOS: ROBERT WOLFSCH

Neither strictly a home for traditional jazz, like the Village Vanguard or the Blue Note, nor a place for rock and blues, like the Back Fence; in a kind of mission statement, it bills itself as “serving art and alcohol.”

That motto isn't facetious; Handler and Kantor are casting their entertainment net as widely as possible. Already, the club has hosted Philip Glass, John Zorn, Lou Reed, the JVC Jazz Festival, They Might Be Giants, and Nona Hendryx. It has also featured a run of Monteverdi's opera *The Coronation of Poppea*, complete with early music instruments, as performed by the group Opera Omnia. There's also something called New York Burlesque's Saturday Spectacular, featuring such performers as Immodesty Blaize and Kitten on the Keys. How's that for diversity?

Sleek design and surround sound

In order to remake the 12,300-sq.-ft. venue, Handler and Kantor hired the Walters/Storyk Design Group. “Le Poisson Rouge posed a number of design challenges,” says John Storyk, the

architect and acoustician, “particularly with columns fixed in not particularly convenient places, which increased the challenge of the surround-sound installation. Space is always at a premium in New York City; we had just 3,882 sq. ft. available for the performance area. The owners were committed to an 800-capacity club—standing room included—with two stages, two bars, two VIP seating areas, dressing and greenrooms, kitchens, bathrooms, executive offices, and coat check.”

Le Poisson Rouge breaks down into two major areas. One descends a staircase to a stand-alone bar area separate from the nightclub. The owners envision this space as a gallery for art shows—a side room is also available to present sculpture or paintings. The bar is an elegant room with low ceilings and tiny, precisely focused downlights, a red-and-white palette, and a distinctive floral pattern stenciled on the walls. Seating includes a number of converted church pews and throne-like chairs with fish carved into their arms. The club’s look—a blend of sleekly modern design with wittily Baroque touches—is the product of a collaboration between Beth Walters, of Walters-Storyk, interior design manager Kathlyn Boland, and Carlos Andrade, a furniture and graphics designer.

Inside the main performance area, the Walters-Storyk team took a number of space-saving decisions. A raised VIP seating area at the back of the room houses a storage space underneath for the club’s Yamaha piano and any unused seating. (The lighting and sound control area is similarly located on a raised platform next to the VIP balcony). The space is also reconfigurable, thanks to a 200-sq.-ft. stage that can be set up in three different ways—a full circle for in-the-round performances, a half-circle, or in a fashion-runway format. In another space-saving stratagem, an addition rolls out from under the mainstage, to bring the audience and performers closer together. (For additional flexibility, the room can be set up with audiences sitting at tables, in rows of seats, or standing.)



As you might imagine, it’s not an easy matter to come up with a sound system designed to cover everything from punk rock to a string quartet. “Walters-Storyk was really our only choice for this project,” says David Handler. “They’re very out-of-the-box thinkers.” David Kotch, of Walters-Storyk, worked on the project, dealing with issues of acoustic isolation, versatility, and the room’s multiple configurations. Kotch worked closely with Masque Sound on the gear list for the club; Josh Loar, the club’s technical director, also had considerable input. (Masque Sound is best-known for its long-running association with Broadway but, working with firms like Walters-Storyk, it supplies many installation jobs as well. Geoff Shearing, of Masque, says that, since the company started its house-of-worship division a couple of years ago, its installation work has grown rapidly.)

“The fixed stage at the front left corner of the room is ideal for large jazz, rock, and big-band ensembles,” says Kotch. “The moveable center room stage establishes an intimate setting for acoustic blues, piano, string quartet, drums, or horns. With the center room cleared and the railings in place on the main stage, LPR can shift to a hot lounge environment.” He adds, “It’s a tough room—it’s not symmetrical and there are low ceilings and huge

columns.” Several design tools, including Meyer Sound’s MAPP software system and CATT acoustics was used to suss out the room’s many acoustic anomalies; the final system was tweaked using Meyer’s SIM system.

“The wild card in this mix was the surround-sound system,” says Kotch. “Because Le Poisson Rouge is a live performance space, rather than a home listening environment, it required a multi-channel surround environment most commonly used in 5.1 or 7.4.” There were other reasons for installing the system, too: Handler notes that many electronic composers—likely tenants at the club—are working in surround sound; also, he and Kantor plan to do film screenings there. (To this end, there are three screens built into the venue.) In any event, Kotch notes that Masque Sound has considerable surround-sound expertise, thanks to its work on Broadway shows like *South Pacific*.

The loudspeaker rig consists of Meyer Sound gear, chosen in part because the company makes self-powered boxes that are small enough to fit unobtrusively into the space, eliminating the need for amps. The rig includes 16 Meyer M’elodie compact curvilinear line array units, plus eight M1Ds, set up in a LCR arrangement. Also contained in the rig are five Meyer UPJ-1P compact Vario loudspeakers to cover the area where

the center stage projects into the audience. Completing the lineup are two Meyer 700-HP subs, two 600-HP subs, two M1D subs, five MM4XP miniature loudspeakers, six UPJunior compact Vario units, and three UMS-1P subs.

“Kevin Mochel, Paul Klimson, Nathaniel Hare [of Masque Sound], performed technical miracles to get this room sounding as wonderful as it does,” says Kotch. “In addition to the 16 M’elodie speakers positioned over the stage, they devised a ring of five additional UPJ-1P boxes to hang over the center stage for performances in the round, with additional audience seating on the unoccupied main stage.” The boxes are hung on curved pipes that follow the shape of the room; the rigging system and array adjustability are the product of a collaboration between Walters-Storyk, Sapsis Rigging, and McLaren Engineering.

According to Klimson, the entire rig of 70 loudspeakers is processed through two Meyer Galileo 616 system processors and six Yamaha DMEs. “The speakers are positioned for multiple fixed and center room stage configurations,” says Kotch. “The Galileos provide loudspeaker management for the 16 M’elodies, eight M1Ds, two 700-HPs, two 600-HPs, and various UPJ-1Ps. The Yamaha DME 64 serves as an AES/EBU matrix and a self-contained mixing platform via wireless tablet PC when the console is not being used. The DME 64 also provides EtherSound routing capabilities for the various inputs and outputs through the DME8iES, DME8oES, and DME4ioES.” Klimson adds, “The front of house can effortlessly switch from a left-right-center sub delay format for main stage performances to the UPJ-1P and MM4XP speakers for acoustic shows at the room’s center stage position.” The stage monitor system consists of eight L-Acoustics 112XPs and one SB15P.

The house console is a Digidesign Profile VENUE Console Mix Rack (with 48 ins and 16 outs)—the first to be installed in New York. For a venue handling several different acts at a time, a digital console would certainly seem to be a no-brainer. “This is a great desk,” says Klimson. “Because it’s self-contained and has no external rack, it was a perfect fit for the club’s limited space.” The monitor console is a Yamaha M7CL-48. A ProTools

system is integrated with the Digidesign desk to record performances, if desired.

The club also has an extensive and diverse microphone lineup, including four Shure SM57s, eight SM 58s, two SM81s, two Beta 57As, two Beta 58As, two Beta 87As, one Beta 52A, one Beta 91, four Beta 98s, four Sennhesier MD421s, two e 609s, two MKH40s, one Electro-Voice RE20, one Beyerdynamic M88, two AKG C-414s, two C 451 Bs and one Neumann KMS105. Wireless gear includes two Shure UHF-R UR4Ds, four UR2/KSM9s, and four UR1 body pack transmitters.

“Virtually everything in the club is custom—both stages, the doors, the bars, the support infrastructure for the lighting and speakers, as well as the speaker system itself,” says Joshua Morris, designer and project manager from Walters-Storyk. “Our systems integrator, Judy Elliot Brown, provided the preliminary infrastructure design and installation consultation. Due to the unique nature of the club, there weren’t many off-the-shelf items that would lend themselves to the space. The result is something that took more time and effort to acquire but is ultimately more satisfying because it does not and cannot exist anywhere else.”

Le Poisson Rouge had a series of soft openings beginning in June, and the early response has been positive. “Virtually every artist who’s appeared onstage here, from Rickie Lee Jones to Simone Dinnerstein, Matmos, and Mos Def, have remarked about the quality of the sound.” With its sophisticated gear, Klimson calls it “the Lamborghini of clubs.”

John Storyk sums the project up in terms of Greenwich Village history. “The Village was the club I hit on my first trip to Greenwich Village, back in the ‘60s. I spent many unforgettable evenings there, listening to some of the greatest jazz artists who ever gigged. There’s a touch of irony in the fact that Le Poisson Rouge is just a ten-minute walk from Electric Lady, the recording studio I designed for Jimi Hendrix in 1968. That studio is still in business in the same spot. How cool would it be for Le Poisson Rouge to enjoy an equally long and illustrious run?” 📶