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CLUB

systems

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SAN FRAN'S BIMBO'S

a club with a past



By Flora Poste

Innocently named music club Bimbo's 365 continues its tradition of hosting eclectic performances in a playful atmosphere.



A San Fran Original

It might be the city's hippest music club, but Bimbo's 365 is best described as San Francisco's answer to Madonna. Despite being a thoroughly unfashionable age, they've both managed to reinvent themselves at crucial intervals in their lifetimes, tuning into emerging trends or setting them for others, to stay at the top of their game. Both are wearing their experience with style and substance, and neither seems near retirement.

Gin in Coffee Cups and a Semi-Naked Mermaid

Bimbo's origins are neatly summed up in its name. Its founder, Agostino Giuntoli, came to the U.S. from Italy in 1922, and was nicknamed Bimbo (regional Italian for "boy") by his first boss, who had trouble pronouncing Agostino. Barely 10 years later, Giuntoli



had made enough money to open a club. Located at 365 Market Street in San Francisco, the venue was inevitably named Bimbo's 365.

But 1931 was Prohibition, and the original Bimbo's was a speakeasy, serving gin in coffee cups and hosting after-hours crap games in the back room. When Prohibition came to an end, Bimbo's boasted "girls, girls, girls." A pre-Hollywood Rita Hayworth danced in the chorus and a semi-naked mermaid, Dolphina, was a club favorite. In 1951, Bimbo's moved to new premises on Columbus Avenue in North Beach and entered the lounge era. Throughout the '50s and '60s, the club became the archetypal glam nightspot, hosting acts that ranged from big bands to Flip Wilson. Herb Caen, San Francisco's late socio-historian, caught it all and recorded it: "Bimbo's [has] jugglers, dance teams, stand-up comics, crooners, chantootsies, Stage Door Johns, a proper band in proper uniforms ... multi-course dinners, red sparkling burgundy in the silver bucket, and an ice-bucketed lady in a silver fox stole topped by a gardenia

bought from a 'pro' in the men's room."

"A Club That Behaves Like A Venue"

Today, Michael Cerchiai, grandson of the eponymous Bimbo, runs the club and has retained its ascendancy in the face of stiff competition from S.F.'s varied entertainment scene. It is the perfect size for a live music club – just under 7000 square feet, with a capacity of 700 in the main room. Cerchiai has a gloriously idiosyncratic approach to booking acts, largely based on a desire not to be pigeonholed while still appealing to the uniquely cosmopolitan character of his audience.

The artist roster at Bimbo's is hard to describe for that very reason, featuring a high percentage of international artists, notably an astute selection of British music stars (from Robbie Williams to Roni Size), as well as local talent. Cerchiai prides himself on giving his clientele the chance to see artists before they become too famous; recent successes include Macy Gray giving a performance on the very day her first record went platinum.

Production manager Scott Burke describes Bimbo's as "a club that behaves like a venue. For me, it's like my favorite radio station live and in person. The music policy hasn't changed much over the years; we try to get cool music, and we provide state-of-the-art production equipment to facilitate our incoming

acts. Usually this combination makes for a good, even great, show."

The inside of the club has a beautiful, elegant feel, featuring red velvet curtains, murals, and tuxedo-clad barmen. A small bar and lounge area holds about 150-200 people, with a dancefloor that sometimes plays host to bands or showcases. The main room features the big stage, with a smaller adjacent stage. There's no balcony, and audience arrangements vary from gig to gig, although a percentage of the audience is always seated at tables around the floor, in keeping with the classic nightclub ambiance.

A "Transparent" System

Burke just completed a major refurbishment of Bimbo's sound system. He brought in the Nexo Alpha, an unusual choice for the front of house loudspeaker, designed and manufactured in France. Bimbo's previously used a Meyer UPA system, and, when time came to upgrade earlier this year, Scott took off to the LDI Convention in Las Vegas, armed with his favorite CDs.

"I knew the manufacturers would be having shoot-outs at this convention, and touring friends of mine kept mentioning NEXO," he said.

Burke was particularly concerned with meeting the special sound needs of Bimbo's main room. "Bimbo's theatre is a difficult room. It sounds wonderful on its own, because there are so few reflective surfaces with all the fabric and soft coverings around the place. However, the ceiling slopes at varying angles throughout the club, which makes flying speakers a tricky problem. Also, I've got to be careful flying PA for the main stage in

case I block the small stage.

"I was concerned that the old Meyer UPAs were missing the mid-punch, and I wanted a more high-fidelity sound. When NEXO demonstrated the Alpha cabinets at that shoot-out, the system remained transparent at amazing levels – the results just floored me!"

Bimbo's is one of the first clubs in the U.S. to go with the

Equipment

FOH

- 1 - Ashly 1/3 octave EQ for delay system
- 1 - Ashly 1/2 octave EQ for additional EQ
- 1 - BSS OMNIDRIVE Compact Plus
- 1 - KT DN360 stereo 1/3 octave EQ (for center fills)
- 1 - KT DN360 stereo 1/3 octave EQ (for UPAs)
- 1 - MIDAS XL-200 (44 mono, four stereo modules)
- 10 channels of compression:
- 2 - BSS DPR 402 (two)
- 2 - dbx 166 (four)
- 1 - dbx 1046 (four)
- Forty four snake lines from stage
- Eight channels of noise gate:
- 2 - Aphex 622 (four)
- 2 - dbx 363X (four)
- Effects
- 1 - Lexicon LXP-1
- 1 - Lexicon MXP-1
- 1 - Roland SDE3000
- 1 TC Electronics M2000

- digital reverb
- 1 - Yamaha SPX 900

Speakers (flown with NEXO's crossbow rigging)

Left Array:

- 2 - NEXO B-1s
- 2 - NEXO M3s

Center Fill:

- 2 - NEXO PS 10s

Right Array:

- 2 - NEXO M3s
- 2 - NEXO B-1s

On The Floor:

- 2 - NEXO B-1s

Left Stack:

- 2 - NEXO B-1s
- 1 - NEXO S-2

Right Stack:

- 2 - NEXO B-1s
- 1 - NEXO S-2 (NEXO NX 241 and PS15 UTD

- processors on all)
- Cyberlogic 617 amplifiers

Monitors

- 10 - Sound On Stage floor wedges (JBL 2445 2" driver, JBL E130 15" woofer)

- 32 inputs with three-band full parametric EQ and hi-pass filter

- Eight mixes with four-band full parametric EQ

- UREI active crossovers (1200hz, time offset correction)

- Crest power amplifiers

Alpha, which has been more commonly used in the touring and live music sectors since NEXO opened its U.S. subsidiary in 1998.

After a go-ahead was given from management, Burke spoke with Jim Sides of NEXO USA, based just down the road in San Rafael, Cal. Sides suggested that he contact one of NEXO's dealers in San Francisco to supply and install the system, even though Burke insisted that NEXO USA remain heavily involved in the system design. Scott chose Fortress-Novo Group, headed up by Arthur Yeap.

After consulting with Yeap's team and

NEXO USA, a design was drawn up and approved. "We've flown a pair of Alpha M3 mid/high cabinets and a pair of Alpha B1s either side of the stage, and another pair of B1s each on the floor on each side. This way, the system provides good coverage, even for the smaller stage. There is a pair of NEXO PS10s for center fill, and we've got NEXO's digital controllers across the system," explained Burke. The system is controlled by a 48-channel MIDAS XL-200 console, situated at a front-of-house position about 50 feet from the main stage.



Circle 129 on Reader Response Card

Mics

- 9 - Shure SM57s
- 8 - Shure SM58s
- 6 - Shure Beta 57As
- 5 - Sennheiser 421s
- 4 - AKG 418s
- 4 - Shure Beta 87s
- 4 - Whirlwind Director DI boxes
- 3 - Shure Beta 56s
- 3 - Shure SM81s
- 2 - Audio Technica 4050s
- 2 - Countryman DI boxes
- 1 - AKG D112
- 1 - Beyer M88s
- 30 x misc mic stands

Lighting

- 18 - PAR 64 1Ks
- 16 - ETC Source 4 PAR lamps
- 6 - 26° ETC Source 4 lekos
- 6 - 36° ETC Source 4 lekos
- 4 - 19° ETC Source 4 lekos
- 3 - High End Systems Colorsport 250s
- 2 - High End Systems Technobeams
- EDI Custom Dimmer rack
- Echelon / Whole Hog console

Visiting Engineers

Bimbo's also serves as a home away from home for a lot of touring engineers. Burke frequently calls on local guys to come in and work the house for him when they're not on the road – Manu Goodwin (Huey Lewis, Green Day, Beck), Deanne Franklin (Tom Waits, Sonic Youth), Steve Fodliani (Rising Star), and Michael Pollock (Ben Harper) among them. In this respect, the NEXO Alpha was a sensible choice; as the system becomes more and more popular on the festival and touring circuits, it is a familiar and reassuring presence for the visiting engineers.

Now that he's sorted out the club's sound ("I'd expect the NEXO system to be current for seven to ten years; that would be a reasonable life cycle"), Burke's next task is to oversee the refurbishment of Bimbo's lighting system. Currently, Bimbo's is outfitted with a smattering of Colorsports and Technobeams from High End Systems, and some generic fixtures. All are permanently hung on pipes both over and in front of the stage, with the primary goal being proper stage coverage. "[The intelligent lights] are solely for on-deck performers; we don't have any crowd lighting," said Burke. He's considering adding some new fixtures to Bimbo's rig, possibly color changers, in the near future. ○