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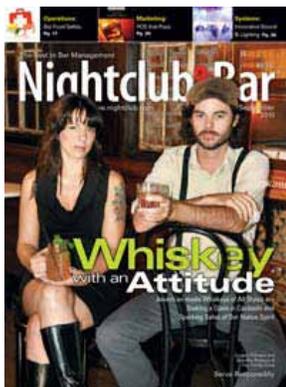


Bright Lights, Big Sound

By: [Sean Evans](#)
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Outstanding Sound, Lighting and Video Lead to Nightclub Success. Discover How to Make Your Club Stand Out

Ask any nightclub owner what the most integral components of their venue are, and you'll get the same response: sound and lighting. These two elements can transform a lackluster space into a spectacular one and, conversely, their absence can make the most beautifully designed venue seem tremendously bland. These facets have the most direct and tangible impact on the energy coming from a room, which means the influence of visual and audio elements on a club-goer can either make or break a night out for guests — and for your bottom line.



On the sound front, "the worst is when your ears bleed, and you can't hear a conversation," says Dave Grutman, operating partner of LIV Nightclub in Miami, ranked sixth on the 2010 Nightclub & Bar Top 100. "If you can't talk to the girl of your dreams on the dance floor, then that's an issue." Grutman uses a Funktion-One system; the sound company out of England customizes most speakers to fit within the particular venue. In fact, any owner who uses Funktion-One ubiquitously refers to it as "The Ferrari of sound."

While the average reveler likely can't distinguish between brands of speakers, they do know when sound is muffled and muted like that of a wonky car stereo system. Installation company Sound Investments — popular among the top-tier venues — works with each club to ensure speakers and subwoofers are properly placed for maximum power and clarity while making sure guests won't feel overwhelmed or even nauseated as a result. "Sometimes when the base is so insane, the low wave frequencies run through your stomach and can make you feel queasy," explains Eric Millstein, president of Dusk Management Group, who uses Sound Investments in the operations of DUSK Nightclub in Atlantic City, N.J. "You never want that."

Light Matters



Lighting is one area where there's even more room for customization; club owners can truly enhance their venue's theme and set themselves apart from the scores of other places using the exact same intelligent lighting system. For example, at LIV, the "wow factor" starts with the LED dome in the ceiling. "There are over 2,000 LED lights inside our dome. We can program them to do anything we want: play a video, flash strobe [lights], whatever. But the finished effect leaves people's mouths open," Grutman says.

At DUSK, LEDs heighten the overall design scheme of the club, which is meant to evoke a feeling of being underwater. "When you enter, it's like you're scuba diving and looking up," Millstein explains. With a curved ceiling and an LED wall complete with 1,000 lights that arc out over guests' heads, the visual design components of the room give guests the sense that they're walking below crashing waves. "We can amplify that effect with fast moving blue lighting from the LEDs, so it really looks like water in motion. The effect is stunning," Millstein shares.

At Playhouse, a Los Angeles club built around the theme of carnival desires, pin spot lighting is employed above every table. "For bottle service customers, we put on the pin lighting above their table to highlight them and make them feel extra special," says Alex Orlovsky, director of marketing for the club. The lighting supplements confetti poppers and sparklers, all of which blend perfectly into the circus atmosphere of the room.

And then, of course, there are all of the extra bells and whistles that add to the theatrics inside the club. TAO in The Venetian in Las Vegas (No. 2 on the 2010 Nightclub & Bar Top 100) recently upped the ante with the addition of a \$200,000-plus laser system. "We installed two pyro-foggers," says Jason Strauss, co-owner and operator of TAO. "The falling plumes of smoke create a perfect backdrop for the lasers to play off. You get a great effect over the dance floor when you look up, staring at a laser ceiling."

Playhouse recently installed "a truck horn, which is tremendously loud," says Orlovsky. "It's more of a Miami or Vegas thing, so it's new to LA, but when the crowd hears the horn it gets them excited. We love to blast it hard when a song climaxes, and the crowd goes crazy."

Screen Time

Video is relatively new to the club mix. Adding an extra touch of pizzazz to LIV is a video jockey who works with the DJs to have videos perfectly sync up with the song being played. "The VJ looks to see what's in the DJ's queue and makes sure that when the first strains of the song hit, so does the first image of the video," Grutman explains. Played on a 40-foot projection screen against the back wall and on plasma TVs at each of the multiple bars, it's a visual tour de force inside the club.

In San Diego, at the city's newest dance club, FLUX, video is a key component. The club's name also shows its unique proposition, as every six weeks the interior changes aesthetically to coincide with various themes. "We wanted our venue to always have a fresh feel for our customers; always in flux," explains Dave Renzella, partner and general manager. Their next motif is Odyssey, based around space, "so we're covering our walls with spandex and are using video projectors to play asteroid showers and other space-themed videos. We're trying to convert some to 3-D so we can hand out glasses for an over-the-top experience," Renzella says.

It's the little flourishes such as 3-D, truck horns and lasers that aid in the overall feeling of unpredictability, which is a key goal in installing a high-end A/V system in a club. Almost all top venues look to two category-leading companies to help them achieve it: SJ Lighting and Sound Investments. These mavens are responsible for the acoustics and visual components of all the clubs discussed here and represent the award-winning gold standard in each of their respective fields.

Getting What You Pay For

But the best doesn't come cheap. "To get into a world-class level of product, owners need to start at \$25 per square foot. It just goes up from there to about \$75 per square foot, though I could spend all the money in the world," laughs Stephen Lieberman, owner of SJ Lighting, headquartered in Los Angeles. "And that's per discipline, so sound is another \$25 per square foot, etc." Crunch the numbers, and on a 10,000-square-foot space, to install lighting, sound and video, the final bill will be around \$750,000. On top of that, there's also the upkeep and maintenance. "The lifespan of your equipment is going to increase exponentially if it's properly cared for," Lieberman says. "The more pollutants in the air — such as fog, cryogenics or cigarette smoke — that are getting pulled into the optics and sound systems, the quicker they'll break down."

However, "the most critical part of what we advocate is setting up a solid control system," Lieberman says. "You can cheap out and buy a low-end lighting product but have a great control panel and still have a decent room. But it doesn't work the other way. Getting a client to understand that the foundation is based on controls is the hardest part."

It's a message his clients have received. "You don't want your crowd to be overwhelmed with sound and lighting early in the night," says DUSK's Millstein, who tapped Lieberman for his expansive lighting design. "It has to be a slow build, so that by 12 a.m., when the club is fully flowing, you've matched the energy of the crowd. We're able to change the LEDs and, subsequently, change the mood of the room." All of that careful analysis and adjusting falls on the in-house technicians who man the lighting panels and soundboards, constantly fine-tuning the effects and making sure they mirror the energy of both the songs being played and the vibe of the room. That expertise doesn't come cheap, as many clubs shell out thousands of dollars to employ the top technicians in the field.

Then there are the implementation issues that can thwart most places, especially in venues where the space isn't designed from scratch and often has to be retrofitted to accommodate bigger speakers, lighting rigs and video screens. "When you put in a massive sound system, be prepared to get complaints from neighbors," Renzella laughs. "We had to go back in and put springs on the

speakers because the bass inside FLUXX was literally going through the building frame and vibrating the building next door."

The largest expense is being able to keep up with the constant influx of new products to the market. "Technology changes constantly; staying on top of it is a full-time job," Lieberman says. "A few Google searches will not return the information you need to build and maintain these systems. You need to hire a professional who's immersed in this world to keep you current."

As to what the future of A/V for nightclubs holds, "more attention is being put on the DJ booth as a stage," TAO's Strauss says. "Venues are trying to emulate the amazing stuff going on at electronic dance festivals. The next step for nightclubs is to make their stages and DJ booths as theatrically and visually engaging as possible. The apex of any night is looking at an organic energy that emanates from the crowd," Strauss continues. "To get that 'wow moment' of energy, it all originates from your lighting and sound. The more these elements can help your venue create a performance-like experience, the better." **NCB**

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