

DESIGNING FOR NIGHTCLUBS

Designing for nightclubs is vastly different than designing for a stage. Don't take our word for it, however — PLSN sat down and talked with three of the leading club lighting designers out there. Each designer has multiple nightclub designs under their belts and many more in the planning stages. PLSN talked with John Lyons from the Lyons Group, Michael Meacham from iDesign and Stephen Lieberman from SJ Lighting.

PLSN: How did you begin designing lights for nightclubs?

John Lyons: I started early in the business as a nightclub manager and then owner. Having worked in some of the larger clubs of the time, I had an opportunity to observe first-hand the effect that lighting and sound had on a dance floor.

Early on, I was in awe by some well-staged Broadway show or a rock concert. Seeing the sound, lighting, rigging and visuals being used was inspirational to say the least. I thought that if I could import those methods to my dance floor, I would be able to give my clientele a truly unique experience.

Michael Meacham: I started out as a DJ back in the mid-1980s, but I have always been fascinated with lighting. It was much easier to find work as a lighting tech, so my first real job was running lights at night club. After a while, I started to get my own ideas about how the rig should look and started some basic designs. As time went on, I became more confident and challenged myself to come up with new ideas, and figured out a way how to make it work.

Stephen Lieberman: I've been working in nightclubs since I was 15 years old. I've always been intrigued by the club culture. Lighting the clubs happened shortly after college. I was working in New York for a company that did a lot of club work and dance events. I always had an eye for visual effects.... I was laying out systems right away... they weren't as sophisticated as some of today's system, but I understood the dynamics and layering of different effects.

PLSN: What kind of training do you have?

John Lyons: Mostly on-the-job training. The club that I first opened with my brother when I was 20 mushroomed into 36 venues. I was the gizmo of the family, so I took on all of the systems-related aspects of the business. I enjoy developing first-time concepts in lighting, and that involves self-teaching as well as a bit of trial and error.

Michael Meacham: I was 18 when I started working with lighting, so my training comes from real-world experience. Many years later, as I started getting into architectural lighting and bigger consoles, I've taken classes ranging from Lighting 101 to grandMA.

Stephen Lieberman: On the job training... I have a BA from University of Arizona, which has absolutely nothing to do with lighting or any sort of "fine arts." My OCD personality has been the driving force in developing my skills. The most important elements of this field can't be taught, you need to be able to have a vision of what works — and then you need to execute it.

PLSN: What is distinct about lighting nightclubs?

John Lyons: The two-edged sword that is nightclub design is that there are no real rules. By their very nature, nightclubs and their lighting need to be redone on a weekly basis. A lighting operator in a nightclub needs a basic foundation lighting rig to work with, but they also require a sizeable toolbox of tricks and effects that they can rotate in and out of a show. Thoughtful design is one that does not hem the light jock in and permits them the freedom to improvise on the fly. [When] my partner, Richard Worboys, and I approach a design, it is from the POV of the operator.

Michael Meacham: The freedom to be as creative as you want. We do not need to be as concerned with practical lighting. Instead of calculating foot candles for general lighting, we can truly think outside of the box. Programming plays a major part in our designs. When designing a moving light rig or a feature installation, we think as programmers, "How cool can I make this?" If we can keep it interesting to us by pushing our creativity, we know that we can make interesting to others.

Stephen Lieberman: Each project is unique — no two clubs are the same. When I design a system for a nightclub, I am always considering the architecture first. You never want your system to look like an after-thought. You have to have a balance in your designs. That balance needs to translate internally within the design and also externally throughout the rest of the project and the other disciplines that are involved.

PLSN: What inspires you when designing a nightclub?

John Lyons: Usually, it is the space itself. Whether it's an empty room or set of blueprints, I always seem to gravitate to the thing about a space that makes it hard to work with. Once I have identified that, I like coming up with creative ways to turn it into an unexpected asset of the room. I also am inspired when I see an opportunity to try something new that a particular space is the right canvas for.

Michael Meacham: Again, when it comes to designing clubs, you have the opportunity in most cases to be as creative as you want. I look at the space, the needs of the clients and then start the design process. Inspiration sometimes comes easy, and other times I need to look beyond my comfort zone. I can see something that resonates well with me and I'll make a mental note. That can turn into an idea or the base for my next feature or design.

Stephen Lieberman: Working in the club and festival world, understanding the music is the primary factor when designing a system. Whether I am putting together a design for a club — or a stage for a festival, my inspiration comes from many places. It's difficult to just sit in front of a computer day after day and create new and innovative designs. To truly be inspired, I find that living life to the fullest gives me the widest perspective to be creative — whether I'm mountain biking in the mountains, driving down the highway, reading a book or just spending time with my family. I am always looking for the intricacies in life that catch people's attention. **PLSN**

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Encore Beach Club



Haze Nightclub at Aria

PLSN: Tell us about two of your most recent nightclub projects, and what makes them unique?

JOHN LYONS

Encore Beach Club, Encore at Wynn, Las Vegas, NV

A real chameleon of a space. By day it operates as an enormous pool deck replete with cabanas, sunbathers and gaming. Much of the lighting is hidden in the architecture of the space. At night, the lighting activates and transforms it into a high-energy nightclub.

Haze Nightclub at Aria, City Center, Las Vegas NV

Although the space was somewhat irregular, we managed to shoehorn a fairly impressive moving rig in. Lots of lighting audio and visual horsepower. An incredibly fast and smooth 3D moving truss system. A lighting operator's dream. You could go weeks without repeating the same look twice.