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A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

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CHANGES IN THE NIGHT

The nightclub sector, particularly in the UK, has suffered of late, but there are reasons to be cheerful at home and abroad as manufacturers and integrators address a changing market, reports **Jim Evans**.

One of the most recent additions to the Patong nightclub scene in Phuket, Thailand, is the Illuzion Nightclub. The audio throughout is based around Outline systems

The newspaper headlines and reports don't make for pretty reading. According to the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers (ALMR), Britain's nightclubs have almost halved from 3,144 in 2005 to 1,733 in 2015. "The music has stopped for almost half of Britain's nightclubs over the last decade – and for many of the rest it's beating a weary rhythm," said the *Daily Telegraph*, citing tighter bureaucracy, the smoking ban, the effects of the financial crisis and a fall in alcohol consumption as contributory factors.

Lifestyle changes have played their part, but the industry is also being "suffocated" by overly restrictive planning laws and tax levies, says the ALMR. Total revenue for the nightclub industry has declined by almost 25% since the start of 2011 to £2 billion this year, according to research firm

IBISWorld. It is forecast to fall by another 3.2% next year.

Despite this apparent doom and gloom, there are plenty of positives out there on the high street and further afield and opportunities for manufacturers and integrators prepared to address a changing marketplace and tailor their technical offerings to suit, while embracing new technologies.

"Today's club market has evolved in order to survive," says Martin Audio R&D director Jason Baird. "Gone are the days of numerous 'superclubs' open perhaps only two nights a week. Pressure from more flexible licensing hours and the late night bar scene has forced the club market to look for ways to increase their usage, towards the holy grail of seven days a week operation.

"The knock-on effect for club sound is that it has to be more flexible. The weekends may still see the traditional

club nights but in the weekday evenings it is now more common to see live acts on the bill too. Add to that the possibility for corporate hire during the daytime and the modern club's business model starts to become viable.

"So a good club sound system has to be configurable to meet the demands of the DJ, live acts and corporate presentation markets. It still needs to retain the wow factor that customers expect from a club night experience, as well as be acceptable to the touring acts visiting the venue.

"To avoid physical redeployment of the speaker system, Martin Audio's MLA technology allows electronic configuration of coverage patterns and SPL profiles across the venue, which can be adjusted to suit different applications.

"Signal distribution around the venue has also taken a step forward, where

audio sources can be routed to different rooms/locations via a central control point. As our MLA series products are all powered and have their own processing on board, this makes deployment straightforward and does away with the need for air-conditioned amp rooms. Using our VU-NET software, each speaker can be controlled and monitored via our proprietary U-NET network."

Mike Igglesdon, design engineer at Funktion One, suggests: "A good sound system should deliver clear powerful balanced sound to the entire audience area. I often find that clubs that are naively requesting outrageous level without considering quality are missing the point. For me, enjoyment comes from being able to hear as much detail as possible. There has also been a trend for going after more and more bass. I completely agree that the physicality of the bass is very enjoyable, but there



Symetrix SymNet Radius AEC Dante-enabled DSPs and SymNet xOut 12s output expanders are part of the Pacha Ibiza Dubai setup

is a limit. Too much for the space and it can not only hurt your ears, but also hide the other frequencies. Spectral balance of the system always needs to be maintained.

"For the most part, club owners are becoming more adventurous with the club design, but purely from a visual aspect. The sound is still generally the last consideration with the club design, and with their more adventurous design we are having to become more creative to get good results. Usually they are happy to make some small alteration to the layout to help with the sound, but better results would be possible with earlier input.

"I would say that with the huge growth of the worldwide nightlife industry, the club sector is dividing rather than moving away from its roots. I believe some people will always look for a 'temple of sound' where everything is designed towards creating a space to purely enjoy music on a dancefloor. I feel the other direction is where clubs combine many aspects including music (both from a DJ and live), visuals, exotic food and drink, table service and socialising to create an entertainment

venue. It's not to say that good sound is not valued in these venues, but there is just a broader focus."

Pioneer entered the professional audio market a couple of years ago with the launch of its flagship club sound system. Working in close collaboration with Gary Stewart Audio (GSA) and Powersoft amplification, the GS Wave series quickly began to make waves on the island of Ibiza.

Pioneer's Alex Barrand, the sound engineer behind the Ministry of Sound London's award-winning sound system upgrade in 2008, oversaw the development process. He explained in 2013: "We didn't just want to enter the market; we wanted to be the best in the market. So we gathered the dream team: Pioneer's pro-Audio R&D expertise combined with GSA and Powersoft's club system credentials.

"The bar is set high these days for the larger clubs and the owners want the best out there, so they know what they are looking for and will not settle for less. Sadly, the big clubs are becoming less common these days but the shift to bars opens up many opportunities but the

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level of audio equipment is in no means compromised, as they want the best."

So what makes a good club sound system these days, and have attitudes changed much in regard to this?

"Naturally, that depends who you talk to," says Barrand. "As a sound engineer and designer of club systems I would say the key point never to forget is how the audience engage with sound. They want to feel the energy of the system, but not overwhelm them as this will lead to fatigue which then results in a very unpleasant experience."

"These days sound systems are extremely powerful compared to 10 years ago and technology is always moving forward, and so is the knowledge of the audiences on the damage that can be caused with high SPL levels. These factors must be the key focus before any system is installed."

CHANGING MARKET

The club market globally has seen great strides to move into the digital age over the last decade. While DJs have largely moved away from the world of vinyl and CD mixing to WAV and MP3 playback, audio infrastructure has also progressed.

The traditional format of analogue inputs matrix units and large 4U heavy amplifiers are fast becoming history as we see the market move towards Class D amplifiers and ultra-flexible LAN-based matrixing.

Iain Cameron, technical sales manager EMEA for Symetrix, notes: "The traditional perception of a nightclub allows for a fairly simplistic approach to audio design. A dance floor, a bar area and booth seating are all common components in a typical entertainment venue. With clubs seeking a greater market share in a post credit crunch era, the need for flexibility is king. Dance floors must be able to accommodate private parties and stages for live acts while still delivering an intimate feel for your standard club night."

"Mega-clubs have taken on new heights also. We are seeing increasing numbers of multi-storey venues looking to deliver a unique experience to their patrons. Installations such as Pacha Dubai have focused on delivering a memorable experience to customers, not only through dance and club spaces

but also through relaxed outdoor terraces, making Pacha, and clubs like it, an ideal location for both clubbing and socialising.

"Meeting such high market demands has not been easy and through the years we have seen many manufacturers rise and fall in this market space. Those who have succeeded have been at the forefront of technology. DSP manufacturers like Symetrix, have made a name for themselves in being able to deliver fast, flexible and powerful signal processing and connectivity. Paramount to all, however, is audio quality."

Since initiating a paradigm shift in nightclub subsonic frequencies by helping to construct the 'Wall of Bass' for Pro Performance and Lambda Labs at Austria's aptly named Club SUB, Powersoft has been continually turning heads, both with its active OEM loudspeaker customers, but particularly within the drum and bass and dubstep communities.

In Austria, 32 of the manufacturer's ultra-compact but supremely powerful D-Cell504 IS modules helped deliver a staggering 25,600Wamping power – the frequencies as low as 7Hz – creating a vibrating concrete block wall that prevented sound escaping and creating neighbourhood noise pollution.

Yet it has been the development of the M-Force system that has really excited the club world and OEMs, who for many years have been building custom club stacks fuelled by Powersoft Class D power.

At the beginning of this year Powersoft produced arguably their best nightclub tour de force when Avalon Hollywood was unveiled, revealing the world's largest subwoofer club installation ever.

Fittingly the club was named after EAW's Avalon system customised with the Powersoft technology, rigorously

"The acoustic of the room remains the most important factor when designing sound systems. This is still overlooked and misunderstood..."

Dave Millard, Full Fat Audio

developed over two years. "It creates earth crushing sub bass," asserts John Lyons, the club's owner and an audio expert as well.

DISCERNING TASTE

Clubbers these days are far more aware of what they are listening to; we're emerging from a period where brand was everything, and things are measured on a somewhat more subjective plane. "Technology has come on leaps and bounds since I came into the industry back in the days of Turbo and Nexo Alpha," says James Cooper of PA system hire and installation

company Flipside Sound Systems.

"Advances in digital networking and amplifier technology have enabled us to achieve a standard that was rare way back when. For me the ability to minimise analogue cable runs has meant installs can provide a far more reliable, flexible and better sounding result. And installs that are not utilising things like Dante certainly fall below the curve."

Full Fat Audio's Dave Millard says: "There's always been a requirement for high-quality sound in the club scene."

The acoustic of the room remains the most important factor when designing sound systems. This is still overlooked and misunderstood and systems are tasked with having to force sound into a space which straightway corrupts and destroys the audio. The best system in the world cannot compensate for this."

He adds: "Club sound in my experience has been expanded to summer music festivals where the same equipment is used outdoors to great effect. The acoustic is as near to perfect as you could expect – there are no walls, mirrors and other reflective destructive interferences. The result is happy people and a happy system engineer!"

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