

The Shows Must Go On

By Nathan Ansell

Even with state-imposed capacity restrictions, it was a less crowded summer night than usual when Sam Blumin got confrontational with a concert-goer. A disruptive older gentleman, who had already been issued a warning at a previous show, repeatedly rose from his table, maskless, grumbling obscenities and rudely flouting the posted rules. Since the audience was too small to justify hiring security, Blumin faced the inebriated rule-breaker himself, vehemently explaining the danger he posed to the other guests. Eventually, Blumin announced that he was no longer welcome on the premises.

When Blumin recalled the moment, he was reclining on a jet black couch and remarking that it could have been worse. Much worse. Other than that man, who clearly had too much to drink, and occasional guests who get up to dance to the music, customers have been largely respectful and compliant. I'm speaking with Blumin on Zoom, and he lowers his mask branded with the crown-stylized logo of The Queen, a historic theater-turned-restored music venue in northern Delaware. He reveals a modest

beard and slightly exhausted look. No acts are scheduled for today, but Blumin is not the most important person in the building by quite some margin. Blumin is not even at his unoccupied desk or open Crown Room; he has made himself comfortable in a remote corner of an IT closet with light blue walls and little else. He lifts his arms, letting his rose gold bracelet, Rolex watch, and bicep tattoo of a frog-like creature rest on the cushions. The creature has a facial expression similar to Blumin's.

"This is what drives culture, especially in a small midsize city like Wilmington," he says. Blumin is the general manager at The Queen. "It's a city made up of a lot of financial institutions, a lot of commuters, so work's on a lot of people's minds during normal times. The entertainment industry and the venues are a way for people to release."

Among venue managers, Blumin is one of the lucky ones. He's been able to weather the litany of complications resulting from the pandemic, from health-related restrictions and minimized audiences to physical reorganization and tenuous artist relations,

that have plagued venues across the nation, some to the point of temporary or permanent closure. His July takeover of The Queen, in association with local real estate and management company Buccini/Pollin Group, was finalized mere weeks before the pandemic began. Aided by fortunate breaks, Blumin's relative success cements himself as an outlier during a devastating time for all of live entertainment.

A year ago, Blumin was working two jobs. He was the operations manager at Mardi Restaurant in West Hollywood and worked as a VIP guest experience manager at the nearby Hollywood Palladium. (Blumin started working at the Los Angeles restaurant in 2018, then added a part-time gig at the Palladium through a family friend at Live Nation Entertainment. To that point, he worked almost entirely in the culinary sphere.)

"[It wasn't] my idea," Blumin says. "My friend thought that I do have a place in the live music industry and Live Nation. And he's kind of like a mentor to me."

Through that friend, Blumin became a candidate for a managerial opening at The Queen last January. Buccini/Pollin Group, who purchased The Queen from Live Nation as their first music venue, identified Blumin as a key candidate right away. They offered him the position within days, which he accepted. Originally from New York, he was excited to return to the east coast. Then COVID-19 hit. Blumin remembers feeling hopeless – and guilty. Everyone around him was getting laid off.

"It's cataclysmic, what this pandemic has done," Blumin says. "Others, obviously, weren't as fortunate as me. It was so sad to just watch what happened to my coworkers."

At the end of March, he drove cross-country to his new job site, packing just clothes and kitchenware

for the weeklong journey. Blumin spent two months between New York and Philadelphia before moving to Wilmington at the end of June, seeing between empty office buildings and emptier roads. The only people he consistently saw anywhere were Black Lives Matter demonstrators.

"The roads were empty, things were closed," Blumin says. "Felt almost post-apocalyptic."

On Blumin's first day, The Queen's situation was indistinguishable from any surrounding venue: a victim of the social Darwinism that few competitors were successfully navigating. All of the bookings on the previous calendar were canceled, with the exception of a band that had made a "generous" offer to postpone for a while. Concerts on the decorated mainstage were out of the question; even though the venue held up to 850 audience members, there was no ventilation and ongoing renovations below the balcony. The 250-capacity side rooms, previously used for private events, had similar issues.

Blumin convened with BPG and two other talent-buyers to discuss a solution.

"BPG had all the faith in me," Blumin says. "We can maintain our image and our brand, still be safe, but still be on the map, be one of the first in America to open for live music ... and serve the community."

Delaware, which had a relatively low COVID-19 rate, allowed restaurants to open for outdoor dining. The Queen had a pre-show lobby, the Knights Bar, able to hold about 45 people. The space contained only a small bar top made of steel and patterned marble, lacking any refrigerators, plumbing, or

shelves. It was a quaint spot next to the box office where guests would drink before the show. Importantly, however, there was an outdoor patio, with two 15-foot, completely retractable glass doors allowing ventilation to the indoor section. Blumin was able to draw upon his restaurant experience to convert the space into its own standalone bar. He added socially distanced tables and a reservation and purchasing system that he geometrically engineered around the bar equipment.

"I was used to seeing people being grouped in tables in restaurants, but at venues, you see a lot of standing, and we don't allow standing or mingling," Blumin says, pointing toward the bar. "We were living like 'Footloose,' in a world with no dancing."

Twenty-three days later, the bar opened. Blumin approached some local acts such as electronic producer NO SIR E, rapper Richard Raw, and Americana band Lauren and the Homewreckers to play there the first week.

Significant downsizing had to occur to comply with regulations. Only one bartender was employed per show, occasionally alongside a runner. The only shows with a security guard were ticketed night shows or particularly busy performances, about 10% of the time. The vast majority of shows did not charge admission. Some artists were understandably apprehensive, cancelling shows as cases spiked, but enough acts jumped at the opportunity to perform in front of a live audience.

"These artists were excited to come back and play. They're like, 'Wow, I haven't played in five or six months, this is the first show, whatever small crowd [there was]. They understand that financially, they wouldn't be as compensated as

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much as during normal times. But they were still willing to play just to show their craft. And because this is something they love: connecting with people, as long as it's safe," Blumin says.

Unorthodox times called for secondary sources of revenue. With the pandemic and capacity restrictions posing an existential threat to everyone, there was a heightened sense of camaraderie among nearby businesses. The Queen started to collaborate with another Delaware venue, The Grand Theatre, who had already been hosting drive-in shows and movies, and the managers exchanged insight and future plans. Some Wilmington restaurants inquired about setting up pop-up tents at shows, asking about the potential for community events, including a couple BPG-owned locations.

"We worked with our food and beverage director for BPG, and he felt really comfortable letting me run with the bar. If I didn't have that background, I would need a lot of support ... with opening and maintaining it," Blumin says. "That lend me a lot of credibility, so I made friends with the local restaurant owners, since I could speak their language. That was definitely crucial, not sounding too green."

As the days got colder, guests became less willing to stay outdoors. Governor John Carney's recent 30% capacity restriction for indoor non-domestic spaces ruled out covering labor costs, as BPG continued to make the case for the Knights Bar being a hybrid environment.

However, an unlikely customer approached The Queen in September, seeking a private area to set up a temporary headquarters. BPG was able to rent studios and the main-

stage to the Joe Biden campaign, who frequently used various parts of the building for speeches and campaign operations. Biden, a Wilmington native, brought good PR and media attention to the building as well.

"Before, it was more secretive and

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we didn't want to blow up his spot, but now it's clear, there's press running the building from all over the country," Blumin says. Biden is making a campaign address in an adjacent room as Blumin is speaking. "We're really lucky that we're able to host him here, especially financially."

Not every venue across the United States has been able to stay afloat; there are only so many president-elects to go around.

"When all of the venues were forced to shut down in March for public health and safety, we pretty much all looked around and looked at each other and figured that we would not make it through this time on our own," says Jordan Grobe, who works in various communications roles at several Washington, D.C.-area venues, including the 9:30 Club and Lincoln Theatre. "No one knew in March how long this would last. And even today, people don't know."

Grobe has worked in the field of live music since his college radio station at George Washington University. He interned for the 9:30 Club in 2014, joining the communications team upon graduating, where he and his boss, Communications Director Audrey Fix Schaefer, have worked alongside each other ever since. Once the pandemic forced shutdowns of every venue that they both represented, Grobe and Schaefer lent their communications expertise to the

newly-formed National Independent Venue Association (NIVA), comprised of venue owners, festival-runners, and promoters.

"Our business model is centered around gathering, being around other people, which is the one thing we exclusively cannot do for public safety," Grobe says with a sigh, gesturing to his Zoom background, a sold-out concert. "But just because we're not open doesn't mean that we don't have expenses and overhead." Between the rows of pictured spectators and camera operators, Grobe's black leather jacket and off-white turtleneck are a natural fit. He reaches past his extended goatee and tortoise shell glasses to adjust his black baseball cap, adorned with an underlined capital "A." If not for the vastly different lighting, he might be mistakable for just another fan.

Grobe cites a statistic from live entertainment magazine Pollstar, estimating \$9 billion in ticket sales losses nationwide. He and the rest of NIVA (to whom The Queen also belongs) recognized the need to keep the venues afloat. In addition to various auctions, donation drives and virtual concerts, NIVA has worked to introduce three different pieces of legislation into Congress, one of which has passed the House of Representatives. The bipartisan Save Our Stages Act, which authorizes over \$10 billion in grants, is the focal point of NIVA's entire campaign.

"For all of these small business owners, they're essentially playing emotional calculus with their businesses and their families and their livelihoods. The original act in March which was able to help a lot of different people and businesses just wasn't addressed to us in any shape or form," Grobe says. The Paycheck Protection Program, to which he is referring, was designed to specifically protect payrolls of businesses in operation, excluding most venues. "We've been

singled out, essentially.”

In June, Grobe helped put together an “Artists’ Letter to Congress” as part of an awareness initiative, sparking over 2 million individuals to follow suit. NIVA’s letter attracted over 600 artists’ signatures, from Billy Joel to Billie Eilish.

“Humans are social creatures,” Blumin says. “Obviously, [live entertainment is] not ‘essential.’ I understand that. But for a lot of people, sanity seems essential.”

It’s not just the music industry at risk, either. Comedian and activist Kirby “DNA” Scudder is a near-perfect embodiment of his eclectic, hipster-friendly hometown of Santa Cruz, California, down to the collarbone-length gray beard and sharply angled glasses. The week of March 11, he was celebrating the grand opening of DNA’s Comedy Lab, a small club that had been “soft open” for just under a year, when he had to tell his business partner to close after their largest weekend yet.

“I was one of the first to realize the world was going down the drain,” DNA says. “I was like, ‘Oh my god, I’ve seen the movie ‘Contagion’ before.’”

DNA has been personally stressed by a coronavirus-impacted world, drive-in festivals and Zoom shows; car honks and delayed laughter were no substitutes for the real thing. Ironically, DNA considers now the time that comedy is needed the most, compared to more “inoffensive” entertainment. For some Santa Cruz residents, including those initially offended by stand-up, comedy is now a medicine to alleviate these pressures.

“People will come up to me all the time, and be like, ‘Hey, it’s so important what you’re doing at the lab. We need this more than ever,’” DNA says. “And I would say to them, ‘Well, how about during the Black Plague? Probably needed comedy back then.

Jokes were probably a big distraction, you know, from boils in your armpit.”

DNA, another NIVA member, recognizes the additional challenges facing performers as well. When he hosted Laurie Kilmartin, a head writer for Conan O’Brien, for a drive-in standup event, Kilmartin was unable to rebut a heckler’s misogynist shouts. DNA was expecting her to

Still, he remains hopeful for comedy’s long-term prospects.

“I think that it’s mind-blowing to see people who come to a play or a theatrical presentation...their eyes just open up, they can be part of something bigger than themselves. That’s such a human condition to want to be part of something bigger than yourself,” DNA says. “But there’s also community and I think that [if]



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DNA’s Comedy Lab was set to fully open in March before the pandemic hit.

“tear him apart for the audience’s pleasure” as per usual, but Kilmartin could not get a glimpse of the heckler in the parking lot shadows.

“I want to showcase these talents in the best way that every aspect of their talent is enhanced, and that you can see who this creative soul is,” DNA says. “I felt terrible, as a producer.”

Although he has never received so much as a flu shot, DNA eagerly awaits a COVID-19 vaccine, but like Blumin, he recognizes that live entertainment may look very different in a post-pandemic world. He considers possibilities of more restrictions, as well as another comedian’s prediction that there may never be general admission for standup shows again.

you look at history, theater doesn’t die, live performance doesn’t die. It only dies in a fascist state, and I think we’re still in democracy.”

Until that day comes, DNA will proudly support the “most resilient” of all entertainment forms, and live entertainment as a whole. He tells a heartbreaking story about Chris Durant, a personal friend and owner of the Savage Henry club in Arcata, California, who is \$12,000 short of a rapidly approaching \$70,000 payment and in danger of losing the club. Among his colleagues’ horror stories, however, he persists.

“We’re like the band on the Titanic,” DNA says. “As the ship is sinking, even if it’s raining fire, we’re still going to be making dick jokes.”