



A Capitol Anthem

A unique new music venue opens in DC's Wharf district

By: David Barbour

On the night of October 12, the Washington, DC nightlife scene got a shot in the arm: A performance by Foo Fighters inaugurated The Anthem, a new and thoroughly unique venue for music and a variety of other special events. Budgeted at \$60 million, this 57,000-sq.-ft. venue is the brainchild of Seth Hurwitz, whose 9:30 Club is a longtime DC fixture. Hurwitz's company I.M.P.—the initials stand for “It’s My Party”—runs both venues. The Anthem has already played host to LCD Soundsystem, Queens of the Stone Age, Erykah Badu, The Lumineers, Morrissey, Little Big Town, the National Symphony Orchestra, and dozens more. Among those lined up to play there in the next few months are Lorde, Beck, David Byrne, Dropkick Murphys, Glen Hansard, The Decemberists, Brandi Carlile, and Jack White.

The Anthem is a key feature of The Wharf, a mile-long mixed-use development along Washington, DC's waterfront that combines restaurants, retail, hotels, and apartment living. Writing about The Anthem, the *Washington Post* says, “Making the mammoth, multimillion-dollar venue feel intimate was no small feat. The brand-new venue can hold five times as many concertgoers as the 9:30, maxing out at a capacity of 6,000 but also with a flexible stage presentation that can put the cap as low as 2,500. On opening night, it was set up for maximum capacity and the scale was a bit staggering upon entry. But with its layer-cake balconies and general admission pit with good sightlines, The Anthem shares the spirit of the



Above: The Anthem is poised between two residential towers, a fact that called for extreme acoustic isolation.



Opposite and above: The lobby features *Untitled Polyrhythm*, an installation by Dan Steinhilber, featuring Sabian cymbals hung on string lights at various heights, some as high as three stories.



The venue in its theatre configuration. For most music performances, the floor is standing room only, with two rows of seats in each of the wraparound balconies.

9:30, bringing concertgoers within arm's reach of stadium-size acts."

Still, it's no easy task to fit a rock club of this scale into

a lineup that is surrounded on either side with a 501-unit apartment building with a swimming pool directly overhead. Realizing this venue drew on the talents of a range



of architects, consultants, and technical staff. Creating the performance space with such an unusual degree of flexibility—while retaining a feeling of intimacy—also posed many

challenges.

The project, spearheaded by I.M.P., drew on a team of collaborators that included David Rockwell and his firm Rockwell Group, architects; Perkins Eastman, architects of record; Fisher Dachs Associates, theatre consultants; the acoustician firm Akustiks; and Walters-Storyk Design Group, acoustic and sound system design consultants.

On the Wharf

The building's exterior has commanding signage, and, entering the lobby area, the first thing one sees is *Untitled Polyrythm*, an art installation by Dan Steinhilber, consisting of cymbals hung on string lights in an arrangement as high as three stories. This area also offers a clear view of the swimming pool overhead. On opening night, the pool was filled with mermaids, waving to the patrons.

Inside, according to *Billboard*, "The Anthem has a raw industrial feel with exposed steel beams, textured brick walls, and raw concrete floors, juxtaposed with sophisticated designs and specially crafted adornments." The design of the auditorium required a long process of exploration, says Michael Fischer, associate principal at Rockwell Group. "We would come down to Washington every week or every other week...and we were trying to circle around this idea of the industrial aesthetic."

Fischer says that certain challenges presented themselves from the get-go: "How do you create a music venue that can generate 120-plus decibels of sound and isolate that from an apartment building that is both alongside and on top of the venue; and how do you create a music venue that can have a capacity of 6,000 for a general-admission show, and yet have a sense of intimacy for both audience and performer?"

The auditorium, which is configured on three levels, is not entirely industrial in style. The second and third levels, which wrap around the room, are faced with uplit metal panels that feature a bunting pattern and perforated, backlit steel panels to the left and right of the stage that are imprinted with a swagged-curtain look. Crystal chandeliers over the bars add a grandly elegant touch.

Commenting on the building's overall style, Fischer says, "We were looking at the history of the site, which, in the early part of the 20th century, was a very active, working waterfront. In the middle of this new commercial development, we wanted to have a piece that harkened back to that history. Also, knowing the kind of music that Seth will bring to the space, we wanted a language that was honest, and without false pretense. The industrial aesthetic is just a direct expression of how this building was put together. The perforated and backlit steel panel 'bunting' at the balcony fronts was a nod to Washington, DC, with its political rallies. The bunting, along with the perforated and backlit steel panel proscenium 'curtain,' were also a play on drapery from baroque theatre."

Hurwitz, quoted on the website Curbed, says, “I was really against having the industrial look because it’s been done so much, but...people actually do feel comfortable when they come in. If you think about it, if they come in here wearing jeans, they feel fine...If you want to dress up, it’s a nice place, too.”

The floor is set up for general standing room for most concerts, although dedicated seating can be brought in for certain kinds of presentations, along with table-and-chairs arrangements for galas and other kinds of special events. Each of the balconies features two rows of specially branded “Super Excellent Seats” with additional tiered standing room directly behind them. Regarding the room’s configuration, Fischer says, “The wraparound balconies, with variegated seating trays, are critical components to creating the sense of intimacy we were looking for. By having these fairly shallow, but steeply raked, balconies wrap

all the way around to the edge of the stage, we were able to ensure performers feel the proximity of the audience at multiple levels. Also, the seating trays at the side balconies, each with a capacity of around 45, create a sense of audience intimacy within the larger room. There are fixed theatre chairs at the first two rows at the balconies—the ‘Super Excellent Seats’—and the rows behind them can toggle between general admission standing room or seats, depending on the show and artist. Similarly, the flat floor of the main level can also be fully general admission standing room or can accommodate a seated audience. There is a lot of chair storage!”

Matt Brogan, a consultant with Fisher Dachs, concurs, says, “At first, it felt like a stadium, until we angled the side boxes toward the stage. It’s a hybrid: an arena crossed with a tiered concert hall, with sides that angle in as they progress toward the stage.”

Photo: Sharon Natoli/Sharon Natoli Photo



The room in its gala configuration. Note the backlit panel, framing the stage, designed to look like a swagged curtain.

Continuing with the theme of flexibility, Brogan says that the stage consists of a series of loose platforms rolled into place, to form a space that is 60' wide, 40' — 60' deep (as needed), and 4' high. This decision was taken, he says, to accommodate shows of all sizes, from very small acts to the top names in concert touring. "For example, a big act like Lorde might travel with her own stage mechanics built-in. The flexibility extends to the rigging. The rigging is somewhere between an arena and a rock club. In an arena, you need to walk the steel to bridge your chain motors; The Anthem has a complete theatrical grid [with a trim height of 43'] over the stage area and in 60% of the house. This is much safer and faster for a small house staff."

The rigging consists of five trusses for lighting and loudspeaker rigs on movable trolleys. Brogan says, "Shift the stage forward and, with a button push, the room can

be made much smaller and intimate [a feature of the 9:30 Club]. The house gear can also be moved out of the way without extra labor to strike and store. This lets smaller acts use the house rig, but quickly accommodate big tours with their own gear. For example, St. Vincent came with her own mini-grid."

Brogan adds that FDA designed the rigging grid and trolley beams with Chris "Sherman" Robb, The Anthem's production manager and lead audio engineer; FDA also specified the company switches and dimmers for the house lighting gear. Robb says that Columbus McKinnon hoists are used in the rig; the components for the movable trolley were developed by Motion Labs.

Fischer adds, "The room's flexibility comes from Seth's setup at the 9:30 Club. They can contract the room there simply by bringing the stage and upstage drapery—as well as the sound system—forward without sacrificing the feel



The concert configuration allows for the intimacy of theatre and the excitement of an arena show.

of the room.” At The Anthem, the I.M.P. team initially looked at having a moving stage similar to the 9:30 Club, but realized they could accomplish it with a flexible platform system. Not having a fixed stage would allow larger tours to bring in their own stages and sound and light setups. “That’s an interesting thing about The Anthem,” Fischer says. “It’s that unique sweet spot where it can showcase a large arena-based tour, or feature a much smaller, more intimate show.” Hurwitz, speaking to *Billboard*, says, “The magic of it is that it’s right for high-end seated [shows] or the Foo Fighters. Some say it’s an opera house. Some say it’s a club. It’s transformative. You have to see it to understand it.”

Hurwitz and his staff are focused on keeping the artists happy, and many of the rooms’ amenities reflect this philosophy. Food service is important, as is making the backstage ample enough that there are dressing rooms for everyone, even in the event of bills with several performers. The wings are 12' by 22' deep, and one of them leads to a VIP area, where performers can greet selected members of the public. The loading dock has two truck bays, each of which can accommodate an oversized vehicle, such as 53' trailer or tour bus. The loading dock opens directly to allow a straight/flat push from trailer to stage. Other features include seven dressing rooms, including a star dressing room, all with en-suite bathrooms and showers; a dedicated visiting production office; Green Room; dining room; and in-house laundry.

Another feature of The Anthem also demonstrates the sensitivities to performers’ needs, Brogan notes: “We all talked a lot about restrooms. We put them off to the side of the room, making sure they were blocked by certain columns. That way, the performers can’t see audience members running off to the bathroom in the middle of a performance.”

Acoustics

C. Russell Todd, principal of the firm Akustiks, notes that his firm’s work on The Anthem required “isolation with a challenge. It’s a rock venue in the middle of a residential building. We had to put on our thinking hats for that.”

John Storyk, of Walters-Storyk Design Group, was brought in by Seth Hurwitz to confirm the acoustic design for the room. Storyk notes that its maximum capacity of 6,000 is something of an outlier between smaller venues that typically handle roughly 2,000 and arenas that accommodate 12,000 and up. He stresses that the space had to be useful for a variety of uses beyond concerts: “One night, they’ll have a rock show and, three nights later, it might have an event for, say, Mercedes-Benz, with a single speaker, and, three nights after that, they could be screening a movie. The challenge was to strike a medium balance among all these things.” In addition to the techniques mentioned above, he notes that the room’s size promotes good acoustics: “I don’t think anyone in the audience is more than 130' away from the stage.”





Opposite: The house lighting and sound rigs on display. The loudspeakers are placed on movable trolleys, to accommodate rigs brought in by visiting acts. Above: Design touches, such as the uplit metal panels with a bunting pattern, in front of the balconies, recall the venue's home city, where political rallies are a fact of life.

Basically, Todd says, "We took same approach as we would with a concert hall, but, instead of keeping exterior sound out, we had to contain the room's high-level amplified music from getting to the residential towers: It's a concrete box-in-box approach, a concrete building that is independent of the surrounding buildings. There's a full 12" concrete block wall with an acoustical isolation joint around the perimeter of the building, and a 6" concrete block residential isolation wall. It's a hybrid, in that some of the residential buildings' columns come down through The Anthem; they're fitted with isolation pads. The main floor is a floating concrete slab. The roof has two layers of concrete: the structural slab and a floating slab on top of it. With this scheme, the sound that hits the underside of the ceiling doesn't propagate to the roof and towers."

In addition, Todd says, "The acoustics in the room are fixed." Figuring these out was a bit of a puzzle. "This is a 6,000-person room," he continues. "If you make it totally absorptive, it will have no life or character. To provide a controlled acoustic for the sound engineers who will work

there, the walls are covered with acoustical absorption, but the undersides of the seating decks are reflective. When you're in the side bar areas, the noise and activity of the bars come to life. You also hear the crowd when it reacts. But the sound system hits a fully absorptive and controlled surface.

"One big issue was low frequency control," he continues. "There are acoustic lapidary panels covering the entire ceiling, as well as round HVAC ducts that diffuse the sound. The walls are a combination of sound-transparent material with panel absorbers. If we had kept it concrete, the low-frequency energy would bounce back into the room and it would be completely boomy. Soft absorption would have the same effect, so we developed a panel absorber with different thicknesses and treatments; it's a big part of controlling the low frequency." Also, he says, "The stage has acoustic treatments around it, again using a sound-transparent material with acoustical treatments behind. We also paid a lot of attention to the balcony fronts, to get some liveliness."

House gear

Joshua Morris, project manager for Walters-Storyk Design Group, says, “We did electroacoustic modeling of the room with Robb’s system design to check for acoustic qualities of the room.” Robb, noting that the 9:30 Club has always benefited from a d&b audiotechnik loudspeaker rig, once again chose the company’s products, which, in this case, include 14 J-Series boxes (eight J8s on top and six J12s on the bottom), 12 flown J-Subs, four J-Infra Subs (located under the stage), along with four Y10Ps for lip fill and four Vi10Ps for wing fill. For amps, there are 22 30Ds and two D80s. The monitor system also consists of gear from d&b audiotechnik: eight M2s and twelve N4s, with a V8 and VGSub for drum fill and two V8s and two VGSubs for side fill; also available are ten D80 amps.

Robb also makes effective use of the company’s ArrayCalc simulation software for performance prediction. The front-of-house and monitor consoles are both DiGiCo SD12, he notes, adding that “it works in any scenario, from acoustic-style music to rock. The SD12 is a good fit for The Anthem—it has a small footprint and we don’t have to strike it as we configure the room for different artists and types of shows. At the same time, this is a console that most of the artists that play here are used to. It’s part of a full production package that we designed—sound, lighting, rigging, etc.—that would let even the biggest artists just plug in and play. Also, the SD12 is upgradable, and with the Optocore and MADI interface, we can connect with anything that artists can bring in.” Communications are facilitated by a Clear-Com system. All audio gear was purchased through Eighth Day Sound.

Jason Beckwith, lead lighting director at The Anthem, working with Paul Hoffman, of Goodlettsville, Tennessee-based Pulse Lighting, designed a house lighting rig that includes ten Robe BMFL Spots, ten BMFL Blades, 16 BMFL WashBeams, ten Martin by Harman Atomic 3000 strobes, 14 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, 12 GLP impression X4S units, nine Chauvet Professional blinder/strobe units, four Antari HZ-500 hazers, and two Robert Juliat Merlin followspots.

Beckwith notes that, given the venue’s size, “Part of our thought process was to have the brightest fixtures available. We did a shootout and it was clear that the BMFL was the leader of the pack.” He adds that, as the staff isn’t able to refocus the house units, gear with framing abilities was needed. The layout is as follows: The first electric contains BMFL Blades, with BMFL Blades and WashBeams on the second electric, a combination of BMFL WashBeams and Spots on the third and fourth electrics, and the GLP X4 Bar 20s on the fifth electric. The impression X4S units are on the floor, upstage.

The house lighting console is a High End Systems Hog 4 with a command wing. “All of our operators are Hog ops, and, in a room this size, most of the bands that come in



have their own boards,” Beckwith says. “It made sense to go with the console that is easiest for the house ops, and with shows that don’t have a console and need to be programmed quickly.”

Beckwith adds that Andrew Smith, also of Pulse Lighting, specified a TMB ProPlex data distribution system at the front of house, including ProPlex 10GBS ten-Gigabit switches that provide the links between the console and the DMX output nodes, which are, in turn, linked to the lighting units. Beckwith says the ProPlex system is “versatile, allowing us to reassign universes. Also, a tour will come in and choose to run down our network, which has so many nodes, instead of setting up its own. The DMX conversion node is at the front of house so, if the operator isn’t comfortable with networking, we can run regular five-



The bar areas are located under the balconies.

pin connectors.”

Interestingly, there is no video system, as per Hurwitz’s wishes; he feels that IMAG distracts from the live performers. Speaking to *Billboard*, Hurwitz says, “When I was giving Dave Grohl a tour a few months ago, he asked me if we were going to add video and I told him no. I don’t like video—at the 9:30 Club, we never had video and it created a rapport with acts. We want to create that same magic here. We want people to look at the stage and not the video. I told this to Dave and he said, ‘It’s not for you; kids these days want video.’ And I just told him, ‘You’ll see. Everyone will be looking right at the stage because this is

theatre.’ And that’s what’s so great about the 9:30 Club. It’s great theatre and establishes communion where everyone is one—the performer and audience. I think video distracts from the stage and when acts tell me about the unique experience they have at my venue, I know I’m right.”

It’s just another detail of a venue that has been created to an exacting vision, and with prime attention to detail. Speaking to the *Baltimore Sun*, Hurwitz says, “Every single inch of the place was built from scratch. If you go this far, \$60 million, you don’t want to stop short there. You want to make sure it’s the best you possibly can.” 📶