

KEEP ROLLING

Brooklyn Bowl scores with music venue-bowling alley hybrid model

by Caitlin Wolper

ADAM KANE MACCHIA

PETER SHAPIRO AND CHARLEY Ryan were working together at a live music venue called Wetlands Preserve when they took their staff bowling.

“The place that we went, which will remain nameless, it was busy and people were having a good time. But when you really broke it down, the food was terrible. The place was dirty. The sound system was awful,” Ryan says. “But our staff, which in general was too cool for school — they were not hippies ... they were sort of tough New York City kids in a way — they reverted to something pure. They just simply had fun, like maybe they’d forgotten how to do in their persona that they’d adopted in New York City.”

That bowling trip took place in 2000, when Shapiro owned the club and Ryan was in charge of the venue’s beverages. Wetlands closed in 2001, and after a few years, Ryan and Shapiro would take walks around Brooklyn, seeking the perfect venue for their new venture. In 2006, they found a building on Wythe

Avenue in Williamsburg, and in July 2009, the first iteration of Brooklyn Bowl opened, offering bowling, food, and live music.

“Most live music venues are a stage facing a bar, just an open space. And the idea was how can we do it differently, how do you add a little more multisensory to it,” Shapiro says.

It started just as Brooklyn Bowl. With their continued success, Shapiro and Ryan expanded the brand to locations in Las Vegas and Nashville. And most recently, Philadelphia’s Bowl opened its doors in November 2021.

The Original Bowl

When Shapiro and Ryan found the first building on Wythe Avenue — long before the lavish trio of the Williamsburg Hotel, Wythe Hotel, and William Vale popped up around it — the space that would become Brooklyn Bowl had neither sufficient power nor the proper accommodations for food preparation. Plus, the roof needed work. The time

between choosing the location and opening it was mired by ironing out the contract and renovating the 2,000-person space to accommodate a brand-new concept.

Usually, Ryan says, potential owners seek to take over a venue that was previously used for a similar purpose; that way the bones of the structure are already in place. Choosing this space was a risk for them.

They also aimed for, and achieved, metrics of sustainability: It’s the first LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) bowling alley in the world, in part due to hand-dryer installation, wind-power electricity, LED stage lights, and fans to supplement an HVAC system. Plus, the bowlers lounge and stage are made of recycled materials — reclaimed cork and truck tires, respectively.

“It was one of those things where if we didn’t have a substantial success, we would have had a big failure,” Ryan says. “But the flip side of that one is: If you follow that idea that you should just be

“Some folks who kind of are used to [background noise], they like it. It’s almost like when you hear old jazz recordings, you can hear bartenders clinking glasses in the background and things like that, where it sort of gives an overall feel for the room.”

Kirk Peterson
Brooklyn Bowl’s director of talent



Peter Shapiro

ERIC RYAN ANDERSON



Charles Bradley performs at Brooklyn Bowl in 2014

GEOFF TISCHMAN



The Hold Steady performs at Brooklyn Bowl in 2016

taking over places that have already been built and that are fundamentally sound, you'll never come up with anything as different as the idea that we have."

It's important to find a balance so a performance venue and bowling alley can be harmonious as one space, despite their separate participants and sounds. In Brooklyn, Ryan cites the half-wall cordoning off the two areas as a visual divider. They credit the architectural team for assistance with the sound design, as well as a PA system that helps cover the sounds of bowling. (However, bands are booked with that ambiance in mind: Singer-songwriters take the stage far less than rock acts and jam bands.) Shapiro also points to screens throughout venues that give views of ongoing shows so bowlers can still see the action.

The Bowl locations comprise both existing and created spaces, but all are designed in a way that permits music and bowling to coexist. Generally, that makes the bowling ancillary to the music, which in itself is loud enough to cover the odd bowling din — they

specifically book bands that are a bit more raucous in service of not drowning out a musician.

"Our sweet spot is the relationship between the lanes and the stage, and that's a spatial relationship that I think everybody in the world told us wouldn't work before we got it, which is maybe one reason why nobody ever tried to do it," Ryan says.

His ideal Bowl is a place visitors feel they can relax; Shapiro imagines musicians coming in early, getting a better-than-usual meal before the show, bringing friends or kids to bowl before or after their set. And that sense of community, of the local bowling alley hangout, is crucial.

"Our places now, they do kind of harken back to our traditions and our history, just the history of a bowling alley that's well-worn," Ryan says. He referenced the common hometown bowling alley (he grew up near one in Battle Creek, Michigan), where bands played somewhere set off from all of the bowling lanes, up by the bar. Two spaces, equally alive, and somewhat nostalgic to look back on.

With their earnest stories of youthful escapades, soaring choruses, and blasting heartland rock and roll, The Hold Steady is perfect musical fit for a place like Brooklyn Bowl. So it makes sense that the six-piece has a long-standing relationship with the venue: They've played multi-show events, dubbed Massive Nights, at Brooklyn Bowl every year since 2016. Most recently, the band performed a four-night run last December, on the heels of its eighth studio album, *Open Door Policy*.

"Our experience with the Bowl was astounding from year one, and with their help, the shows have grown into Massive Nights, an annual event that draws fans from around the world," frontman Craig Finn says. "Brooklyn Bowl's amazing staff and attention to both the artist and fan experience is incredible and has made the club into our home base."

But neither the band nor the venue uses nostalgia as a crutch; both seem to borrow from the past to shape a more innovative future. For Brooklyn Bowl, their elevated food (from the nationally renowned Blue Ribbon Restaurant

MARK WILLMAN



ADAM KANE MACCHIA

Group), darkened atmosphere, and impressive slates of acts lend an air of sophistication to a seemingly retro setup.

"People who are in the business of hospitality, I know that they're perceptive when they come to me and say, 'Wow, we really looked at this and we think this is like the most complicated place to make work that we've ever looked at or thought about.' And that's true," Ryan says. But what matters most is that to the general public, it looks easy.

'An Adult Playground'

Kirk Peterson, who joined as the director of talent in 2013 as the venue began expanding, first in Las Vegas, then Nashville, and later Philadelphia, describes the Brooklyn Bowl concept as a "an adult playground."

Music is still the central focus, though. While Peterson says that "there's usually enough energy and volume in the shows that [the bowling] really is sort of just in the background," acts often find it's a nice addition. While

sometimes bands ask that the bowling be halted for the night, it's backgrounded enough to be both distant and atmospheric thanks in large part to Ryan's attention to layout.

"Some folks who kind of are used to [background noise], they like it. It's almost like when you hear old jazz recordings, you can hear bartenders clinking glasses in the background and things like that, where it sort of gives an overall feel for the room," Peterson says.

While he says there's no single genre that defines a Bowl setting, they see the most success with "party and roots music," Peterson says, including "funk and blues and soul and jam bands and DJs and hip-hop." Recent performers have included G. Love and the Juice in Brooklyn, Jamestown Revival in Nashville, Melvin Seals in Las Vegas, and Ghost Light in Philadelphia.

"There are certain things that we emphasize, obviously more than others, and ... they're kind of good-time bands," Ryan says. "I like real music. You know, played by real musicians on analog instruments for the most part."

The Bowls also tout a bit more

flexibility than other venues, for a number of reasons. Brooklyn Bowl often hosts kids' shows — they open at 11 a.m. on weekends — that also introduce the parents to the space. (Its demographics are mainly people in their 30s and 40s, per Shapiro, but it draws some in their 20s as well.)

Plus, because of the bowling and food amenities, Bowls are able to offer lower-priced tickets for concerts that are normally more expensive at other venues.

"That's how New York really became so big — on the weekends, we would keep tickets down at 10 or 15 bucks," Shapiro says. "If you keep the prices down, people just walk up in Brooklyn and see what's going on ... and then a lot of new people would get to see a band, which is the band's first goal, they want to play to new people. We can do that because we have the food revenue, the bowling revenue — we don't need to charge as much at the door."

A Strike With Streams

Nashville's Brooklyn Bowl was slated to



Brooklyn Bowl Philadelphia

open on March 13, 2020, “within a day or two of the world shutting down,” as Peterson put it.

The effects of COVID-19 reverberated across all the Bowls, of course. They closed their doors to visitors, and after a time they turned to streaming to stay afloat.

“We had to go really lean and mean for a time there, and essentially 95% of our staff was either furloughed or let go,” Peterson says. “A big part of that was unfortunately having to take a lot of people off the payroll. We had to borrow some money [and] we had to get creative with our streaming capabilities.”

Using the livestreaming platform FANS, they were able to coordinate a slate of shows. The platform utilized Zoom to bring attendees into the venue and provided a multidirectional visual experience for users. Livestreamed shows ranged in cost from about \$10 to

\$25 for access; some shows also offered special merchandise for purchase.

Because many artists on the Bowls’ radar are based in Nashville, a lot of those shows were broadcast out of the then-unopened Nashville Bowl, including Billy Strings, Maren Morris, Jason Isbell and Amanda Shires, Margo Price, and more. St. Paul & The Broken Bones even played a virtual New Year’s Eve set from that stage to ring in 2022.

Peterson says that the Bowls relied heavily on the streams and platforms during the height of the pandemic and will continue to use this platform in the future. He also credits fans’ loyalty for the Bowls’ survival: “[Our streaming site] was really our only revenue stream during the pandemic, and it made a huge impact on our bottom line to kind of see through to the other side.

“For all the press there was about refunds and ticketing companies and

promoters, fans showed a lot of faith in the industry in general. We didn’t have to refund a lot of tickets to people. They basically said, ‘We’ll hold on to them and we’ll come when you guys are ready,’” Peterson continues. “So I think the music industry — the concert industry at large — owes a lot to the audience, the fans. If everybody decided ... that was it and asked for their money back, probably you’re not having this conversation right now.”

The Nashville Bowl finally opened the last week of June 2021, more than a year after its planned debut, with headliner Old Crow Medicine Show. Already, according to Peterson, the space feels connected to the Nashville community.

“It’s really been fun with the Nashville Bowl because everyone’s just blown away by the room. It’s exactly what the market needed,” Peterson says. “The artists love

the way they sound on stage; the audience loves the sight lines and the sound.”

A Winning Recipe

In Brooklyn, Las Vegas, Nashville, and now Philadelphia, the acts and audiences at the Bowls may vary, but the aim remains the same — to create a relaxing, adult-gearred atmosphere with bowling, food, and music at the ready.

“As we go and take this brand to other cities, we really pay a lot of attention to the market and the culture of those places,” Peterson says. “[We] really just try to fit in and create a place that people can go out and hear their favorite band and have a great night.”

When they’re looking for a new venue or location, the criteria remain fairly simple. Shapiro says, “It’s got to be in the city, and we’re looking for an amazing space.”

Of course, that space will need to be fixed or formed to the same specifications of existing Bowls, with great sight lines, quality food and drink, and a layout that lets bowling and music live in the same space.

“These projects do start with me and then with our design architect in terms of assessing the space in question and whether it can work,” Ryan says. “The question really is not whether it can be become a Brooklyn Bowl, but whether the space has the capacity to really sing in the way that we want it to or need it to.”

Aside from streaming, he credits the venues’ individuality and the visitor experience they offer — and the dedicated visitors that creates — with helping the Bowls persevere through the pandemic.

“Cream rises, you know, and you’ve just got to fight to survive,” Shapiro says. “A great music venue stays strong.” ■