

Revenue was on the rise at Rupp Arena in Lexington, Ky. Also going up: a new facade, as seen in a rendering.





A dark blue circular graphic with the word "SPOTLIGHT" in white, sans-serif, uppercase letters.

SPOTLIGHT

KENTUCKY / TENNESSEE

# FIGHTING SPIRIT

**F**IRES, CANCELLATIONS AND bad weather were hardly a match for the venue operators in the Kentucky and Tennessee region. Despite obstacles out of their control, most reported bigger grosses and increased ticket sales. All agreed 2018 was a solid year for the live entertainment business in the region and cited a good economy and the sheer number of fan-friendly acts out on the road as the reasons for the bump.

THE YEAR PRESENTED  
ITS CHALLENGES, BUT  
VENUES RESPONDED  
WITH STRONG  
PERFORMANCES



# THE CIRCUIT

## EXECUTIVES FROM SOME KENTUCKY/ TENNESSEE TOP STOPS VENUES TALK ABOUT HOW THEIR YEAR HAS GONE

### ASCEND AMPHITHEATER, NASHVILLE

**Isaac Thompson, general manager**



#### How did you do in 2018?

Last year was a record-breaking year for Ascend

Amphitheater. In addition to the fantastic headliners that came through, we collaborated with the Nashville Symphony, Music City's 4th of July Celebration, CMA Music Fest and the Music City Marathon.

#### Big shows

Jack Johnson, Willie Nelson, Nine Inch Nails, and Roger Daltrey performing with the Nashville Symphony were big nights.

#### Changes

In 2018 we enhanced fan-facing public Wi-Fi, partnered with the environmental organization Lonely Whale to remove all single-use straws, and continued our composting and waste diversion programs.

#### What went right

Attendance in 2018 was a major driver in the overall success of the venue. Fan experience and sustainability initiatives also played a key role.

#### What went wrong

Weather is a constant challenge. We experienced inclement weather during 11 of our first 15 events this season. We're constantly exploring new ways to enhance the fan experience when weather is inevitably involved.

### RUPP ARENA, LEXINGTON, KY.

**Bill Owen, president and CEO**



#### How did you do in 2018?

Really well. Revenues were up 15 percent over 2017.

#### Big shows

Justin Timberlake set our all-time highest gross for a single performance. Chris Stapleton sold out. We also had The Eagles, Foo Fighters, Alan Jackson, Red White and Boom Fest, the Cirque du Soleil show "Corteo" and we had 30,000 guests in during a four-day run featuring Halestorm, Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Alabama and Snoop Dogg.

#### Changes

We kicked off a \$300 million project to replace our convention center facilities and completely replace the exterior of Rupp Arena. NBBJ is designing it and it's the largest construction project the city has ever undertaken. Construction started on Aug. 1 and will be done by November 2021. Rupp Arena will close in June for the replacement of 8,000 bleachers spaces with 5,000 chairs. We're also updating our concession stands and adding four new clubs.

#### What went right

Our relationship with Oak View Group; it's paid a lot of dividends. They've really helped us improve our revenue. Not stacking competitive acts together was another thing that went right.

#### What went wrong

Cancellations. We put a lot of logistics and planning into those shows and the staff does not need practice.

### THE KENTUCKY CENTER, LOUISVILLE, KY.

**Kim Baker, president and CEO; vice chair, Kentucky Center for the Arts Foundation**



#### How did you do in 2018?

It was a great year for our venues. We were definitely up from 2017.

#### Big shows

"Les Miserable," "Harry Potter in Concert," "The Nutcracker," and Joe Biden's American Promise tour was very popular.

#### Changes

We'll have a new lobby by the end

of the year. We're also upgrading our concessions and our acoustics. We started a \$2.2 million roof repair project. Everything is expected to be completed by fall 2019.

#### What went right

We purchased the Brown Theatre, a historic theater on Broadway (in Louisville), for \$2 million. We also created an equity, diversity and inclusion task force that looks at our programming, staffing and policies.

#### What went wrong

We had a fire caused by sparks during the roof repair project. It caused a lot of damage. Since our venues are connected by the roof, it impacted all of them. We had to cancel "Waitress."

### BRIDGESTONE ARENA, NASHVILLE

**David Kells, senior vice president, entertainment and marketing**



#### How did you do in 2018?

We were up. We've gone up every year since 2012; we're

68 percent higher in gross on





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# THE CIRCUIT

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non-hockey events since 2012.

## Big shows

U2 played the arena for the first time. We had Justin Timberlake, the SEC Women's (Basketball) Tournament, NCAA Men's (Basketball Tournament) Rounds 1 and 2, Brad Paisley, Paul Simon, Harry Styles, Maroon 5, two Bruno Mars concerts, Childish Gambino, Elton John and the CMA and CMT Awards.

## Changes

We started a two-year project for new in-bowl game presentation equipment. Phase one started in the summer of 2018 and included new ribbon boards and new lighting and a new (point-of-sale) system. Phase two will be in the summer of 2019 when we're installing a new center-hung scoreboard. On the concourse we put up a carousel that goes up 15 feet above the fans' heads that delivers team jerseys that fans have bought in the merch store. It's increased sales of the jerseys dramatically.

## What went right

All the projects came together in the end and we didn't have to close down the venue for any of the upgrades.

## What went wrong

We could have scheduled in more time after the new gear came in to train the staff on how to use it.

**RYMAN AUDITORIUM,  
NASHVILLE**  
**Sally Williams, general  
manager**



**How did you do in 2018?**

Last year was an incredible year.

We had a total of 274 ticketed events — that's 195 concerts and 79 Opry at the Ryman shows.

## Big shows

We saw a slew of really great headliners this year, among them Kelsea Ballerini, Luke Combs, Shakey Graves, Margo Price, Old Dominion, Tony Bennett and Ben Rector. One of my personal favorites of the year was David Byrne. He sounded awesome, and it was one of the most innovative shows I've seen in a long time.

## Changes

We made some significant production upgrades in 2018. We installed a complete video system capable of producing broadcast-quality linecuts as well as ISO recordings to complement our existing audio broadcast/multitrack recording suite. This video upgrade followed the recent substantial upgrade of the Ryman sound system to a JBL A12 rig. Additionally, we upgraded to Yamaha PM7 consoles. ... We also improved our key light system with Ayrton Ghibli fixtures.

## What went right

We continue to see a lot of multishow runs at the Ryman, which have been a big hit. Having acts bring in a different guest star each night of a multiday run was another hit idea. We also increased the number of Amy Grant and Vince Gill Christmas at the Ryman shows from 10 to 12 and added Rodney Crowell as support, which was a fantastic addition to a show that has become a holiday tradition.

## What went wrong

The amount of on-sales going on in the city at once can create ticket traffic. We need to schedule on-sales in a way that gives all shows the room they need. ☑



## Q&A

### CHARLIE JENNINGS, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, DANNY WIMMER PRESENTS



the Kentucky/Tennessee region include Louisville's Bourbon & Beyond, Hometown Rising and Louder Than Life. Although Jennings now lives in Los Angeles, he's never far removed from his Southeastern roots.

#### How would you compare the Kentucky/Tennessee market to other markets in the country?

Both states are in major growth mode. In Knoxville there is very robust music programming. Chattanooga is a town that's exploded over the last 10 years from being a town known for country and Christian music to being a town known for all genres.

A lot of people never saw Chattanooga as a strong market, but over time it's gone through tremendous growth and is now getting some respect. Across the board all the cities in Tennessee have seen rising revenue and attendance. Louisville is a cool, hip town and right behind Nashville as the premier live event city in the region.

#### What's fueling the growth in the region?

**C**HARLIE JENNINGS WAS born in Bristol, Tenn. Before joining Danny Wimmer Presents, he worked for AC Entertainment, which has offices in Knoxville and Nashville, for 11 years.

DWP, which bills itself as the largest independent festival producer in the country, produces 14 annual festivals in 13 U.S. cities. DWP-promoted fests in





**Brandon Lancaster of Lanco at one of the area's many festivals, Bonnaroo.**

The rich history of music in the area has led to a renaissance of live performances in the region. From Elvis to Kentucky bluegrass to Justin Timberlake, there's a strong history of music here. Nashville had the leadership of the city behind it as far as keeping the live music business strong and vital. When the economy rebounded, people got used to going to live events again and it's stuck.

**Tell us about the festival space in the region.**

We've got a lot of festivals here. There's our DWP Louisville festivals, plus AC Entertainment's Forecastle Festival. Over in Manchester, Tenn., we have Bonnaroo. Nashville has the CMA Fest, and the list goes on and on. The collection helps fuel the artists' presence in

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# TOPSTOPS KENTUCKY & TENNESSEE

Ranked by tickets sold. Based on data from concerts and events Dec. 1, 2017-Nov. 30, 2018, as reported to Pollstar. Data updated as of Jan. 3.

RANK	VENUE	TICKETS SOLD	CAPACITY	GROSS	SHOWS
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## MORE THAN 15,000 CAPACITY

1	Bridgestone Arena, Nashville	732,760	20,000	\$58,619,825	66
2	KFC Yum! Center, Louisville	271,440	22,000	\$18,005,563	38
3	Rupp Arena, Lexington, Ky.	207,154	23,500	\$13,359,852	33
4	Nissan Stadium, Nashville	157,182	68,000	\$18,433,548	3
5	Thompson-Boling Arena, Knoxville	76,296	21,678	\$4,807,350	12

## 5,001-15,000 CAPACITY

1	Ascend Amphitheater, Nashville	150,024	6,800	\$6,355,799	27
2	Municipal Auditorium, Nashville	46,676	9,432	\$2,427,032	10
3	Mud Island Amphitheatre, Memphis	17,496	5,061	\$969,970	5
4	UTC McKenzie Arena, Chattanooga	13,961	11,121	\$673,969	6
5	BB&T Arena, Highland Heights, Ky.	8,669	9,400	\$476,669	2

## 2,001-5,000 CAPACITY

1	Ryman Auditorium, Nashville	275,306	2,362	\$14,622,678	139
2	Andrew Jackson Hall, Nashville	151,832	2,472	\$10,136,037	82
3	Whitney Hall, Louisville	124,831	2,377	\$6,313,327	79
4	Palace Theatre, Louisville	46,836	2,597	\$2,953,399	19
5	Orpheum Theatre, Memphis	36,988	2,308	\$2,916,965	21

## 2,000 OR LESS CAPACITY

1	Marathon Music Works, Nashville	70,470	1,800	\$1,998,507	68
2	Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville	64,402	1,645	\$4,339,556	48
3	City Winery, Nashville	53,049	314	\$1,846,638	272
4	3rd & Lindsley, Nashville	42,137	500	\$762,105	132
5	W.L. Lyons Brown Theatre, Louisville	40,999	1,441	\$1,529,271	48



the region and gives them exposure, and when they come back to the market to play individually, business is better because the fans are coming out to see something familiar.

#### Why is region such fertile ground for festivals?

No. 1 is the geography. The population around Louisville is very big and there's tons of potential ticket-buyers. Two, it's a beautiful part of the country. We've got a great park system and people want to get out and do things outdoors here. Three would be the amazing spring and summer weather here. We don't get a lot of highs and lows — it's consistent.

#### Do you see country music as the key to the region?

In general, we're highly country and bluegrass. Certain cities are more rock-oriented or soul-oriented, but our roots are still solidly on the country side, and the live music scene is filled with country artists.

#### Do touring bands often play in both states?

Most bands will stop in Nashville, Memphis and Louisville. Smaller bands typically add in Knoxville, Chattanooga and Lexington.

#### Are ticket prices and per caps healthy in the region?

The fans here are enthusiastic and they buy a lot of merchandise and drink a lot and take part in the food offerings, so per caps are strong here. Ticket prices are below other major markets; this is a price-sensitive region, and that helps leave pocket money for the concessions and merchandise. ▣

## SPOTLIGHT

# Scene: Memphis

## HOME TO GRACELAND, BEALE STREET HAS LEGACY OF BLUES, SOUL, ROCKABILLY AND MORE



In Memphis' venue mix: Cannon Center for the Performing Arts (above) and the New Daisy Theatre (below left).

**E**LIZABETH CAWEIN KNOWS Memphis. She founded Signal Flow Public Relations, a boutique music publicity and marketing firm, in 2011 after discovering her passion for music publicity while working as communications and development coordinator for the Memphis Music Foundation. She's also the founder of Music Export Memphis, a nonprofit that creates showcases, festivals and tour grants to showcase local Memphis artists.

Cawein spent some time with *VenuesNow* and told us why she thinks Memphis is one the greatest music towns in America.

#### Tell us about the Memphis music scene.

We have a DIY personality. We're very entrepreneurial. That spirit runs across every genre of music that's played here. It's true of our

venues as well; nontraditional venues are really big here. While we have every-size legit rooms here for touring bands, we also have a robust house-concert

community here with folks who are constantly activating unexpected music events. That's changed our venue community over the past few years because there are more venue ladders for people to climb. We have vintage clothing shops that have opened a 25-seat room; distilleries run concerts. We also have

Sofar Sounds here (a company that activates concerts in secret locations). All this has upped the creativity here and changed the notion of where people can enjoy live music.

#### Where does that leave traditional venues in the marketplace?

They have their place and won't ever be replaced. There's very little competition if you are a huge band and able to sell out an arena; the FedEx Forum is the place to go. Minglewood Hall holds roughly 3,000 people. We've got lots of rooms with 1,200 to 1,500 capacity. It's the smaller rooms where the competition exists.

#### Do touring acts work in Memphis?

We often struggle with touring acts. Where we sit regionally is challenging. I often sit next to

fans from Little Rock (Ark.) or Nashville who have driven a few hours to get here — but then we often have to compete with those two cities for the tour. I have definitely seen tours that skip us in favor of those cities and often when we get a big tour it's on a Tuesday. That's been true for at least the last 10 years. Luckily, a lot of artists want to come to Memphis just because it's Memphis.

#### On the other hand ...

We have the most fantastic local live music scene of any city in America. The genres are diverse. We go from hip-hop to Americana to garage rock.

#### Does country music play a big role?

The perception that we are a country music town is not accurate at all. I can only think of one or two artists who identify as country music artists.

#### What is your prognosis for the Memphis live entertainment scene?

We're growing constantly and we know that live music is the No. 1 reason people come to Memphis. They're coming for the legacy. We're celebrating our bicentennial in May and there are a ton of events and collaborations going on and a great energy surrounding conversations about what the next 100 years are going to look like. ▣



**ELIZABETH CAWEIN**  
Founder and director, Music Export Memphis





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