

Foundation Presents was concerned that putting on a concert in Florida days after Orlando's devastating Pulse Nightclub shootings would be a challenge. But in this business, the show must go on, and this was the case for the promoter's June 2016 Death Cab for Cutie and Chvrches show at the St. Augustine Amphitheatre (The Amp), its first time working with the venue.

"Needless to say, emotions were high, and it was difficult to put your head around putting on a show, but everyone tried to put a positive spin on it," said Michael McRaney, Foundation Presents' owner. "Yet, The Amp was so on its game. We brought in extra security, and they made it all work

and went the extra mile during a tumultuous time."

This is the consensus of many promoters and artists who've taken a chance on a secondary market that has a lot to offer.

"I've walked The Amp's back hall when artists come off the stage and have heard them say to each other, 'That was quite good' and 'What a great crowd!'" said John Valentino, senior vice president of AEG Presents. "We frequent both venues often, everyone who plays there loves it, and we've had multiple returning acts. Every manager gets it; when you find a special place, you want to do more business there."

Proof in point, AEG recently opened its concert season at The Amp with a March 1

Alabama show that sold out weeks in advance. Its 2019 shows include Midland, Kane Brown, Santana, Tyler Childers, Kelsea Ballerini and Juice WRLD.

Enhancements Unveiled

In conjunction with the Alabama show, the band's third performance at the venue, The Amp unveiled a new food truck area and kicked off its new beer – Backstage Brew – created by Jacksonville craft brewery Intuition Ale Works.

In response to its nearly 20 sold-out shows in 2018, The Amp's 300 level seating was expanded by adding 700 more seats, bringing the venue's capacity to 4,700.

"We have a high percentage sellout rate, with people catching wind that it's a great

Cranking Up 'The Amp'

SPOTLIGHT

Despite being in a secondary market, the St. Augustine Amphitheatre and Ponte Vedra Concert Hall continue attracting top talent.

By Lisa White



The Amp opened its 2019 concert season with an Alabama show and the venue has Midland, Kane Brown, Santana, Tyler Childers, Kelsea Ballerini, and Juice WRLD on the calendar.

SPOTLIGHT

spot to be in," said Ryan Murphy, director of the St. Augustine Amphitheatre and Ponte Vedra Concert Hall.

"The Amp is an open venue, so it gives Live Nation and AEG an opportunity to work with us. We're not pinned down to specific promoters or entities, which makes us a venue artists like to play."

After an analysis revealed that many of its shows sold out within 100 days of concert dates, it was obvious the demand was there for bigger acts.

"We know we have a lot of momentum, so we went for it," said Gabe Pellicer, assistant director of The Amp and Ponte Vedra Concert Hall. "Our recent rebranding is more about becoming nationally known. We don't have to chase profit and loss, so the focus is on being the best we can be."

ket, we're taking the lead on a lot in Florida. We're positioned in northern Florida, which helps with the routing, but going into the state is still a commitment."

It's a risk many are finding worth taking. The National just announced its sole Florida performance will be at The Amp.

The same was true with Tame Impala's 2018 show, which bypassed larger markets, including Orlando, Miami and Tampa to play in St. Augustine. The Amp is also an annual stop for Widespread Panic.

Relationships with artists have been cultivated along the way, which has helped solidify both venues' reputations.

Jack Johnson helped launch the Green Hands sustainability program, which establishes and maintains sustainable operating practices. These include recycling, a ban on plastic water bottles and a compost program.

"We're a smaller venue for him, so it was special and speaks to our reputation."

Another standout gig was Wu-Tang Clan's October 2018 show celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*.

"It sold out within days," Murphy said. "We had a bunch of activation around it, including DJs and dance offs on our backyard stage."

In addition, in September 2018, The Amp produced and hosted Sing Out Loud, a four-weekend music festival.

The free event featured a number of artists including The Decemberists, Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit, Lucero, and Rising Appalachia, with proceeds benefitting a local domestic abuse shelter.

A Versatile Venue

What has helped make St. Augustine a popular stop is the versatility of The Amp and the adjacent Ponte Vedra Concert Hall.

"The concert hall programming is an important piece of the puzzle, as it allows us to create a complete ecosystem for the market," Murphy said. "No matter who the artist is, they have an appropriate place to play."

Ponte Vedra Concert Hall is an old, converted church that was taken over in 2011 to put on about 200 shows a year as well as host community events, speaking engagements and weddings. Its capacity is 900 standing and 500 seated. Past performers have included Art Garfunkel, David Crosby and Gary Clark Jr.

"Ponte Vedra's bread and butter is the performing arts crowd, with jazz, blues and adult contemporary acts," Murphy said.

AEG has many acts seeking a smaller-sized venue like the concert hall and has made it a frequent stop for its tours.

"We can do up-and-comers, heritage or classic artists and they all do really well," Murphy said.

Some well-known artists he has booked at the hall include Dave Mason, Buckethead, Gaelic Storm, Judah and the Lion, LP, Morgan James, Pat Metheny, and The Psychedelic Furs.

"We have staff buyers that run the spectrum, and everyone has something to contribute with these two venues," Murphy said.

The Amp also has flexibility for smaller acts and events. It hosts 10 to 12 shows on its backyard stage and utilizes its front porch stage for local acts in a variety of genres, including hip hop, jazz and Latin fusion. These events are free to the public. Backyard shows have a capacity between 1,000 and 1,200, while the front porch holds 300.

"Also, every Saturday, we hold a farmer's market and have local bands play on the porch stage," Murphy said.

Positioning both The Amp and concert hall not just as concert destinations, but as facilities that serve the needs of the market and community in a variety of ways, has ensured that every inch of the space is properly utilized.

"If we just opened the doors and got people in and out, we'd be missing out on an opportunity," Murphy said. "Community support is priceless." ★



PUMPED UP BOOKINGS: Foster The People, on tour with Paramore, was just one of the many bands keeping The Amp at St. Augustine busy last summer.

Owned and operated by the St. Johns County Cultural Events Division, the Amp hosts over 40 concerts and multiple community events each year, along with the Saturday farmers market and the Sing Out Loud Festival.

"We own and operate a couple Orlando venues, and this state is like a cul de sac," said Foundation Presents' McRaney. "With The Amp, you can dip your toe in the state."

Creating a Destination

When Murphy arrived on the scene a decade ago, he was tasked with convincing artists and agents that The Amp and concert hall were worth the trip. He said, "Slowly but surely, we started getting more artists here, so even as a B mar-

"We're one of Jack's top two or three venues in the world that he likes playing," Murphy said. "His involvement with our venue has been amazing."

It's also about going above and beyond for artists. For example, knowing Sublime With Rome loves hitting the beach, there is always an ATV, cooler and surf boards awaiting the band's arrival.

The staff also arranged for John Legend and his family to have a nearby alligator farm to themselves.

McRaney said The Amp also feeds everyone, not just the artists, with food from Gypsy Cab Co. around the corner.

"They remember St. Augustine for how unique it is," Murphy said.

And there have been more recent feats that have put an even bigger spotlight on The Amp.

"We were a stop for one of Paul Simon's last shows, partnering with AEG," Murphy said.