

When looking at the casino venue landscape of the last 20 years, the big have gotten bigger but there's still room for newcomers and those who have not reached their potential.

New multibillion-dollar integrated retreats like Resorts World and Fontainebleau have opened post-pandemic and quickly got in on the action with their own bespoke concert theaters. Stalwart entertainment destinations like the Colosseum at Caesars Palace and Dolby Live at Park MGM continue to develop and build on the popular residency and concert model hosting global talent. Major players like Caesars, Hard Rock and others proliferate across the country as gambling and casinos continue to become legal in more territories.

Beyond Las Vegas lies still a wide open frontier that is still serving local communities and providing artists additional high-quality venues to potentially play and tour. Often put into its own category of venue, casinos share many parallels with the rest of the industry, where deals have to work for everyone and everyone ultimately wants what's best for the artist, fan and venue.

"When I started looking at the business model that made casinos successful, I was realizing that a lot of my peers in the agent world were really just trying to get as much money as they could," says Seth Shomes, founder and CEO of talent agency Day After Day Productions, who, in the late '90s and early 2000s saw the opportunity and proliferation of casino venues as the potential for true concert venues for performing artists of all kinds.

While the modern casino business has largely gotten away from the "loss leader" concept — everyone wants to at least break even with ticket sales for most shows — that doesn't mean gaming isn't still a casino's primary and unique income stream.

"To this day, I might book something at a casino and it sells out, and the casino's like, 'Nah, we don't want to do that show again, it didn't drive gaming.' Then, sometimes we have a show that sells 50% and it does great for gaming and they want to bring it back," says Shomes. "It is very different from a traditional hard-ticket venue for sure."

Shomes says a fundamental problem between gaming and non-gaming venues has been that agents or artists are looking for a payday rather than trying to bring shows that make sense

for both sides — and help ensure repeat business.

"As these casinos became more attractive for artists to play, it then has generated competition between casinos and hard ticket venues," says Shomes, noting venues like Mohegan Sun Arena in Connecticut, a 10,000-capacity basketball arena that is part of many major tour routings. "There are casinos and casino markets that have really become stops."

Another example is Wind Creek Event Center, formerly known as The Sands Bethlehem, in Pennsylvania. With its own entrance separate from the casino and separate entity operating and booking the facility, Wind Creek is an example of a best-of-both worlds casino venue that has become a regular stop on many tours playing into the 4,000-capacity range.

"What kind of makes us different is our shows aren't necessarily connected to player development, it's connected just to being a good venue," says Jamey Hines, executive vice president and general manager of Wind Creek Event Center, which operates as Vision Entertainment Group. He says allowing artists to do their own VIP and meet and greets, which is part of the artist's ticket onsale, is another way to stand



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CONTENT IS KING

COMEDY STILL
RAKING IT IN AS
NEXT GENERATION
OF 'CLASSIC ROCK'
SOLIDIFIES

BY RYAN BORBA

► **DRUNKEN LULLABIES:** The Wind Creek Event Center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, offers a 3,000-capacity general admission space allowing for raucous shows, like this 2023 gig by Flogging Molly.

Photo by Lisa Boehm



out as a more traditional concert venue, with casino backing.

"We balance out being a casino property and being a hard-ticket room all the time," he says. Live Nation is the booking partner but Wind Creek takes risk on the shows and buys in house. The venue has a capacity of 3,500, with seated or GA configurations on the floor as well as seated and VIP suites on a second level. Upcoming shows include Rascal Flatts, Gabriel Iglesias, Ali Wong, Whiskey Myers and many others.

He says demand and ticket sales are overall strong this year, with any economic troubles or sticker shock dependent on the show in question.

"The stronger content is still the stronger content," says Hines, who was re-hired at Wind Creek to get the venue up and running again after COVID. Formerly a Sands property, the resort was purchased in 2019 by Wind Creek Hospitality, the gaming and entertainment arm of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. Hines says, maybe surprisingly, that all-in ticket pricing has led to some sticker shock and less "carting" by potential ticket buyers who maybe do not realize the full price is already on display. "People aren't used to it and I think the things in the 1,000 to 2,000 ticket range are

getting the most pushback, so we just make efforts to make sure people are aware."

On the talent side, comedy remains strong at venues of all types, and always has been a natural fit at casino venues, which can mean residencies and extended stays at Vegas by Sebastian Maniscalco and Nikki Glaser. That can also mean a sold-out stop at Four Bears Casino in rural North Dakota, in the case of comedy star Jo Koy, who is playing many casino dates before major concert arenas and theaters across the country this fall.

Developing the next "casino" artist is, like much else in the world of live entertainment, about building an audience and communicating.

"It's about working hand in hand with your artist and their team to really strategize and say, here's the value of what I think is this, or here's where maybe that doesn't fit," says Shomes. One example is Aaron Lewis, who has built a following in many casino markets and made annual gigs out of markets that may otherwise get skipped, such as the Silver Legacy in Reno, Nevada.

"All artists have an idea of where their brand is going to be best serviced, whether it's a theater, arena, fair, festival, casino, whatever," says Shomes,

who's represented Lewis for 20 years. "When I look at other artists that we don't represent and I see them playing a mixture of venues, I think that's a smart strategy." He notes the importance of artist hospitality and amenities, something casinos are already well equipped for, going above and beyond to take care of artists and their teams.

Another smart strategy is for unaffiliated casinos with unaffiliated buyers (long-established casino buyers like Kell Houston of Houston Productions and Billy Brill and Joe Moallemour of DWP Talent Services book venues across the country) to communicate more often and potentially go in on offers together.

"You guys are three hours from each other and there really shouldn't be a conflict," Shomes says, as an example. "You should be looking to block book. How can you route together, so you can go collectively to an agent and say, 'Hey, we're not just offering you one date, we're offering you three.'"

Much like the rest of the live industry, much of it comes down to service — artist hospitality chief among them, where casinos can shine and offer amenities often in under-served communities that make a touring artist's life much easier.

Also much like the rest of the industry, finding and developing new talent is of the utmost importance when many of the classic rockers of yesterday are retiring or fading away. More recent hit-makers like Boyz II Men and Goo Goo Dolls could be the next generation of casino artists, which is constantly evolving.

"I'm especially excited about our ability to program family entertainment, which we've been able to do now in the past year since the Great Wolf Lodge opened on property," says Christian Printup of Foxwoods Resort in Mashantucket, Connecticut, which includes the 4,000-seat Premier Theater among other performance spaces. He says there's about 160 concerts on the books for 2026, including new types of content thanks to the sprawling property's family friendly destinations, including a water park.

"Our first foray was 'Sesame Street Live' with Elmo, and that was a smashing success, so we're bringing that back for next year, and we're adding Bippi, who is coming in December," says Printup. "Then I'm super excited about Lenny Pearce, the toddler rave guy. He does toddler techno and takes nursery rhymes into electronic music, and people come with their babies and little kids. It's amazing." ★

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▼ Y2K ALL OVER AGAIN: O-Town performed at Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut as part of the Pop 2000 Tour with Chris Kirkpatrick, an example of the next generation of "classic rock" and nostalgia artists hitting casino venues as many rockers of the '70s and '80s retire or become less active.

Photo by Jay Malone / Getty Images

