

FUNK BOX

Baltimore's Funk Box boasts Meyer Sound, a dedication to real musicians, and owners who care.

By Daphne Carr

The renaissance of Baltimore from burned out, grimy downtown to renewed waterfront has been a long time coming. A new sweep of business has given this old, post-industrial East Coast town a sense of place that doesn't use the term "DC."

The Funk Box stands on the spot of the former 8x10 Club in Federal Hill, a neighborhood in transition since the '70s, when the city was selling houses for one dollar so that people would buy them and fix them up. Funk Box co-owner Dave Rather says all that's changed: "Now you buy the

the funk got it

Main Speaker System:

- 4 - Meyer Sound MSL4 self-powered speakers
- 4 - Meyer Sound USW1P self-powered subs
- 3 - Tannoy CMS601CT30 70V ceiling speakers

Monitor Speaker System:

- 5 - Meyer Sound UM1C monitors
- 1 - Meyer Sound UPA-1C UltraSeries speaker
- 1 - Meyer Sound USW1P compact powered subwoofer

Main System Dynamics:

- 1 - Denon DCM-280P CD player
- 1 - Furman PLPLUS power conditioner
- 1 - PreSonus ACP88 eight-channel compressor/gate
- 1 - Shure P4800 DSP line driver
- 1 - Soundcraft K2 live console
- 1 - Symetrix 533E stereo graphic EQ
- 1 - TC Electronic D2 delay
- 1 - TC Electronic M1XL dual effects signal processor

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Monitor System Dynamics:

- 6 - Meyer M1A controller
- 3 - Symetrix 533E stereo graphic EQ
- 1 - Furman PLPLUS power conditioner
- 1 - Yamaha MC3210M monitor console

Monitor Amplification:

- 3 - Crest CA6 amplifiers
- 3 - Crest CA9 amplifiers

shell for \$150 and sell for \$400,000.”

Rather and his brother, Adam, had been running a bar and restaurant called Mother’s “about 30 seconds away” for six years. Adam brought his knowledge of running a Caribbean restaurant into the mix while Rather, a committed New Orleans music enthusiast, had a feel for community and a killer sonic sensibility. “I went down to Mardi Gras and got turned on to [New Orleans funk legends] The [Funky] Meters. New Orleans music has become the soundtrack to my life, and I’ve organized trips to take hundreds of people to Jazz Fest.”

Rather soon decided that the way to translate his passion for sharing music into profit was with a brick-and-mortar venue. “I used to run this promotions company called Mom’s Social Club. I’d put on New Year’s events, bring groups up from New Orleans for Halloween parties. Then I realized that the only way to make money doing it was to own my own club,” he said.

So when the chance came, Rather, his wife Kelly, his brother Adam and soundman Tim Walther bought the 8x10,



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a building which had been in continual use since the early 1900's. Their vision was a renovation, a top-notch sound system, and an upscale atmosphere that would cater to the influx of neighbors looking to stay local for drinks and entertainment. What they ended up with was a \$2.5 million dollar total overhaul that has made the Funk Box one of the best sounding – and feeling – live music venues in the country.

When the Walls Came Down

“We bought the club and kept it open for one month so we would be able to close it down in a grand fashion,” said Rather. “Our



idea was to put on a new roof and a new floor, but while we were doing that we realized that the walls weren't stable. It went from being a renovation to a total rebuild. We kept three walls but dug out the basement so we could add bathrooms. The project tripled in price and took longer than we had planned.”

Installer Dave Brotman, of DBS Audio, said that part of the reason the build-out took so long is that Rather and his partners didn't cut any corners. “They're not your typical owners. They love music and want the musicians to have the best.”

Brotman said this sentiment spilled over into their choice of sound system. “The bidding process took about a year because we bid the highest, about \$30,000 above most people, and it took a while to convince them that the Meyer system, while a large initial investment, would have close to no maintenance. I've been working exclusively with Meyer products for about 12 years. When someone asks what they're going to be working with and I say Meyer, they know it's good and breathe a sigh of relief.”

Rather admitted to needing some priming before making an educated sonic decision. “We knew we wanted something really quality for our sound system, but we're not really technical

people so there was a learning process," he said. "We spent three or four months listening and it came down to [two]. The owner of Howlin' Wolf in New Orleans was really pleased with his Meyer system and we decided to go with that. Only 20 percent of the audience can really, really tell a good sound system, but for the kind of music we do – something like bluegrass with all those subtle harmonies – it really had to be clean."

Small But Mighty

Funk Box's space is small, but completely functional. "It's a cozy space, really tiny," said Brotman. "Holds maybe 400 tops. The stage is 18x14 and hard to fit a nine-piece but we do it. The second floor has a wrap around balcony that goes to the upstage edge. You can lean over the drink rail and see behind the band. There are very few places you could get a bad view in the club." With four Meyer MSL4s flown on either side of the stage and four Meyer USW1P subs, all seats sound equally as good.

But the best seats, said Brotman, aren't seats at all. "The Funk Box has a tongue and groove, spring-loaded dancefloor that gives about five or six inches. When there are lots of people, it's like a wave. It really helps your knees."

But while the audience is treated with respect, the artists are treated like royalty. "The third floor dressing rooms and green room are beautiful. I put a Tannoy ceiling speaker system in with a volume control for each room. It runs the front of the house mix and everyone just loves it," said Brotman.

Some things the audience loves without even knowing it. When working on the interior, Rather and Brotman decided to put in the most fire retardant wall covering on the market. "Because of The Station fire, the fire marshal wanted something even better, so we had to go find something more retardant than what was on the market. It cost them a fortune, but now we know it's safe."

Johnny B. Goode Tonight

The Funk Box opened in September 2003 with rock n' roll legend Chuck Berry. Stars and up-and-comers alike have remarked to Rather that his expansive backstage, including a full bathroom with shower, are a treat. Brotman adds that everyone from "the

bouncers, to the bartenders to the owners" has a great attitude about the club, which he adds to by sending his best engineers to man the sound controls.

Partner Tim Walther serves as the full time booking agent, and Rather said it's "a challenge to keep a consistently interesting roster. We book serious musicians who can draw at least 100 people – mostly funk, reggae, bluegrass, and blues."

"Having a strong schedule is such a rush. The music, it isn't really commercial, and it's great to see people supporting

talented, hard working artists. I just want the artists and the audience to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible so they can do what they do best," he said.

But there was a single, sweet moment when Rather knew all his efforts weren't for naught. "I knew it was worth it when Steve Kemock, who played guitar with the Grateful Dead since Jerry died, came here. He is such a gifted, technically trained guitarist and he was just amazed at our system. He is going to sell copies of the Funk Box show from his website."

And that just might be the sound of a new legend forming. ○