

NIGHTCLUB & BAR MAGAZINE

When asked what his favorite aspect of his job is, Crobar brand Co-owner and Co-creator Ken Smith says nothing of mingling with celebrities, rubbing elbows with the greatest DJ talent on earth or knowing that his brand is on the verge of becoming internationally established. “The people,” he says. “It is different every night, but I always know that I am going to meet someone who is going to make me laugh.” Completed by the other half of the brand creation, Callin Fortis, the duo’s at-titude is pervasive throughout the Crobar philosophy in all three locations, Chicago (1992), Miami (1999) and New York (2003). While the first two locations are stunning success stories in their own right, New York has an overall resonating harmony between patrons and portrayal that simply is monumental. A DJ’s fa-vorite playground, a diva’s late-night Martini, a drag queen’s Sunday dance party— Crobar is the physical implementation of New York’s melting pot social scene. “If you didn’t come early,” says Smith, “we are the last stop. That is how we al-ways have been. You have to go to Crobar.”

Absolute Aggregate

“The design philosophy is basically the same,” Fortis, who also wears the hat of designer says of all three current Crobar locations. “Then, they are a DJ’s favorite playground. a diva’s late-night martini, a drag queen’s Sunday dance party — crobar is the physical implementation of new york’s melting pot social scene tailored to fit the demographic for each market.” With Crobar Chicago’s sleek chrome and Miami’s European flair, the New York location necessitated a distinctive style to fit its target market, which Fortis and Smith saw as any New Yorker of legal age. Fortis hired local designer Lionel Ohayon — putting trust in his similar style of execution and collaborative design. The dream for Crobar New York was absolute aggregate — mixing from the DJ booth all the way to the front door. “There is sort of a social implication that good nightclubs can implement seamlessly,” Fortis says. “We make it so the social hierarchy flows together, boundaries are very transparent and people don’t feel so separated. “A nightclub design is basically a place where everything is neutral,” he says. “It is a melting pot. We start there. Black, white, straight, gay — they mix together where everything is neutral, and that place is the dance floor.”

So, in essence, Crobar New York succeeded where others had failed

— an award-winning design that enables the mixing of cultures in a city so diverse, aesthetic beauty habitually battles shock value for attention. High Ceilings, Higher Profits

The first sign of conglomeration comes at patrons immediately in the form of the DNA Wall. This tower of original analog tube television sets is encased in plexi-glass, giving tiny, sporadic glimpses to what’s beyond. All of the televisions were rebuilt to contain the latest in digital technology, allowing for plasma clarity on late-1980s screens. “It goes back to the social concept of design,” Fortis says of the metal spider web of screens and tubes. “We like to mix technologies, rather than doing ‘new, new, new.’ There is a certain integrity and romance and sex appeal from drawing from what’s old.” »

To pay the club’s varying cover charges, patrons step up to meet the cashier behind an antiquated, city bank facade as a sort of intended pun to begin the evening. Instead of emerging into a nightclub, however, and experiencing everything at once, the men felt it was important to slow the tempo while at the same time paying homage to Crobar’s distinctive neighborhood location. “Art is a big part of our concept in New York, because we are located in Chelsea. So, you enter in an art gallery,” Fortis says. Broadening the dimensions of club design, this lounge space is devoted to a new art exhibit every three months.

The adjoining Reed Room, named for the Bamboo poles erratically sprouting from the floor, gives guests their first offering of libations from one of six bartenders. The tilting poles serve to separate the room into sections and offer an eye-appealing contrast to the perfectly straight lines of bottles against the back bar. This room is a segue that Fortis says, “forces the patron to experience all the levels that are exciting.” Rather than walking into the main room via a standard staircase or doorway, the group created Crobar’s infamous tunnel. Comprised of white tile walls, there is a blue backwash glow and circular cutouts creating large white dots on the floor inside. It is the tunnel that actually moves a guest’s experience inside of Crobar from sight and sound to visceral and physical.

“I put white noise generators in the tunnel, which cancels the sound

from either side,” Fortis says. “So, as you enter, you have a physical perception of silence for an instant. It is like a vacuum sound, then immediately there is the thumping hard music of the nightclub.”

The Main Room’s sprawling, glossy hardwood floors support an impres-



sive island bar stretching 180 linear feet and containing eight skilled bartenders. The finished sheen is juxtaposed with elements such as a giant mural of blended graffiti-styled artwork, exposed rough beams, a 55-foot ceiling and a scaffolding texture to the metal walls.

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A Distributor's Dream

Bob Myers, operating partner for Crobar worldwide, has been with the organization since 1997, and he joins Ken Smith and Callin Fortis in looking toward the development of the Crobar Buenos Aires, Brazil, with unleashed possibility. Backing the men in this latest venture is the confidence in the numbers happening in New York City. "Nationally, we are the No. 1 on-premise account for Red Bull," Myers says. "As long as you take the casinos out, we sell more than any other nightclub in the United States." Selling 180,000 cans of Red Bull a year, Crobar New York also sends out 320,000 bottles of water, 150 cases of dark liquor and 700 cases of wine annually. While readers may need a second to close their mouths, the club's coup d'etat comes in that famous bird in a bottle. The club sends out more than 125 bottles of Grey Goose each Saturday and an astounding 12,000 bottles annually. "The building was an old manufacturing facility," says Fortis. "It had sort of an interesting New York life. At one point, it was a storage and production place where they built and housed the Macy's Day floats." The Prop Room, a 5,000-square-foot space once dedicated to parade fabrication, now services Crobar's elite VIP guests in plush style. "We have been very blessed," Fortis says. "We have always found places with great bones." Much like a rollercoaster ride, the club is so carefully laid out, each aspect is designed to raise or lower a patron's heart rate through sound, light and layout — to take the breath away, not once, but continuously through slow and calculated unveiling.

From Trash to Cash

"It was very important for us to be original and different," Co-owner and Co-creator of the Crobar Brand Ken Smith says. Advertising and marketing became for Crobar a perfect avenue to prove just how different they were. "When we came to New York," Smith says, "we tagged garbage with our name. You know there aren't any alleys in New York, so the garbage sits on the street. So, we went around with stencils and tagged garbage everywhere in the city of New York, much to the dismay of other owners, because every club was advertising on their garbage for us. It kind of set a tone for our entry into New York." Taking an extreme portion of the budget to market, the group began — and retains — an unheard of strategy to promote the club citywide. The F.A.M.I.L.Y program, an acronym for Fashion, Art, Music, Industry Loves You, is at the heart of Crobar's advertising, and it palpitates outward to every available group in every sector of entertainment, with specific programs for each and an overall emphasis on promoting to the industry segment. "Within that," says Fortis, "we

have the Ambassador Program, interpreted from basic corporate business strategy to establish ambassadors within each demographic." These ambassadors then move out into the streets, enrolling people under them until a massive pyramid effect is created. In addition to these paying positions are the Concierge Program members. "Rather than try and identify the tourists," Fortis says, "we go to the concierges and service them as clients." Each concierge is given a Blackberry and access to a personalized FTP site, enabling them to place hotel guests on Crobar's guest list, citing the patron's name, relevant personal information and hotel. With a collective database of 3.3 million people, street teams armed with posters, garbage turned into daily free advertising and every industry covered, Crobar operators worked to become as New York as the L Train, yet sliding into the nightlife scene in a limousine at midnight.

Urban Street Credit

With all of this marketing, the product must match up in strength. Acquiring some of the world's largest names in Electronic music as resident DJs, Crobar New York has all eyes and ears tuning in. The feted booth has felt the fingers of Sasha, Tiesto, Danny Tenaglia, Deep Dish, Carl Cox, Sander Kleinenberg, Roger Sanchez and Erick Morillo, to name just a few. Residents of New York City might consider them neighbors from the sheer frequency of Crobar's talent scheduling. And who wouldn't want to play there, with all three locations using sound systems by Steve Dash, and the Crobar brand currently working on a signature Array system, yet to be named. "We were kind of the first ones to bring Electronic music to the states," Fortis says of Miami in 1992. "It was the huge underground following that sort of moved into mainstream. I thought at the time, 'This is crazy,' but it worked." Like the immigrants who once streamed off the boats at Ellis Island, crowds, averaging 5,300 people of all varying walks of life, look to Crobar nightly with high expectations. Better music, better promotions, a little slice of a better moment — Crobar serves the masses with Hip-Hop, Trance, House and even live acts such as the Black Eyed Peas, who have played the club on several occasions. "We have a lot of different things across the board," Smith says. "People have such short attention spans, I tend to get away with more weekly/monthly type events in Miami and Chicago. But New York is so fast and moves so quickly — people get bored. It is hard to pull a night off more than once." To combat this, management looks to outside promoters when necessary. "We try to go in-house as much as possible," Smith says, "but we

have learned over the years, you definitely need both. The great promoters we have met over the years, we have brought in-house." Never neglecting a large segment of the spending population and its dedication to diversity, Crobar has become known for its ability to morph into a gay bar on specific evenings. Allegria is one of the brand's most successful events. Incorporating a South American theme, the party has been a Sunday night sensation for more than 14 years.

A Collective Mindset

When speaking with Ken Smith or Callin Fortis, the word "family" is used in a prolific sense. It is the acronym for their tireless marketing campaign, and it is another word for "staff." Employing more than 100 people in New York alone, the company makes each one feel at home. "I hire people who are gregarious," Smith says. "Family. It is the family attitude, instead of having attitude." Today, with all the success, the minds behind the brand still give credit where it is due. "The staff at Crobar is what makes Crobar," Smith says. "I would like to say it is us, but it isn't. It is our staff." NCB

