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A New Miami Club Celebrates the Golden Days of Disco

By: David Barbour

Step into Miami's newest club and you step into another era. On the site of the former Crobar, one of the city's longest-running hotspots, now springs Cameo Theatre, a piece of high-drama design that evokes Studio 54 and the Palladium in the days of Andy, Halston, and Liza. It's a brilliant throwback based on an entirely different idea of the disco as a meeting place for all levels of society, a meritocracy based on talent, looks, and the appetite for fun.

One look at the dance floor is all you need: The dangling glitter balls, the faux-Warhol murals of Marilyn Monroe, the sleek red curved seating, the light poles, the DJ booth made of a 10' tall mirrorball cracked open like an Easter egg—all these details add up to a faithful rendition of nightlife glamour, circa 1978. At the same time, this is no theme-park version of clubbing—it's an articulation of what was best about that time and place, placed in a 21st-century context.

Cameo Theatre is the brainchild of Callin Fortis, former club owner and designer (his firm is BigTime Design Studios), and, with his business partner, Ken Smith, the force behind the Crobar clubs in Chicago, New York, and Miami. Crobar Miami was installed in a former movie house known as the Cameo Theatre. "The building was built in 1933," says Fortis. "It was a really delicate job to redo it into Crobar, because it's an historic building, and the gesture of the theatre, with its proscenium arch, had to be kept."

When the reign of Crobar came to an end, "the key was to erase people's memories of the Cameo," says Fortis. "When we did Crobar, I basically designed a structure that fit inside the theatre—the envelope of the theatre was in the background, but you participated in the new architecture. This time, the question was how to make it be less like Crobar and more like a theatre."

The answer, Fortis says, "was to use grossly oversized pieces, so you feel very human inside the space, while the theatre looms in the background." Indeed, at 11,000 sq. ft. the space is open, extravagant, ready for a party. There is seating on at least three levels. A 1,600 sq. ft. bar separates the bar from the dance area. A freestanding wall, making a cross-hatch, is filled with LEDs, creating an eye-grabbing effect.

ON THE DANCE FLOOR





the Marilyn Monroe wall and the mirrorball DJ station. Left: The crosshatch wall is filled with LEDs from LED Source. Below, left: Vice.

But why evoke the '70s club ethos at all? "It was an iconic time," Fortis says. "A few years ago, I designed Crobar in New York. It's a place where gays, straights, the bridge-and-tunnel crowd, and the East Siders can all mix on the dance floor. That's what I missed." It's a concept that evokes the 1970s concept of clubbing, as opposed to today's venues, which, he says, are all about "bottles and models—that's boring. The idea was to create a language and design that everybody could relate to in a party way." The great clubs, he adds, drew on the personnel from New York's creative industries. "At Crobar New York, we had a motto—FAMILY—an acronym which stood for 'the fashion, art, and music industries love you.'"

But Crobar is a modern phenomenon designed for today's clubgoers. Fortis speaks fondly of the "dirty disco days," or the '70s and early '80s, adding that Cameo Theatre is an "analog" rather than a "digital" experience—meaning, for one thing, that you won't find a lot of video effects. "There are flat screens at Kmart advertising underwear—it's not a big deal anymore. Technology is now so in your face, it's no longer interesting. The idea behind Cameo Theatre was to use technology of today, but to give it a warmer analog feeling."

For example, Fortis cites the chase poles over the dance floor, vertical light strips that dangle from the ceiling. "They're a reference to the Studio 54 chase poles. There, they were A lamps in red, green, and blue. They didn't have LEDs like we do." So it goes throughout the club, with classic design ideas re-realized, using modern gear. Also adding their own distinctive touches are details like the glitterball DJ booth (a custom piece of art created by sculptor Victor Arrias), the Monroe images by graphic artist Sean Drake, and a mural by David LeBatard of a voluptuous Latin woman.

Upstairs, in Crobar's old VIP room (and, before that, the theatre's balcony), is Vice, which was designed as a separate environment, although, Fortis notes, it can function as Cameo Theatre's VIP room. There, the décor is less industrial and more erotic. Fortis describes it as a place "where rock 'n' roll meets Betty Page meets 8mm pornography." A painted filmstrip of such images on the wall adds to the theme, along with a painting, by the artist Eric Kroll, of the bottom half of a woman, seen from behind and clad only in stockings. "It's meant to be mildly disturbing, but not really offensive," Fortis adds.

Fortis stresses that Cameo Theatre is not a museum piece but, most emphatically, a club for 2007. "Without being retro, it's a nod to the infamous party times of the past. Kids today weren't even born when Studio 54 was open—but if ask a 25-year-old, he or she will say it was the most famous club ever. But it was never our intention to be Studio 54; Cameo Theatre is all about the party, the mix of people."

Re-imagining the light rig

One of those people is lighting designer Joe Zamore who, except for a few years working at a rep at Martin, has been a club designer of note for decades. "There's a specific reason Joe was on this project—he lived it," says Fortis, referring to the lighting designer's long roots in the club world. "When we came up with the story for the club, he knew right where to go."

"They wanted to create the look of the great clubs," says Zamore, "and I'm the only one who remembers. This is our Palladium, with the grand old treatments and effects, but utilizing the latest technologies."

For example, the main club lighting makes use of an extensive package of Martin gear, including eight MAC 250s; nine Roboscan Pro 918 scanners: four Wizard Extreme 250W discharge lights; four Mac 550s; four Atomic strobes with colors; eight Mania DC1, eight DC2, and eight DC3 club units; four Mania EFX 700s and two EFX 800s; and two Magnum haters. Other gear includes 40 PAR 36 pinspots, four ETC Source Fours, 36 LU-3 recessed downlights, eight Color Kinetics ColorBlast LED units, one 6' mirrorball, two 3' mirrorballs, and 300' of LED- Source LED rope light.

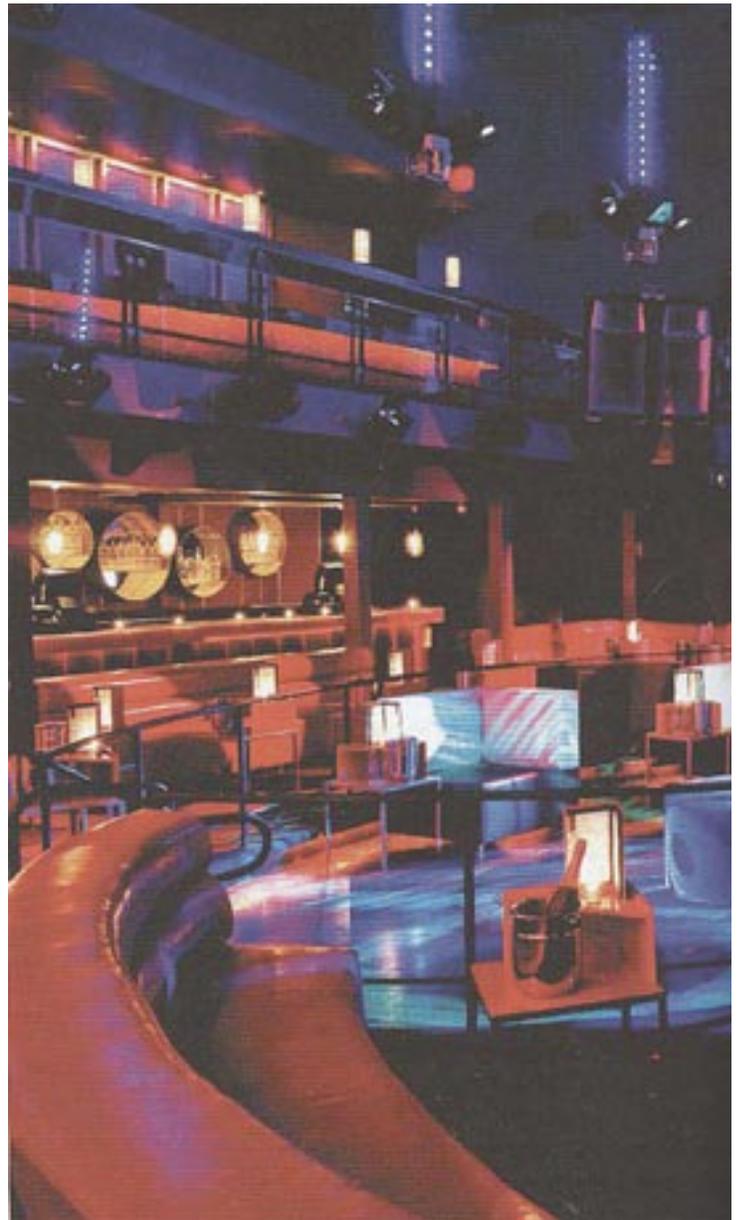
As has been mentioned, new technology is often put to the task of creating vintage effects. We built chase poles like in Studio 54, but we used LEDs to make them," says Zamore. The eight custom units are each made with 32' 1W Luxeon RGB strips; the effect is completed by the addition of the Wizard Extremes and Trilite police beacons.

The cross-hatched tic-tac-toe wall is, Zamore says, "a freestanding three-dimensional wall piece that floats in the space. We had meetings about panels—including units from Traxon and Color Kinetics—that would mount on the wall's surface. But, given the wall's size, that kind of solution would have cost something like three-quarters of a million dollars. We ended up building it by hand, using tiny LED boards from LED-Source, writing cues in all three dimensions. It has full DMX control and can do any kind of chase or multi-color patterns."

As designed, the space, with its shiny surfaces, mirrored objects, and multiple levels, is extremely lighting-friendly. Indeed, there are surprises built into the design, he notes: "Look at the Marilyn images; depending how you light them—from the front or the back—they look totally different." (Lit from the front, they reveal images of dollar bills.)

Control of the main floor lighting is by a High End Systems Hog 1000 console; an Artistic Licence preset architectural control handles the non-entertainment lighting. (The contractors for the job were Lightspeed Productions, PRG, and Stage Equipment and Lighting, with the LEDs all supplied by LED-Source.) Upstairs, in 'Vice, the lighting rig is "a mix of stuff salvaged from the club's past," says Zamore. The list includes five High End Systems Trackspots, eight Coemar iSpot 150 150s, six Lightwave Research AF 1000 loggers, three Martin Fibersource CMY150s fiber-optic sources, and forty-eight 1W RGB LED strips. Lighting is controlled by a Martin Lightjockey.

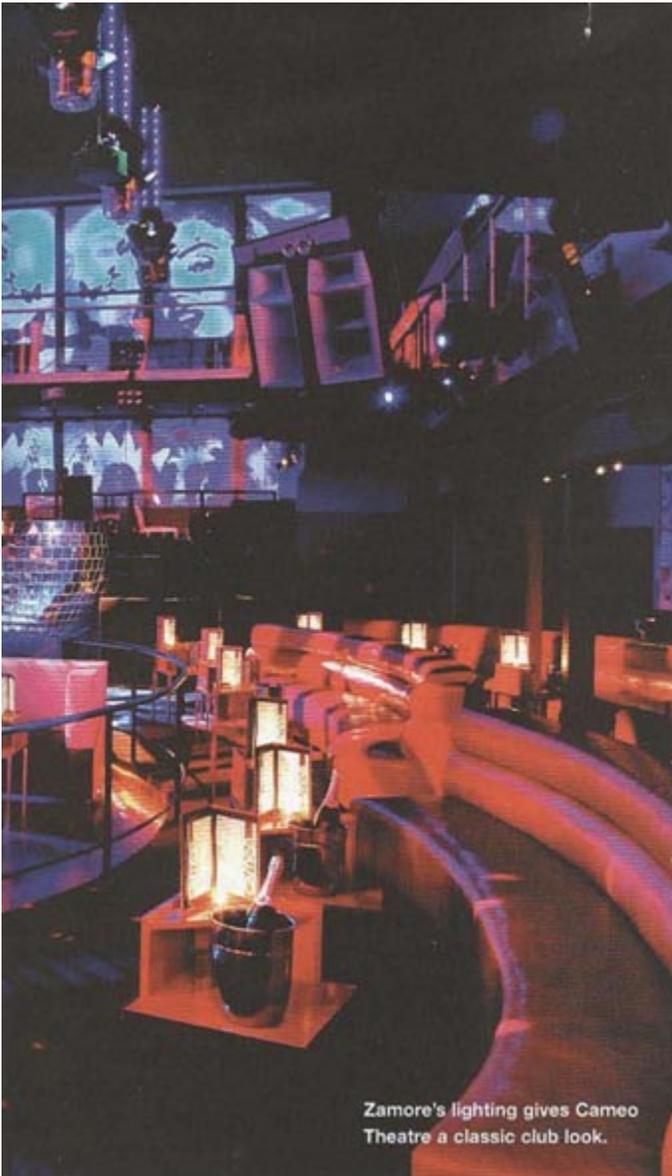
"It's been a very long time since I had done a club," Zamore concludes. "The advantage I had, having worked for Martin, was that I was aware of all the new technologies." Indeed, his experience made him a near-perfect choice to work on a club that looks to the past and future in a single gesture.



Turn the beat around

If the lighting of Cameo Theatre creates vintage effects with modern technology, the sound creates modern effects with older equipment. "The system had been there for years," says David Padilla, who oversaw the sound system for Cameo Theatre. Indeed, most of the gear harkened back to the mid-90s, when Crobar opened. "They were going to sell it—it was on eBay," he adds.

That plan fell through, and Louis Puig, another owner, asked Padilla for advice. "I said, 'It's an amazing sound system,'" says Padilla. "But it needed maintenance. I came in and retooled all the woofers, cleaned up the speakers. It's the same system that was in Crobar, except for a few pieces that weren't friendly to today's DJs. It's an old New York style of sound system; down here, in Miami, the DJs aren't as much into the full bass and tweeters thing, so I took some of that out."



Zamore's lighting gives Cameo Theatre a classic club look.



To blend in with the new club's look, Padilla says, "We took the grilles off the speakers and painted them silver inside, to make them look more futuristic. Also, the loudspeakers sat on the floor in Crobar; they sat on big bass cabinets call Berthas, which go back to the 1930s. Instead, I found a company in Canada [Belisle Acoustics, of Quebec] that makes a series of cabinets called Transparence, for live applications. They're more compact. I bought eight subs and they sound fantastic; that's all I changed in the rig."

The original system had been set up by Steve Dash, then part of the sound firm Phazon; Padilla made a few changes to Dash's setup. "We modified the BSS crossovers to their original state," he says. "We cleared out the settings Steve had done. I've learned a lot from people like him and Richard Long, who made the industry what it is today in terms of sound systems. Everyone is happy with this system; they think it sounds brand-new."

The rig main dance floor speakers are 10 PDS 44018 custom cabinets from Phazon, plus four Phazon custom tweeter arrays. "Those were originally taken from HLA concert speakers by JBL," says Padilla. "They had a custom shop there and they added another section to the box to add two 14" drivers for a little more punch to the mid-bass and low end. It was a genius idea because, since they were sitting on top of other speakers, they could breathe through the portholes that were added. Now, since they're hung, there's nothing obstructing their natural flow. It adds to the depth of the system."

For side fill on the main floor, there are 12 JBL MS28 Marquise cabinets. Side fill on the upper deck is provided by eight Nexo PS15s. Processing gear includes one BSS OmniDrive FDS-388 loudspeaker management system, three Rane AD22 audio delays, four Rane GE30 graphic EQs, two Rane GE60 graphic EQs, and two Turbosound LMS D6 loudspeaker management systems, along with Phazon balance and EQ units. Padilla also retained the original amps: 16 from Macro Tech, 18 from Crest, and 12 JBL MPX units.

DJ gear includes three Pioneer CDJ 1000MK3 players, two Technic SL 1200MK2 turntables, two Pioneer VDJ1000 DVD players, and one Pioneer EFX 1000 effects unit. In Vice, the gear includes six Electro-Voice Xi 1152/94 X-Arrays, four EAW DCS2 subs, and two Dynacore Cobra 2 speakers. "We re-coned the speakers upstairs and added some Klipsch speakers, because they have a certain sound," says Padilla.

Overall, he says, good-quality audio gear doesn't necessarily deserve to be thrown out. "Even if it's 50 years old, if it's well-maintained, someone with a good ear can go in and tweak it out and it'll work for a good long time. These speakers are great stuff—they just need to be tweaked up, cleaned up, and re-coned." It's an excellent metaphor for Cameo Theatre, a club that aims to blend the best of the old and new in clubbing.