

# CHANGING



SPREAD AND FOLLOWING TWO PAGES COURTESY AGUA CALIENTE RESORT CASINO SPA RANCHO MIRAGE

Agua Caliente's live entertainment venue, The Show, celebrated its 10th anniversary in March.



**A**S MORE TRIBAL casinos become destinations for high-level stars and shows are more often expected to generate profits as well as draw gaming customers, *Venues-Now* spoke with three casinos from different regions about the climate for attracting acts and fans to their live entertainment venues.

We also talked to Tom Cantone, who it's been said revolutionized the casino business in 1985 when he booked Eddie Murphy at the Sands in Atlantic City, starting the trend of bigger stars performing in casino venues. Cantone, Mohegan Sun vice president of sports and marketing, discusses his 35-year career and how he helped shape what we know today as a casino act.

# THE GAME

# THE SHOW



**AGUA CALIENTE  
RESORT CASINO  
SPA RANCHO  
MIRAGE**

**CITY:** Rancho  
Mirage, Calif.

**VENUE:** The Show at  
Agua Caliente Resort  
Casino Spa Rancho  
Mirage

**CAPACITY:** 2,700

**AGUA CALIENTE  
MAINTAINS STRATEGY OF  
FEATURING BIG STARS**

**BY BRAD WEISSBERG**

# GOES ON

**A**GUA CALIENTE RESORT Casino Spa Rancho Mirage is celebrating the 10th anniversary of its live music venue, The Show, this year by acknowledging that some traditions are worth keeping, like booking the biggest names.

"We've ramped it up by going after the A-listers," said Dan Pferschy, director of entertainment at the venue for six years. "We've had Van Morrison, Duran Duran, Steven Tyler, Dolly Parton and Styx."

The Show, which seats 2,100 and has a standing-room capacity of 2,700, started big when it opened in 2009 with Billy Joel, Matchbox Twenty and Martina McBride. Ten years later, Jerry Seinfeld kicked off anniversary festivities March 2. (Another comedian, Gabriel "Fluffy" Iglesias, holds the mark for most shows played at the venue, 17, and will return in May for two more.)

Billy Brill, talent buyer for Agua Caliente for 13 years, has been booking talent for 30 years. He also books for Pala Casino in San Diego; Thunder Valley Casino in Sacramento, Calif.; Eagle Mountain in Porterville, Calif.; and Pearl River Casino in Mississippi.

"We are open to all demographics, but in this business what we really are looking for is gamblers and to give our customers a new experience," Brill said. "I buy what's right for the casino and don't let the promoters jack up the prices because we are a casino. The modern casino booker job is all about making money for the casino. It's no longer a loss leader. It's totally different than it was 15 years ago."

The facility, which also changed its name coinciding with the anniversary to Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa Rancho Mirage, sits next to Palm Springs, which helps it maintain a robust business hosting bands who are rehearsing for their tours.

"They come to us because we are close to Los Angeles and the weather here is perfect most of the year," Brill said. "The Moody Blues, Duran Duran, Alice in Chains and Barry Manilow have all rehearsed here before their national tours. Every time Barry Manilow has a national tour, he rehearses here."

The venue also hosts international acts for fans of Armenian, Chinese, Korean and Latin music.

"While I'm grateful to buy the talent, it's a team effort and there is a tremendous team at

Agua Caliente," Brill said. "We treat the artists well and try to take care of them."

Pferschy said he's always thinking of the bigger picture and the players. "We want to drive people to the property with this amenity," he said.

Classic rock, country and comedy are calls easy to make for the casino crowd. Choosing hipper acts is hit and miss. "We want to include younger stuff to get the next generation of players through the doors,"



The Pretenders are one of the top bands to have played The Show.

said Pferschy. "But often they don't attract the players. We booked Janelle Monae and while she did great with hard sales, she was light in the casino. We're looking at Greta Van Fleet now."

"Our goal is to try to get our money back, and it's scaled that way," he said. "But as long I get the guarantee back it's been a successful show. This helps me in getting some of the artists. They can be costly and a challenge to a venue this size. Lack of seats is a problem. We don't want to gouge. It's a delicate balancing act."

Ticket prices run \$25-\$125.

Pferschy and Brill agree that making meet and greets a deal point is the latest evolution in the casino venue industry.

**"As long I get the guarantee back it's been a successful show." — DAN PFERSCHY**

"Meet and greets are big business," Pferschy said. "They want to come in earlier and earlier and get our staff to help them out. There should be a cost to that. The meet and greets go for several hundred dollars each, (so) sure, the casino should get something."

Brill said, "It's not all one way anymore. It's coming up as a deal point more and more. It's all about doing good business for the casino."

There is no food in the showroom. Concessions consists of beverages, which are provided in-house.

Agua Caliente Rancho Mirage's senior vice president and general

manager, Kato Moy, has been with the property for nine years.

"The Show is a very intricate part of the property," Moy said. "Entertainment is a very attractive amenity for gamers and non-gamers. Different genres attract a large audience and within that we book entertainment that appeals to both."

Moy said there is a mathematical formula he uses to ascertain how many theatergoers wind up spending money in the casino or at the restaurants.

"In general, there's a certain percentage that we know come onto the gaming floor," he said. "We want to bring first-timers to the property. We know what genres help with that. We have databases that help us select the type of talent we book."

Moy wishes he could add more seats and have a larger capacity. "On the flip side, because of the intimate seating it's easy to get the best seats in the house," he said.

Moy's favorite event was The Judds in December 2010. "They put on a great show," he recalled. Brill's best memory is Billy Joel opening the casino.

His biggest challenge is cancellations. "Sting got sick," Brill recalled. "We felt bad for the customers."

Another cancellation by Brian Setzer on New Year's Eve tested Brill and the Agua Caliente team. "We were scrambling," Brill recalled. "I suddenly remembered that Kool & The Gang always do a New Year's Eve Vegas show. So, we put on a dance party for New Year's Eve and had Kool & The Gang playing The Show within 48 hours."

Brill has seen a lot of changes in the casino venue industry during his 30-year career, but none has been as pleasing as seeing "casino venues get out of the dark and get respect. The modern casino is very professional. It's the new frontier for entertainment." ▣



Dan Pfersch is the entertainment director at Agua Caliente.



Tom Cantone received the inaugural Executive of the Year Award from the G2E Global Gaming Conference in 2013.

## CANTONE MEANS CAN DO

### Mohegan Sun exec still helping redefine casino entertainment business

**W**HEN TOM CANTONE was recruited to Atlantic City's Sands Casino Resort in the 1980s, casino entertainment consisted of faded stars and topless girls. Cantone wasn't satisfied. He wanted to do better.

"I wanted to open the doors to pop culture and get the hottest, latest and greatest to play at the Sands," Cantone recalled. "Every agent back then shied away from booking their contemporary acts to play a casino. I felt like an army of one out to convince all the agents and managers that there was money to be made playing a casino venue who has the same demographic profile as the people who buy their clients' records, go to their clients' movies and see their clients' shows."

Convincing hesitant agents took time; it was an educational process. "I explained this was a new industry that has potentially millions of dollars to be made," he said.

Cantone's breakthrough came when Eddie Murphy, fresh off his star-making turn in "Beverly Hills Cop," agreed to kick off his new national stand-up tour at the Sands in 1985.

"Eddie Murphy is the reason casino entertainment is what it is today," Cantone said.

Other hot '80s stars such as Linda Ronstadt, Robin Williams and Billy Crystal soon followed.

"Our strategy was to bring in younger, new, fresh talent that will pump new blood into the entertainment stages," Cantone said.

The Las Vegas Sun noticed and wrote a headline that proclaimed Atlantic City the new entertainment capital of the world. It said that the acts Atlantic City was booking were innovative and trend-setting and that Vegas needed to pay attention instead of doing the same old thing.

Cantone's graduating class at the Sands is a who's who of the casino industries' biggest players: Rob Goldstein, who now runs the Sands empire in Las Vegas; Bob DeSalvio, who is heading up the Encore property about to open in Boston; Bill Weidner and Brad Stone, who built the Sands' Macau properties; and Hard Rock Hotel Chief Operating Officer Jon Lucas.

Donald Trump poached Cantone in 1987 to program all three of Trump's Atlantic City hotels: the 5,000-seat Trump Taj Mahal, the 1,200-seat Trump Plaza and the 1,200-seat Trump Marina.

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# LET'S HAVE A BALL!



4/18 Nick Offerman



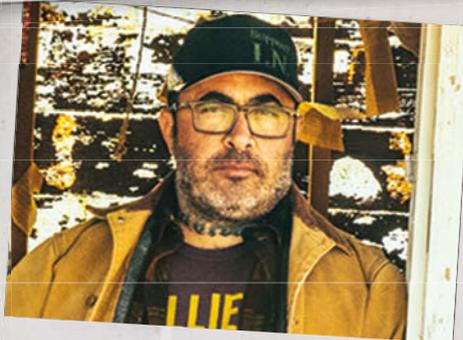
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Steve Martin, Elton John, James Taylor, Fleetwood Mac, Rod Stewart, Don Henley and Dolly Parton all made their casino debuts at the Taj Mahal. Roseanne Barr taped her HBO special there.

Cantone stayed in Atlantic City for 15 years before he was lured away by Foxwoods Casino Resort in Connecticut to be vice president of entertainment and program its Fox Theater. He stayed until 2007 when Mohegan Sun persuaded him to be its vice president of sports and entertainment and run its 10,000-capacity venue, the Mohegan Sun Arena.

It's at Mohegan Sun that Cantone perfected his booking philosophy of getting the biggest stars touring — and some who were not — to play his casino venues.

Billy Joel's first residency ever, and first stint at a casino venue, was at Mohegan Sun in 2008. "Billy did 10 sellouts, with a \$10 million gross. It put our entertainment brand on the map," Cantone recalled. "It took me 25 years to get him. The deal got done because I have a relationship with Dennis Arfa (Joel's manager and agent). That's where relationships matter."

"I'm all about relationships," said Cantone. "Relationships turn into friendships when trust is established. Relationships open doors."

It's through relationships that Cantone started booking artists to appear in a year in which the artist is not touring. Jennifer Lopez, Bruno Mars

and Kevin Hart are just some of the big names who have played Mohegan Sun when they were supposed to be on hiatus.

"It's really satisfying to create a date instead of booking one," Cantone said. "It becomes a signature event for the property."

Cantone's relationship skills are present in every move he makes, from the way he handles negotiations to the way he treats the artists and his Mohegan Sun team.

"It's a give-and-take when we make the deals," he said. "In the beginning there was different pricing between a casino price and a non-casino price. But as I've gained trust with the agents, the promoters, the managers and the artists, I've gotten that mostly eliminated. If the ROI is not there, we will pass. We make good business decisions based on what we think the model will return. At the end of the day, the heat generated with a major name in the building can win the war if you book the right person at the right time."

The way he handles the artists is no exception to his relationships-first rule. "Artists want a friendly face at the door when they arrive who will make them feel relaxed and

among friends," he said. "We want to make it matter that they play our venue instead of somewhere else."

Cantone puts lavish praise on his team — Joe Soper, Greg Romeyn and Kevin Reilly and a support staff of about 400 — who are responsible for programming rooms in Connecticut, Washington, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and New Jersey. Soon to be added to the workload will be programming a new South Korean venue and two casinos in eastern Canada. "I'd be nowhere without all the people who work with me. They are a dedicated, tireless group," he said.

Relationships popped up again when Cantone cited cancellations as his biggest challenge.



David Spade and Adam Sandler are among the big-name stars that Tom Cantone has persuaded to play Mohegan Sun.

"Cancellations are the worst," Cantone said. "Justin Timberlake canceled 12 days before his show, at the worst time of year around the holidays. I scrambled to fill the space. And here's where relationships come into play again: I knew Michael Bolton; he lived here in Connecticut. I was able to get him to extend his tour by two days to play our venue. It mattered. We were full to capacity instead of being dark."

Jim Koplik, president of Live Nation Connecticut, has been booking shows at Mohegan Sun since it opened.

Cantone "used to be my competitor," Koplik said. "But I've grown to love the guy anyway. I've worked with tens of thousands of people and Tom ranks near the top. He's a great person to work with. He goes the extra mile."

"The old person who had Tom's job would never give rooms to the artists. It was a huge

pain to explain to the artists they would have to pay for their rooms, and we'd lose shows. The first thing Tom did when he got to Mohegan Sun was to put hotel rooms in every deal. It opened the floodgates," Koplik recalled.

"Tom loves to be backstage and greeting the band," he said. "He's fashioned the venue as his venue. He bleeds Mohegan Sun."

Koplik also admires Cantone's never-give-up attitude. "Tom waited four hours to meet Bruce Springsteen and give him a tribal blanket in 2014," Koplik said. "That's dedication."

Steve Levine, ICM's co-head of concerts, is also a longtime friend. "I first started dealing with Tom in the early days of Atlantic City," Levine said. "I've somehow worked with Tom in every job he's had since then.

"Tom is not about himself.

He's about creating a positive experience and a great partnership. He's been one of a small group of executives in the casino business who understand how to deal with an artist in a way that makes them want to come back again and again, and not just for the cash. He comes from a place of 'yes,' and a problem is just a temporary issue to be quickly resolved."

Cantone said he'd be nowhere without his family: wife Anissa; daughters Brooke and Tessa, and son Marc.

"I always say first and foremost a dad and husband— and then you can call me anything else. If you are not happy at home, you are not happy at work," he said.

## "Relationships turn into friendships when trust is established. Relationships open doors." — TOM CANTONE

Cantone loves his job and he's delighted that playing casino venues has become cool and hip. "In the past a hot young artist would never have thought to go to a casino because they thought it's not where their fan base is, and it's where older artists go perform out their final years.

"We changed that perception so much so that new artists today actually start their careers in a casino venue and many of the biggest tours in the world start in casinos. That never happened before. Now we are the first call for so many contemporary artists."

"We don't sell tickets; we sell memories for life," Cantone added. "We produce fun. How cool is that?"  —Brad Weissberg