

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY'S SECRET WEAPON

# CENTERSTAGING

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/// BY DANYELLE SANDERS AND PETER LANDAU



The stage is set. It's the 53rd Annual GRAMMY Awards, and before you are five fierce female singers: Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Hudson, Marina McBride, Yolanda Adams, and Florence Welch (Florence and the Machine). Together they dominate the charts, and these Divas are relying on you to make everything behind their performance flawless.



/// Michael Jackson rehearsed for his highly anticipated *This Is It* tour at CenterStaging before his death.

This isn't one of those dreams where you show up to class unprepared and half naked. It's just typical day at CenterStaging, LA's premier rehearsal and backline facility, and a company that specializes in production and technical support for television and live performances. CenterStaging works closely with notable production companies who produce some of the most watched and anticipated events, such as the GRAMMY's, American Music Awards, Billboard Awards, American Idol, Country Music Awards, the Coachella & StageCoach Music Festivals, and so many others.

"Music is what we do, and rehearsal is, without a doubt, the most important part of a show," says Brent Dannen, CenterStaging studio manager. "It's here where you can sort through what works and what doesn't. Everything has to be perfect because, come show time, you don't have the luxury of a do-over. We do everything we can to make sure the rehearsal process and performance of the artist is perfect. It can definitely get a little crazy."

CenterStaging's gigs run the gamut from primetime to late night, working regularly on shows like *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *Lopez Tonight*, *American Idol*, *The Voice*, *The X Factor*, *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. When it comes to television, "If it involves a musical number or concert segment, then we most likely have a hand in it," says Kerry Jensen, CenterStaging production support manager. Whether its backline or rehearsal space at its posh facility in Burbank, CA, CenterStaging

is the place where artists and musicians come to work before anyone sees them play.

In the entertainment industry, reputation is key. CenterStaging is a true testament to that philosophy, with a business generated exclusively by word of mouth. Offering 10 state-of-the-art rehearsal studios, including a brand new dance-specific studio complete with mirror wall, playback, and Harlequin Liberty sprung wood floors, other CenterStaging services include an extensive range of backline, an instrument repair center, storage lockers, cartage services, and an onsite catering facility. CenterStaging also houses an artist relations complex for some of the top musical manufacturers in the world, such as Fender, Roland, PRS, Zildjian, Gen 16, JH Audio, Steinway & Sons, Touring Tech, Bearcom, Vic Firth, and Tour Supply, making CenterStaging the ideal one-stop venue for any musical artist.

Jan Parent and Johnny Caswell started CenterStaging in a little warehouse on San Fernando Rd., moving to the Burbank site in 1993 where they built their first three rehearsal rooms. "For many years, we supplied musical instruments for television shows like *American Bandstand*, *Soul Train*, and *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* prior to the start of CenterStaging," says Jan Parent, show department manager. "What really launched the business was *The Arsenio Hall Show*. That show essentially ended the practice of lip-syncing performances on television, replacing them with live bands and all the problems inherent



/// One of the many rehearsal spaces at CenterStaging.

with producing and controlling sound for a live show format, an art form I can proudly say we've mastered."

In November of 2009, the company was acquired by SoundCheck LA LLC, becoming CenterStaging—A SoundCheck LA Company. The new owners are a trio who are not unfamiliar with the value of CenterStaging. These industry professionals include Mitch Clark, formerly owner of Tomcat Global, Inc.; Scott Scovill of Moo TV and Branded Media Factory; and Ben Jumper of SoundCheck Nashville & SoundCheck Austin.

"CenterStaging is a music industry icon," Clark says. "As a facility, it's legendary. That's what drew me to it—the opportunity to be a part of and continue that legacy." As managing partner, Clark immediately hired Michael Anderson as general manager and invested \$1 million in new inventory of musical instruments and new audio gear for the studios, while also giving the facility an overall upgrade. Clark notes, "I had the pleasure of working with Mike on a couple of big installs for Cirque du Soleil shows." Anderson worked as director of production, creating stage productions of *The Beatles Love*, *Viva Elvis*, and *Zed*. "Once this investment was

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- BRENT DANNEN, CENTERSTAGING

made, it was obvious we needed somebody that could manage the company and take it to the next level.

Reinvented like no other, this is not your typical rehearsal hall. Built with artists and their production needs in mind, CenterStaging has succeeded in designing an environment conducive to the creative process. Custom artwork from painter Mark Jenkins, photographer Eddie Saunderson, and sculptor Megan Geer-Alsop is now on display throughout the entire facility, elevating CenterStaging to a level of artistry that is surpassed by none. "We want the place to feel

comfortable and at the same time be productive for the artist," says Anderson. "We are not your typical rehearsal facility. We work with the greatest musicians on the planet, and our facility, gear, and employees must reflect that."

In the past two years, the company has changed dramatically, not only aesthetically, and the overall attitude and vibe make working with CenterStaging an enjoyable experience for all. Clark states that the real investment of acquiring CenterStaging was in the employees. "Fresh paint and new carpet are only part of the change," he says. "The real story is the pride and dedication demonstrated by the CenterStaging employees.

"Clients are noticing the positive changes, and they are talking about it," says Mac Burrus, music co-producer for *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. "*Jimmy Kimmel Live* has always been a place where ideas happen on the fly, and CenterStaging has been able to handle any request that comes up at the last minute. Gabriel Serrano, a CenterStaging technician who regularly works on the show, is testament to CenterStaging employing the knowledgeable and fast-thinking people that help us execute any request. His friendly attitude and ability to work with anyone comes through on our show and really helps us create an excellent TV experience for the artists and our viewers."

Johnny Lord, show department manager, is another employee that continues to make CenterStaging stand above the rest. "I define television production as a small idea that snowballs into an amazing conglomeration of detail, hard work, long hours, and a family atmosphere that all come together to pull off a piece of content that an audience enjoying it could never imagine what actually went into making it," says Lord. Lord received a Primetime Emmy Award for band staging and has participated in some of the largest productions in television history, such as the 9/11 telethon, *America: A Tribute To Heroes*,



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/// TOP LEFT: CS Technicians setting up gear in studio. TOP RIGHT: Mike Rose – Drum Department Manager

the Katrina special, along with countless GRAMMY events and Award shows.

Lord’s responsibilities start with coordinating the vision of the show’s production with the needs of the various bands. Next, he works with manufacturers and CenterStaging’s department managers to make sure endorsements are covered for the performance. From there, he coordinates load-in times with the staging supervisor, and works closely with the art directors on the exact sizes and heights needed for the risers, all of this on a tight deadline.

With staffers like Lord and Serrano, the future of CenterStaging is bright, and the company plans to expand the business into Hollywood with a new facility to keep delivering top service to its customers, where and when they need it. The company is currently looking for a site with ample parking, spacious studios, and privacy to protect its clients.

When it comes to musical production, CenterStaging is the glue that holds all the disparate elements of the industry together. This team of professionals is courteous and

innate with the knowledge of client needs. Parent notes the staff is never star-struck. “It doesn’t matter how big the client is. We’ve seen them all. We pride ourselves in working with the best and striving to be the best every show we do.”

Working daily with superstars can make one jaded. It’s just another day at the office in this business, but sometimes an artist will surprise a staff member and remind him of how special working in that office can be. “I was working late one night in my office,” Anderson recalls, “and there came a knock on my door. It was Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys. He asked if I knew where he could get some toilet paper for the bathroom. I have to admit, that made me pause for a moment and think just how special it is here at CenterStaging. There is no other single company in the world that does the caliber of shows and works with the caliber of artists that we do. We do rock this world.” **LD**