



# Reinventing Buddha

A Funktion One audio installation within Dubai's Buddha Bar is helping to change the preconceptions of an F&B giant, reports **Barney Jameson**

## SEVEN YEARS HAVE PASSED

since the Buddha Bar opened in Dubai, home to one of the world's most competitive F&B industries. Each night since has been another opportunity for a competing bar, restaurant or nightclub to establish itself as the emirate's latest place to be seen. A succession of venues have opened to loud fanfares but few have claimed real longevity. Yet this is precisely what Buddha Bar has achieved.

Often referred to as the flagship of the Parisian-born chain of restaurant-bars, where the music matters as much as the menu, the venue still boasts the same ornate décor as in

the beginning, the same iconic giant Buddha, and the same long, loud bar where the party still takes place. The Buddha Bar formula has proven its worth and it would take brave men indeed to try to change it.

Which is where Alex Bracken and Andy Williams, who together make up Dubai-based Funktion One distributor EmTec, come into the story.

Never the kind of people to let a little thing like a winning formula get in the way of progress, Mr Bracken and Mr Williams have taken one of Dubai's original iconic venues and gifted it a new Funktion One loudspeaker installation. In doing so

*'Buddha Bar is already at a high level but I get a lot of feedback from the crowd and it's all positive – the regular clients, the bigger clients, have totally seen a difference'*

they have confronted and ultimately overcome the audio preconceptions of one of the world's most prestigious F&B operators, while creating a landmark reference project. Most impressively, they have achieved both of these things while the Buddha Bar remained open for business as usual.

'The venue was fully operational, so we had to work around that,' explains Mr Williams, as he begins a tour of the newly retrofitted nightclub from within the DJ booth. It was not, he continues, a matter of late nights so much as 'early mornings – starting at 6am and finishing at 4pm. We were taking the old speakers out and putting our speakers in so it was a slow process. Normally the venue is shut and you can pull things out and put new things in but because this isn't a new build the conduit was already in place so we had to run lots of new cables. Also the whole system was in mono, which is not good in a venue like this. Once I discovered that... Well I had to run a whole new load of snake cable up to the amplifier room so I could put everything into stereo.' He shakes his head as he remembers.

Mr Williams delivers this entire explanation at machine-gun speed, as if he has so much occupying his mind that he has to answer the question as quickly as possible before another problem springs up for him to solve. For him, time is always short but ideas are too

precious to explain briefly, so he says his piece and he says it fast, and he means every word.

He is also a perfectionist. Halfway through *Pro Audio Middle East's* visit he stands in the centre of Buddha Bar's main dining area and, rather than talk about how much he has achieved, he focuses on two loudspeakers that he has yet



**PSM121 cabinets in situ**

to move into their ideal position. In contrast, his partner Mr Bracken saunters over to the DJ position, dials the music up loud and revels in the muscle of the new system, a huge grin on his face. The contrast between the two lifelong friends is part of what makes EmTec work.

There is no doubt that both partners should be proud of what they have



**Funktion One Res 1.5 covering the bar**



FEATURES: INSTALLATION

achieved within Buddha Bar. As Mr Bracken reasons: 'This is the flagship Buddha Bar venue worldwide and they are very particular about what they want. They were scared on a higher level of using Funktion One – it's a big leap.' In fact, he adds: 'A lot of people are still scared in the industry because they think it's a club system, but it's a full range of boxes from the smallest to the biggest, and the proof is in the hearing.'

Nevertheless, says Mr Williams, the consequences of a less than perfect install would be severe: 'Dubai is a small town really and the F&B community is quite small. So if they say Buddha Bar is a disaster then we won't be doing a job again.'

On that note, we begin the tour with another demonstration of Mr Williams' determination to get every detail right. 'Starting at the beginning, we changed the zone mixer,' he says, indicating the newly installed Formula Sound ZMR-80 located beneath the main DJ mix position. 'Zone mixers, for me, are just the worst part of the chain,' he continues. 'So I used the Formula Sound mixer, which isn't digital and hasn't got remote controls or flashing lights but it sounds awesome. There are now six zones in stereo, whereas there used to be eight in mono.'

Three pioneer CDJ 2000 decks and a pioneer DJM 2000 mixer sit in the booth while monitoring is via a pair of 12-inch Funktion One PSM12 enclosures. 'They've got a built-in active crossover so you can run them as two-way or just one-way,' says Mr Williams. 'We've got an MC2 E45 driving it, so they're not being pushed to the edge.'

Indeed, they can't be – the DJ booth faces directly onto the restaurant, where the audio energy is a little more restrained than at the adjacent bar. But first, Mr Williams leads the way around to the venue's main entrance, which is served by a pair of F81 enclosures positioned above the reception desk.

'All of the music is based around the DJ, it's not a BGM system,' he continues. 'Originally they didn't have sound in the entrance but the managers here felt that it would be nice if when people came in they started to get a bit of a vibe. We've kept the F81s off the reception desk as much as possible.'

Immediately following the entrance is a large public waiting area flanked to the left and right by two corridors leading towards the central dining area. To the side of both corridors are private rooms, mirrors of one another with plush furniture and décor.

'We've got a rectangular corridor here so we've put an F101 in each corner because we didn't want to drive it too hard,' explains Mr Williams. 'We've also got two MB212 mini bass speakers here, hidden.'

While the corridors and private

areas are both covered, the concept behind the zone, he continues, is to let sound 'drift over' the larger central area. 'The management didn't want speakers pointing right at the guests,' he clarifies. 'In here it's about atmosphere – people still listen to the music but it's not in their faces. This is a place where people come to sit before they go for dinner, whereas the two side-rooms are where people go later and have drinks, so they're louder.' Both rooms are served by a pair of F101 enclosures with an MB112 discreetly positioned in the corner to add 'a bit of extra bass lift'.

The delicacy of the zone is the first indication of a design ethos in which both of the EmTec partners believe. 'I try to keep speakers down to a minimum,' Mr Williams says. 'I want the sound to be perfect. We're not about selling boxes. If I can get away with two speakers and a bass bin then that's what I do.'

Tellingly, the drive for perfection in the details also encompasses the company's choice of cables. 'I replaced a lot of the cables – I really care about them. We're using Van Damme and Klotz – most of the bigger speakers are Van Damme and the smaller speakers are Klotz.'



MB212 subs are in use for various areas of the venue

Continuing through the venue, two small areas to either side of the central staircase are served by single mounted F101 enclosures to ensure smooth coverage before a visitor reaches two private dining rooms, each of which is covered by two F55s respectively. 'It's up to the guest how hard it gets pushed in here,' explains Mr Williams. 'Some people want it turned down, others say they've had their food and want it turned up.' The F55s cater for



F101 speakers have been discreetly installed to complement the decor



DJ Nicholas Sechaud and Andy Williams

either requirement.

A little further into the venue is the large main dining area, watched over by that famous giant Buddha. But even the statue is dwarfed by the enormous wall-sized window. Combined with the high ceilings, it makes for a difficult acoustic space. As *Pro Audio Middle East* discusses the problem with Mr Williams and Mr Bracken, our voices bounce around the room. Yet when Mr Bracken strolls over to the DJ booth and puts on some music, it is noticeable that the audio produced by the area's four wall-mounted F101s hardly reverberates at all.

'I haven't fine-tuned it yet – it's pretty good but it can be a bit better,' Mr Williams reasons before explaining that he has sought to overcome the acoustic challenges simply by 'pointing the speakers towards the floor and adding a little touch of EQ. Funktion One speakers are so directional that they don't spray sound all over the place and that makes my life a lot simpler. Plus they don't have it very loud in here – the main volume comes from the bar area.' Accordingly, low end is catered for by two MB112 subs

located at either end of the room, one in front of the DJ position and one beside the Buddha statue.

More zones and dining areas are located further in, from a flexible sushi-style bar covered by F55s and a pair of floor-standing MB212s, to a far quieter area at the rear of the



The new rack



Single mounted F101 enclosures ensure smooth coverage



Even the giant Buddha overlooking the



building in which four F81s deliver the closest thing to a BGM performance in the entire venue. Overlooking the main dining area, meanwhile, is the balcony, only opened at weekends and covered by two MB212 subs and seven F101s. The venues racks are also located upstairs, comprising six 1,000W F40Q and three 2,800W E100Q amps. Loudspeaker control is via four XTA DC1048 processors.

But it is at the bar that the impact of the Funktion One installation is most felt. The long, narrow space – located to the side of the main dining area – has always been the heart of Buddha Bar Dubai. Now two impressive F1 stacks comprising a single Res 1.5 and a double 18-inch sub (F218 Mk2) per-side sit at either end, keeping the energy high where the drinks are served.

If the Buddha Bar management was ever nervous about choosing a system most often associated with large clubs, then it was this area that proved the most challenging. In a venue where the décor is of paramount importance, the F1 stacks could have overwhelmed the area. Instead, a customised paint finish has helped them to blend in with their surroundings as they fire across the bar.

‘Originally I wanted to put them in front of the bar,’ says Mr Williams, ‘but the client didn’t want that. I like to keep the sound off the bar,



Four wall-mounted F101s cover the restaurant



main restaurant is dwarfed buy a huge window



One of Buddha Bar’s Res1.5 enclosures

it’s a main concern’.

Equally important is the bar’s close proximity to the main dining area and the risk of overspill between the two zones. Even on a quiet afternoon when the venue is empty of customers, however, it is clear that spill has been minimised by careful positioning and a minimalist approach. ‘I go into some venues and there are delays everywhere and it’s utter confusion,’ reasons Mr Williams. ‘I know most people don’t realise but it makes your brain work really hard. It makes you exhausted.’

Nevertheless the proof, as Mr Bracken says, is in the hearing, and if Buddha Bar ever had any misgivings regarding its choice of new system then they have been dismissed, as resident DJ Nicholas Sechaud is only too happy to confirm.

‘There’s a very thin line between pleasing the people at the bar and pleasing the diners who are still eating,’ he begins. ‘You have to know how to balance both sides. But with the new audio system that’s very easy. I just love it. I was already pushing the audio over the edge in the past but now it’s loud and it does not disturb anyone.’

He adds: ‘Buddha Bar is already at a high level but I get a lot of feedback from the crowd and it’s all positive – the regular clients, the bigger clients, have totally seen a difference.’

Buddha Bar’s continuing success is a testament not only to its long-standing winning formula but also its willingness to invest in new ideas, keeping it at the top of the list of venues to visit in one of the busiest cities in the world. The venue’s management may have taken a gamble on EmTec, but the quality of the installation it is enjoying as a result proves that Mr Williams and Mr Bracken were always a safe bet. Meanwhile, the high profile project has delivered a healthy boost to the reputation of EmTec itself.

But for Mr Williams, the significance of the installation was never as important as simply getting it right. ‘I didn’t think to myself that this is Buddha Bar and we’ve got to do something special – I treat every job in the same way, with the same respect,’ he concludes. ‘I don’t want someone to walk into any of our projects and say it’s bad, no matter where it is.’

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