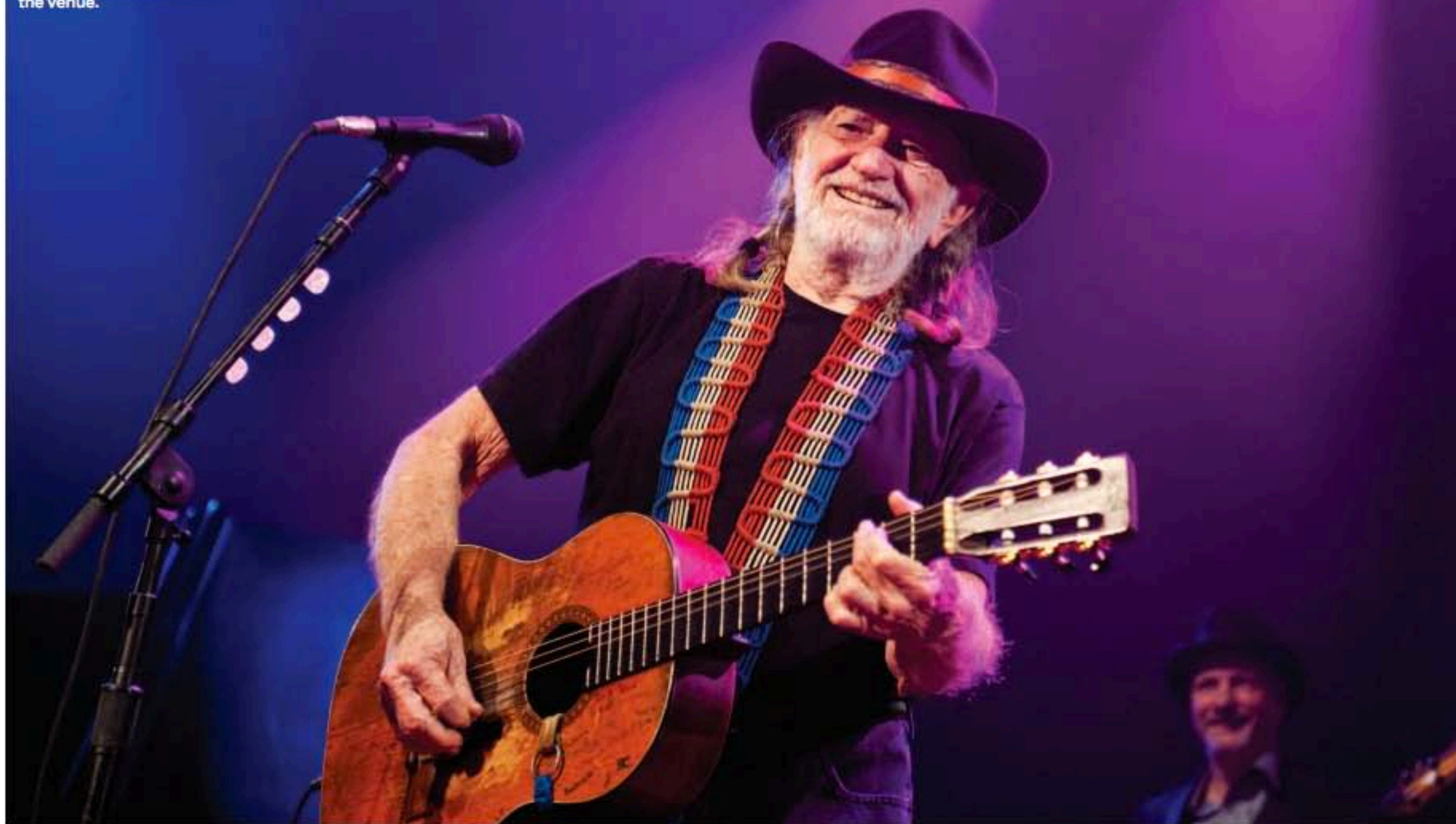


Encore: Thirty-five years after he performed on the first "Austin City Limits" broadcast, WILLIE NELSON returned to play one of the first concerts at the new ACL Live at the Moody Theater. He is part owner of the venue.



AUSTIN'S NEW LIMITS

ACL LIVE AT THE MOODY THEATER OPENS AS NEW HOME TO FAMED TV SHOW AND LARGE VENUE FOR AMERICA'S LIVE MUSIC CAPITAL

BY EVIE NAGY

On a Monday night last November, about 300 people took turns riding a freight elevator to the sixth floor of the University of Texas' communications building in Austin, grabbed a free beer and guitar-shaped chocolate off folding tables and filed into a cramped studio to see Americana/country star Lyle Lovett perform for the 12th time on the legendary public TV program "Austin City Limits."

Produced by PBS affiliate KLRU since 1976, "Austin City Limits" is the longest-running music series in the history of American TV, and Studio 6A's low-key inconveniences have always been part of the charm of this venue, which the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has recognized as a landmark. But the Lovett performance would be the last time the "ACL" studio audience would have to ride the elevator back down three floors to use the restroom.

On Feb. 10, the doors opened to ACL Live at the Moody Theater, a 2,700-seat, state-of-the-art venue that will double as the new TV studio for "ACL" and Austin's second-largest indoor music space, hosting 60-100 concerts per year, in addition to the show's tapings.

After an opening family show with Disney's Imagination Movers, the theater's first offerings included two nights with Willie Nelson, who is part owner of the new theater and who performed on the first "ACL" broadcast three-and-a-half decades ago. After concerts from Robyn, Styx and the Gypsy Kings, a gala benefit on Feb. 24 will open the studio and feature Steve Miller Band, which will also perform for the first "ACL" taping on Feb. 26. The theater will be an official venue throughout the South by Southwest conference in March, and all 330 premium seats and five suites are sold out for the year.

ACL Live at the Moody Theater is part of Block 21, a \$300 million development in the heart of downtown Austin that includes the W Austin Hotel & Residences, which opened Thanksgiving week. The developers, led by Austin's Stratus Properties and Los Angeles-based Canyon-Johnson Urban Fund, spent \$40 million of the total cost on the theater project, whose owners also include Nelson's nephew, Freddy Fletcher. A fixture in the Austin music scene, Fletcher owns the renowned recording studios Pedernales and Arlyn, and has been responsible for aligning the developers' priorities with the technical needs of both KLRU and a world-class venue.

"The priorities for me were things like load-in, acoustics and facilities for the patrons," says Fletcher, who toured theaters all over the country with Nelson to survey ideas and best practices. "And we had the luxury of being able to build this from the ground up, instead of retrofitting the building."

The venue's 2,700 seats will be scaled down to 800 for "ACL" tapings, maintaining the intimacy of the show but opening the studio experience to many more fans than was possible at Studio 6A. Two scalable stages will allow for multiple floor configurations, and while "ACL" will use high-definition cameras, the other video equipment is compatible with 3-D filming. The building is equipped with a custom Meyer Sound System and High End Systems' intelligent lighting with 48 Intellispot XT-1 fixtures. Ticketfly will handle ticketing.

ACL Live at the Moody Theater is also one of few live music venues in the country built to the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED rating standards, based **continued on >>p64**



New neighbor: ACL Live at the Moody Theater is part of Block 21, a \$300 million development in the heart of downtown Austin.

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from >>>63 on factors including material selection, water and energy efficiency, and indoor environmental quality. Patrons will be able to drink at one of a dozen bars, and there's even a locked smoking porch for artists, separated from the internal green room. A large gallery space will host historical photos from the show and video screens.

"If you're in the back row of our balcony, and you look into the eyes of the performer, you're only 75 feet from his eyes to your eyes," venue GM Tim Neece says. Neece is an industry veteran who took over the space last summer after seven years at the University of Texas Performing Arts Center.

Stakeholders feel that the building's dual purpose will set it apart as much as its amenities. "I don't think there's another venue anywhere in the country like this, designed from the beginning as a state-of-the-art venue combined with a state-of-the-art production facility," ACL executive producer Terry Lickona says. "We have the additional lure for artists to come play a date in the venue to make real money, and then stick around for an extra day to tape an 'ACL' show for scale."

And when the show isn't taping, Neece says, "the facilities can be available in the right situation to either stream a show or record for a DVD or for some other kind of broadcast." Lickona would also like to pursue the space's potential for new "ACL"-branded KLRU programming, such as a comedy or Latin music series.

Lickona and Neece both acknowledge the possibility of scheduling conflicts between the TV show and the venue. "It's inevitable that we will come up against a situation where [the theater] will have a hard, confirmed date with tickets that are already on sale, and then I'll get an offer from somebody who I've been chasing for years and they can only do [the show] that one day," Lickona says. He notes that he works closely to coordinate dates with venue booking director Colleen Fischer, and that "we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Still, Lickona says the invitation to join the project was "a dream come true" after more than 10 years of discussion at KLRU about relocating the show.

"From my perspective as a developer, I recognized the intrinsic value of 'ACL' as a kind of global brand," says Beau Armstrong, CEO of Stratus Properties, which acquired the land across from Austin's City Hall in 2005. "I was and still am terrified about messing with the formula that has been successful for the program. That said, the space where 'ACL' taped was never designed for that use. As cool and as quirky as it is, it just has not kept up with technology."

In moving "ACL," the priority was "protecting the integrity of the brand," KLRU GM Bill Stotesbery says. "Second was increasing capacity and improving the attributes of the space for those attending the show—better parking, easier accessibility, more restrooms." The balance was important, because according to Lickona, "if we screw up 'Austin City Limits' and everything it stood for, we'll be run out of town on a rail."

According to "ACL" president of brand development Ed Bailey, protecting the brand means answering the question, How does a TV series operate in 2011 in a world that has changed radically since "ACL" started?

"The fact that there is a venue [operating year-round] that's called 'Austin City Limits' is right not only for our brand, but right for the city of Austin," Bailey says. He compares the new era for the brand to 10 years ago, when C3 Presents licensed the "ACL" name for its three-day festival and exposed the brand to a new generation that perhaps weren't as familiar with the public TV series.

"It really lifted the brand energy," Bailey says, "because there's nothing that can compare what a 300-person studio can do versus having 75,000 people together for three days straight."

The energy and history of the "ACL" name was evident by the end of Studio 6A's farewell, when Lovett performed his song "Closing Time" onstage with the KLRU staff, some of whom had been onboard since the show's debut.

"Fifteen years ago, when we were struggling to make ends meet, we felt like our goal was, 'We can't let this show go out on our watch'—there's no more 'Soul Train,' there's no more 'American Bandstand,'" Bailey says. "[The new venue] takes 'Austin City Limits' from a television series to a full-fledged music brand." ■■■