

## BUSINESS

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## Real Estate: Staying clear of credit-repair scams. 12

HOW I MADE IT 2 :: PERSONAL FINANCE 3 :: JOBS CLASSIFIEDS 4 :: REAL ESTATE CLASSIFIEDS 9 :: MONEY TALK 11 :: HOME OF THE WEEK 13

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Los Angeles Times

HOW I MADE IT: JOHN LYONS

## Nightclubs' sound advisor

RICHARD VERRIER

**The gig:** Owner of the popular Avalon Hollywood and Bardot nightclubs in Hollywood, and founder and president of John Lyons Systems, which designs and installs audio and lighting systems for high-end restaurants and nightclubs in such venues as the Mirage and Venetian hotels in Las Vegas.

**Background:** Started working at a bar when he was a 14-year-old in Buffalo, N.Y. "I thought it was really cool to be in a room with adults and great bands — to be doing that and getting paid, it was like a dream world for a kid." Lyons, 53, was barely out of high school when he and his brother Patrick began working at a 1,500-person club called Uncle Sam's. "The managers were classic screw-ups, Lyons recalled. "They'd get drunk or chase waitresses. It wasn't long before both of us had a set of keys." After turning around the club in Buffalo, the brothers were soon tapped to manage other Uncle Sam's clubs in Detroit, Des Moines and Minneapolis, the last of which was featured in Prince's 1984 film "Purple Rain."

**Secret to success:** "Our method was always wake up early, don't drink and just do the ABCs," Lyons said. "You can break the nightclub business down into really simple components: Your place has to be clean, you have to have a lot of nice people who are taking care of customers, the air conditioning has to work, and you have to pay attention to your entertainment to make sure it's as good or better than what's out there."

**From disco to punk:** In the waning days of disco, the Lyons brothers assembled an investor group to buy out a glitzy club in Boston called 15 Lansdowne St. Discotheque (later called Ava-



KATIE FALEENBERG For The Times

**IN DEMAND:** "Before I knew it I was working on every single club in Vegas," nightclub owner John Lyons said of his sideline business, John Lyons Systems.

lon). They relaunched it as the punk club Spit, which featured the likes of the Ramones and the Talking Heads. While in Boston, Lyons joined a "matrix of nerds" at MIT that included the prominent sound engineer Henry Kloss. He developed a prototype video projector for another venue Lyons opened next door to the Spit called Metro, which he said was the nation's first "video nightclub."

**Necessity is the mother of invention:** On a busy Saturday night in the early 1970s, Lyons was forced to shut down a club he was managing and send 1,500 patrons home because the sound system suddenly broke down. "I didn't know what to do," he recalled. "It was devastating."

The next day Lyons resolved to learn how to repair and improve sound systems. Eventually, he collaborated with speaker manufacturer EAW to design a series of speakers tailored to dance clubs. Known as the Avalon series, the speakers were licensed to EAW and are now installed in thousands of venues around the world.

Inspired by a Pink Floyd concert, Lyons also devel-

oped sophisticated lighting systems in his clubs that were designed to synchronize with music. He received awards that prompted other club owners to hire him for his services. "Before I knew it I was working on every single club in Vegas," he said of his sideline business, John Lyons Systems. He has a small crew he works with out of his office at Avalon in Hollywood, but likes to do the electrical work himself.

**House of Blues:** Lyons teamed up with Isaac Tigrett to open the Hard Rock Cafe in Boston two decades ago. The two hit it off and, along with Lyons' brother Patrick, partnered with actor Dan Aykroyd to launch the first House of Blues in Cambridge, Mass., in 1992. Lyons did all the sound and lighting at the club and helped the franchise expand in other locations. He was no stranger to Aykroyd, whom he had met years earlier when he and the late John Belushi showed up at the Spit.

"These two characters came up and clearly didn't belong there," Lyons recalled. "I said, 'Sorry, gentlemen, you look like I'll probably have to throw you out

in an hour.' Customers recognized them as entertainers but I didn't know who they were because I didn't watch TV because I was working. Dan was like, 'Sir, clearly you're understaffed. We're here as a security detail and we're going to help you.'" Thus began a lasting friendship.

Aykroyd is an investor in Avalon Hollywood, which Lyons acquired in 2002 with his partner Steve Adelman. Formerly known as the Hollywood Palace, where the Beatles had their first West Coast performance, the historic Vine Street venue needed a makeover. Lyons invested \$6 million in improvements that transformed the onetime vaudeville theater into one of the top-rated clubs in the country. Lyons' clubs and his sound and lighting business generate about \$15 million or more a year in revenue and employ 150 people, he said.

**Sage advice:** "If you create an organization that is based on good principles and being fair and straightforward with people, you have more harmony."

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