

The Saddle Rack

By Thomas S. Friedman

The largest country music club in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Saddle Rack, was founded by Hank Guenther and opened on Aug 13, 1976 in San Jose, CA. The club prospered for some 25 years, but the astronomical rise of real estate prices in the Silicon Valley eventually swayed Guenther to close the club in 2001 and sell the 6.5-acre parcel of land where it stood.

» The "New" Saddle Rack

Gary Robinson purchased the rights to the Saddle Rack name and, with the club's general manager, Andy Buchanan, re-opened The Saddle Rack in 2003, this time in Fremont, CA, a town northeast of San Jose along the east side of San Francisco Bay. The new four-acre site currently houses Robinson's sheetrock business, the Saddle Rack and ample parking for the 1,800 music fans that pack the club on weekend nights. Keeping with its down-home roots, the venue features touring country and rock acts, as well as the popular house band Diablo Road featuring *Nashville Star* alummus Jewels Hanson.

Seeking to upgrade the fan experience and attract more national performers, the Saddle Rack was looking to replace its aged sound system with a more modern rig.

The Saddle Rack's FOH engineer, Mike Brunz, first got a taste of the future of sound reinforcement several years ago in the form of the Tectonic Plate flat-panel speakers from Tectonic Audio Labs. "Friends had checked out a new speaker system being installed in the historic Empress Theatre in Vallejo, CA," says Brunz. "I came by, listened to this new technology, and I was impressed. Given that our existing speaker system was over 12 years old, and with what I heard at the Empress, I went to club owner Andy Buchanan and talked him into trying out this new technology."

Winning over the Skeptics with an Unusual Sound System

Artist, producer, bassist, musical director for Italian superstar Zucchero and studio/live sound engineer, Polo Jones occasionally fills in as the FOH engineer at the Saddle Rack.

Jones is also brutally honest. "My first experience with the Tectonic system wasn't entirely positive. This was a demo system before the final rig was properly installed and tuned. I felt that the 1k to 5 Hz range was kind of harsh and the crossover points weren't dialed in. However, with the systems installed and properly commissioned, I could get a better feel for what the system was doing and immediately realized that I would have to approach this differently from our old trapezoidal box / center-fill / delay speakers, or from the line-array rigs that would come through with tours."

Once dialed in, Jones found that "the Tectonic system is very, very clean. I had to take into consideration that there are no paper drivers (with their inherent compression). I had to use my compressors very differently to get the sound I was used to. It took me two weeks to fully understand the system."



The Saddle Rack's main P.A. features six Tectonic PL-12 Plate flat panel speakers.

» The Trial Begins

Tectonic Audio Labs temporarily put up a temporary system of two Tectonic Plates per side on lifts to provide a real-world demo for the club. "The difference with the Tectonic system was immediately apparent," says Brunz. "The coverage was far and above what we had previously had or tried, including line array systems that still required side-fills."

The club features the center stage and two side bars as performance areas. The previous system was composed of four trapezoidal boxes per side flown from trussing over the stage, as well as a center fills and delay speakers to cover a space approximately 100 feet deep by 150 feet wide. The club now boasts a permanent

system of six Tectonic PL-12 Plates, in two hangs of three on either side of the stage, allowing Brunz to get rid of all of the extra speakers and eliminate time-alignment and phase issues.

"With a 165-degree coverage pattern, the Tectonic Plates cover this very wide space, and you're still hearing the entire mix. Previously, you just didn't get a full mix at all places in the club. You can now stand pretty much anywhere in the club, including right at the front of the stage, and hear everything coming off of them."

Jewels Hanson likes to head out to the side bars — actually *onto* the side bars — for a couple of songs. With the extremely wide pattern of the Tectonic panels, "she can hear herself all the way out there, and we doesn't have to worry about feedback," adds Brunz.

"I can tell you that with the Tectonic plates, I've heard frequencies from instruments that I've never heard with that level of clarity before," Brunz continues. "Our house bassist plays a five-string and I've heard notes with more clarity than I've ever heard before. I knew they were there, I just never heard them that way. They just don't cut through that way with regular paper cone systems."

The same clarity and intelligibility is evident in vocals. "When singers are singing, they push and project. When they chat into the mic, they don't. Talking between songs is important to the Saddle Rack, as the bands are sending shout-outs, announcing drink specials, etc. This is important to us as a business. Now folks in the club can understand what they are saying!"

» The Un-Learning Curve

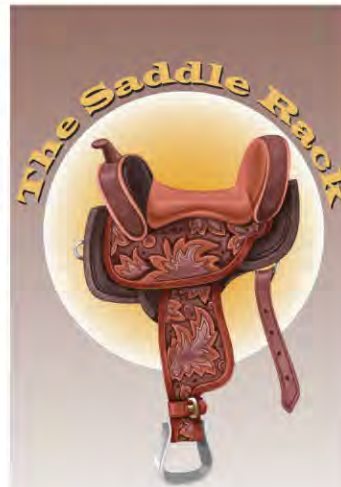
In learning to mix on the Tectonic Plates, Brunz explains that he had to "un-learn" some old habits established from mixing on traditional speaker systems. "The first thing I had to do was to stop automatically putting a hi-pass on all the vocals. Now I start at 'flat' and maybe put a light notch at 2k Hz. A lot of times, I just leave the vocals flat."

Making small changes on the Tectonic system is very noticeable, and tends to bring out the very best and the worst of the rest of the system and, frankly, the operator too. "You notice subtle changes very quickly," says Brunz. "Subtlety is the key word. I don't need to make dramatic changes, especially when it comes to vocals."

When Bobby Kimball of Toto performed at the club, "I probably pushed the system harder than ever before. No distortion, nothing was breaking up, everything was cutting through very clearly and everyone could hear, no matter where they were in the room," says Brunz. "With no crossover in the vocal range, the system runs so much smoother."

There are other advantages as well, Brunz notes. "I don't have any problems with distortion. It's non-existent, and the clarity is far and above anything that I've used before. Really, the only time I do experience distortion is if I'm pushing the console input level. The Tectonic system is not the cause; it's the diagnosis. And the system gets really, really loud; 115 dB at the back of the room. For the Toto show, the system ran loud enough to walk the subs two feet backwards." Fortunately, at that show, helpful bouncers were on hand to re-position them.

"The Tectonic system is the real deal," concludes Brunz. "When Toto came to the club, folks looked at the system and asked, what are these? They were looking for big boxes, and the Tectonic system is not that. I just told them that this is difficult for me to explain, but a whole new technology. Everybody loved it." **FOH**



Inside the Saddle Rack

Location: Fremont, CA

Capacity: 1,800

Integrator: Tectonic Audio Labs

FOH Console: Avid SC48

P.A. Speakers: (6) Tectonic Audio Labs PL-12 Tectonic Plates (3/side)

Amplifiers: Lab.gruppen C68:4

Subwoofers: (4) Dual-18 Electro-Voice (2/side), powered

Processor: Symetrix Radius 12x8EX

More details at tectonicaudiolabs.com