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In the big league



MDL Beast firmly put Riyadh on the map as a destination that could host a world-class, large-scale music festival, writes **Simon Luckhurst**

THE FESTIVAL SCENE IN SAUDI ARABIA HAS BEEN RAPIDLY growing over the last year, not just in the number of gigs staged but also the scale of the operation. Nowhere was this more evident than the recent MDL Beast Festival held in Riyadh. Over the course of three days, in excess of 130,000 electronic music fans enjoyed back-to-back sets from a mix of local artists and superstar DJs, including Martin Garrix, David Guetta, Steve Aoki, Tiësto and Sebastian Ingrosso. Spread across five stages ranging from the 2,000-capacity Saudi Beast to the 45,000-capacity Big Beast, the event was not just big by Saudi terms, but has become one of the top three biggest EDM events in the world.

Three stages comprising the Underground Beast district gave EDM fans who wanted to go deeper a separate experience from the main stage. Each one was built from shipping containers and covered in graffiti by local artists, capturing the allure of underground dance culture. There was also the Down Beast stage, where artists like Lady Lou, Dokkan, Hatoon and Usif provided soundscapes for any attendees seeking respite from the excitement everywhere else.

It's one thing to stage a festival like MDL Beast in the US or Europe, it's quite another to bring that to a blank piece of land in the desert just outside Saudi's capital city. Festival Creative's LemonX, and its client Midwam, wisely enlisted the services of London-based veteran technical events productions specialist LarMac LIVE to coordinate the site-wide production and artist management effort. 'The backbone to our business is multi-artist, multi-stage shows – large-scale festivals and TV shows,' explains LarMac LIVE co-founder, Ian Greenway. 'We like to think that we know how to keep multiple artists and stakeholders happy, usually in very changeable environments, and all of these skills were used like never before here.'

In charge of coordinating virtually everything, LarMac LIVE called on just a minimal pool of suppliers to cater to the audiovisual requirements across the five stages. 'We actually ended up simplifying our supply chain as much as possible, in partnership with Sela locally assisting with procurement,' says Greenway. 'PRG quickly became the go-to company for lights and video, with audio coming out of their German office. This was a real no-brainer, primarily because we were using a large number of a very few fixtures and so sourcing the assets was a huge factor in this decision. PRG also comes with a support structure and a special projects team like no other.'

'From a procurement side, however, we knew that we could strip out certain conversations and make things easier by cutting away inter-supplier comms,' he adds. 'We'd typically bring on board quite a number of suppliers, but that simply wouldn't have worked with so little time. PRG delivered a huge volume of this show so that the advance was as simple as possible, and to make sure procurement and contracting didn't swallow us up. We have the fortune with EDM that we can really control what systems go where. As long as the kit is of one of the usual "flavours", we can design purely to ensure that our customer experience was the best it could be.'

No stranger to working on massive live events, PRG was able to call on its sizable inventory of AV equipment. The MDL Beast organisers place great importance on its influence in helping to grow Saudi's live entertainment sector and, as a result, LarMac pulled out all of the stops to make the event sound great. The audio equipment was specified and deployed according to designs by Scott Willsallen of Australian and UK company, Auditoria, known for leading the audio production on flagship events such as



The main hangs each consisted of 20 K1s



Two delays were erected to extend coverage

the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games, and a regular partner of LarMac.

In terms of equipment, PRG was able to pool its L-Acoustics, Meyer Sound and d&b inventories to provide for all stages. 'The client wanted the absolute best for MDL Beast,' recalls Willsallen. 'This gave us the scope and budget to design an uncompromised system of L-Acoustics K1s, K2s and KS28s for the huge main stage audience area. We used two delay rings in addition to the main system – this reduced the maximum listener distance to under 65m to the nearest array. This relative proximity delivers higher fidelity and greater impact for every listener,' he explains. 'We also used cardioid sub-bass arrays with the delay towers to augment the main sub-bass array of 48 KS28s in front of the stage.'

The main system consisted of four lines of four K1-SBs and 20 K1s with a bass array formed from 48 KS28 subwoofers. Front-fill consisted of six stacks of four K2s alongside a pair of single K2s stacked on top of the subs to fill in the centre. There were four towers in the first delay ring and three in the second delay ring, with each delay array consisting of 20 K2s and six KS28s. Powering all of the L-Acoustics equipment on the main stage required nearly 50 LA-RAK II amplifier racks.

The three other big stages all similarly featured L-Acoustics-based sound systems with control from DiGiCo SD10 consoles running a Waves SoundGrid Extreme Server, while the Beast Down stage was treated to a LEO-M and LYON-W setup from Meyer Sound with 1100-LFC subs providing low-end. Monitoring here was from a combination of Meyer Leopards and d&b M2 wedges. Shure's UHF and Axient Digital Wireless systems rounded out the primary audio equipment complement across all of the stages. Cabling was via Optocore.

'Away from the main stage, the other stages were either L-Acoustics or Meyer Sound and all were generously designed to deliver loads of power, even coverage and really great sound,' notes Willsallen.



The entire festival saw more than 130,000 attendees over three days

On the visual side, BPM SFX was selected as the special effects vendor, due to a solid working relationship and the company being 'uniquely placed in the dance world', says Greenway. Lighting and video design came from High Scream, Phixion was brought on board for scenic design and staging was supplied by a variety of local companies.

The LarMac LIVE team faced some significant challenges to pull MDL Beast off successfully. The entire site had to be created from scratch, meaning its standard workflow was off the cards. 'Going from A to B to C just wasn't possible here,' Greenway says. There was also the task of everything apart from staging being flown in just weeks before Christmas. 'We were up to four 747s of freight, plus all of our dangerous goods – there was one plane of pyro explosives alone. Time did beat us here to start with – we just couldn't find commercial cargo space due to the holidays.'

While logistics may have caused some headaches, the production was fundamentally handled as any typical LarMac LIVE event would be. 'We have quite established ways of advancing festivals with talent and, given how fresh the market was and the quick turnaround required, we really relied on these to keep us lean and efficient.'

'Shows of this scale are all about having the right people in the right places – experts in each discipline, doing what they do best,' he furthers. 'From an audio standpoint, we've worked with Auditoria a lot in the ceremonies and special projects world, and, while festivals are probably not a big part of their business, they were right for this job given the attention it required and the expectation of our client.'

When the festival opened just before the very end of 2019, attendees were treated not only to some great electronic music, but also arts and culture, all pulled off seamlessly



The view of the main stage arena from the DJ booth

with little time for proper planning. 'It simply wouldn't have got off the ground anywhere else in the world or without the passion of LemonX and Lutma, the Saudi-based promoter, or indeed the incredible levels of finish from Sela. What we all collectively achieved still amazes me.'

Despite its vast experience, there were still a few lessons to be learned by the LarMac LIVE team. 'That anything is possible,' says Greenway. 'With just 10 weeks to go and no show in place, we genuinely threw everything at getting this gig together. We're actually just one cog in a really big machine, and on MDL Beast everyone was always pushing in the same direction, 24/7. I can't recall another project like it, and the fact that it happened (and in fact happened in such a world-class fashion) is testament to what can actually be achieved with the right people involved.'

For those in more established territories, it's hard to understand the gravity of an event like MDL Beast. Every weekend, major DJs are playing most big cities across the world, but Saudi citizens have never been able to witness it first-hand at home. Now the stage has been set for bigger EDM artists to make their way to Riyadh.

'This is the first of many Beasts we hope – it definitely takes more than one show to develop a scene, especially in dance, but Saudi is so hungry for this kind of culture that we're really excited about their world stage growth,' concludes Greenway. 'In my three months experience of the country, I'm genuinely impressed by what they're delivering and the talent they're enticing over. Of course, it comes at a premium but, with the right knowledge, in time a maturing market like Saudi could become a huge world hub for entertainment in practically no time at all.'

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