

# Star Powered

**A small Pa. town that has hosted the likes of Bruno Mars, U2, and Beyoncé keeps upping its cool factor.**

*By Jonathan Takiff STAFF WRITER*



Rock Lititz is building a hotel for musicians to stay at while using the rehearsal space across the street. MARGO REED / Staff Photographer



At Atomic Design's workshop, Chloe Rich checks out a scenic design component with welder Tate Warsel. JONATHAN TAKIFF / Staff



The empty lot across from Rock Lititz, America's largest music production center, will soon be a 139-room hotel. MARGO REED / Staff Photographer



Tour Supply Inc.'s Jesse Martin said roadies setting up at Rock Lititz can just "run across the street" to get supplies. JONATHAN TAKIFF / Staff

Can the "coolest small town in Pennsylvania" get any cooler for both its celebrity guests and the general public?

On Thursday afternoon, Lancaster County's Lititz (pop. 6,000) pulled back the curtains to reveal another project cementing its status as "the" small town in America for such major entertainers as Beyoncé, Bruno Mars, and Metallica to get their huge arena and stadium stage shows together — the Hotel at Rock Lititz.

"Like the shows being created just a few steps away at Clair Global [sound] and Tait Towers [stage builders] and Atomic

Design [scenic designers], the Hotel at Rock Lititz is going to be an experience you've never seen before, customized to serve the entertainment production community but also open to the public," said Nimesh

Shah, managing partner of the King of Prussia-based As One Management company, which is the operating partner for the five-floor, 92,000-square-foot, 139-room property. Among its amenities are 15 extended-stay suites and two luxury penthouse suites.

Sweetening the deal even more for acts to build their stage shows in town is a new “Concert Rehearsal and Tour” law passed last year by the General Assembly that has finally kicked into gear. Modeled after the economic enticements used on the film industry to shoot in the Keystone State, major tax credits are now available for artists who spend at least \$3 million building and rehearsing their new projects in Lititz and then taking them out to play at Pennsylvania concert venues.

“The idea is to spur the economic momentum that’s already being developed in Lititz, and also bring more activity to concert venues, which have largely been financed with state funds,” said Jake Smelts, chief of staff for State Sen. Ryan Aument (R., Lancaster), who introduced the legislation. Qualifying big spenders can score up to \$800,000 in tax credits that scale higher if they play in secondary and third-tier markets such as Allentown and Lancaster. One qualifiable show date is also allowed at Philadelphia or Pittsburgh venues.

Lititz’s standing as a hotbed of concert production expertise started 51 years ago with Roy and Gene Clair’s pioneering work tuning up amplifiers and speakers for theater, arena, and stadium sound “reinforcement.” The town’s rep expanded with the 1978 arrival of stage construction innovators Tait Towers from England, and then in the early 1990s with scenic designers Atomic Design. U2, Taylor Swift, Bruce Springsteen, Lady Gaga ... these companies do ’em all.

In the last 3½ years, the Lititz stage tech and creative community has also revved up its collective gears with the staggered opening and expansion of an adjacent 98-acre Rock Lititz complex, cementing its status as a one-stop shopping “epicenter of live events,” said Adam Davis, Tait Towers chief creative officer and a Rock Lititz partner.

Phase one was the Rock Lititz Studio, a 52,000-square-foot, 100-foot-tall production facility where even the biggest arena and stadium shows can be built and rehearsed with ease. While today’s biggest shows weigh in at upward of 300,000 pounds, the studio can “hang” one million from its rafters.

Then came the Rock Lititz Pod, and this past January, Pod No. 2 — an adjacent complex of funky, and often huge, spaces for such “ancillary businesses” as Tour Supply Inc. (the roadies’ best friends) and Rock-It Cargo (a Philly-spawned leader in global tour shipping) to offer their coordinated services. “We moved our New York City office to Rock Lititz, because this is really where the action is,” said TSI’s Jesse Martin.

“The efficiencies of having the rehearsal space and the show builders right across the street cannot be underestimated,” said Atomic Design’s director of brand development and marketing, Chloe Rich. “If something goes wrong during rehearsals — and something always goes wrong — we’re right here to fix it.”

Major pieces of locally crafted concert staging history decorate the Pod buildings — a chunk of Roger Waters’ graffitied “The Wall” set and huge cannons that fired on an AC/DC tour. More personable gear that boldly shouts “live event” will be present in the adjacent hotel, targeted for opening toward the end of 2018, said Rock Lititz general manager Andrea Shirk. “When we say ‘live event’ we’re thinking about the experience, about the backstage, and the technology, not kitschy stuff like a signed Elton John photo. We’ll recycle real stage gear — a wall of Clair speakers, Justin Timberlake’s bridge [to be hung above the lobby]. We’ll cut a tour bus in half and turn it into a lounge.”

While Davis said production crews are “always” setting up and rehearsing in Lititz, nothing could pry the

names of the “three” he said were currently in town. “Maintaining the privacy of our clients” is core to the town’s low-key, laid-back vibe. “Plus, we’re contractually sworn to secrecy.”

But we didn’t spot much hustle or bustle around the Studio or in Pod shops and offices, other than at Atomic Design’s scenic construction zones. And other RL employees granted that “the business is up and down,” suggesting that those new Pa. tax incentives would probably come in handy.

“We have a total allocation of \$4 million to work with, the first year,” said Smeltz, “and I’ve heard of two productions which have already been attracted to Lititz because of it. If the economics pan out, as we expect, and we wind up on the plus side in tax revenues generated from the increased Lititz activities and local concert stagings, we hope to raise the available credits next budget to \$10 million.”

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