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BUDWEISER GARDENS HELPED PUT LONDON ON THE MUSIC INDUSTRY'S RADAR

It wasn't so long ago that London, Ontario was little more than a blip on the Canadian map, a sleepy auto manufacturing town that was often overlooked by concert and festival promoters in favor of larger, more happening cities like Toronto and Detroit.

But then, in 2002, the city opened what is now Budweiser Gardens, a music and sports venue in downtown London. That's when things started to change.

Budweiser Gardens has since hosted sold-out arena shows from some big names, including Green Day, Bon Jovi, Keith Urban, Elton John and Bob Dylan.

"When I got to town, you had to drive two hours to Toronto or two hours to Detroit to see a good show," said Brian Ohl, Budweiser Gardens' General Manager. "We used to have old venues that weren't great places to watch live music. A lot of people bypassed the market because it wasn't a place to play. London was tough, but we learned if you provide a quality venue with quality entertainment — people will buy tickets and sell out a show."

Country music is huge in Canada right now, Ohl said. In addition to Urban, he said, Brad Paisley and Dixie Chicks each played the venue before a full house.

In July, Budweiser Gardens will host the Traxside Festival, a two-day live music event celebrating Canada Day that features native country artists as well as headliner Thomas Rhett, who was named Male Vocalist of the Year at the Academy of Country Music Awards on April 2. Live Nation is co-hosting the Traxside Festival.

"Country is strong here," Ohl said. "For 15 years, we have tried to convince Nashville that we could do country music. Now people realize that we can sell out a country show in London."

People still love rock 'n' roll, too, though, Ohl said.

"Green Day sold out, the Lumineers played a sold-out show," he said. "Those two bands made a lot of people happy because they weren't country. It was both some good 'ol rock 'n' roll and it was some new rock 'n' roll. That's a genre that people would like to see more of here."

The venue opened in 2002 as the John Labatt Centre, named after the founder of a local brewery. Referred to by Londoners as "the JLC," city officials changed its name to Budweiser Gardens in 2012. Spectra Venue Management oversees the venue.

Budweiser Gardens has a capacity of more than 10,000 for live shows, as well as 1,100 premium club seats, 38 private luxury seats and five group sales suites. In addition to concerts, the venue hosts theatrical performances, including Riverdance and Cirque du Soleil, and sporting events such as the London Knights, which is part of the Ontario Hockey League, and the London Lightning, a Canadian pro basketball team.

The venue's construction 15 years ago helped bring life back to downtown London, which for years had seen a slump in people and activity. With an exterior that incorporates images of the historic Talbot Inn, a hotel that had been located there in the 19th century, Budweiser Gardens is nestled in a bustling epicenter of the city. The downtown area now boasts high-end hotels, restaurants and nightlife to match different interests, Ohl said.

“The building was built to help revitalize downtown, and it did,” he said. “If you go out here on a Friday night, the places all around are buzzing. The restaurants are full. We’re not done yet, but it’s really changed things downtown.”

It hasn’t always been easy, Ohl said. The 2008 recession put a dent in London’s auto manufacturing industry, and the entire city felt the impact. Thankfully, Ohl said, London is again thriving thanks in part to a surge in tech business.

“We’re definitely doing well as a community now,” he said.

Budweiser Gardens gives back to the London community through various charity work. The pinnacle of those efforts is an annual in-house event called “Bud’s Backstage Experience,” which raises money for the Children’s Health Foundation and Make-A-Wish Southwestern Ontario.

This summer’s event aims to raise at least \$10,000. Attendees will walk through dressing rooms replicated to look like they did when acts like Pearl Jam and Ed Sheeran played the venue. They also can buy various concert memorabilia at a silent auction, and enjoy themed food, such as a pear salad that had been requested and enjoyed by Elton John when he performed at the venue.

Spectra is key in helping Budweiser Gardens’ success, Ohl said. Weekly conference calls with the company’s other arena managers help him come up with new ideas for more crowd-pleasing events at his facility.

“Every other week, I’m talking to this guy or that guy about the shows they are doing,” Ohl said. “We share information that helps all of our venues. That’s the biggest thing.”

Two years ago, Budweiser Gardens put in a new ice rink for the London Knights, a local hockey team, and renovated the venue’s restaurant. Plans are in the works for several building upgrades, including the installation of a new sound system and new LED lighting.

Budweiser Gardens is poised to take on even bigger and better shows in an ongoing commitment to giving music fans the ultimate arena concert experience right in the heart of London, Ohl said.

“We can do any-sized show, and sell it out,” he said. “We haven’t done Springsteen or U2 – but this is a plug to get them.”