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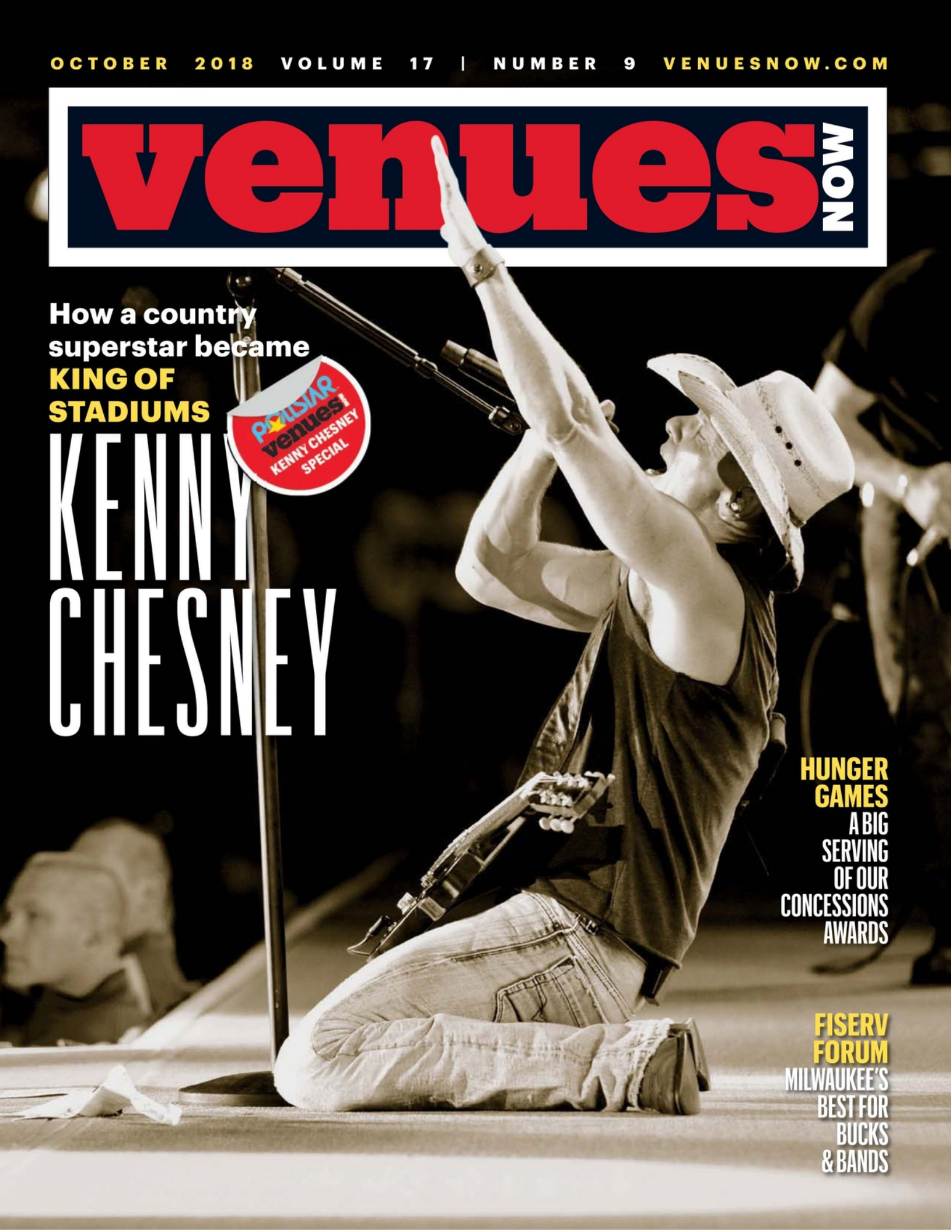
How a country
superstar became
**KING OF
STADIUMS**

KENNY CHESNEY



**HUNGER
GAMES**
A BIG
SERVING
OF OUR
CONCESSIONS
AWARDS

**FISERV
FORUM**
MILWAUKEE'S
BEST FOR
BUCKS
& BANDS



BOOKINGS

Across the Sea From L.A., Hollywood's Golden Age

Annual jazz festival
welcomes fans to the
splendor of art deco
Catalina Casino

BY ROBERT GRAY

SANTA CATALINA ISLAND'S historic casino is one of Southern California's hidden treasures. While it doesn't offer gambling — Catalina Casino takes its name from the Italian word meaning "gathering place" — it does offer a wealth of history and entertainment.

And once a year, it becomes a destination for fans of smooth jazz. The casino's ballroom hosts the 32nd annual Catalina Island JazzTrax Festival Oct. 11-14 and 18-21. Artists advertised for this installment include Basia, Candy Dulfer and Adam Hawley.

The venue sits in the town of Avalon on Catalina Island, as it's known locally. The island, which has about 4,200 residents, lies just "26 miles across the sea" from Los Angeles and was immortalized by the Four Preps in their chart-topping hit from 1957.

Once visitors have traveled those 26 miles, the casino acts as a time machine, transporting visitors back to Hollywood's Golden Age.

"Walking in the ballroom is like stepping back in time. When you do it the first time, your jaw drops," said Art Good, producer and creator of JazzTrax, which began in 1987.

Even after all these years, Good said, he enjoys seeing that look of awe in the

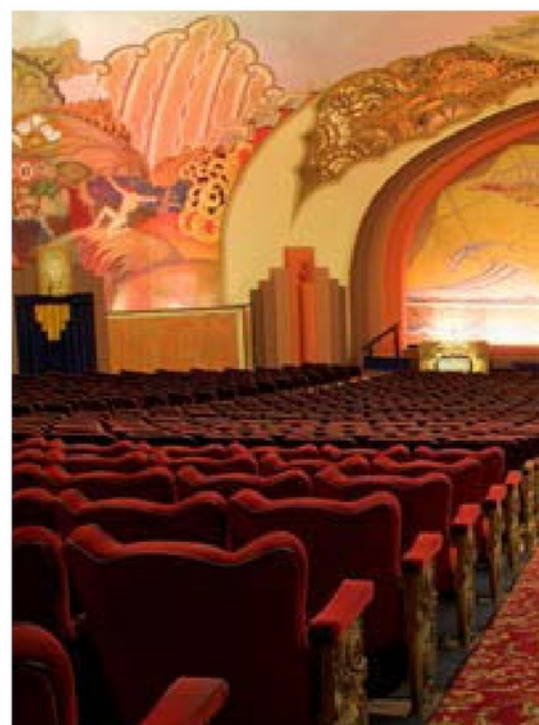
crowd: "When they walk in the ballroom for the first time you can see the look on their face. It's amazing. There's nothing like it. The festival's on an island in a 1929 ballroom, overlooking the ocean."

The building, designed in the art deco style, opened May 29, 1929, just in time for summer visitors. The casino attracted movie stars and directors who danced the night away while the era's superstar bandleaders and their musicians played into the night. The island became a playground and movie backdrop for the rich and famous over the next several decades.

The 20,000-square-foot ballroom is the 12-story oceanfront facility's pièce de résistance. It features a 50-foot ceiling with chandeliers, an elevated stage for bands, and raised seating areas encircling a dance floor that can accommodate 1,500 dancers. It's the world's largest circular ballroom without supporting pillars.

The venue was a pet project of confectionery millionaire William Wrigley Jr., who bought the entire island sight unseen in 1919. He brought his Chicago Cubs baseball team there for spring training for many years and built his wife a home on a hilltop in the seaside village of Avalon with sweeping views of the harbor and the casino, and over to the baseball diamond so Wrigley could, with binoculars, keep an eye on his ballclub.

The casino was a state-of-the-art centerpiece for Wrigley's island. He



spared no expense, dropping \$2 million on its construction (well over budget), although it took just 14 months to complete with Catalina tile and silver leaf decorating the ornate edifice. The facility included the first cinema built for "talking pictures" although guides will tell you they left an orchestra pit and in-

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Catalina Casino (above), built by Chicago Cubs owner William Wrigley, opened in 1929, and its ballroom is host to the annual JazzTrax Festival. Also inside is the Avalon Theater (left), still used for first-run movies and film festivals.

operated only during some special events. Otherwise, visitors stroll up ramps akin to the ones at Wrigley's eponymous ballpark in Chicago. Women attending formal events these days wear sneakers and change into high heels at the top. For the galas of yesteryear they wore flats under their gowns before changing to more formal footwear.

"It's an opportunity to go back in time. The theater has a personality and the ballroom is magical. It's like walking into 1944," said Paul Budnik, a casino guide and longtime Catalina resident, before leading a recent group outside onto the promenade that rings most of the ballroom and affords panoramic vistas of the harborside village, green peaks and valleys inland, and out to sea.

Most of the island's 1 million annual visitors arrive after an hour-long ferry ride aboard the Catalina Express, although helicopters and private jets are options as well.

The ferry journey is easy to navigate from several mainland ports and is part of the charm for many visitors, but it poses hurdles of both logistics and cost (about \$75 round-trip for adults, though its part of some hotel packages) that limit single-night concert bookings and the crowds to support them on a regular basis.

"JazzTrax is the largest event we have in the casino," said Rudy Alvarez, director of sales with the Catalina Island Co., which owns and operates the casino as well as hotels, restaurants and nearly two dozen other land and sea activities. "The black tie Conservancy Ball is the most high-profile event, but it's not used as much as we'd like. It's so big that you have to have a big group to fill it up."

Good says attendees of JazzTrax, which attracts about 1,400 people for each weekend, according to Alvarez, generally come over and make a long weekend of it. Many regulars meet up with friends from across the country. The two-weekend format helps defray costs since festival organizers can barge over equipment and store it for the duration of the festival.

Catalina tourism officials say events such as JazzTrax work well for several reasons: They bring in a new wave of visitors after the summer season has ended and helps convert them into repeat visitors.

Good says JazzTrax took a decade to become profitable, but he says it has legs to remain successful for years to come. "Our demo is 50 to 70. We're amazed by first-timers every year. I thought retirement would kill this festival. What I didn't know was it would only explode it. People had it on their bucket lists for years. Our audience has the time and money, and they're bored."

So what makes JazzTrax a winner three decades on at the Catalina Casino? Good, a smooth jazz radio pioneer, doesn't miss a beat: "It's the room, it's the town, it's the island, it's the music." ■

stalled a pipe organ, just in case the new film technology didn't catch on.

The Avalon Theater on the ground floor is still used for first-run movies and the organ is played leading up to showtime on weekend evenings. The nearly 1,200-seat cinema is also host to the annual Catalina Film Festival and last month helped host the fourth annual Catalina Wine Mixer, including a screening of the Will Ferrell-John C. Reilly cult classic "Stepbrothers," which inspired the real life festival.

There is one elevator, though it is