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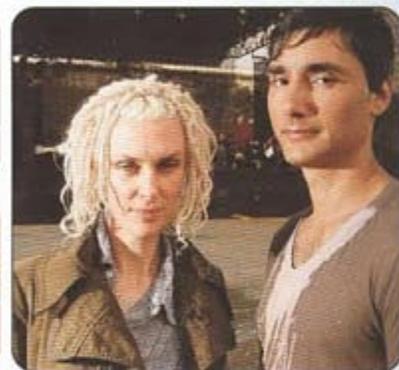
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Callin Fortis + Ken Smith

The iPod of nightlife might not be the perfect analogy, but it certainly matches the type of brand recognition cro-bar enjoys. While creators Callin Fortis and Ken Smith's empire has shrunk to

one venue for now, the anticipation with which the industry awaits their next move puts the duo on the top of our list.

"Being the second guy is not the same as being the first guy who says, 'Can I jump

off this bridge and live?' They're the first guys," says SJ Lighting's Steve Lieberman, who designed the lighting systems at crobar Chicago and New York. "That's why it's great that they're partners,

because it must help to know there's someone next to you when you're about to jump off that bridge."

Since their first crobar opened in Chicago in 1992, Fortis and Smith have jointly produced lucrative and artful club experiences that others have been moved to emulate, pull out all the stops to compete with, or exaggerate their association with. Smith calls the mimicry flattering,

and doesn't hesitate to concur: "crobar has set the bar higher in terms of what people now expect as the baseline experience for a great club."

The duo wasn't always a dynamo partnership. Originally, they were competitors in Chicago's new wave and punk rock club scene. "We actually did the if you can't beat 'em, join 'em [thing]," Fortis says what led to his collaboration with the then-

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First nightlife job:
Doorman at
O'Banions, at
Chicago punk
rock Nightclub,
1979

Age: 49 Hometown: Chicago, IL



First night-
life job:
Wine
steward at
a high-end
restaurant

Age: 40s

pink-mohawked Smith. The Chicago location, for one, has certainly passed the time-test. It continues to operate profitably more than a decade after opening its doors. But one club does not an empire make, and the duo brought crobar to Miami in 1999. "We overestimated the DJ concept initially" Fortis says about the now-celebrated South Beach club. "We had all these

residents that, once we came to town, we realized nobody had ever heard of. It was a completely different scene. So we had to gradually introduce people to that music."

Once that club became successful (it's since closed and reopened as Cameo, still under the guidance of Fortis and Smith, and their new partner Louis Puig of Space), it came time

to jump on New York. The Big Apple scene had laid fairly dormant, or rather muted and underground, since the closing of Palladium and the megaclubs of Peter Gatien's heyday. So the two rolled out a marketing initiative they called Fashion Art Music Industry Loves You, or FAMILY. And as the big-name DJs became increasingly expensive to book, they aimed to make their third

crobar about more than just the name on the flyer, adding a fashion and art crowd to the bread-and-butter dance music enthusiasts. The club ruled New York immediately upon its opening in December 2004, but closed in February of last year. "We had a huge two years before all the trouble that happened over there," Fortis says. "When that started to go south, we terminated

our license agreement and moved on."

Looking ahead, the two anticipate a new 10,000-square-foot crobar in West Hollywood next year, and another in Beijing. "To be able to enter the Chinese market, especially for the 2008 Olympics, when Beijing will be the focus of the world, is very exciting to us," Smith says.

— Chrissi Mark