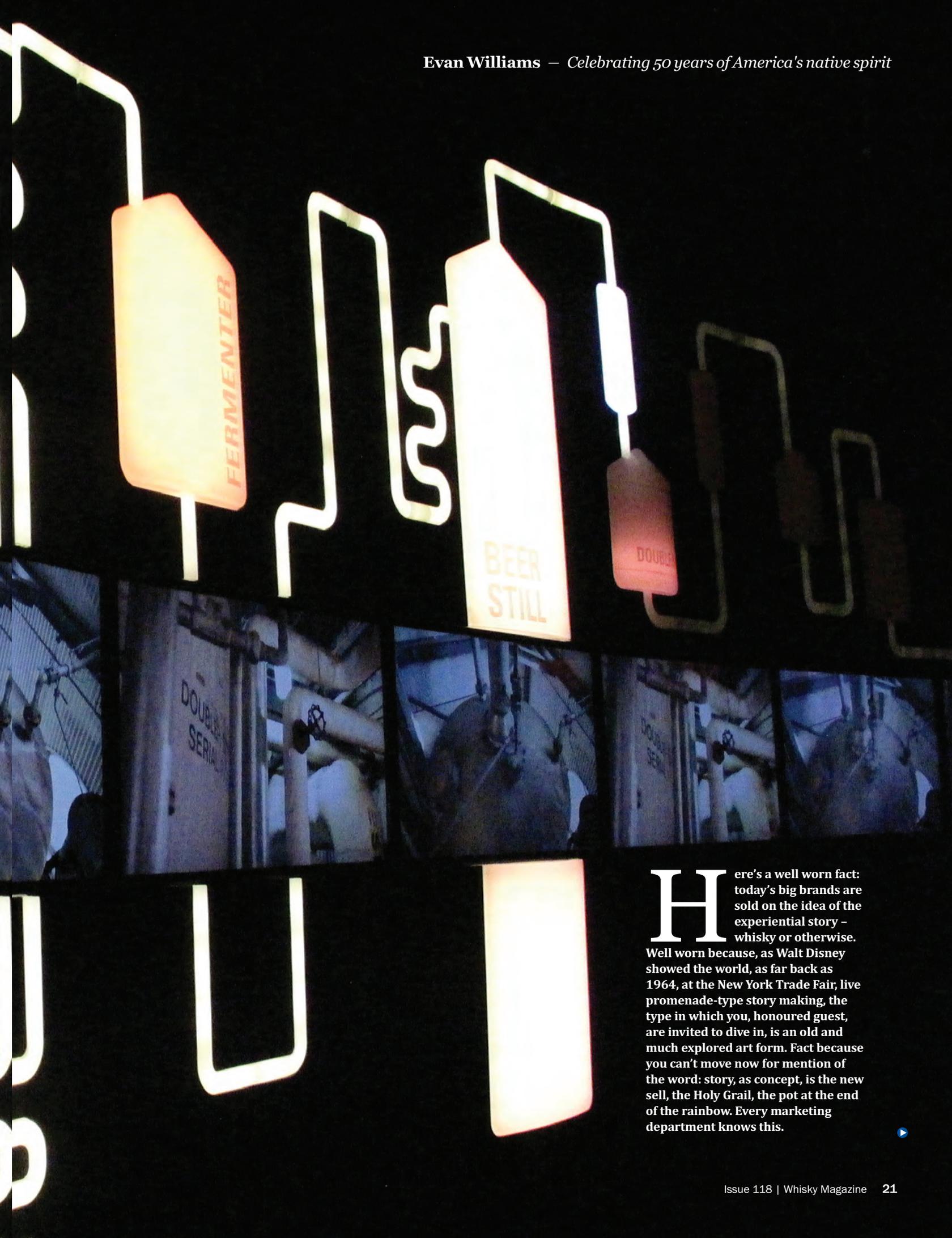


# THE NEW STORY ON WHISKEY ROW

WORDS  
DAVE WADDALL

*Dave finds a visitor centre with a twist*



**H**ere's a well worn fact: today's big brands are sold on the idea of the experiential story — whisky or otherwise.

Well worn because, as Walt Disney showed the world, as far back as 1964, at the New York Trade Fair, live promenade-type story making, the type in which you, honoured guest, are invited to dive in, is an old and much explored art form. Fact because you can't move now for mention of the word: story, as concept, is the new sell, the Holy Grail, the pot at the end of the rainbow. Every marketing department knows this.

“ The street traces Kentucky’s  
lifeblood, the Ohio River.  
Big things shouting big stuff ”

Dave Waddell

Unfortunately, as Adam Scott - designer, architect and champion of the so-called built story, and with whom (full disclosure), in another life, and on various projects, I've had the opportunity to work - rightly says, most big brand marketing departments make plane crashes out of their storytelling. Whatever the intention, says Scott, however well-meaning the brief, the story, when actually told, collapses in on itself, its qualities, its feints, its draws, its surprises and rewards, now reduced to, either, on the one hand, a clutch of brand truths chased down by a welcoming glass of champagne; or, on the other, to an event in which money precedes all

thought, one so extravagant as to loosen itself entirely of its original purpose. The first is a pleasant lecture, the second a dictator's pool party.

I'm not being fair. I've had some wonderful experiences, not least, and for example, a multi-distillery funded surprise dinner beside a loch on Islay, an intimate and very homespun piece of storytelling that, as Scott might say, made liberal use of Walt Disney's recipe for creating a compelling, believable tale, one in which I was both delighted and unwitting protagonist. However, such an experience, one that began in a deserted and overgrown car park, saw a piper emerge from the green, to lead us

through the forest and into an evening as simple as it was beautiful, is memorable as much for the quality of its very rareness as it is that of the story it tells. Compare it to the average car launch if you will.

What joy, then, to have chanced, at the end of last year, on Heaven Hill's brand new Evan Williams Bourbon Experience, on Main Road, Louisville, Kentucky. Heaven Hill, you will know, is the Shapira family owned distillery that has had, since its inception in 1935, a Beam as its master distiller, that continues, as far as I am aware, to produce and lay down whisky not only for itself, but also for an unspecified number of non-distiller whisky producers, and that, in 1996, lost its original Bardstown distillery and seven warehouses to a fire. Evan Williams is one of its two flagship Bourbons - the other being Elijah Craig. Its new distillery sits on the old Bernheim site. Its standard recipe is a mashbill of 78 per cent corn, 10 per cent rye and 12 per cent malted barley,





## INFO

### The Evan Williams Bourbon Experience

528 West Main St, Louisville, KY 40202

Tel: (502) 584 2114

Web: [evanwilliams.com/visit.php](http://evanwilliams.com/visit.php)

Tours available from 10am to 5pm

Monday through Saturday, and from 1pm to 5pm on Sunday.

Adults (21+) – \$12.

Children, 10 and under – Free.

### Adam Scott

FreeState, 4 Goodge Place,

London W1T 4SB

Tel: +44 (0) 203 005 7990

Web: [freestate.co.uk](http://freestate.co.uk)

### Solid Light, Inc

438 South Third Street, Louisville,

KY, 40202

Tel: (502) 562 0060

Web: [solidlight-inc.com/index.php](http://solidlight-inc.com/index.php)

### Opening pages:

A video display showing the Bourbon production process and steps

### These pages from left to right:

Whiskey Row, Charlie Downs, Ohio river front 1790, outside the experience, Whiskey Row detail

though its contract work and the fact it acquired Old Fitzgerald, a wheated Bourbon, from Diageo in 1992, further developed as the super premium Larceny, means that Heaven Hill is home to two or more Bourbon formulas, to which add three further recipes, for its corn and rye whiskies and for a straight wheated whisky. It has a total of 84 whisky line extensions. Heaven Hill's a serial creator-maker, no mistake.

So, to the point. Heaven Hill has come up with a visitors' centre (if you're going anytime soon, look away: I'm about to let the main cat out of the bag) that is also a *bona fide* working micro-distillery, and has done so in such a way as to qualify for a form of experiential storytelling that takes as its core the best of Walt Disney *circa* 1964, and then some. Let me explain. First, it's perfectly placed, perfectly timed and makes perfect sense: Old Whiskey Row, in a building once occupied by the Phillip Hollenbach company, pre-prohibition whisky distributors for the likes of Old Fortuna, Old Tom, Old Coxy and Pride of the West, just yards away from where Evan Williams set up his first commercial distillery, close to Heaven Hill's present distillery and at a time when Louisville is expertly surfing the Bourbon wave. It's the inevitable result, says Larry Lass, Director of Corporate Communications,

of a 'perfect storm.'

Second, it tells a story – of a day in the life of Evan Williams, of Heaven Hill's present production methods, of whisky being made, of a history that promenades down Whiskey Row, and finishes in one of two period tasting rooms – that begins in such a way, as Scott would say, as to both reinforce and, at the same time, disrupt our expectations. Main Street, Louisville, you may know, is a street made of giants. A life-size and golden replica of Michaelangelo's David stands just a block away. A 120 foot to scale copy of Babe Ruth's 34 inch bat leans up against the Louisville Slugger Museum. The Mohammed Ali Centre is across the road. The street traces Kentucky's lifeblood, the Ohio River. Big things shouting big stuff. Small wonder, then, that the Evan Williams Bourbon Experience should feature a façade that is a five-storey high upended bottle of Evan Williams, which at around the second storey morphs down into a 3D neck-and-lowball-glass working fountain. Only, the surprise here is not the giant, but rather its position, and therefore its relative quietness. It's on the inside, looking out. You can't see it – until you're standing directly in front of it. The pavement is just this, the pavement. Heaven Hill's giant doesn't compete with – or repeat – the street. It

doesn't need to. It's a quiet giant, an invisible roar, an oxymoron. It silently hooks. See it, finally, and you're going in.

Third, it's how Heaven Hill - or, more specifically, Solid Light, the design agency commissioned for the project - plays with both the characterisation and the structure of this story that makes the experience of visiting the centre so radically different. It's utterly, to borrow a much hackneyed phrase, immersive. It's film and its period-staged experiences (projected surround night-lit windows, a riverside shot growing out of real riverside grass, two room-sized screens depicting front and back views, the 2D action taking place about a late eighteenth century still) are designed to create spaces in history, delightful, illusory vignettes that progress us through the life, thinking and character of a close-enough-to-touch Williams, the result the distinct impression that you are, like some benign voyeur, experiencing a genuine *Back to the Future* moment, a fission of hyper-reality. You are standing right inside the story.

This is clever, and great fun, and revisited later, upstairs, in slightly more traditional form, in either of the tasting rooms. One is a remodel of an early 20th century Hollenbach reception room, the other a lounge lizard type 1960s homage to Max and Harry Shapiro; but really, however fine the melding of the now with the then, whatever the technical wizardry of an integrated system run off your guide's cell phone, the brilliant theatre of corridors that walk you through a century of Bourbon history, the success of the story rests, prepares for, circles, reflects on the unveiling of a moment that is as unexpected as it is wonderful. Fifteen minutes in, trapped in a darkish corridor, a dioramic video wall display of the distillery's production methods at an end, the voice of an Evan Williams sound-alike, our sonic uber-narrator, fading to nothing, your guide will ask you to step forward, turn around and with the press of a button raise the



(electric) curtains on the main event: a working micro-distillery.

Here beats the story's heart. No longer propelled by the carefully choreographed narrative of either an historical character or the way Heaven Hill makes its whiskey, I am suddenly deposited into the live world of the production floor, to make what I like of what I see. Here it is: A gleaming pair of purpose-made Vendome micro-pot stills, at least two raised stainless steel fermenting vats, wash and spirits tray boxes, two holding tanks, one for the low wines, the other compartmentalised, the new make's coming off the still right now, head and tail separated off from the main cut. I learn that the man passing below, making the cut, is Charlie Downs, that the cooking (four hours) and half of the fermenting (four days) takes place out of sight, in the basement, and that the low wine comes off at between 70 and 80 proof, today's heart is at 142 proof, whereupon it'll be barrelled and whisked off, for now, to the top two floors of Warehouse Y, Nelson County, one of Heaven Hill's 51 warehouses.

And because today is this day, I get to meet Downs, ex-supervisor of the main

distillery, and now delighted master of an operation as different, he says, as 'going from a Volkswagen to a Cadillac'. He says it's like 'going back in time'. He says he's 'babying it more'. He says he's 'still learning.' This from a man who's been helping Heaven Hill make whisky from as far back as when Lyndon B Johnson was beginning to ramp up America's involvement in Vietnam. And what, say he, the quality of the white dog? 'I believe this is going to be even a little bit better than Bernheim.' To which Kass will later add that the mashbill's slightly different, for reasons, he says, of both taste and having to accommodate the pot-based nature of the stills (I won't get more from him on this); that Downs controls the reflux manually, and limits himself to working off the bottom two trays, the higher ones posing too much of a threat 'to flavour'; and that there are plans to make not just bourbon here, but also rye and wheat whiskies, and to experiment with different mashbills. I am a character in a story, a bit of which is being told for the very first time.

And there's the rub. I will, in a minute, go up the stairs that are also a micro-example of the Heaven Hill's rickhouse setup, settle into tasting a shot of Evan

Williams Single Barrel against the Larceny, and exit, eventually, through the gift shop. Like the start, it will be a fine experience, though this time, as Scott might say, one designed to reward rather than hook and hold. It's a taste of the story, and then the chance to take some of it away. It's neat, a pick-me-up ending, and no loose ends. However, none of this, the final exchange, or what, indeed, went before, the giant façade, the high-tech odes to both Evan Williams and Heaven Hill (yes, true: however factually put, this is still a hero-brand writing songs to itself and for us), none of it hangs together without the smell of corn cooking, the roar of machine, the material nowness of the centre's distillery. The distillery provides the tale its moment of poetry. An unexpected and visceral turn, a movement that carries everything with it, inviting in the process multiple interpretations, and projecting bits of itself (barrels of whisky) into the future, it's the real, the living pulsing centre of a story called the Evan Williams's Bourbon Experience. It's inclusive. It's generous. It's bold storytelling. Which is why you must go, now, or tomorrow, at the very latest. Walt Disney would. 



**These pages from far left to right:** Posters from Bourbon history, giant bottle neck detail, Evan Williams original 1790 still house reimagined