

Audio Battleground

Rocking the vote in a hotly contested race

By Dan Abelson

Progressive but turning conservative, the largest consumption of brandy per capita in the United States, America's Dairyland, and the very fulcrum of electoral balance. Somewhere in this bizarre description lays the reasons why in 2004, the state of Wisconsin became a center of a political turf battle, providing the winner with one of the most sought-after political prizes of all: 10 precious votes in the Electoral College. Ten votes that could have decided the next president of the U.S.

Like Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, Wisconsin saw an almost constant stream of candidates, as well as their wives, daughters and various surrogates making every effort to fill the daily news cycle. Small- and medium-sized crowds gathered at these events, requiring a manageable yet rather typical level of support from local sound companies.

The political parties, Democrats in particular, called upon entertainers to assist in fundraising and to "rock the vote," as the phrase goes. Concerts by a variety of artists shilling for the Democratic team were held throughout the country in the months of September and October, raising millions of dollars for the presidential campaign of John Kerry.

As Election Day approached, and the focus shifted from fundraising to vote getting, both parties began to use entertainers in an entirely new role; to help assemble enormous crowds at free get-out-the-vote rallies. Due to their immense size, unconventional location, and ultimate purpose as a media event, these rallies posed a unique set of challenges to the mostly local and regional sound companies that provided gear and crews.

As an alternative to the typical presentation sound opportunity many of us regularly experience, study of a large political rally offers an interesting audio perspective. This is why I decided to attend a huge rally in downtown Madison held just five days prior to the



View of the massive rally looking toward the Wisconsin state capital, where Democratic presidential hopeful John Kerry spoke with an assist by Bruce Springsteen. Gregg Brunclik's Clearwing Productions provided the far-flung sound system delivering coverage of it all.



Spotlight

fever-pitched 2004 election.

Upon my arrival, and as Democrats and Republicans grasp for every vote in this battleground state, the crew of Milwaukee-based Clearwing Productions is fighting against time, the elements, the rigid media requirements of a presidential campaign, and oh by the way, a half-mile-deep coverage area. They're working feverishly to provide clean, intelligible audio to a national television audience and the 80,000 plus supporters present who have joined to hear local politicians, as well as Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters, Bruce Springsteen, and Kerry himself on the streets of Madison.

Political events in the upper Midwest have become second nature for Clearwing's Gregg Brunclick. His firm has supported both Democratic and Republican rallies for three presidential election cycles. As the campaigns rarely know where they will be five days before an event, they rely on sole-source vendors that can provide everything in one phone call.

Clearwing supplies crews, staging, power, material handling, lighting, sound, site power, tents, and thousands of lineal feet of bike rack for security fence. All but the bike rack is in-house



The mix position, out of the direct line of fire, flanked by L'Acoustics ARCS clusters.

gear, with additional site labor coming from the hordes of campaign volunteers and local IATSE crews.

"We only get one day to prep, and one day to build before a rally," notes Brunclick, "and all work must be completed well in advance of the doors opening so the Secret Service can perform security sweeps. Even our own crews must leave for sweeps, and rarely is there an exception."

I meet up with the Clearwing team for breakfast at 7:00 am the day of a rally. They've already been at work for at least two hours. An aforementioned security sweep gave the team the opportunity to get off-site a few blocks away for a meal and a break.

In our discussion, I learn that these rallies present a completely different set of challenges. "The gigs are never in places where we would normally do a show," explains Lighting Director Scott McCowan.



Kerry energizing the crowd, backed by the skills of Mix Engineer Scott Briese.



“The site takes shape while you’re building it, and there are always changes,” adds John Schuler, a carpenter. “One site coordinator wanted us to turn the whole set-up 90 degrees after we had already completed three-quarters of the load-in. We just smiled and moved everything where she wanted it. It’s true in this business: the only constant is change.”

Project Manager Dave Jentz reflects on the security aspects of the event where a president or presidential candidate is the featured speaker. “Security is really tight. Secret Service, Explosive Ordinance Detail, and local police. There is no gray area like in rock ‘n’ roll. The agents are very professional and consistent. They can be a bit impersonal at times, and you don’t shake their hands. Security for the president is tighter than either the vice president or an opposing candidate. We don’t hear much about security plans, don’t know exactly when the entourage will arrive or the route they will take.”

Brunclick points out another rather interesting challenge of working political events, the fact that campaign volunteers have never worked around technical crews before, all the while trying to tell the Clearwing staff what

they can and can’t do. “They mean well, but they might be the toughest part of working one of these gigs. You can’t imagine how many times they tell us, ‘you can’t go there’, despite the fact we’ve been cleared by security and are wearing a pin issued to us by Secret Service.”

On this day, lead Audio Engineer Scott Briese and his assistant Andre St. Pierre are responsible for providing a five-array, distributed L’Acoustics rig. Loudspeaker clusters consist of a six-cabinet ARCS grouping near the stage to fill close-in ADA seating and one of two camera risers, along with two delayed arrays consisting of six DV-DOSC line array modules on lifts, each accompanied by two subs per array. The picture is completed by two far-delay arrays, each comprised of five V-DOSC enclosures and four subs per array, erected on scaffold.

“Normally you put loudspeakers where you want, but here we negotiate their placement,” notes Briese, “Where we want to be doesn’t usually work for the site coordinator. And where they want us to be doesn’t usually work for us. During set-up yesterday we moved loudspeakers six times. It’s all about the camera shot. And there are always trees to shoot around.”

STAGGERING ARRAYS

Due to the anticipated crowd size and narrow geometry of the residential blocks of the event site, careful attention to coverage was required. With the wide horizontal dispersion of the L’Acoustics devices, Briese and St. Pierre were able to maximize coverage by staggering the arrays along opposite sides of the street, aiming diagonally along the length of the listening area.

Long after Briese finishes setting and timing his last delay stack, he is notified that a truck toting a large LED video screen has arrived and been parked directly in front of a delay stack, some 1,500 feet from the console and with no coordination with the sound crew. After a bit of compromise, the video truck is repositioned so that its impact on the array only eclipses the coverage of the low-est V-DOSC enclosure.

Electronics consist of a Midas Heritage 3000 and two t.c. electronic EQ Stations, XTA 226 system processors feed transformers driving long cable runs to racks of Lab.gruppen amplification spread out along the site, adjacent to the delay towers. A liberal (pardon the pun!) amount of time delay processing was required to time-align the first array to the three delayed arrays over the deep soundfield.

On stage, Shure UHF Series wireless microphone systems are predominant, with Martin Audio LE-12JB



Move that truck! The obstruction of an array was lessened, with only the lowest cabinets shielded. And, necessity becomes the mother of invention with the conversion of a bus stop shelter to a distributed equipment site.



wedges, driven from the main console, providing on-stage monitoring. As the main/monitor mix location is positioned out of the main sound field due to sightline considerations, Briese monitors his mix using two Martin WT-15 enclosures as nearfields.

After line check on the remarkably small stage, the day's pre-show entertainment starts with a performance by local artists Paul Cebal and the Milwaukeeans to warm up the assembling crowd. Some serious house management is underway behind the scenes as supporters arrive. Although the event was free to all, Kerry's staff has chosen to scale the house and divide the audience area into large sections. Supporters who have printed tickets off the Internet are led to general admission areas at the middle and rear of the audience area, served by the delay towers and the large LED board.

VIPs holding special tickets, over 20,000 of them by my estimate, are located near the front of the stage. The crowd enters through controlled gates via a well-staffed and efficient process. Supporters close to the stage are screened for weapons. Clearly the campaign staff is experienced in the handling of large crowds and egress.

After a quick set change by the Clearwing crew, Dave Grohl performs three songs intended to get the younger audience members excited about the candidate. Following Grohl is a litany of obligatory appearances by local politicians, including the mayor, congresswoman, and Wisconsin's two U.S. senators – all of whom are tolerated by the partisan crowd, now reaching capacity.

TAKING THE STAGE

Finally, following a 45-minute lull during which Briese plays vetted cuts from a CD compilation provided by the campaign, the candidate's motorcade arrives, the traveling national media contingent takes their places and the real show begins with "The Boss" taking the stage.

Springsteen performs just two songs, both on acoustic guitar, with a three-minute political pitch in between. From my vantage point near the house console, the sound is great – simple and transparent, just what it should be. Briese, a capable and confident regional mix engineer, is intensely attentive, no doubt understanding the significance of his responsibility in feeding the national press and the immense crowd. Giving him a nod that guitar and voice are sounding just fine to me, he says, "I bet I'm only one of just a few mixers who can say they mixed Bruce Springsteen for 80,000 people."

Springsteen closes his mini-set with the campaign's de-facto theme song "No Surrender," and introduces Kerry, the day's real star. While from an audio perspective there's nothing

just offstage left, Kerry recites his stump speech.

The man who could have been the next "leader of the free world" goes through his paces. The crowd, thousands of feet deep, clearly hears every word, responding to each charge made by the candidate – a testament to Clearwing's attention to detail and system performance.

Upon completion of the largest political meeting in the history of the state of Wisconsin, I genuinely appreciate the challenges the crew experienced and battled through to get fine results. As an audio provider who regularly delivers sound outdoors to large audiences, I understand how a careful balance of elements, many like the weather that we cannot control, must come together to result in great sound reinforcement. It's much harder to

achieve than most of us, even the most professional, can appreciate. Often we're forced to compromise, but good sound for large crowds is never by accident.

On this calm, humid, overcast 60-degree day, the crew and this equipment package, receiving these particular inputs, the right balance has achieved.

Congratulations to the

Clearwing team for helping to make an historically significant event, with very real political consequences, sound great.

Author's Note: Although Mr. Kerry was ultimately unsuccessful in his bid to win a majority in the Electoral College or the popular vote, he did win Wisconsin by a slim margin. Residents of the state can expect a vibrant political environment next time around, and the performance audio providers based here can prepare for brisk business during the next presidential campaign. ■

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overly exciting about speech through a single wireless microphone, this event and the presence of an entire national media entourage makes the normally simple task require an A-game performance.

At all times either Briese or St. Pierre have an eye on the Shure receivers, and Briese constantly checks the operation of the ever-critical press muls by monitoring a confidence output of each, returned to the mix through dedicated Anchor Audio AN-1000X monitors. Ironically, at this gig, the "tapers" take precedence over every other aspect of the event.

While Springsteen and wife Patty Scialfa elect to listen to the candidate from the second floor porch of a student apartment where the residents have put up a banner imploring, "Hey Bruce – Come Up For A Beer"