

## Doing It Both Ways

Terry Nelson on working with the Doobie Brothers

By Christian Doering

Everyone knows the Doobie Brothers: instigated by Skip Spence of the legendary Moby Grape, the “Brothers” got together in 1969 and hit it big throughout the ‘70s with the now-classics “Listen to the Music,” “Black Water” and “Long Train Running.”

Then there was the love-it-or-hate-it “Michael McDonald period” in the ‘80s, which yielded “What A Fool Believes” and “Minute by Minute.” Today the band consists of founding vocalist/guitarists Pat Simmons and Tom Johnson along with drummers Michael Hossack, who’s been on board since *Toulouse Street*, the second album, and Keith Knudsen, who joined in 1973. Multi-instrumentalist John McFee has been Doobie Brother number five since 1980.

On tour, the band is augmented by saxophonist Marc Russo, percussionist M. B. Gordy and Guy Allison on keyboards. And, by their long-time studio

and live engineer Terry Nelson, who is also the production manager, who is well equipped to wear all those hats. “I started making a living at engineering in 1974,” he recalls. “I was chief engineer at Santa Barbara Sound for 10 years. It was one of the first multi-tracks in the mid-Coast, and it’s still a good room. That’s how I met Kenny Loggins, Jim Messina, Mike Love (of the Beach Boys) and a lot of other artists.” Nelson’s studio work with Kenny Loggins earned him Grammy and Emmy nominations in 1993 and 1994, but he kept getting calls to go out on the road.

“I’d work on their records,” he recalls, “and they would want me to do live sound, so I got pulled away from the controlled environment to the ‘out of control’ environment. Back in the ‘80s, I was one of only a handful of guys that did both – it was kind of unheard of.”

During this period, Nelson completed two world tours as FOH engineer for Jackson Browne, while more recently, he engi-

neered the latest Doobie Brothers album *Sibling Rivalry* at John McFee’s studio, a converted barn in Solvang, California. With a new album “in the can,” it became time to get ready for the 90 live dates per year that the Doobies currently play.

### WHAT TO BRING

The band carries a complete monitor system (a Yamaha PM4000-M and Shure E5 personal in-ear monitoring systems, plus one wedge that is used just for talkback), and front-of-house (more on that later), all supplied by Sound Image of Escondido, California. These cases go into the band’s 53-foot semi, along with custom stage risers and backline equipment.

Lighting as well as stacks and racks are rented locally for each gig, which can occasionally make life interesting for both the production manager and FOH engineer sides of Nelson

“It’s a game of trying to get what you want, getting the right boxes teamed up with the right power amps and processors,” he explains. “On my rider it says ‘line array preferred,’ but I also see EV X-Array, EAW KF850 and KF750. Line arrays aren’t the answer for all the different rooms we play – sometimes a good trap box sounds better. On the rider it says that homemade boxes are unacceptable, but sometimes it’s the lesser of two evils. You can get two PAs of the same make, same everything, and two different companies will drive them differently, which will make the box sound different. I’ve tried all the line arrays. To me, the best sounding ones are where guys are putting the high power amps, like a Crown 5k



Terry Nelson, long-time FOH and FOH mixer for the Doobie Brothers, at his Yamaha “5k”; and the band shown in its current incarnation.



(MA-5000), on every component and just dialing back the processor.”

Having worked with the band and their material in the studio, Nelson finds that live mixing is “a totally different beast. What’s being sent to me is pretty consistent every night, because the guys are great musicians. It’s much the same dealing with a song they wrote in ’72 or one written in ’02. You’re still dealing with an unknown environment. Some nights I push the vocals to the extreme, other nights I don’t have to do that.”

“On some of the newer tunes, like a lot of people, we have a hard disk system playing back some assorted parts to make it sound more like the record,” he continues. “Some nights I find that I have to push those direct parts harder, other nights I don’t. You’re just playing a master magician – ‘OK, what am I doing now, what do I have to juggle?’ No two nights are the same. You get lots of variables: room, gear, and the stage. Sometimes the stage is dead, it doesn’t emote anything, and I don’t hear any drums or guitars.

“Other nights it’s just coming right at me,” Nelson adds. “We just played the Morton Meyerson in Dallas, which is a beautiful hall that’s made for symphonies: you could hear the drop of a pin, it’s not made for a nine-piece rock band with a PA going. In any environment, my job is to compensate for the audience so they hear what they should. You’re dealing with a lot of surfaces, and with boxes that react differently every time they see another surface. You have to know what’s coming off stage, how it’s supposed to sound coming out of that box, which is where tuning your PA comes in to try to make it consistent every night, even though you’re in a very inconsistent environment.”

Nelson has recently acquired a new tool in the struggle against the “out of control environment” of the road, a 52-input Yamaha PM5000. The “5K” brings together updated analog circuitry based on the PM4000’s functionality with the digital scene recall functions of the PM1D. With an eye on improving analog audio quality, Yamaha also looked at circuit design, grounding and critical areas of the signal path: pre-amps, equalization and



*Another view of the PM5000 supplied by Sound Image.*

VCAs. While the PM5000’s analog control surface offers immediate manual control of all functions, the console can also be reconfigured instantly to one of 990 scenes that are stored in digital memory.

### **GETTING THE SOUNDS**

“Terry has tried other consoles with the Doobie Brothers,” notes Dave Shadoan of Sound Image, “but he was getting the sounds he wanted from the PM4000. When we renewed our contract this year, he asked me about the PM5000 and I said ‘I’ve heard nothing but great things about it.’ We have taken delivery of quite a few already, and have one out with Jimmy Buffett as the monitor console. I think it’s possibly the last great analog console, and if that’s the tool Terry needs, we’re happy to provide it.”

Delivering consistent sound under totally inconsistent circumstances is always a challenge. “Sonically I like the pre-amps and the EQ better, it’s smoother,” Nelson adds. “I’ve got a ton of sends, which is good because I use lots of effects. It’s more flexible than the ‘4K’ It’s laid out differently, so it took some time to get used to. You’ve got the stereo group outs at the top, and you’ve got knobs and also a button that will turn that into a send with no trim, so you can go directly to that output pot, which is kind of handy also.”

“The 12 VCAs are a real nice feature: I can do lots of stuff with the grouping. I take all the instruments out of the stereo bus and put an insert of a modified (dbx) 160A limiter across those. Then I put the vocals on the mono fader. There’s a separate mono

button on each channel, so I can take all the vocals and run them through a mono master slider that’s right next to the stereo slider, so I can actually raise the whole vocal mix as a group or lower the whole instrument mix as a group to get the balance right.”

“I’m not really using the recall that much because of the dynamics of the band – from two acoustic guitars to nine guys playing straight ahead, in your face rock ‘n’ roll, and lots of vocals. I like the built-in delay on one of the stereo outputs. I use it for my nearfields, which are JBL self-powered monitors. I don’t have to carry a separate power amp or delay, rather, just plug it into the back and dial in the delay in feet or milliseconds. It’s good to see if what I’m hearing is what I think I’m hearing, based on what I know it sounds like out of the little monitors. The biggest part is, you don’t have time to put headphones on; by the time you cue something up, it’s already done. This way I can push a quick button to troubleshoot any crackling or distortion, or a strange sound on a channel – ‘Did I hear that coming out of that instrument?’”

It’s easy to see that Nelson stays on top of the details, from PA decisions made weeks in advance to the last-second glitches that can crop up during any live performance. No wonder he’s become an essential part of the Doobie Brothers’ sound, both live and in the studio. ■

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