

## A Long Way From Home

Catching up with mixer Michelle Sabolchick

By Chris Bushick

It's been quite a journey for mixer Michelle Sabolchick - literally and figuratively. We're catching up with her fresh off a three-week tour of U.S. military bases in the Middle East and Europe, handling sound for Collective Soul.

In a career now spanning a dozen years (and counting), it was the first time Sabolchick had ever traveled to military facilities, and compounded by current world events, some locations were fairly proximate to definitively hostile territory.

"It was pretty intense," she notes. "Everywhere we went, the troops were so appreciative of us just being there. The amount of gratitude that we saw everywhere was amazing, and it was a really good feeling because we were over there to show our support for the troops, and they were thanking us for coming."

Like the tour itself, sometimes the

individual shows were intense. On the first night of the tour, during the second song, the house console began losing channels left and right. First, the bass channel started cutting in and out, and after switching the bass to a different channel, yet another channel started to drop out," she recounts. "We had to keep bumping things over to other channels to the point where I had no open channels available. I was just praying that we would make it through the show without losing anything else. It was just one thing after another."

### FULFILLING A DESTINY

Working as a world-traveling audio professional, mixing top acts, is a long way from Sabolchick's small-town rural Pennsylvania roots. It was a locale with virtually no live music scene, yet in spite of the lack of exposure and influences, she still knew from an early age that her destiny lay in sound.

A research project in high school on the recording industry set the pace,

and once out of school, she embarked on her career by working at a radio station, and later, assisting at a recording studio. When finally introduced to the live side of the sound picture, however, she found an environment to truly call home.

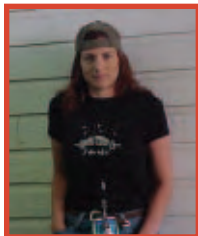
Shifting to the new path, she took a job with a small sound company outside of Philadelphia and later began traveling to wherever work happened to be available. About five years in, the first big tour opportunity came knocking, as house mixer for the Spin Doctors for U.S. and European dates. And since that successful big-time debut, the opportunities - Joan Osborne, General Public, and Fastball, among many - have just kept coming. She also enjoys an ongoing working relationship with the Indigo Girls.

When mixing, Sabolchick finds that she employs two distinctly different approaches. "Some bands have a very specific idea of what they want to sound like, and if they do, I try to adhere to that as much as possible."

Other bands choose to leave the mix completely up to her discretion. In these cases, she first evaluates mixes of these artists on CD and then makes sure that any extra embellishments, such as drum fills, are easily heard in her live mix.

As far as vocals are concerned, they're always out front, but not to the point where they're too hot. "I like to have a nice blend, where it all fits together, but you can still hear all of the words."

In a dozen years (and counting!) of front-of-house mixing work, Sabolchick has used a wide variety of gear. She loves line arrays, especially the (L-



Michelle Sabolchick, from small town to large consoles.

# Sound Profiles

ACOUSTICS) V-DOSC and (Clair Bros.) i4 rigs, as long as she'll be able to fly them at every stop along the tour.

"Line arrays aren't perfect because they can really sound horrible when stacked, but they have a consistent sound - no matter where you go, and I really like that aspect about them." On tours where the PA must be stacked, the choice is cabinets from d&b audiotechnik.

## IN THE TOOLBAG

With Indigo Girls, sometimes the full band plays, and at other times, just Emily Saliers and Amy Ray tour as a duo. When it's the group, full production is carried, with Sabolchick selecting the components and system approach.

Although she generally goes with Midas XL4 or ATI Paragon boards, she allows that there's eagerness to try digital consoles and has been seeking out an opinion from everyone she's



Above: Michelle (center) with Indigo Girls and crew. Right: Prepping for a gig.



met that has used them.

A few horror stories about these digital "beasts" crashing right before (or during a show) haven't deterred this interest. "I think it's great that the technology is finally getting there, and I'm dying to get my hands on one and really see what they're all about."

Of all the tools used over the years, one "secret weapon" is the dbx 120XP subharmonic synthesizer. It joined the stable after a random tryout on the Indigo Girls' acoustic guitars during a soundcheck. One particular portion of the show where it's particularly useful is a song called "Chicken Man".

"I just bring it (the 120XP) in on the guitar solo, and it makes the acoustic sound huge," she notes. "It's kind of a subtle thing, but it really fattens up the sound and also adds some fun."

When touring with Saliers and Ray presenting their acoustic set, the 120's bypass mode proves useful. If the PA lacks warmth, the feed is routed to the 120, in bypass mode, and it tends to fatten everything up a little bit.

## FOOT IN THE DOOR

Ah, the age-old question: how do you go about getting into this business and growing it into a fulfilling career? Sabolchick coun-

sels the logical position: start at the beginning. "It really depends on the individual. If there's an opportunity to work with local bands or a small, regional sound company, it's a great place to start. Find out whether sound is something you really want to do," she explains. "On the other hand, you can go to school to learn the basics, and then realize, 'I hate this. I can't do this for the rest of my life'. In the meantime, you've invested a lot for nothing."

However, she is quick to add, "School can be a good starting point, as long as you go into it with a level head, knowing that just because you went to school doesn't guarantee a great job right out of the gate. You're still going to have to start at the bottom with everybody else."

A life on the road requires a unique individual. Touring is not suitable for everyone, and thus the pursuit of sound work has definitely got to be a love. Even after 12 years of touring, some of Sabolchick's closest friends still can't understand how she can be away for so long.

"I happen to like traveling, and take great pleasure in being part of a team that's committed to the motto of 'the show must go on, no matter what.'" She adds, "I've been lucky enough to work with a lot of different touring acts, and lucky enough that everyone I've worked with has been great. I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

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## Michelle's Excellent Adventure

A look at some of the many gigs/venues Sabolchick has worked as house engineer.

- Collective Soul, U.S., Europe, and Middle East
- Indigo Girls acoustic duo
- Thievery Corporation, "Richest Man in Babylon" tour
- Indigo Girls "Become You" tour
- The Atlanta Ballet
- Debelah Morgan "promotional tour
- "Honor the Earth" tour featuring Indigo Girls, Bonnie Raitt, Jackson Browne, David Crosby, Joan Baez.
- Lillith Fair
- "Come On Now Social" headline tour
- Luscious Jackson European promotional tour
- Fastball Tour
- "Shaming of the Sun" headline tour
- "Suffragette" sessions tour
- Spin Doctors world tour
- Joan Osborne (in support of Widespread Panic, Rusted Root, Melissa Etheridge and others)
- General Public tour
- Freelance engineer/tech for Fidelity Sound, Virginia Beach, Virginia.
- International Fringe Festival, Orlando
- Church Street Station, Orlando.
- Wolfman Jack's Rock 'n' Roll Palace, Kissimmee, Florida
- Engineer/tech for Zeo Brothers Productions