



# NOT THE RETIRING TYPES

## OKIE BROTHERS BACK ON THE ROAD WITH TESLA

TIME FLIES: IT'S BEEN ALMOST 20 YEARS SINCE FIVE GUYS FROM SACRAMENTO STARTED A BAND CALLED CITY KIDD, SIGNED A RECORD DEAL, TRAVELED TO BEARVILLE STUDIOS NEAR WOODSTOCK, NEW YORK, HAD THEIR NAME CHANGED TO TESLA, AND GOT A TASTE OF THE ROCK STAR LIFESTYLE.

"THEY HAD A CHEF AT THE STUDIO," GUITARIST FRANK HANNON RECALLS. "TO HAVE A FRENCH LADY COOKING ME LOBSTER, THAT WAS A DRASTIC CHANGE."

THE BEARVILLE SESSIONS PRODUCED A SINGLE, "MODERN DAY COWBOY," WHICH GOT HEAVY ROTATION ON MTV'S "HEADBANGER'S BALL." THE REST IS... WELL, NOT EXACTLY HISTORY, BUT DEFINITELY COMES DOWN TO CLASSIC ROCK.

BY CHRIS DOERING

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Tesla went on to release six albums and sell about 14 million copies before they dissolved in 1995. The fan base stayed loyal, allowing the band to reform in 2000, and recently, return to the studio to cut *Into The Now*, which they're currently touring the U.S. to support. (The tour is appearing in theatres, live music venues, fairs and festivals – a wide gamut.)

"Oh, man, that was just one of the best Tesla memories I have," singer Jeff Keith says of the band's recently held first show in five years. "That one in Sacramento was it, because we were all back where we belonged. We realize what we've been through, what mistakes we made and how much we missed each other."

### TOGETHER AGAIN

When Tesla decided to get back on the road, they only needed to make one phone call, to Steve Emler, head of their long-time sound company, Okie Brothers of Fresno, California. Emler has been the band's production manager and front-of-house engineer for "a long time. I basically came out of retirement to do this tour, and when Tesla's done, I'm done," he says.

In keeping with the band's music,



*The primary monitoring setup ready to go, including Sennheiser "ear buds" on top of racks with Rane IEM processing.*

the back line is relatively uncomplicated. Troy Luccketta plays a Tama kit that is "really wild," according to Emler. "I'm using 22 inputs on the drums, so you can imagine."

Guitarist Tommy Skeoch uses Hughes & Kettner amps, while Hannon uses his own "Tone Monster" amps, a back-to-basics single channel high gain tube design that's the product of a two-year collaboration with Steve Bishop at Modern Vintage Amps in Sacramento. Brian Wheat's bass is amplified by Warwick heads with HiWatt four by 12-inch and two by 15-inch cabinets, loaded with JBL transducers.

Both guitarists also play acoustic, and often use acoustic and electric instruments together. "There's a lot of dynamic range to deal with," Emler says. "Trying to get an acoustic up over the Hughes & Kettner sometimes can be a trick."

Tesla's microphone case holds a variety of Audio-Technica models, while the opening acts are mic'd up with Avlex. Monitor engineer Dave Summers mixes on a Crest Century LMX console.

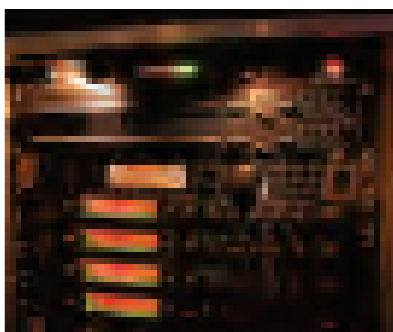
The tour is also carrying Avlex-powered EAW SM222's, but Emler notes that, "We don't use much wedge. They're mainly for the opening acts. We have everybody in Tesla on Sennheiser in-ears, with the Rane MM42 in-ear monitoring (IEM) processor. It changes the whole persona of the sound, making the in-ears sound really big. They really did their homework on this thing."

The MM 42 is a four by two matrix mixer with shelf/cut filters, three-band compressor, five-band parametric equalization, and three-band peak limiter. "It has presets for all the different ear molds," Emler explains, "and we use different ear molds on everybody. There's a lot of volume coming off the stage, but since we got them on in-ears it's been a lot less. They're really learning to behave."

While pro audio technology has come a long way in the past five years, Okie Brothers kept up with the times. Emler's current house console is a Crest V12 with a Mackie sidecar desk, while his rack holds t.c. elec-



*Plenty of channels of Crest console, with Mackie sidecar providing even more. Right, running it flat.*



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tronic and Rane units.

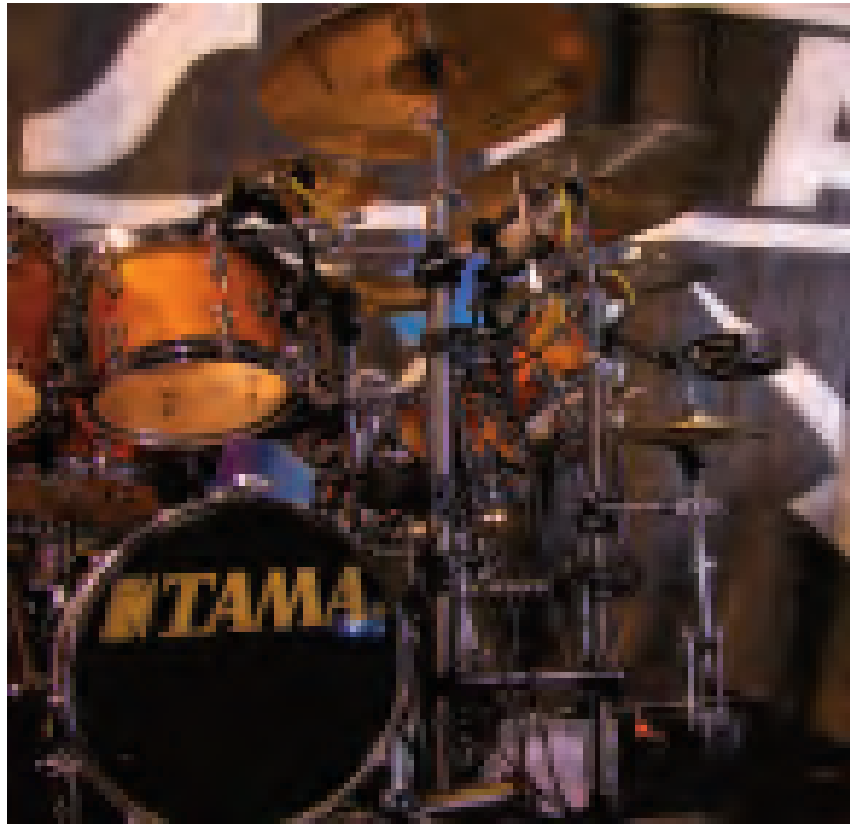
"Some touring guys haven't used Rane," he points out, "maybe because it's seen as more of a contractor thing. But I think it's the best." As a result, all gates are from Rane, and graphic EQ is handled by the company's DEQ 60L digital unit, with some Rane compression on hand as well.

Additional support in this regard is supplied by t.c. Triple-C compressors. "They call it Triple-C because it splits the signal into lows, mids and highs and then compresses each one separately," Emler explains. "There's no pumping or anything." t.c. reverb and delay, along with dual t.c. Helikon harmonizers for vocals, rounds out the set.

Notably absent from the house system is a loudspeaker management processor – the signal chain is Crest V12 to the Rane DEQ 60L. These feed the Crest 9001 power amplifiers driving 24 PAS dual-18-inch-loaded subwoofers, as well as the dual line arrays covering the house each night.

The tour marks the debut of the new Renkus-Heinz self-powered STLA/9 line array system. Like Rane, Renkus-Heinz has more of a reputation with contractors than with road dogs, but Emler has been pleased by his unorthodox choice.

"I've always felt like line arrays weren't really good rock 'n' roll PAs," he says. "I could never get the aggres-



*A copiously mic'd drum kit.*

siveness out of a line array. But this one gets right in your face. A 200-pound box, and that includes power. We hang eight boxes on one motor. When I go to 10, the rigging just barely pushes it over a ton. They're also

small – only 39 inches wide."

Tesla is carrying a total of 20 boxes, which travel five per dolly and sit right into a tray, without need for strapping. It's a situation that makes Static, the tour's chief roadie, quite happy. In

### Back To The Future

The development path taken by Design Engineer Ralph Heinz for the new STA/9 line array included a "back to the future" detour. At Bell Labs, circa 1950, when W. E. Kock and F. K. Harvey were investigating microwave antennas, they were also (and coincidentally) developing the acoustic lens. (The ratio between frequency and velocity is the same for sound and microwave radiation so they have similar wavelengths.)

For his line array modules, Heinz adapted this technology into a Plane Wave Generator (PWG) intended to work equally well on high frequencies (which behave more like rays) and midrange frequencies (which act more like waves).

A new CoEntrant Driver, the CDT1.5, was also developed for the STLA/9, and it integrating the outputs of a 6.5-inch cone and a 1.4-inch-exit compression driver. The PWG's "acoustical lens" is designed to be able to optimize vertical dispersion throughout the stated 35 Hz to 19 kHz operating band. (Lows are radiated by dual 12-inch woofers.)

Meanwhile, self-power is generated by the RH PM-3 PowerNet amplifier, a three-way Class D digital design.



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venues where the PA is ground-stacked, the stacks of five are rolled up the ramp and set into place on the stage wings.

For center and/or downfill coverage, the choice comes down to Renkus ST4s on the wings or a single TRX122 in the center, depending on the size of the stage,

"My graphic is flat every night," Emler adds, "unless I get into a really tough room or if I'm using less than eight boxes. When I start using less boxes, I tune the horns down with the graphic."

Room tuning is of the old school variety. "I put CDs on, talk on the vocal mic, walk the room a lot," he explains. "Headphones are used only to check channels. Being with the band a long time, I know how they should sound."

So was this tour worth coming out of retirement? It seems as though this time around everyone's having a good time. "Tesla's become pretty easy to mix as opposed to the old days. The band's in good health, which they



Left to right: Emler, Production Manager Dave Summers and Chief Roadie Static.

weren't years ago. The in-ear thing has helped dramatically, and with the new PA, you never have any problem getting the voices out front, the drums always sound like cannons...

"Now I'm getting to mix. This PA has made a huge difference in my stress level," he concludes.

With everything working so well, it just might be a long time before Steve Emler gets back to Fresno. ■

### Nikola Tesla

(1857-1943)

The namesake of the band covered in this feature is a tribute to Nikola Tesla, one of history's most illusive electrical engineers and inventors.

Tesla helped change the face of our world with his inventions, beginning with his alternating current (AC) motor, found in everything from dishwashers to lawnmowers. The father of AC designed the system of generators and transformers that deliver electric current via power lines to our homes.

Tesla also worked with radio-frequency electromagnetic waves, and despite the claims made by Guglielmo Marconi, invented the idea of radio as we know it today. (There are numerous patents that bear this out.) In working with radio waves, he created the Tesla coil as a means to generate and receive this form of energy.

And from there, Tesla went on to experiment with actual wireless transmission of electrical power. I highly recommend a "Google search" of the term Tesla to learn even more about this fascinating individual, including the tribute on the "Tesla The Band" ([www.teslatheband.com](http://www.teslatheband.com)) web site.

- Keith Clark



Stacks of 18-inch-loaded PAS subs on the floor.

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