

Street Sports Get Legit Sound

Going well beyond "the typical"

By Daniel Keller

"Skateboarding is not a crime."

When bumper stickers sporting that message began appearing around a decade ago, most people's reactions ranged from puzzled to indifferent. But in recent years it's become increasingly clear, skateboarding is hardly criminal – it's part of a multi-million dollar "street sports" industry that has overtaken baseball, football and other traditional sports as the number one draw among kids up to age 18.

Much of the appeal lies in the excitement and authenticity of skateboarding and other action sports like BMX biking, motocross, and snowboarding, which trace their evolution more to the streets of the cities than the stadiums of the major leagues. Events like ESPN's *X Games* have elevated street sports to multi-million dollar economies, and hundreds of athletes make their livings through competitions, demonstrations and sponsorships.

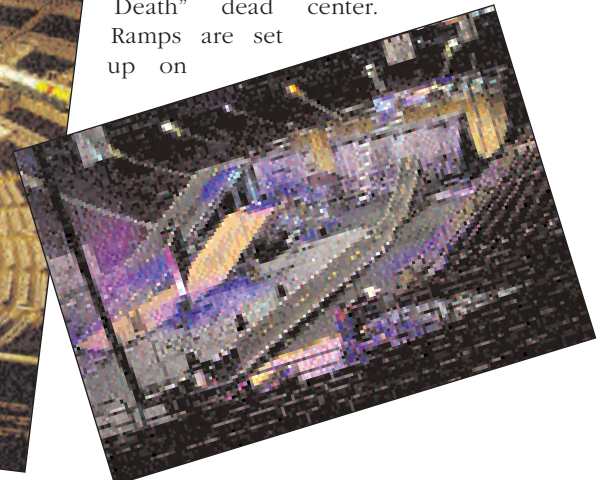
Though he no longer officially competes, skateboarder Tony Hawk remains one of action sports' most visible and successful advocates. The business empire he founded generates over \$250 million a year in sales of clothing, skateboards, video games and other merchandise bearing his name.

PUMP IT UP

The Tony Hawk Boom Boom Huckjam Tour began last year as a one-off event hosted by Las Vegas' MGM Grand Hotel. The event was conceived as a non-competitive showcase for the athletes, creating a spectacle that is as much performance art as sport. Its appeal was immediately clear to Hawk and his partners, who have taken it on the road that fall.

The absence of formal competition opens a whole new world of creativity for its participants. It's an atmosphere of freestyle meets choreography, a three-ring circus hardcore jam pumped on adrenaline and guitars.

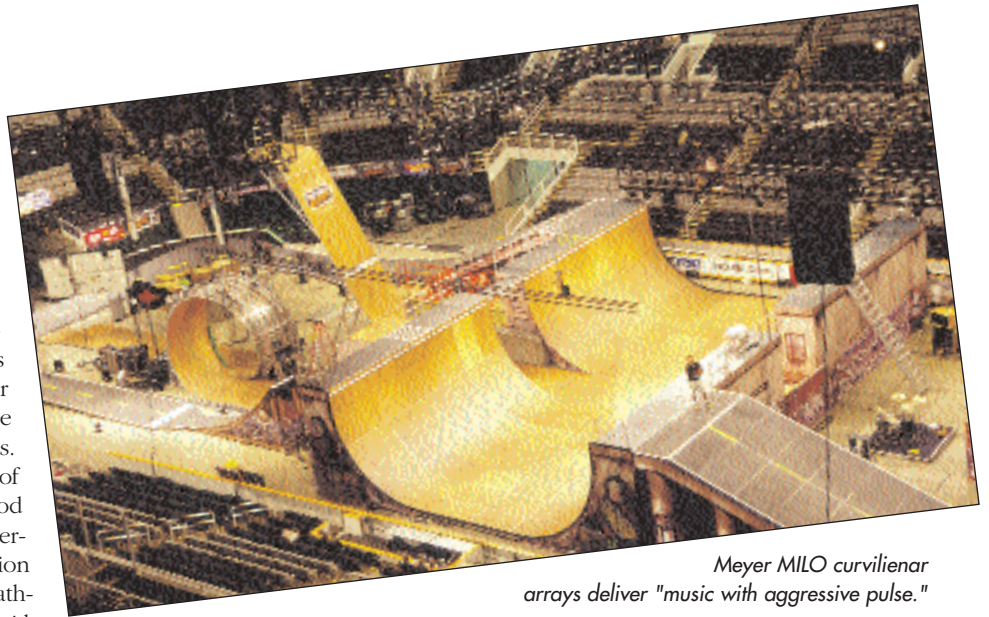
The show features skateboarders, BMX and motocross riders, centered around a giant 60-foot by 25-foot half-pipe featuring a "Loop of Death" dead center. Ramps are set up on



either side for high-flying motocross jumps over the top. A barrage of sound and lights helps to pump up the crowd.

Music is a major component in the culture of street sports, with punk its leading genre. The aggressive pulse of hardcore music has always served as a soundtrack for these athletes, helping to pump the adrenaline and inspire the passions. Last year's tour featured a rotation of bands including The Offspring, Good Charlotte and Devo. While a commercial success, the lack of integration between the name bands and the athletes' show led to some confusion, with sound and visuals competing for the audience's attentions.

This year a major goal was to achieve a more consistent integration between the music and the athletes' performances by designing the music to serve the performance. Inspired by such highly visual acts as Blue Man Group and Cirque du Soleil, Hawk and partners enlisted the services of the Anarchy Orchestra, a group of hand-picked musicians who have played with the likes of the Ringling Brothers' Circus, Alanis Morissette, Herbie Hancock, Frank Black, Macy Gray and Steve Vai. The band delivers a barrage of punk and hard rock instrumentals that maximizes



Meyer MILO curvilinear arrays deliver "music with aggressive pulse."

the energy level of the crowd and the athletes alike.

Serving as M.C. for the second year was freestyle BMX veteran Rick Thorne, who's past credits include appearances in the Vin Diesel film XXX and a music video for Good Charlotte. A high-energy audience favorite, at any point in the show Thorne is likely to drop the microphone and attack the ramp himself.

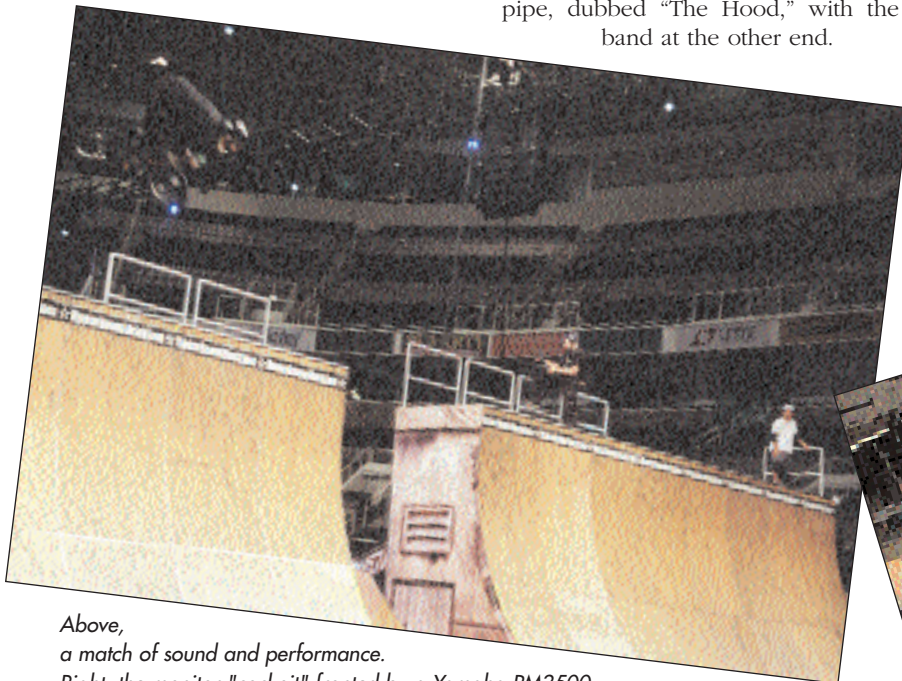
Trading sets with the Anarchy Orchestra is turntablist D.J. Aero, who has spun on tour with Tommy Lee and performed at Ozzfest, Glastonbury and countless MTV events. The D.J. and M.C. are located at one end of the half-pipe, dubbed "The Hood," with the band at the other end.

ALL THINGS TO EVERYONE

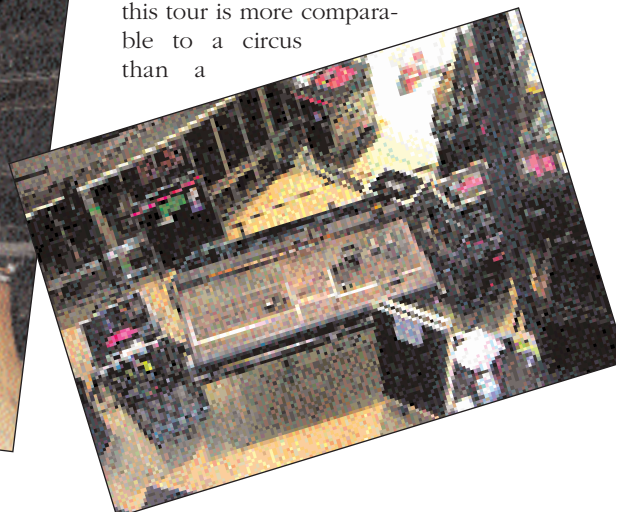
From an audio perspective, this has got to be one of your more interesting gigs. It requires putting across a great sound that's in your face, yet doesn't interfere with the visuals. The music needs to be full-spectrum and ballsy, while the spoken word – provided primarily by an M.C. who cups the mic – needs intelligibility.

The event covers the entire floor of an arena, with seating mainly in the second level and above on the sidelines. (A small section in the middle of the lower level is available for seating, but the rest of the lower level is left empty in the event of runaway motorcycle jumps.)

"Your typical line array wouldn't do the trick here," explains Rick Stanley, director of corporate and regional events for Sound Image. The Escondido, California based company was brought on to provide audio for the tour again this year. "Essentially, this tour is more comparable to a circus than a



Above, a match of sound and performance. Right, the monitor "cockpit" fronted by a Yamaha PM3500.



On Tour

concert or a ball game. The entire arena is the event, dasher to dasher, end to end. The better perspective seats are up high, in the 200 section and above. The cabinets have to hang and aim high, but they have to be out of the sightlines.”

Sound Image assembled a power-house system based around Meyer Sound’s recently introduced MILO curvilinear loudspeaker systems. Four clusters, each with eight MILO cabinets, are positioned as pairs on either side of the half pipe centerpiece, angled at about 80 degrees to cover the sidelines. Another two MILO clusters are positioned at either end of the half-pipe.

Additional VIP seating on the lower level at the half-pipe is covered by custom Sound Image G-2 carbon fiber enclosures loaded with JBL 12-inch and 2-inch drivers on a 90-degree waveguide. On either side are six Sound Image V-Lo 4 by 18-inch JBL-loaded subwoofers. Nine QSC PowerLight PL 4.0 amps drive the Sound Image cabinets.

The band sets up on the floor of the arena, inside the track. Drums are covered by an assortment of Shure mics, including SM91 and Beta52 on kick, SM98 on toms and SM81 on overheads. Guitar amps are covered with SM57’s, and a Beta52 on the bass cabinets. The band is all on Shure UT wireless

transmitters and PSM in-ear personal monitoring systems.

The front-of-house (FOH) console, a 32-channel Midas Heritage 1000, sits up high at crowd level, with a rack of BSS comp/limiters and reverbs from Lexicon and Yamaha. “We’re using Meyer’s RMS amp monitoring, but we’re running through XTA DP223 crossovers as filters,” explains Stanley. Monitors are mixed on a 52-channel Yamaha PM3500 desk located at the far end of the half pipe.

PLACE TO PUT IT

One of the tour’s major challenges was what Stanley refers to as the “choreography of logistics.” “The setup is different every day, and a lot of it has to be mapped out pretty quickly once you arrive and assess the situation. The labor on this tour is intensive – over ninety points on air with lighting and everything. Pre-rig starts at 3 a.m. So for the audio crew, you just try to let water seek its own level. Whenever you can get in someplace to hang a cluster, you do. The amp racks for the subs are stuck underneath part of the half-pipe, and cable runs are all under the tracks. So you’d set up, leave the cables dangling, wait for it to get built and then connect.

“Last year we were dealing with several different bands every few dates, which meant different setups, and different crews,” he continues.

“The focus was divided between doing a

The Sound Crew:

John Tompkins – Crew Chief
John Kerns – FOH Engineer
Matt LaVoice – Monitor Engineer
Jeff Chergosky – System Tech

sporting event and doing a rock show, and it was hard on the crew. The arrangement this year puts the focus where it belongs, on the athletes. There’s one FOH, strategically located on axis with two stacks, where he can mix with consistency.”

With this many bodies and machines flying through the air, precautions are mainly by way of leaving plenty of room. Other than at the center of the loop, the entire first level of seats is left open. Equipment racks are located underneath the half-pipe whenever possible. “There were still a couple of occasions where bikes or skateboards took some equipment off the top of a rack,” reports Stanley.

Concern for space is also what led to the decision to try the MILOs. “There was no real estate available for amp racks – in some stadiums there was less than five feet to the dasher. One thing that was nice about MILO’s is the ease of setup. We could put a few on a cradle, splayed to a certain angle, and have them travel that way.

“It was a bit of a departure for us to bring in the Meyer system. We primarily use our own proprietary Sound Image cabinets or JBL VerTec line arrays, but we brought in the MILO’s to fill a very tour-specific need, and it was the right way to go. They did a great job.”

Stanley reports the tour was a refreshing change of pace. “Most of us working the tour come from a rock background, and in a lot of ways this is a whole different machine. There are 15 trucks, 13 busses, and 30-plus athletes instead of a band. The mentality is totally different – you can see it in the eyes of the athletes. They’re not jaded. Until 10 years ago, this didn’t even exist. For them, it’s all about being interactive with the fans. It’s worth going to a show just to see that.” ■

Based in Los Angeles, Daniel Keller regularly covers a variety of professional audio applications.

