

State Of The Market

Three vets share their views

By Keith Clark

I recently had the opportunity to do some checking up on the “state of the touring market” with three guys based in Nashville who know: Everett Lybolt of Sound Image, Ralph Mastrangelo of Clair Bros and Ken Porter of Spectrum Sound. All are long-time veterans of the concert sound world and share a common work ethic of starting at the bottom and doggedly sticking with it, doing virtually every audio (and related) job along the way.

Interesting notes: Everett is a licensed pilot who flies to work every day from his rural home. Ralph is a native New Yorker who’s coming to terms with the pace of life in Nashville, while Ken, who I’ve been fortunate enough to know for about a decade, is celebrating his 25th year of business.

Our discussions were diverse, ranging from the states of the local Nashville and national live sound markets to technology trends to suc-

cessful business operation. I’m pleased to be able to share the highlights.

Everett Lybolt, Sound Image:

Nashville is really kind of a small town, and the audio industry in general is like a small town as well, when you think about it. I came here to head up this office for Sound Image in 1993; Rick Stanley passed along the torch as our planes crossed the sky in opposite directions. There was a small warehouse, but I had a lot of relationships from years of working sound on the road that proved helpful.

Things have steadily fallen into place, a little bit at a time, but in the last two years we’ve doubled the amount of business handled. We specialize in national touring, nothing regional. Our infrastructure isn’t geared for it at the present time.

The thing about Nashville, from a sound company perspective, is that if you run the business correctly and responsibly, you make money. Some make more than others, but it trickles down rather well here. One nifty fact about

Nashville is that you can reach about 80 percent of the U.S. population within a day’s drive.

We generally have two to three shows out at a time. This is primarily the “mid-level-type” artist that can sustain tours over the course of five to six years combined with top artists that can tour for decades.

As a band grows here in Nashville, the business managers begin deciding that they can afford certain amenities. A monitor system probably gives a band the most continuity that means the most to their performance. If there’s one thing you can have and easily take with you, and get some sort of consistency, it’s a monitor system.

One of the jokes around here: What’s the most frequently asked question of an audio company in Nashville? Will it fit in the bay of a bus? That’s where bands and management take their first step in audio production – it goes in the bay.

The next step is going to a trailer, and that’s when they move along to consoles. They’re still smaller at first – “little baby consoles” – but more advanced than before, more channels and capabilities. We’re seeing a lot more compact digital consoles being requested and used, such as the Yamaha O1V and DM2000, Spirit by Soundcraft, and so on.

This office handles mostly country artists; it’s our bread and butter. Of course, this is a big reason to have an office in Nashville. There is inventory kept here, but most of it is constantly on the road. We mainly keep backup pieces for quick replacement if needed.

Interestingly, over the past two



Everett Lybolt getting ready to take another call, with his office décor showing his passion for flying.



Conversations

years, we've had a lot of work in January, and winter in general has been better than usual of late. This current summer season, on the other hand, had ticket sales that were a little tighter. It's hard to say if any of this points to a long-term trend. Dave Shadoan (Sound Image president) was supposed to send me a crystal ball when I took this job, but I guess it's lost in the mail. (laughs)

Digital consoles are coming on strong. It's only taken audio about 10 years to catch up with where lights are, I guess. (laughs) Digital consoles can be kind of scary to old dinosaurs like me, but they sound incredible, and once you develop the "chops" for them, get up to speed on how they work, they're great.

The big difference has been companies like Yamaha and DiGiCo designing digital consoles specifically for live reinforcement as opposed to simply adapting something from the studio. We find that some artists believe there is a sonic upgrade with digital, and it's worth the price. Others don't believe the sound is better and therefore don't believe it's worth it. We leave the decision with them, as it should be.

Ralph Mastrangelo, Clair Bros: I came to this town in the early 1990s when I began working with Dave McBride and MD Systems, and stayed on with the merger of MD and Clair later in the decade.

One of the changes I've seen with the coming of line arrays is that a lot

of sound company affiliations have changed. We used to see a lot more "brand houses" – companies aligned with certain brands. But with more diverse products available, that's not nearly the case anymore.

In addition to our national and regional touring work, we also handle a lot of local events and the corporate market. The Clair Bros installation division, which just moved to new, expanded facilities next door, is doing gangbusters business. The biggest portion of this is house of worship, and we're also offering lighting and video as part of our packages, which is quite popular in the install market.

Our client range is diverse. Because of our location, there's a tendency to think all we do is country, but that's less than 40 percent of the roster.

Virtually every equipment decision we make is client driven. Our role is to serve their needs, to get them whatever they want. This goes for digital consoles just like everything else.

We've been buying a lot of digital consoles – Yamaha PM1D and DM2000, DiGiCo D5 Live – but we're still sending out plenty of analog boards as well. For awards shows and festivals, I can't imagine using anything but digital, it's definitely an upgrade from the way we used to have to do it. As to sound quality, hey, everyone's got his or her own subjective opinions.

The bottom line is that we're not going to set any trends with regard to gear. As a bigger company, sometimes we're asked, "what are you buying?" The simple – and honest – answer is, "the customer decides."

Digital consoles have their place, but you have to be careful not to become a slave to any technology. Learn not only the "how" but the "when, where and why." Monitor world is the place we're really seeing digital taking over. Stage monitoring in general is light years ahead of where it was a short time ago.

Sound reinforcement is all we're doing anyway, when you come down to it. Physics. So you try to maximize that side, optimize it as much as possible, make it repeatable, and then you can focus more on the moment, the artistic side. After that, it doesn't matter if it's an analog or digital board, you can make either work for you just as well.

On the national touring scene, the big thing I've noticed is that the amount of time out on tour is getting shorter. There are a lot fewer two- to three-year consistent tours. In contrast, this year we probably had 20 tours out from July through September. Start dates used to be March, then April, then May... The change could be permanent, but who knows?

It's hard to name many pop/rock bands over the last 10 years who have had more than one strong album. And the record industry in general is upside down, which affects our industry. Nobody's every going to truly be able to reproduce the live concert experience, or replace it with anything else, so we've got that going for us. But if an act isn't exciting, there's no compelling reason to go to a show.

Ken Porter, Spectrum Sound: My work and interest in sound goes all the way back to high school – played in bands, set up gear for other bands, kind of a local roadie. In college, I started out in music education and evolved to working with both recording and live systems, and it kind of went from there.

We opened the doors to this business in 1979 and have been going ever since. There weren't nearly as many sound companies here at that time, so we saw a need to be filled. Later we set up an operation to build road cases both for ourselves and other sound companies, and that's gone really well.



Ralph Mastrangelo takes a break before going back to the shop to help the crew move a console.



Conversations

It's hard to say exactly why we've survived so long, but you have to start with providing quality gear and services at a fair price, and developing relationships that help foster and sustain steady business.

But going beyond that, as a company it's vital to look at efficiencies, ways to make the company more profitable regardless of hot and cold periods. All new equipment purchases must be prudent; there must be a reasonable expectation of a long-term return on your investment. This is where I see some businesses get tripped up. We have so many talented people in this industry, providing true quality, but they don't have the right balance on the business side.

I was fortunate in college to take a number of courses that are relevant to our company – accounting, marketing, law, for example – and these put me on the right track. My wife has also been a big key. She's smart, methodical and business oriented. She keeps our books, helps us stay on the right track and is also an excellent sounding board.

I understand that these are things that audio people don't necessarily like to think about, but you've got to watch your wallet. Or find someone else who will.

Locally, the amount of work available goes up and down. There are several corporations based here, so some good corporate clients and gigs can be had.

One interesting thing I've been told



Ken Porter runs a tight ship while his service techs get large and small Yamaha digital consoles ready to get back on the road.

Sound Image Acquires dB Sound



Sound Image, based in Escondido, California, has just acquired significant shares of dB Sound, Chicago, a consolidation that creates one of the industry's largest pro audio service companies.

"Taking these two highly successful companies and blending them will yield tremendous advantages for our clients," says Dave Shadoan (above left), president of Sound Image. The new entity

has been renamed "db Sound Image" and will retain its Chicago-based operations.

Shadoan adds that key staff from the dB Sound team will remain in place, including Harry Witz (above right) staying on as the only original partner and serving the role of CEO of db Sound Image.

"I'm thrilled that Harry is part of the team, and frankly, couldn't run the company without him," Shadoan notes. The db Sound Image executive management team also includes Sound Image founding partner/COO Ross Ritts, CFO Ralph Wagner, and Shadoan.

"I couldn't be more excited about the future," adds Witz. "The new configuration of db Sound as a component of Sound Image will allow for a new, higher level of worldwide support, service and give us the depth customers are looking for."

Sound Image also operates offices Nashville and Phoenix, while dB Sound (again, now. db Sound Image) has developed branded franchise partners in Australia, Japan, and Germany.

is that tours don't necessarily like to come to Nashville due to the demand for comp tickets. With so many people here working in music, I guess many feel like they deserve to be "comped for working in the biz." A while back, one production guy said he was trying to deal with 240 comp requests!

In-ear monitoring and digital consoles, as well as other digital products, have been significant in attaining consistency in our work. Country acts, in particular, can play a diverse selection of venues back to back. One night they're in a club, the next they're at a state fair, the next they're at a shed.

So the ability to more easily carry this compact gear has made a world of difference. Digital has also given us the luxury of repeatability, where opti-

num settings are simply stored and recalled each time, giving a great starting point.

Line arrays presented the opportunity to provide more consistency from a system. Simply, there are fewer variables, and addressing the issue of vertical control takes a lot of room problems out of the equation. Digital technology takes us even further.

I'm quite comfortable with the reliability of digital consoles. Definitely. Most of the questions I get deal with their operation: "How do I get it to do this?" If you're fluent with the console, you simply walk the user through the process of getting what they want and need.

A side note related to the digital discussion is fiber optics. Sure you can "run a tank" over certain types of fiber and not hurt them, but I was at a soundcheck recently where audio output was compromised and no one could figure out what was wrong. Finally, it was discovered that something heavy was resting on a section of fiber, and as a result, the light band was being compressed.

So the next time you work with fiber and there's a problem, be sure that no one is standing on it. Just another little thing for your checklist! ■



Keith Clark is editor of Live Sound and can be reached at kclark@livesoundint.com.