

Consistency With Limitations

The saga continues. Possible incarceration?

By Dave Rat

The intrepid author continues to detail the overall goal of sonic consistency while heading up sound on a 14-date tour across Europe with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. (If you missed the earlier installments, see August and September 2004 issues.) – Keith Clark

Day 10, Friday – Vienna to Dublin (fly day): Happy birthday to me! I'm 42 years old today. Last year on my

birthday, in the midst of a U.S. Peppers tour, I called ahead to have a van pick up Scott the Lampi and I at the tour busses parked in front of the New Orleans gig. Went fishing all day on the Bayou for red fish. This year I'm dead tired on an overcrowded plane flight. Awesome!

Last night's show (in Vienna) was stronger, the band seemed to be having more fun and the audience was happy. Yet the thought that I'm just a "glorified carney" (carnival worker) crosses my mind.

Day 11, Saturday – Dublin, Ireland (show day): Nearly 120,000 people today. I heard something about it being some kind of capacity record but won't risk being corrected by guessing.

Everything has become fairly predictable. Noise limits were reasonable, and lots of happy Irish. To me it felt like any good-sized field/park gig with the exception that I had to hike a hell of a lot farther to listen to the three waves of delay clusters.

I must say that having good techs who are able to match the sound of the delays to the mains is unbelievably important. Also, having delay cabs that match the mains, as we do, is vital.

Day 12, Sunday – Edinburgh, Scotland (show day): Following an overnight bus ride, I arrive to actually get a decent line check. Wow, good stuff!

Probably one of my least favorite parts of touring is long bus rides, or worse, catching the 6 am ferry in mid bus ride. Once again I'm faced with



Despite having to spend his birthday on a plane, Dave did manage to find a little time to sneak in some fishing later in Wales.

Rat Tales

the choice of sleeping in a sealed bus locked in the belly of an ocean bound ferry or wandering aimlessly around the deck after being jolted awake by our bus driver shouting, "Everybody off the bus!" This time I hide in my bunk, close my eyes, cross my fingers and try my best to sleep through the creepy echoing boat belly ride.

Good-looking gig today, the shows continue to pick up momentum. It seems directly related to the crews' lack of sleep and road weariness. Just like re-starting an exercise routine - the initial traumas are beginning to fade and we seem to be adapting and settling in.

Day 14, Tuesday – Paris, France (show day): Ah, the refreshing sensation of having a show that feels right, with the synchronization of the band, video, lights and sound right on.

The other shows have been good, with highlights of their own, but this is the first gig of the run where everything has totally fallen into place. It's important to keep in mind, however, that my perspective is severely tilted after 20 years of seeing the Peppers play and mixing nearly every show for the past 15 years.

The idea of carrying processors and "mirror image" PA systems is living up to my expectations. Each show has been a progressive build on the last; rather than hoping the system is



The show in Paris, where all production elements finally jelled fully.

going to be O.K., my confidence is building. Unfortunately, this is our last show with the Pixies.

Issues to be addressed:

- Guitar "down" the vocal microphone – ever since the band went to in-ear monitoring (IEM) systems, the delicate balance of guitar volume/tone has progressively gotten more difficult to deal with. Guitar bleed into the vox mics has reached a level that is sometimes unmanageable.

- Something is glitchy with the

drum machine track CD used for The Zephyr Song.

- Deal with the recording levels for the live two-track machines.

- See how the "VIP fill" system on the stage wing is working. The feed to this system is the same as the recording two-track, with the whole mix plus two stage audience mics. We added the fills soon after the band went on IEM so that friends and people on stage could hear a proper mix.

Day 15, Wednesday – Amsterdam, Holland (show day): Other than the self-pity of having to mix in a chamber of sonic hell, the show was really cool.

Tonight I believe we may have set a record for the lowest note ever created from a trumpet. Flea plays trumpet as the intro to the encore, and John (Frusciante, guitarist) runs this feed through some guitar effects. I took some liberties with a sub-synthesizer. It was good fun, and having trumpet "blur vision" is a new experience.

Besides mixing in the giant echo chamber, I had further concerns when presented with a rather ominous memo/warning sheet for the show. At the venue, there are 24 sensors mounted below the two-story-high stadium floor, and due to structural concerns, the memo told us:



Getting friendly with local law enforcement prior to the Edinburgh, Scotland show.

Rat Tales

Point #1: If any sensor reads “1 meter per second, squared” then house sound will be turned down 6 dB and video close-ups disallowed on the screens.

Point #2: If any sensor reads “2 meters per second, squared” then house sound will be turned down an additional 6 dB and video turned off.

And so on up to Point #6, where we were warned that police would be brought in to make things “better.” By

that point, I felt it necessary to determine (in catering of course) what is actually meant by “1 meter per second, squared,” in the real world. Assuming “1 meter per second” works out to be 3,600 meters per hour, it means an acceleration of a bit over 2 miles per hour.

So I did the math and if at any point, the venue is moving 2 miles an hour faster than it was before, then “Houston, we have a problem!” The

memo also clearly stated that both low-frequency energy and synchronized audience jumping could cause my potential incarceration.

Day 16, Thursday – Manchester, U.K. (travel day): Unplugging the top guitar cabinets worked out really well. For some reason, guitar-bleed into John Frusciante’s mic has been worse this tour. We tried moving, redirecting and turning down the cabs - finally I requested that they be unplugged. There was also an IEM issue as well, with the guitar “jumping up” when John steps away from the mic.

The results of the unplugging went beyond my expectation; not only did it resolve the issue of me needing to ride the vocal mic from 200 feet away, but also, the rig sounds better and the band is happier with the IEM sound.

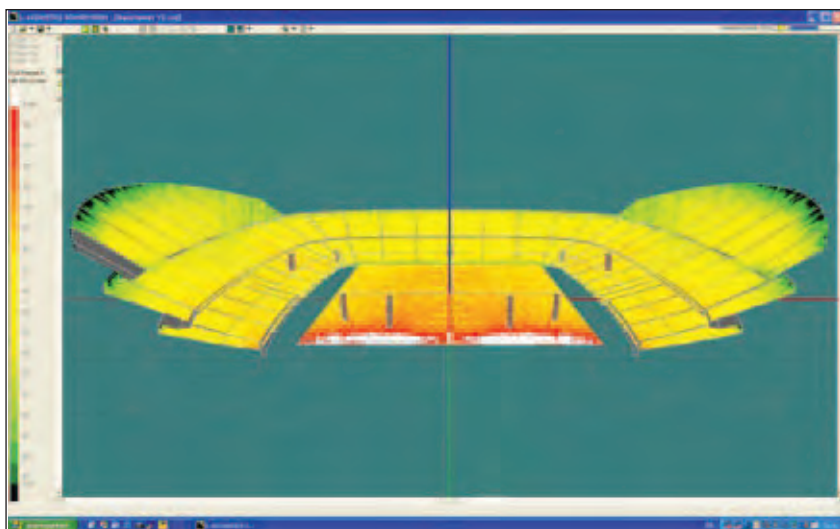
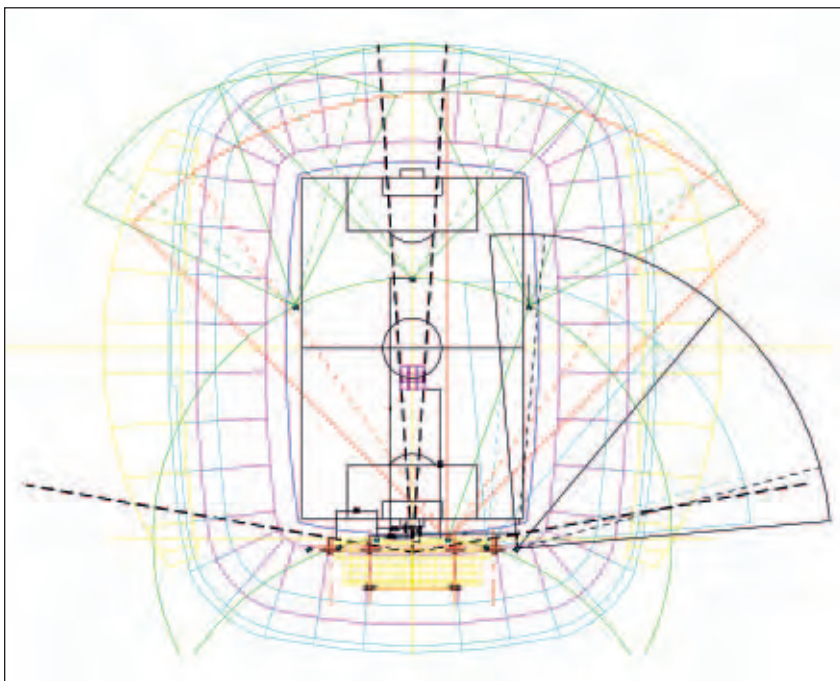
We burned new CDs for the *Zyphr* drum machine track, yet it was still faulty. Turned out to be the CD player – it’s one of those cool Sony single rack-space vari-speed units. Switched to the spare unit, and all seems good, although we won’t know for sure until they play the song again.

Day 17, Friday – Manchester, U.K. (show day): The first rock gig at the new Manchester Stadium. The roof opening looks like a giant potato chip (Pringles variety to be more exact). It’s something like 50 meters (about 150 feet) high on the sides, and with dual-tiered balconies.

It was a tough space to cover but the system designer, Flo (Radiohead FOH tech), did a superb job. Originally we were trying to make system coverage decisions based on photos and 2-D drawings, but that was rough. When Flo ran the room with the new 3-D Soundvision software, it all came together and worked very well.

Day 18, Saturday – London, U.K. (show day 1): The “Big Kahuna” of the tour – 85,000-plus tickets sold for each of three shows. Additionally, there will be recording done on these shows for a live Peppers album.

I can feel the pressure and anticipation of both the crew and band. Everyone is pushing that extra bit to



Originally trying to make system coverage decisions based on photos and 2-D drawings proved limiting (above). An assist from a third dimension, in the form of Soundvision software, helped (below).



How it looked from the back of the "Big Kahuna" at Hyde Park in London.

guarantee perfection.

For me, it's all about noise limits. The system is the same, the shows are coming up nearly the same, but noise restrictions change everything. Rumor has it that last year, nearby wealthy residents offered 1 million pounds (about \$2 million U.S.) to have the bands not play in the venue. So, there's a lot of audio measurement going on and much concern for the powerful residents.

Today's show went fine, but I felt a bit strangled by the noise limits. It's a matter of staying focused on the aspects I actually have control over. Crappy sounding rooms, noise restrictions and inadequate trim height are just challenges to overcome. No use crying about it.

Working with U.K. touring company Britannia Row, we came up with the following to increase sound for the audience (and me) while maintaining a positive off-site situation. (Only two complaints so far!)

- Lower trim height for the main loudspeakers.
- More down-tilt to reduce sound reflecting off of the audience.
- Reduce delay cluster volumes which point at measurement mics off site.

Day 19, Sunday – London (show day 2): Laptop dead – aarrghhh! Well, it's running now, but it was dead earlier. No booting, and an operating

system crash... Not going to dive into the nuances of this computer meltdown here, but in order to get it running, I did the following (after trying everything else).

- Panicked. Well, not really, but

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could feel the welling sense of dread slowly rising inside me.

- Disassembled laptop and removed the hard drive.
- Disassembled MP3 player and removed the hard drive.
- Borrowed dual rectangle USB

cable from Scott the Lampi.

- Plugged MP3 player with my laptop hard drive into (system tech) Nick the Fly's laptop with Scott's cable.

- Prayed to the "computer gods" that "plug and play" did not mean "plug and then go search for drivers on the Internet."

- Found the file named "system" and replaced it with the "system-alt" file located nearby. (When it crashed, my computer had blamed that specific file.)

- Took it all apart and re-assembled.

- Closed my eyes and hit the power button.

Celebration! All is good, the computer lives - no data loss and I'm back to life as a functioning human again. The show rocked, plenty of volume, the noise meters off-site measured 2 dB lower and all seemed good.

Then comes the post-show report: "20 vociferous noise complaints." And we still have one more show here next week. Oh jeez, this is not good.

"What are we going to do to solve the issue?" I'm asked. Not exactly sure at this very moment, but I can predict many "meetings" with "very concerned" people. ■

Dave Rat heads up California-based Rat Sound and will conclude this discussion in the next (November) issue. By the way, if you have comments or questions for Dave, he's monitoring the Rat Sound message board at www.ratsound.com/wwwboards/wwwboard.shtml.