

Blue Collar Wireless

Adventures and lessons learned from multitasking

By Mark E. P. Woods

I got into this business for several reasons – among them the ability to sleep late, get free drinks and meet girls. As a now-happily-married audio professional, these “perks” don’t seem to apply much anymore.

But the most important reason I followed the sound reinforcement path is because it’s fun. A recent gig proved that despite long days and challenging situations, this work is still rewarding well beyond the financial sense, and you’re always learning something new.

The cell phone rings as I’m stuck in I-285 traffic, where I’m returning from a blissful day of kayaking on Lake Lanier here in the Atlanta region of north Georgia. On the cell was Neil Gluckman, my union local’s business agent.

“There’s a TV show in town that needs someone with ‘body and hair’ microphone experience. You can do this,” Neil says, ever to the point.

True, I have plenty of experience with Broadway-style mic’ing so I reply, “What the heck. When does it start?”

“Tomorrow, 8 am.” Thanks for the advance prep time, Neil!

“The show loaded in three weeks ago and started shooting last week, but they just decided to bring in someone to do mics,” he adds.

“All right... why not?” comes my measured response. Another quick call to Amy Walter, the Atlanta Production Supervisor, and I’ve got more specifics. Time to get on home, shower off the “lake” and get some rest.

BIT OF A BLUR

The next morning at the appointed 8 am (sharp!), I’m on the stage of The Alliance Theatre Stage in downtown Atlanta, the site of *Blue Collar TV*, and a television program being taped for broadcast on the WB network. I’m already familiar with the *Blue Collar Comedy Tour*, having mixed front-of-

house for it at least six times over the

past few years.

For the uninitiated (and if you haven’t seen the DVD, check it out and be ready to laugh – hard!), the tour features the stand-up routines of Jeff Foxworthy, Bill Engvall, Larry the Cable Guy and Ron White. All very funny comedians.

Things began as a bit of a blur. I’m walking into a building I’ve not worked in, a set and production I’ve never seen and a production team I’ve never met before. But thanks to the good nature and professionalism of the audio crew, I’m up to speed in no time.

To say the least, there’s a lot going on. Fritz Lang is in the basement recording isolated audio tracks and mixing feeds for the directors and writers. Brian Kiger is mixing band monitors, while Alliance Theatre Sound Engineer Holly Blakely is mixing for the live studio audience on her InnovaSon Compact digital console (located house/rear).

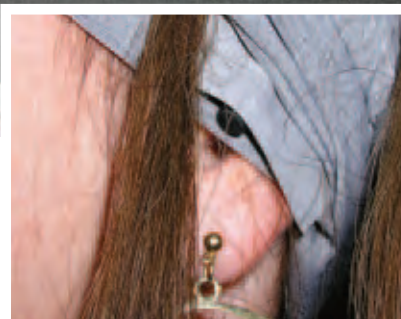
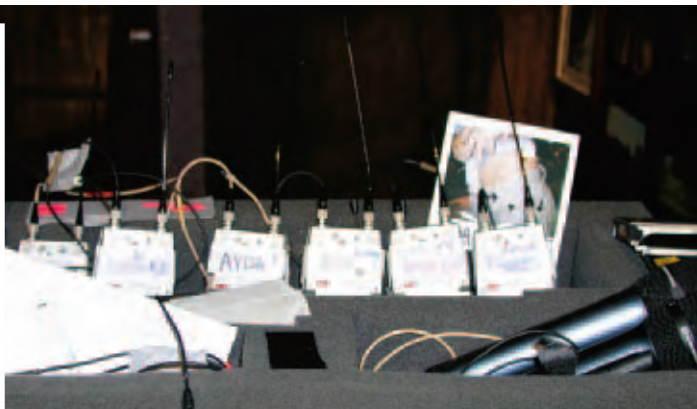
Meanwhile, Rick Newstreet is dealing with the always-tricky wireless



A packed house at the Alliance Theater to see the unusual sight of a network television show taping, with Holly Blakely at the InnovaSon board providing the house sound mix.



On Location



RF Tech Joe Sparacino at the rack, ready for the challenge; the wireless systems lined up and ready to be concealed; and a close look at how to hide a lavalier mic in a headband.

COM sets, and onstage, A2s Joe Sparacino (RF tech), David Neesley and Steve “Gyro” Garrard are mic’ing actors as they hit the stage.

My job, simply (or often not) is to help these guys find creative ways to hide the mics on the performers without compromising sound quality.

Let’s think about this for a moment. There’s a live studio audience that needs to hear reinforced audio, a remote recording truck that must have “pristine” audio for broadcast, cameras that faint at the sight of a (Sennheiser) MKE II microphone capsule – and we humble A2s are seeing costumes for the first time just minutes before the taping begins.

This is the very essence of the challenge: hidden BUT effective mics.

REINVENT THE WHEEL

About now, a few of you might be asking, “Why not just do this in a studio in New York or Los Angeles, where everything for this sort of adventure is already set up? Why reinvent the wheel by turning an Atlanta stage into a TV studio?”

The answer, simply, begins and ends with the name “Jeff Foxworthy.”

While hiding a Sennheiser transmitter on Jeff (and don’t ask where I was hiding it!) prior to a segment, I asked him about this. The response was something to the effect of “seven years of filming my last TV series in LA was enough. I told them I’d only do this show if it’s in Atlanta, where I can drop

my kids off at school every morning.”

Anyone who’s spent serious time on the road or on location can understand that.

Back to the gig. Our learning curve proved steep, but we managed to come up with some tricks that I’ll now share with you for free. (Who’s your buddy?)

- When hiding a mic capsule at the neckline, have the actor remove any gold chains – these tend to make unpleasant sounds when rubbing on the capsules. Body hair does the same thing, even if it’s shaved down to stubble. (Anyone ever seen Larry the Cable Guy up close?)

- T-shirts are tough places to sneak in a mic. The capsule can be positioned so that it just peaks out from the fabric. Take some color matching gaff tape and tape the capsule to the underside of the collar. Some “Top-Stick” double-sided wig tape can then be placed between the skin and the gaff tape, preventing the fabric from sliding around and making scratchy noises.

- “Fat suits” are a challenge. The padding can buckle up when the actor moves. Talk about a good time to become friends with the hair and make-up department – these folks have lots of experience hiding capsules in wigs or even natural hair.

- Cocktail dresses look pretty on the ladies, but the form-fitting style shows a transmitter a mile away. Bra straps can sometimes hold the pack,

or use an elastic belt at the waistline with the transmitter off to the side. Anywhere the eye may be drawn is a good place to avoid. The spaghetti straps on the shoulders of these types of dresses do work as a hiding place for the capsule and cable.

- Guys in collared shirts are probably the easiest. A capsule placed in the collar, pointed outward, seems to work well. Actors with neckties are also simple. Thread the capsule down through the front of the knot and have the capsule just peak out in the shadows at the top of the tie below the knot. A little tape or “Top-Stick” will help with clothing rustle.

- And the best way to remove chewed up (and spit up) chocolate chip cookie residue from a mic capsule is with alcohol wipes and a change of windscreens. (Again, don’t ask!)

By the time this is published, the show will have made its network debut, and we’ll probably know if there will be more adventures in audio with Jeff and the guys.

One request of Sennheiser: can I get that MKE II in blue, please? ■

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