

Taking The Opry On The Road

Continuing traditions with modern twists

By Chris Kathman

Back in the days of the original *Grand Ole Opry* broadcasts, it was quite common for artists to sit in with each other, and they often played in front of a common backing band.

In the most recent touring version, Vince Gill opens and closes the show,

Rebecca Lynn Howard plays her set backed by Vince's band, Vince guests with Del McCoury, Patty Loveless does her own set with her band and also sits in with Vince, and the same drum kit stays up all night.

I visited the production when they made a stop at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles, and spoke to Showco Front-Of-House Systems Engineer Dan Laveglia as well as David Turner, who mixes Patty Loveless. Last year, I heard David mix Patty at a show in Anaheim and was really impressed. To me, it was an ideal mix, with everything audible, detailed, natural sounding – and nothing painful.

We sat down at a table in front of the Greek and talked for a while. David was born in Mississippi and still lives there, in Oxford, which is about a four-hour drive from Nashville. I observed that it's also the home of best-selling author John Grisham. David laughed and said, "He's got the biggest house in town!"

As a youngster, David played in garage bands and was "always the guy that futzed with the PA." He started mixing in clubs in the early '80s, and picked up his first road gig with Hank Williams Jr., in 1982. He also did monitors for Conway Twitty and FOH for Eddie Rabbitt, as well as spending eight years as FOH/Production Manager for Tammy Wynette.

Like many of us, David got roped into tour managing, which he still does for Patty Loveless. He started out



David Turner, a long way from Oxford – literally and figuratively.

with baby bands – “I’d try to latch on to one that I thought was going to the top.” But it never seemed to work out that way! He spent a year with Trick Pony, which is where I first met him, when they were opening for Brooks and Dunn.

When that ended, David sent out his resumé to a bunch of management firms, and Patty Loveless’ manager was the one who called back. He can’t say enough good things about her. “She gives everything she’s got, at every performance. She has high standards and hires the best players; the musicianship is impeccable.

“Patty also doesn’t expect anything out of anybody else that she doesn’t expect out of herself,” he continues. “She’s as concerned about the welfare of the crew and the band as she is about her own.” (That sounds very different than a lot of other artists who we have all worked for, doesn’t it?)

For Patty’s headlining dates, Yamaha DM2000 compact digital desks are used at both the house and monitor positions. Each position has two external eight-channel mic pre-

amps, a Presonus Digimax that David uses for the acoustic instruments, and a Focusrite Octopre that he runs the vocals through. Both of those output 96 kHz signals to the AES/EBU input on his console.

The tour began with two Midas Heritage monitor desks, but after a few shows, the switch was made to the DM2000 on monitors for Patty. Brent Sparks, her monitor mixer, told me that “When Patty sings with Vince, her voice is in the wedges, and she takes out one earpiece.”

With her own band, all musicians are on in-ear personal monitors (IEM) except the bass player, who prefers a single Showco wedge. A Shure SM87 ULX wireless microphone system captures Patty’s vocal. Brent, who works closely with Showco Stage Tech Justin Curtis, also receives some individual channel outs and submixes from the remaining Heritage desk.

IN AN AFTERNOON

I had visited Dan Laveglia several times when he was doing monitors for Willie Nelson, before he got his cur-

rent gig with Vince Gill. The last time I saw him was at UCLA’s Royce Hall, and he was really excited about a Lake Technology Contour to control all the monitor mixes.

I asked Dan how he got trained on the DiGiCo D5 Live digital console that he’s using this time out with Vince Gill, and he answered, “I ended up doing it in Nashville in an afternoon. I met with a couple of the more knowledgeable Clair guys and spent the day cramming as best I could.

“Hugh (Johnson, Gill’s FOH mixer) was looking for some consistency in his crew, and I was looking for a more casual schedule than the Willie Nelson account would allow. Everything gelled quickly as Hugh has been using the console for a few years – he even does some training for DiGiCo. So I didn’t have to worry about being real in-depth with it at first.

“Of course, he’s shown me tons of stuff since then,” Dan added. “The desk has a lot of really cool functions, but mostly it’s very tactile with the touch screens and knobs, which can be lacking in some other digital offerings. System engineering has taken a turn in the last few years. I’ve got three different Windows operating systems at FOH. Being a PC geek is as important as knowing audio!”

The “local box” that lives at the mix position has two AES/EBU cards, for eight stereo channels. There are an additional two boxes that live onstage, and perform the role of the traditional split. “Our recording and playback is also digital,” Dan explained, as well as the t.c. electronic System 6000, which has all four of its engines connected to the console via AES/EBU. There are eight channels of Lake Contour available for different outputs of the D5.

I asked Dan if he uses (SIA) SMAART or anything similar. He replied that he “points the RTA mic at the floor (of the venue) and sweeps the room with a low-frequency tone, looking for room resonances. After these have been addressed, we have some steering filters that help in getting rid of the power alley in the center of the room.”

Dan pointed out the low profile



Brent Sparks getting things set for Patty Loveless’ monitors on the DM2000 digital console.

Conversations

mini-sidefills, made up of Showco L-3 boxes. The upper ones have a 12-inch cone driver and a 2-inch compression driver, and the lower ones have a single 15-inch driver. He also mentioned that, "We have a pretty nice little vocal mic from Shure" for Gill, consisting of a KSM-32 large diaphragm element housed within an SM-87c body. (For now this is a prototype.)

RINGING IT OUT

Hugh Johnson is at the console for the entire run of the two-hour show, except when David Turner mixes Loveless. I watched him painstakingly ringing out the two Shure KSM-32's that are the main mics used for McCoury's band. There is also an SM81 pointed at Del's guitar and a Beta 98 on the stand-up bass, both of which the performers move in and out themselves – self-mixing in the traditional bluegrass style.

The tour carries the monitor rig and FOH gear only, and uses stacks and racks from local suppliers for the



The picture of pro audio experience – Dan Laveglia (left) and Hugh Johnson, both keeping up with the times on a DiGiCo D5.

mains. At the Greek, the house system is supplied by Schubert Systems Group of North Hollywood. (For more about

this system, see *August 2004 issue*). The house tech is Neal Shelton, and I asked him for some comments about working with Dan and Hugh.

"They were really timely," was his first comment, which as we all know is quite important. "Both Dan and Hugh knew about (JBL) VerTec and instantly complimented (the system) on how smooth it was compared to many VerTec rigs. Being a lower sound pressure level show than most that come through the Greek, we turned up the delays a couple of dB to get the sound to the back of the venue.

"Hugh asked me to turn down the horns on the bottom three boxes, which are closest to the audience. We made the usual adjustments to cut a little 4 K and 2.5 K, and a little bit of 400 Hz, and we went with it. He was happy, and it was a good show."

Inquiring minds will enjoy knowing that, like the people around Pearl Jam call Eddie Vedder "Ed," and the ones with Lucinda Williams call her "Lu," the crew that travels with this tour refer to Vince Gill as... "Vinniel!" ■

Chris Kathman is a working mixer, tour manager and regular contributor to Live Sound and ProSoundWeb. He is a widely published author and can be reached at chris@prosoundweb.com.

CAT-alyst
For more information go to www.procosound.com

Pro Co's Digital Snake
It's faster. – Want to race?
Save time and money with the first
latency free digital snake system.