

The Pro Angle

Bringing more to the “rent versus buy” table

By Gary Gand

Last year, I explained my theories about venues renting a substantial house sound system versus buying, installing and maintaining a “rider-bound” rig.

On one hand, renting provides ultimate flexibility, non-obsolescence and built-in techs to make it work. On the other hand, owning a system substantially cuts setup time and can improve coverage and sight lines. And, depending upon how many shows can be amortized over the cost, owning can be cheaper in the long run.

The bottom-line deal-breaker is staffing – finding (and retaining) folks who will treat the system like it’s their own. This pretty much means recruiting at least one seasoned pro that

wants to settle down, maybe even raise a family. He or she must NOT want to go back on the road anytime soon, and be capable of disregarding possibly tempting offers to join up with shows coming through the venue. (Because we’re all – always – on the lookout for good people.)

A little back-story before we come full circle...

It’s the “dark ages” – the early 1970s – and we see a young Chicago guitarist and his girlfriend/keyboardist who happened to attend a weekend college showcase (called the National Entertainment Conference – NEC) to hear 20 or so bands perform. The event was largely a scheme to get colleges to hire bands “en masse” by

holding “auditions” where the schools could “vote” for the best acts and then hire them as a co-op.

The guitarist was me, and the keyboardist was my (now) wife Joan. We eventually got into the sound business and later took over providing systems and support for NEC shows in the Midwest, working with such (then) unknown groups as the Oak Ridge Boys and a cool young bluesman named Robert Cray.

While hanging out at that first showcase, I met my first real, live front-of-house engineer. To that point, I’d never seen a guy mix on a console located in the audience.

The man is James D. (Jim) Anderson. The company he worked for was Stanal Sound, started by Stan Miller, best known for his long-term work as Neil Diamond’s sound guru, and a very innovative cat to this day.

I peppered Jim with questions, and he was extremely patient with my lack of knowledge. I’m a pretty quick study (if I do say so myself), and by the end of the conversation we were into the aux bus and pre-fade monitors. We were just moving along to Ohms Law when the work lights came on and it was time to go.

Keep in mind that he was mixing on an eight-channel Langevin studio console with one monitor mix, an Echoplex tape echo, and four, two-way passive infinite-baffle loudspeakers stacked on the sides, driven by Altec power amplifiers. Jim was also the entire crew.

Did it sound fabulous? Of course! Plus, it was the coolest thing I’d ever seen. Note to self in best lead guitarist internal voice: “I can do that.”



James D. Anderson, Esq., bringing the veteran touch to an installed system at the McCallum Theater.

Reality Check

The next time I saw Jim, he'd just come off a Black Sabbath show where a discontent audience had put holes in the PA by throwing bottles at the stacks. The system included Altec two-way loudspeakers with fiberglass radial horns, and Crown DC300 power amps.

Another mixing gig at that time was for a *National Lampoon* show titled "Lemmings," featuring some unknown comedians posing as a rock band doing a spoof on Woodstock. The drummer was played by Chevy Chase (the name of a local country club), with the role of lead singer filled by a fellow named John Belushi (who did a wickedly good Joe Cocker impersonation).

About 10 years went by as we made our name in the sound business, when Jim called up and hired us for a string of shows with the Osmond family. Over the years, this turned into Donny, Marie and various combos as the family went their separate ways. Jim mixed the Osmond Brothers, Scott Rose (PFL Audio) came in with Marie.

Around 1988, Jim left the road, and I heard he'd found a "cake" gig at some posh new theater out west. I hadn't heard from him in about six years when I recently opened *Palm Springs Life*

magazine (while on post Summer-Fest rehab) and saw a photo of him with a caption saying, "McCallum Theatre completes multi-million-dollar sound and lighting upgrade."

I immediately fired off an e-mail to Jim proposing a get-together, and what follows is the story of his adventures with a new sound installation at the McCallum Theatre. Let me preface this with one comment: If you're able to find one of the best sound guys in the world to be your long-term house tech (see paragraph 3), then just hand him a million bucks and let him go to work.

(Roll tape...)

Gary Gand: How did you end up in Palm Desert, California?

Jim Anderson: I was living in Kearney, Nebraska, after working for Stanal, came out to "The Desert" (that's what locals call it) to relax between California dates on an Osmond tour, and fell in love with the area. At the time, I noticed a steel frame going up for a new theater.

After the place was completed and running for about a year, I was talking

to Tim Ison (Engelbert Humperdink's lighting director of 17 years and a Palm Desert resident), who told me of an opening at the theatre and said, "Buy my house." So I did, and went to work at the McCallum. That was 17 years ago and I've been here ever since.

Gary: How was the sound system when you started in 1988?

Jim: It needed a lot of work. When I arrived, I generated a six-page punch list of items that needed attention from the installer. The consultant had some good ideas, but there were some quirky things, like incoherent clusters, too much wire without enough usable circuits, the patch bay and mic splits located in the mezzanine lobby, and modified Class-A, hi-fi amps for top end, which frequently overheated.

Twenty-four 10-inch woofers, crossed over to 80 Hz, handled the lows, and there was a frequency gap between the top of the subs and the bottom of the woofers. We proceeded to build our own cabinets in the scene shop.

Gary: Did you ever "finish" the system?

Jim: There was never enough budget, so after 16 years, it sounded good but coverage was not optimized and it was underpowered. Many components were obsolete or reaching the end of their usable lives. We couldn't come close to satisfying artists' tech riders.

About a year ago, management came to me and said, "Give us your dream list of equipment." It was approved by April, and I was told it needed to be finished by the beginning of the next season.



It's in the details, with ideas like inseting the house arrays (above) and a slick little trick that Jim devised to trigger CD players with sound FX. He has a trigger input appear on his patch bay for each CD player and can fire them from this box, instead of having to fumble around on a CD remote or enter a track number and hope for the best. It uses a standard XLR cable instead of some proprietary DIN/Euro thing that gets lost or crunched.



Gary: How did you select the gear?

Jim: I was systematic about it. I re-read every rider from the last two years and made a list of everything the acts required. As good as our original system sounded, our proprietary boxes lacked commercial identity. We lost one show because the act felt our system "wasn't big enough."

JBL has been very good to us over the years, so I wanted to use as many JBL/Harman products as possible. That was easy, since most riders specify BSS, Lexicon, dbx and so on. So I wanted a system that would fill most artist requirements while providing our customers added value for their entertainment dollar.

Gary: You're a poster boy for Harman Pro!

Jim: I contacted Mark Engebretson, who's now at JBL and had helped design and tune our original cabinets. The first words out of Mark's mouth were "line array," so I decided to take his advice and specify eight JBL VerTec VT4888 boxes per side.

We also have dbx compressors in black and blue (160s and 160SLs), BSS equalizers, gates and compressors, Soundweb for distribution, a Lexicon 960 reverb, many AKG microphones and Crown I-Tech amps for mains and monitors.

All signal processing for the main system is handled by Crown IQ, included in the I-Tech amps, which are connected into our facility's LAN and can be controlled and monitored from any of five computers.

The FOH console is a Soundcraft Series 5 with 48 inputs. We also have 24 JBL wedges and two JBL custom subwoofers.

Gary: How did you put all of this together?

Jim: I contracted Bob Patrick of IPR Services, who was the sound system project manager for Acromedia when the theater was under construction. IPR provided us with design, engineering, drafting and project coordination services on the new system. The biggest challenge was interfacing

the new components with the remaining ones.

I did the purchasing and was my own general contractor, actively hands-on throughout the project. The most unique feature of the installation is that the line arrays are installed in niches cut into the proscenium walls, which reduces the "aesthetic pollution" usually associated with line arrays. I also needed more floor space at house mix to accommodate the additional racks, so walls had to be moved.

Gary: I see you still have some classic gear from the old system.

Jim: I kept the good stuff – my old microphones and wireless, along with some great outboard gear that I still like the sound and feel of, as well as tri-amped sidefill monitors. We also retained the center cluster, also now driven with Crown I-Tech. The lobby and dressing room systems stayed in place, as did the underbalcony delay speakers.

Gary: Would you do it again?

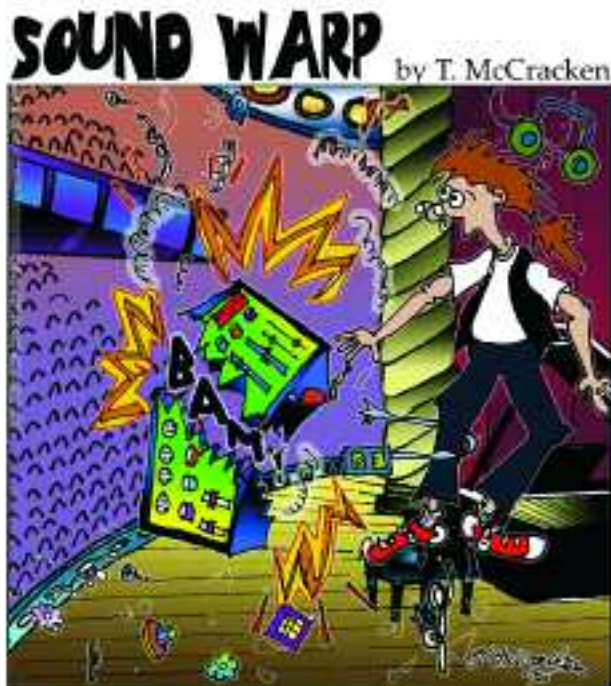
Jim: In a heartbeat! I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to plan and build a project like this. It's rewarding to see the universal acceptance of the new system by both artists and patrons.

(End tape...)

The McCallum Theater is aesthetically gorgeous, and now, it has sound to match. It hosts some of the biggest concert acts in the business, including proven favorites like Tony Bennett, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, Kenny Loggins, and contemporary performers such as Enrique Iglesias, Jewel, and The Wallflowers. A regular slate of Broadway shows, symphony orchestras, modern dance and classical ballet performances are also on the docket.

I like the place so much, I actually BUY tickets! ■

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"The theater's Feng Shui must be off."