

# Catching LivePhish On The Road

BY CLIVE YOUNG

The jamband scene has always had a thing for live recordings, and with good reason. While albums may present a definitive version of a song, the improv-oriented acts reinvent their music every night onstage, making each show a ‘you had to be there’ experience. While Tapers in the audience dutifully recorded every show of their favorite bands in concert over the decades with varying levels of success, readily available technology now allows the acts themselves to preserve every performance, and instead of individual songs becoming fodder for the double-LP live sets of the 1970s that were cobbled together from multiple shows, today, entire tours can be downloaded legally from the Internet, as each gig becomes an instant souvenir for fans who were there.

Phish makes its concerts digitally available via LivePhish.com and the LivePhish iPhone streaming app, presenting every show the band has played since 2002 as well as select concerts from the group’s archives. Rather than merely slap a board mix

online and call it a day, however, the band has taken more strident steps to protect its live music legacy.

Jon Altschiller, mixer, engineer and producer at Chiller Sound in New York City, worked on the band’s studio albums in the early 1990s, but today, he records 80-plus tracks backstage every night on an Avid Pro Tools HD rig, mixing each song on

the fly for instant release in MP3 and FLAC formats just minutes after a show ends.

While FOH engineer Garry Brown gets 79 inputs a night on his Midas XL8 console—and does his own recording of the board mix for posterity as well—Altschiller gets a complete split, as well as nine audience microphones. “It’s amazing,

because we have the same experiences, but our mixes are just completely different,” said Brown. “I’m pretty much uncompressed, but Jon’s is very compressed.” Altschiller agreed, explaining, “I’m compressed to the hilt, because I know probably 80 percent of the people listening to my stuff will hear it through computer speakers.”

The need to properly record the shows for LivePhish, as opposed to simply using a board mix, is readily evident to the engineers, because they’re each looking to achieve different ends with their individual mixes. “I’m watching the levels every second of every show, whereas Garry’s listening to the room,” said Altschiller, “and the sound of a recording and the sound of the room are totally different. I’m not dealing with amplification the way he is.”

Instead, Altschiller is faced with the challenge of approximating a “live” sound under the aural microscope provided by digital recording. To accomplish that, he banks heavily on the recording gear he uses backstage. “I’m using ATI 8MX2 mic-

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Jon Altschiller pauses before recording another Phish concert for posterity.

## LivePhish

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pres for the drums, Grace Design m802 mic-pres for the body of the band—pretty much all the tonal instruments and vocals—and then Millennia Media HV-3Ds for the room and all the ancillary stuff, which I like because they're very open and they

really capture a room without much color to me," said Altschiller. Mixing itself takes place on an Avid C|24 control surface and is heard via headphones or a pair of Genelec two-way studio monitors.

Key to creating the in-concert feel is Altschiller's mastering gear: "I have a mastering chain where I use a bunch of analog tube gear to fatten it up and give it a little more live ambience. Then I use a TC Electronic M6000

for some reverb, but mostly for the mastering algorithms, which add a lot because I do an MSD code—a mono sum—so I can raise the sides and compress the middle more. I've set up a mix chain and then a mastering chain for this, so I can really hit digital zero. That way, when people listen to it on their computers, if they're listening to a Sting record and then they want to put on 'Tweezer,' it should be 'there'—it should be loud."

Having traveled through the entire chain, the audio from each set (the band plays two a night) winds up on a compact flash drive, with the first set uploaded—but not released to the public—during intermission; the second set takes about as long. "So right after the show, I get on the bus at night and within 60 minutes, boom, there it is online and everyone can download it," said Altschiller. "That is pretty fast and incredible. I don't listen to it on the night of the show anymore, because my ears are just burnt and I can't assess it, so I listen in the morning, usually at least the whole second set to see where I ended up,"

It's not always easy to know in the moment where that was, often because of where he physically was—which is to say, Altschiller and his recording gear wind up working in some unusual spaces backstage. Makeshift mixing facilities have ranged from the referees' dressing room at Madison Square Garden, to trailers at sheds, to the back of a semi parked at the loading dock. "Every night, it's a totally different space for me, unlike FOH, where you know you'll be 100 to 125 feet from the stage. Wherever I am, I try to get rid of as much reflection as I can. Still, it can be very difficult—I go with headphones and I have to trust my template a lot. There's a lot

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of times where you know the room is going to be a bit of a bass trap, so you have to say to yourself, 'I know that I'm not hearing what I'm supposed to be hearing.' But I find that even if your acoustics are bad, you can find your balance, so a lot of times when I listen back, we're in good shape and I can make adjustments [for the next show if they're playing multiple nights at a venue]."

Much as Phish's music changes eternally, Altschiller's recording gear continues to evolve as well—the engineer is mulling a move to Pro Tools 10, for instance. For the most part, however, Altschiller sees himself as a curious aberration in the complex touring machine that surrounds Phish. Laughing, he explained, "My perspective is that I am so ancillary to what is going on out there on stage. This whole experience is about the show...except that the band is very interested that in the future, its live recordings are actually good, and I'm very appreciative of that. I'm honored to do this for them, actually. I've really liked them as a band for a long time, so it's definitely good."

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