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Having a Ball with Phish

by Shirin Shaikh, On February 24, 2012 00:00 EDT

Phish always keeps its fans guessing, with unpredictable set lists and jams that can range from button-tight covers to expansive freak-outs, but one thing followers can count on is the band setting up shop at New York City's Madison Square Garden for a string of shows leading up to New Year's Eve. The turn of the calendar page into 2012 was no exception, and while thousands stood in Times Square 10 blocks away watching the ball drop, inside the hallowed arena, thousands saw people rise, as numerous fans were flown in harnesses high above the crowd during an extended "Auld Lang Syne."

In the center of it all, dodging balloons and confetti at the FOH position, stood Garry Brown, who's mixed the band for three years and frontman Trey Anastasio's solo gigs for twice as long. Ironically, the solo shows find the singer/guitarist backed by a larger band yet Brown oversees a Midas Pro series console for them, while a Phish concert always finds the engineer mixing the quartet on a Midas XL8: "I've had it two years now, and it's been superb. Sonically, it's excellent; it's had a few hiccups every now and again because it's a computer, but I've had no issues with it—it's very enjoyable to mix on."

Of course, one of the most popular features of digital desks is snapshots, and on typical tours for most bands, they come in handy, retrieving mixes and effect settings at the touch of a button, night after night. With the reigning kings of the jamband world, however, even though they have 77 inputs coming off the stage, using snapshots is a pointless exercise. "I have no idea what they're going to play," chuckled Brown. "I think their [repertoire] is in excess of 600 songs, and there's basically no set list, so it is four guys on stage and the show gets mixed— that's it."

Between the daunting number of songs and a show-taping, set listposting fanbase that even the New York Times described as "obsessively meticulous tabulators," any engineer might find taking the FOH desk reins to be intimidating, but Brown entered that fray from a surprising position: He didn't really know the band's music.

"I've actually never really listened to their stuff apart from live, so I came in with completely no perception of what Phish was. So I've interpreted what they do to what I think it should be, and OK, maybe I've learned over the years that I need to do 'This' at a certain point because that's what the fans are expecting to hear. There are times when I'm mixing now where I feel where the song should be going, so hopefully I'm in tune with what they're doing."

That's no simple task; on most tours, engineers are there to replicate an album as closely as possible, but that yardstick doesn't apply with Phish. "My aim is just to make sure the four guys can be heard—and they're all lead players in some respect. For instance, the bass player's not just laying down the groove; if you listen to each of them individually, they're actually very detailed what they play, so it's just more trying to make sure that what they do is heard and it comes across. Fans have their preferences; some want to hear Mike or Page or Trey. For me, kind of coming in like I wasn't a Phish fan, I



Phish singer/guitarist Trey Anastasio takes in the sights before his Telefunken M81 vocal mic.

approached it in a normal [band mix] way and that wasn't necessarily the right way. I've had to learn as time's gone by, and I've quite changed how I mix it. It's definitely made me reconsider how I mix a band, but as long as the four guys can be heard, then it comes down to personal taste after that, really."

Another thing that comes down to personal taste is miking, which for Phish and the engineers means a selection of microphones from a broad number of manufacturers. "We don't necessarily endorse anybody," said Brown. "We try and pick what's right." That, and they keep experimenting, it turns out. While the band's guitars had long been on Royer R-121L mono ribbon live microphones, they've been replaced— by Royer SF-24L stereo ribbon mics, which are traditionally used as drum overheads. "We switched just to try it and we actually prefer it; me and our recording guy, Jon Altschiller, really like it, so we've stuck with that," said Brown. Vocal mics have also been changed in recent times, moving from Telefunken M80s to M81s, and keyboards are heard via Radial J48 DIs. Drums are captured via a Shure Beta52a and Beta91a on the kick drum, Neumann KM 184s on the snare, and a mixture of KM 184s, an Earthworks DP30/C and Sennheiser MD 421s on the toms. "As for the overheads, we're playing with that," said Brown. "It was the Royer SF-24L but we're now trying other things; the back side of the ribbons was starting to get a bit too much."

Mixing is largely what-you-see-is- what-you-get for the band; Brown noted, "There's no gates on anything and there's very little compression, so it's a very straight-ahead mix. I'm actually trying out the Bricasti M7 digital reverb at the moment on the piano—it's superb—so the piano is maybe reverb-heavy, just to give it width because it's on a pickup, but really that's it."

While Phish has played Madison Square Garden for New Year's Eve numerous times, it's changed audio vendors in recent years, and that in turn changed how the PA for the event was approached. Working with Clair (Litz, PA) now, a full 116 boxes were hung above the stage as the band played in the round at one end of the arena. The system was comprised of Clair's proprietary i-5 line arrays, hung 16 deep on the mains and adjacent i-5B sub arrays. Side hangs were i-5s again, this time 12 deep, and the audience behind the stage was covered with hangs of a dozen i-3s.

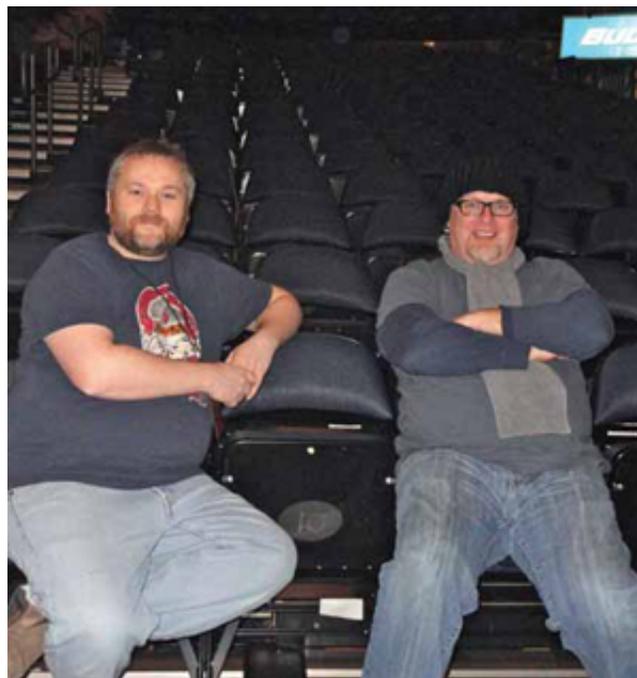
"It's a lot of PA," Brown conceded. "When we first came in here two years ago [with another vendor], we didn't have enough boxes, so we added two boxes to every hang [the following year]. This time with Clair, they had two clients that were in here, so they shot the room for me and based on that and the calculator, we knew the normal hang here is 14 deep for the mains but it wouldn't really give me the vertical coverage I needed or wanted, so we did 16. And their stadium system is 18! It's given us the vertical coverage, but there's a lot of horsepower there, too. Last night, it was extremely thick, which was actually great; it was probably the quietest show that I've done with Phish, but also the thickest show I've done with them. The one song that's probably the loudest, 'Tweezer Reprise,' was only 103 dB, whereas back in the day, it used to probably hit 107-108. I was looking at the meter and looking at Wookie (system engineer Wade 'Wookie' Crawford), saying 'This is only 103? Well, it doesn't sound like 103!'"

Despite all the sound above it, the band relies on straight monitor wedges onstage, all carefully mixed by longtime monitor man, Mark "Bruno" Bradley. Overseeing a Yamaha PM5D console, Bradley was sending mixes to a selection of standard Clair 12AM wedges and four of the company's new CM-22s. "I'm excited about it," said Bradley. "It's a double 12-inch, 2-inch and it sounds awesome, so we're trying those out."

There is no personal monitoring to be found on a Phish stage, with the band sticking to what it knows best. Bradley explained, "I think they tried it a long



Some fans got the ride of their lives on New Year's Eve as they dangled between the crowd and the Clair i-5 line arrays at Madison Square Garden while Phish played "Auld Lang Syne."



FOH engineer Garry Brown (left) and monitor man Mark "Bruno" Bradley pause before the evening's festivities.

time ago, but they've been around for almost 30 years. When they started, there wasn't such a thing, so that's not how they came up, I guess you would say. Plus, they like to hear each other naturally; they like to be as close to each other as possible. If they could, they would set up in a circle facing each other, so they could see and hear each other, but since you have to face the audience, they try to do things as organically as possible."

The choice of using wedges may be the only thing not in flux for a band that creates new spaces within its music every time it takes the stage. "Every song is very different," said Brown. "You can have one song where 'it's the mix' and it's amazing; next song, you've got to completely change it and achieve that again. So I think it's the combination of me and Bruno and the band all working together, and I'm not screwing them up on stage and they can hear themselves; everything pulls together."

Clair
Clairglobal.com

Midas
Midasconsoles.com

Vital Stats

Phish
 Clair (Lititz, PA)

FOH Engineer:
 Garry Brown

Monitor Engineer:
 Mark "Bruno" Bradley

Crew Chief/Systems Engineer:
 Wade "Wookie" Crawford

Monitor System Engineer:
 James Leonti

Tech:
 Don Baker, Henry Fury

FOH Console:
 Midas XL8

Monitor Console:
 Yamaha PM5D

House Speakers:
 Clair i-5, i-5B, i-3, BT-218, P-2

Monitor Speakers:
 Clair CM-22, 12AM

House Amplifiers:
 Clair StakRak with Lab.gruppen PLM

Monitor Amplifiers:
 Lab.gruppen PLM

FOH Equipment/Plug-Ins:
 Bricasti M7; Waves MultiRack Platinum bundle; SPL Transient Designer 4; Crane Song HEDD 192; GML 8200



Monitor engineer Mark "Bruno" Bradley provides audio to three wedges—main mix and stereo left and right—for keyboardist Page McConnell (left) and four—vocals in front, mix in back, keys on one side, rhythm section in the other—for Trey Anistacio (right).

Microphones:

Royer SF-24L; Telefunken M81; Earthworks DP30/C; Neumann KM 184; Radial J48 DI; Shure Beta52a, Beta91a; Sennheiser MD 421



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