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FOH Interview

Robert Scovill



Robert Scovill (right) and Jim Brentlinger. Photo by Andy Tennille

His is one of the names that comes up first when talking about people who are influential in the migration of studio technology to the stage, but it might surprise people to learn that he designed a system that allowed Tom Petty to record two albums playing with two bands as an ensemble as if they were onstage. In other words bringing the stage to the studio.

Although certainly not an opponent of analog audio, he is an outspoken advocate for digital technology who recently pushed back from the studio when he started to sense that fluency with the technology was becoming a replacement for energy toward musical performance and

creative abilities, especially when it came to recording as a musical unit - i.e. the band.

He is a very seasoned road dog who has been touring and recording since he was 19. In 2005 he took a full time gig with a manufacturer (Avid) as a digital console maker and in turn made his exit from the road, citing an incident that got his attention when one of his boys told his first grade class that his dad "worked at the airport" because they were always dropping him off there.

But early this year, Robert Scovill looked down at his ringing cell phone and saw the name "Tom Petty". He took the call (with the approval of his spouse and his kids of course) knowing it would likely be an invitation to go back out on the road. So now he is joining family, full time job and touring. When *FOH* caught up with Robert in Cincinnati, he had his two young sons on the bus with him.

Ironically, we ended up talking quite a bit about methodology vs. technology and how technology by nature is sure to let you down at some point, and how when a tried and tested methodology is in place, it can often offset technological shortcomings. Ironic, because this interview almost did not make it to print. The hard-disc-based video camera I used died right after this and the interview had not been downloaded. Getting it out of the camera and onto the page took some doing...

FOH: So, back on the road, huh?

Robert Scovill: Yes indeed, but as it turns out, my Avid office is just conveniently located on the bus or in a hotel room now.

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Given that I'm a remote employee for Avid, meaning I work from home for them, my day-to-day workflow is not all that different from working from home. Except that there is a few hours of my day dedicated to making a big PA sound right, and then after dinner we do the big rock show. Short of that - pretty much the same. (Laughs.)

Let's start by talking a little about the rig. Obviously, you are on an Avid console. D-Show or Profile?

Yeah, both Greg and I are on D-Show control surfaces with FOH and Stage Rack I/Os. Given the choice, I just prefer the D-Show surface. I have way more hours on it. I think the same goes for Greg in that he has worked with D-Show since our first tour together in 2005 where I was using D-Show at FOH and he was my systems tech.

Is it just because you are used to it?

Yeah, familiarity is certainly part of it, but there are a few features on D-Show that are not on the Profile surface. One being that you can't separate the functions of the output faders from the output encoders on Profile. I really like that feature on D-Show. I also like the higher resolution metering and the dedicated safe switches per processing channel. I also prefer the Assignable Channel Section on D-Show - it feels a little more logical for my brain, but that said, there are so many fans of Profile out there. It's just great to have some choices in your tactile surface while still using the same I/O.

What was the driving force in deciding to go with the K-1 rig?

Well, the main force certainly was listening to it. I contacted a couple of engineers who had worked on it who were also very familiar with V-DOSC and they gave it glowing reviews. So I knew I had to get in front of it. So I contacted L-Acoustics and we arranged a day-long evaluation with Dave Rat at Rat Sound up in Ventura County. We set up matching stacks of V-DOSC and L-Acoustics Subs with K1 and K1 Subs and did some A-B comparisons with identical listening material. The difference was very impressive, and in many ways, it was like taking a blanket off of V-DOSC. That was difficult for me to process, because I still felt that V-DOSC offered the best response I have ever heard from a PA, certainly from 1000Hz out. But when I say taking the blanket off, I mean it not necessarily purely from the frequency response angle, I mean it regarding coverage and control, especially in the horizontal domain. K1 is much more linear and is a true 90 degrees of coverage. In addition, it offers what I describe as vastly improved "dynamic resolution." By this, I mean when you are evaluating program through it; be it an individual input or inputs with in a mix, all the cues are there to tell you that dynamic adjustments need to be made at the input stage on the console etc. I don't think I have ever experienced that to the level that I have experienced it with K1. I mean it is really something to behold to change an attack time or a release time on an

input in the midst of a dense mix and clearly hear the effects of it. The only time I ever experienced that to this degree is while mixing in the studio in a very controlled listening space. It speaks to detail not only in frequency response, but in dynamic response of the system.

How has the greater precision - not only of this rig but of most modern PAs - affected the show, both for you and the artist?

One of the real challenges with line source in the early days was to get the artist used to hearing what was now coming from the back of the PA as well as what was coming back from the house. Because the pattern control was so dramatically improved compared to horizontally arrayed PA systems, in the beginning, artists had the sense that the house mix might be muddy, because they could hear very little of the mid-range or top end in the PA, when in fact in front of the PA, just the opposite was true. This in turn put a bit more pressure on the monitor guy, because the artist was going to lean a little harder on them. But given that gain before feedback was so dramatically improved with line source, it seemed to work out very well.

One of the other challenges that reared its head with line source is that, acoustically, the line source acts much more like a point source than horizontally arrayed PA systems. With that being the case, what ended up coming back to the artist on stage was much more like echo than the diffuse-sounding reverb created by point and shoot arrays. I think this is particularly a challenge in small short-throw rooms, like theaters and smaller, where the echo times are very short and in turn can really color the sound of the PA system in the space, as opposed to point and shoot systems, which are much more diffuse in nature, and their subsequent excitement of the room is more like reverb. You have to be careful with it and really balance your tradeoffs, because you could easily just go into a room with the mindset, "Hey, let's just put up the longest line source we can in here so we can achieve the best pattern control down to the lowest frequency." Sounds like a great motivation until you realize that your directivity becomes so good that in the low end, or even the bottom end, you've actually introduced low frequency echo in the space. Not cool if the program material has a lot of rhythmic content in it.

Working for Avid, I think most people assume you are all about Venue - which I know you love and are something of an evangelist for. But I hear that your classes are less about gear than about method.

Well, I do believe VENUE is a really great product, and it alone is responsible for driving some changes in live sound workflows, along with the perception of the viability of digital mixing for live sound. That said, what I try to promote not only in my seminars, but also for curriculums that I have consulted on is, to find a way to teach "concept," not "console." When you leave one of these seminars, or graduate from one of these schools, in regard to skill as a mixer, it should not really matter much which console you end up mixing on. You have to be able to strive toward the sound you are looking for, and in turn operate whatever console is in front of you to those ends. In many curriculums, what is missing is that the course ends up

being focused on "how to operate this console." Well, guess what? Consoles are a rapidly evolving piece of technology, and what you are mixing on today will be gone in relatively no time, especially now with digital consoles.

What I teach and preach is that you need to learn the mental as well as operational skills as a mixer. The first time you hear a piece of music that you will be mixing, or hear and evaluate a single input and think, "Ah, I want to do this with it," or "I'll need to use this mic on that" you ARE mixing, right then and there, before you've ever laid a hand on the console. The console and any of its associated processing are just a means to that end. Some consoles are just a better means than others. For me, VENUE is the best means to that end where we sit right now in live sound.

Is that because of the way the recording process has changed and the fact that most of the schools out there are really more recording schools that have added a live sound component?

Well, I suppose that could be a natural progression in the schools, given that their focus is primarily on recording, and in an effort to broaden their appeal and their student base, they've added sound reinforcement to their curriculum offerings. I find it interesting, ya know, that Greg, the band's monitor engineer, actually moved into that position after mixing monitors for Tom and the band during the recording of the new record. We came up with a system where the monitor console was set up like an old split recording console, where the front end was going directly to Pro-Tools and the return path was the source of the inputs going to the band for monitors, etc. While the band is playing and using the monitors, Ryan, the bands engineer and producer, taps into the Pro-Tools system with an ICON surface, and is solely focused on mixing "in the box" while the band is performing.

Really? With a Venue as the front end? I'm gonna have to go get it now. My God. It's back to the days of Stax with a real band playing in the room.

Yeah, it's a very efficient, very cool way to work. They did like 17 songs in just over 20 days or so, and they did it in an environment where they are very comfortable and, most importantly, don't feel like they are in the studio with the pressures that come with it. The first time we tried it was on the Mudcrutch record for Petty and his original band, and I had a pretty good feeling that if that was successful, a Tom and the Heartbreakers record would not be all that far behind.

I'm actually really proud of setting this in motion, and of the courage that the band and Ryan their producer showed in committing to it. I mean, it let them focus on creating "as an ensemble," and doing it in a way that totally served the music and, most importantly, the process of creating music as a unit. The idea was to capture moments in time and assemble that in to a coherent record of music as opposed to capturing little slivers of time and assembling them into a song. The fact that we used digital technology to do that is, in a weird way, counter cultural by today's music production standards. I hear

people from time to time try to blame technology like Pro-Tools for the sterile nature of many performances in today's recordings. But in the end, you can really tear that accusation down. I mean, I don't want this to sound convenient because I work for Avid, but you can't blame the technology for that. You have to take a cold hard look at the folks making the production decisions and, in turn, choosing to use the technology in a way that serves the musical ends we are hearing today. Those choices are not made by the box, but by the person who pushed the "on" button.

Speaking of technology, I know some who are worried that the role of a really good tech is becoming less valuable as technology does a lot of what they used to be counted on for.

Well, there are certainly two sides to that story, and I don't think we'll ever lose the need for qualified people. I remember saying this in my AES keynote address some time back when discussing the state of the industry and the skill sets needed with today's advanced PA systems. "Folks, we have the modern day 'roadie' employing the cosine formula on a daily basis when setting up the PA system. These are heady times, people." In terms of actual processing potential for PA systems, we may not really be all that far from PA systems that are "self aware." Meaning they go up in the air and they use some method to evaluate what they are, what kind of acoustic space they reside in, where they are in the array and what they are responsible for in the space in terms of coverage, etc. Now does that mean we'll need less-qualified people in the field to manage these systems? In my opinion, far to the contrary, you'll need *more* qualified

people with broader skill sets. We just have to ensure they don't lose their basic audio skills along the way. Much like fighter pilots in the Vietnam era who were taught to rely on smart missiles fired from their jets at long distance. Over time they lost their dog fighting skills and had to be retrained in how to handle themselves and survive without the smart weapons. We'll find ourselves in a similar situation over time, I bet. When we rely on technology as a replacement for basic knowledge and methodology, we'll be heading for some hard times. But I digress back to an earlier question.

I have a friend in the tech business who tells all of his clients, "Remember, it is a machine. It is GOING to break."

Well, yes, we talk about this all the time with digital consoles, don't we? Because we know at the core somewhere is a CPU with an OS of some sort. I have always said to people from day one with VENUE, we should never tell anyone that it will never crash. It's just an insane and frankly disingenuous thing to say. What we HAVE to say, and be able to back up, is that we have the absolute best response to a crash compared to anyone out there. Last time I checked, the mortality rate on hard drives was 100 percent. So what that requires is a mindset that is "on the case" about regular maintenance, and that hard drive replacement is on the regularly scheduled list of things to do. It's simply an adjusted set of values and the skills that come with it.

We have to wrap this up. Any closing thoughts? Philosophical musings? More Scovill-isms?

That's JUST what we all need. (Laughs). How about this one. It is the tag line for all of our seminars. "Listen like a fan. Mix like a pro."

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