

P.A. GEAR TO GO

BY KEVIN YOUNG

The early portion of a band's career is an endless series of choices: When to tour? Who to trust to represent you? How to represent yourself? The last is the most important – at the heart of it, how well you represent yourself will determine your success.

Have the basics in place – no amount of gear will make up for it if you don't. Competition is steep – hooks count, both to get the gig and get interest. There's no magic bullet, no one formula. It comes down to great material and strong performances. Obviously the simplest and most obvious advice about how to shine on stage is "don't suck." If you can't follow that advice – and, let's face it, a good many bands can't – there's not much that will help you.

It doesn't matter what kind of music you play. It doesn't matter whether you're playing covers or original material. For any act the stage is the place you make your case in front of the people who are most important to your bottom line. Your audience is a vital resource whose attention and entertainment dollar are already stretched thin. Anything you can do to get an edge on the competition helps. If you are good, if you are compelling on stage, sometimes you can get that edge with a little extra production.

SORTING OUT WHAT YOU NEED

IN REHEARSAL

One of the best purchases a young band can make is a small practice P.A.. Before you hit the stage you need to be well rehearsed. Having a small system for rehearsal is useful if you're in a space with no P.A. or just plain lousy equipment. If you're moving around from rehearsal hall to rehearsal hall, having your own gear also helps for consistency. If you do have your own lockout rehearsal space, chances are it's cheap and doesn't come with a P.A..

There's a side benefit to buying a small system that goes well beyond being able to hear your vocals. It feels more like you're in business with people when everyone's invested something in the project. If you think you've learned something about people by spending a lot of time with them playing, you should try spending money with them. Co-ownership of this type of gear is a good idea. If the band breaks up you can sell it and split the proceeds and if a member leaves it's easier for you to buy out their share than to start over if the P.A.'s owner packs up and moves to greener pastures.

ON STAGE

Hauling your own production isn't always feasible, it's also not usually necessary for a new original band. One of the first questions you need to determine is when and if it's worth the expense?

When it comes to getting solid advice about sound reinforcement, you can't do much better than long time Red Hot Chili Peppers Engineer, Dave Rat. In addition to mixing bands like The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rat has worked with a laundry list of successful touring acts: Blink 182, The Offspring, Rage Against The Machine, Black Flag, Sonic Youth, Soundgarden, L7, and Pearl Jam. He's also the owner of Oxnard, CA-based Rat Sound and knows audio production inside and out – not just from running the gear, but from providing it, designing it, and building it.

That all-consuming passion you have for making music? Easily matched by his passion for problem solving, innovation, and creating the optimum system for live sound. Rat's passion drives his career and is the force behind Rat Sound's journey to international success from a company that got its start doing back yard gigs for beer and petty cash.

"Sorting through what to buy is where it gets tricky," he says. "When making purchasing decisions in the sound world I use five main factors to help me see things clearly: size, weight, cost, sound quality, and maximum volume."

He suggests weighing the above factors against each other when it comes to your particular application, putting them in order of importance as they pertain to the application you intend the gear for. "If you're independently wealthy, travelling in a minivan, the order will be vastly different than if you're eating macaroni and cheese and putting together a system for a giant old warehouse," he says.

Upgrading your live sound isn't necessarily just a question of whether to buy or rent a P.A.. In many cases hauling your own system is far more trouble than it's worth. You can get an edge by bringing a small amount of outboard gear instead.

"There is a vast difference in quality between the lower line compressors and gates

vs. the higher-end stuff," Rat cautions. "For me, a super compact travel rack would have a quad comp, or two, like the BSS DPR404, a Klark Teknik DN514 Quad gate, and a multi-effects unit like one of the Lexicon PCMs." A good selection of good gear goes a long way. "I'm not a big fan of all the super expensive, pretty gear with big knobs. I want it compact, functional, and great sounding."

After you've sorted out what you want, what you need, and what you're going to use it for, you have to decide whether you're going to rent or buy.

"On the smaller scales I think buying is the way to go," says Rat. "Set your sights for success and since you will be a successful band, you will be playing lots of gigs."

If you do actually need a P.A. to gig, you can use a small system, in rooms that have nothing, augment it with rentals when necessary. It doesn't hurt to team up with a friend that likes to do sound, either, Rat suggests. "Pulling graduates from a sound school that are starving for experience may be a cool line to follow as well. Just like when you put the band together, you searched out a set of people with certain musical talents, keep going with that plan and bring in the techs as well."

Bear in mind that more expensive gear may save you money in the long run, he says. "If you buy good quality and reputable gear, it should hold its value," says Rat. "If you go too cheap, you may take a big financial hit if you have to resell it to upgrade. So add that into your research and see what the re-sale and depreciation values are."

The flip side to this is that the more successful you are, the more production you potentially need, and the more sense it makes to rent. "On larger scales renting is the way to go unless you plan on touring over 250 days a year." The more high-end a system is, the higher the percentage of the year it has to work to be cost-effective."

Being well informed about the options available is important whether you're renting or buying. In addition to checking out manufacturer's sites, bending the ears of engineers you come across when gigging, you might like to take a look at the Rat Sound site as well – www.ratsound.com. "Quite a few years ago I started a free message board with the goal of offering the information and guidance I wish I had had when I started." What makes the Rat board unique is that it provides a productive and useful forum of helpful peers, Rat explains. Where the user has the ability to ask any question they wish "without fear of being slammed by know-it-alls."

ONE MORE PIECE OF ADVICE FOR GEAR LOVERS

"Never sell your first P.A., because you may miss it forever," says Rat. "I wish I still had some of the gear I have owned over the years. My first system was two 12" monitors, a BGW 250W power amp and a cassette deck with a pair of mic inputs for a mixer with a "Y" cable on the outputs. The main downfall of the setup was that you had to record the show to make the P.A. work and the P.A. would shut off when the tape reached the end.

"I did sound for an amazing show that Social Distortion played in the bowl of a skateboard park in Venice Beach, CA. I charged \$30 but got stiffed on payment and was given two blown JBL 8" speakers as payment instead. Funny thing is I was bummed but now, looking back, I would gladly take the JBL 8's."

NEEDS VS. WANTS

Deciding what route to go – practice P.A., full system, or select outboard gear – ultimately depends on where you play. And where you play often depends on where you can actually make money. Most people who make a living as musicians do so with a variety of drastically different gigs and Canadian guitarist Gerry Finn is a prime example of this.

Finn started his career playing with metal acts Helix and The Killer Dwarves in the late 1980s, but while based in Los Angeles, CA Finn also took a gig playing with a cover act that did disco covers for clubs and corporate gigs. Over the years he's also taught, worked as a session player and played with a



KEN FRIESEN

On tour something will break ... usually more than one thing and right when you need it.

Back up everything you can afford to

– particularly on things that can easily go missing: power supplies, adapters, and cables of all varieties. If a piece of gear has been acting up for any reason, hoping for the best won't fix it. Eventually vibrations, a glass of beer, or Murphy and his cursed, all-pervading law will strike.

Organize your gear. The more accessible everything you need is, the more likely your show will go off without a hitch. Put your spares in a specific bag, drawer, road case, or lunch box – the same place every day – extra cables won't do any good if they're in the van, at your hotel, or 10 hours behind you at last night's venue.

Don't skimp on road cases. No hard case can guarantee the safety of what's inside it, but you can cut down on risk by getting the best you can afford. How much padding or shock mounting is up to you, and depends on how fragile the gear in question is. For the most part, going to a custom case manufacturer is a good idea. Generally, they're not that much more expensive. Even if they are pricey, it's worth every penny – if only for superior latches, hinges, locks, and other hardware. Like any contractor, get two or three different quotes before you choose a company and compare their materials and hardware to what their competitors use.

Finally, label and number your cases, even if you only have a few cases. It helps when you're explaining to a local crew where to put things when you're setting up, it's easy to identify if it's left behind, and it's less likely to be mistakenly loaded into the wrong vehicle.

