

## Down The Backstretch

Finishing up and reflections on success

By Dave Rat

**I**n this finale to his ongoing series, the author completes the saga of directing sound for a recent European tour by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Did he end up in the clink for SPL violations, and was a safe return to “terra firma” in the U.S. in the offing? - Keith Clark

**Day 20, Monday – Cardiff, U.K. (off day):** After some meetings in London, I hopped a train to Cardiff, where I ran into Tommy Winston. How cool is that, to be out and about in far away lands and see old friends? Turns out, he lives nearby and was just coming off tour.

This is just the second time I’ve seen him in the 12 years since we met on Lollapalooza, when he was tour manager for Lush. At that time, I’d

taken him “venue fishing” way back then – kind of a “guerrilla fishing” method applied to all bodies of water. Barb-less catch and release, minimum impact and applicable at ponds and golf courses worldwide (hence the collapsible fishing poles in my bags).

Back then, Tommy had told me that someday he would take me fishing the English way. More than a decade later, tomorrow is that day!

**Day 21, Tuesday – Cardiff (load-in day):** Tommy picks me up at 10 am and off we go through rolling Welsh countryside up to a small fishing area. So amazingly wonderful! All the stress of the tour and struggling to stay up on the world back home slips away. We swap plenty of great old stories –

it’s truly magic when things line up.

**Day 22, Wednesday – Cardiff (show day):** Got to find Scott, get cable, and then find Nick the Fly as well as small screwdrivers, an MP3 player and a desk to work on. Yes, it happened again: dead laptop. This time, though, it’s all fairly easy. Except the finding Scott part.

In the production office, I note that Wi-Fi is probably the biggest advance in touring technology since the sleepable tour bus. Today there’s a line of chairs down the hall, filled with lapping crew. (Although I must note that my Wi-Fi PC card, combined with laptop hibernation, seems to be the cause of my recent computer instabilities. At least I hope so.)

Stadiums don’t really seem all that big by this point; it feels more like a large arena gig tonight. It’s strange how quickly one can acclimate. I remember clearly my earliest arena shows, their largeness, and how overly reverberant they sounded.

Now, a decent arena is fun to work in, although I do find that the resonant frequency of an indoor venue has a huge impact. All arenas resonate to some degree, and I currently prefer the resonance to be in the 125 Hz to 160 Hz range.

Closed-roof stadiums, on the other hand, seem to be resonating at about 70 Hz to 100 Hz, which is a bit more of an issue to deal with in trying to get the sounds I prefer.

Tonight’s show was awesome. Chad kicked over the drums; we have no more spare tom-tom mics, so we’ll have to bring in more for the next shows. (Those little phantom powered



The author heading toward the end of the line... Feeling a little dazed?

# Rat Tales

mics can make a very big sound when their tiny heads get torn off!)

Two more gigs to go.

**Day 23, Thursday – London (load-in day):** After a short overnight drive, we arrive at 7 am. Bye-bye tour bus!

It's Internet day. High-speed access in the hotel room is only 20 English pounds for 24 hours (\$40 U.S. or so). Got to love the weak American dollar while shacking up in the second most expensive city on the planet.

Spent most of the day catching up on the infinite stream of e-mails. I finally make it out for a meal by 3 pm and then hang with Ben Harper's sound crew. They're doing Glastonbury Festival later this week. Besides seeing friends on the road, I can also tell you that being in an English pub when England loses soccer game is an exciting experience!

**Day 24, Friday – London (show day):** Relaxed and fun show, turns out the concerns about SPL hassles and possible "incarceration" were unfounded.

Reflecting on the tour, it seems that our theories for consistency from venue to venue across the country have largely played out successfully. We've been able to leave, fully loaded out, play elsewhere and then return with the sound still the same. Each show has proven to be "just another day." Very little stress.

**Day 25, Saturday – Santiago, Spain**



Cardiff - As the band rocks on for the last show in Cardiff, turns out the SPL concerns were for naught.

**(travel day):** An 8:30 am lobby call in London, and we're off to Spain for one more show. On the bus to the hotel, I take a look at the itinerary and figure out what most of the people on this tour actually do:

- Eight travel in "band world" (four who rock and four more who keep "those who rock" smiling and happy);
- Four have the word "production" by their name so I assume they "produce" things (logic – gotta love it!);
- Five run around stage and look cool while handling back-line and monitors;
- Five hack their way to FOH each day through the crowd (sound, lights, video and techs);
- Twelve drive big, heavy things around;
- Five "advance" sound, rig, video and \$\$\$;
- Sixteen work on the Splinter

Films video crew;

- Nine handle Neg Earth "red team" lights;
- Ten more handle Neg Earth "blue team" lights (no idea why blue gets an extra);
- Six for laser and LEDs
- Three on carpentry and the added benefit of rigging;
- Two handle clothing and battling bootleggers;

The list concludes with two food people, a security guy who keeps us safe, and, of course, a main "money guy." (The duties of a few more names on the list remain a mystery.)

**Day 26, Saturday – Santiago (show day):** Walking into a 30,000-capacity gig, and find it feels like a toy. Concrete seats, and the big video walls are noticeably gone. Just two "banana hangs" (loudspeaker arrays) needed, and it's not until show time that the somewhat empty and depressing feeling subsides – just seems so wrong to finish such a grand tour with a sputter.

When the band comes on, however, it feels like a nightclub, with the energy of the crowd driving them to a warm and powerful finale. I was flat-out wrong – this is the perfect way to end the tour, with a soft, familiar landing.

Time to go home.

**Day 27, Sunday – Europe to U.S. (final travel day):** I never did do laundry once the entire tour, instead choosing the brute force method of buying new clothes combined with wearing free SWAG. Paid the price in not being able to close the suitcases,



What a way to spend a day off!

so jettisoned everything that I remotely have the slightest dislike for.

The dreaded 6:15 am lobby call is followed by three separate flights over the course of 24 hours to get me back to my living room in California.

Never did touch the “unfinished work” that I brought with me; instead, I scrambled to keep up on e-mail and write the article to share this experience. (Oh, and did some rock shows as well.)

Ahhh – finally arrive at LAX with overstuffed luggage, then go through customs and immigration. Hugs, and goodbye, and the car we ordered to take us home is nowhere in sight. So Nick the Fly and I grab a cab instead – \$62 cab fare, and I only have \$60 plus some funny colored money picked up along the way.

After a quick search through the house turns up no further funds, the cabbie just tells me not to worry it. Home at last.

**Next Day – Starbucks, North Hollywood:** Its 7:30 am, nothing in the fridge and my car is in an unknown location, maybe at the shop getting repaired. A couple of past-due notices in the mail, the registration on my motorcycle has expired and the new sticker is hopefully at the shop.

Put some air in the bicycle tires

and move along to the ATM and then Starbucks, one of the few places I feel comfortable, mostly likely because it's common to the dual worlds I live in. Reflection time.

What I set out to do on this tour was to mix series of very large shows, enjoy the benefits of carrying full production, while using local vendors due to logistics. As with any tour, there was the expected “ramp-up time” where all the various departments (hopefully) find their rhythms and harmonious interactions.

The most important goals to achieve were sonic consistency, and make steady progress to the point where each show could be improved in comparison to the previous one. There just was no time to start from scratch in each city.

Carrying processors, having a skilled advance tech and matching the system configurations now simply seem to be the obvious solutions. My biggest regret is that I didn't force the issue of subwoofer placement for an even higher level of consistency. Many of the vendors had a hard time getting their heads around the non-conventional sub layout, and I wish I had pressed harder.

PA height is another variable that could have been addressed more fully. I look back on the days when I used to fight for the mix position to

be 125 feet from stage, and then smile at the thought of my complaining of being too close at less than 200 feet!

I've been receiving many kind words for writing this article and that's made the effort more than worthwhile. I'll sign off now, ready to immerse myself in catching up on a month of backlog from being away, all the while pretending I'm a normal human.

Until the next tour. ■

*Dave Rat heads up California-based Rat Sound. If you have comments or questions for Dave, he's monitoring the Rat Sound message board accessible at [www.ratsound.com](http://www.ratsound.com).*

### Dave's Big Thank You List

*Nick the Fly, FOH tech* - Amazing (BSS) Soundweb programming, calm in the storm and going above and beyond;

*Tony Smith, advance system tech* – Didn't see his first Peppers show until halfway through the tour! His organization and advance work was critical;

*Bill Rahmy, tour manager* – Worked with the author's “unconventional ways” while orchestrating a successful tour on a grand scale;

*Stage Humans* – For nearly flawless sounds and inputs every show, as well as their exceptional patience,

*Red Hot Chili Peppers* – For playing music the author still loves and enjoys after 15 years of mixing;

And, the sound companies who support the tour:

Britannia Row - UK

Wigwam - UK

StagePro - Netherlands

DTBH - France

Satis & Fy - Germany

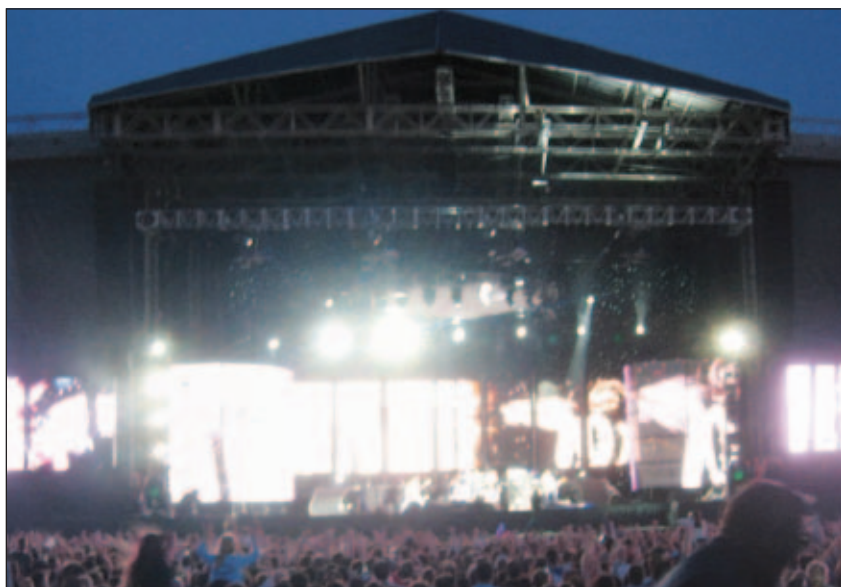
Agora - Italy

Austria - Spain

FOR Music/KLEMM - Vienna

Twin Cam Audio/High Level - Spain

And finally – Peter Mench and all at Q-Prime, as well as LACOUSTICS, for the great tools and innovative advice.



*Toward the end, a gig for 30,000 can seem more like a nightclub, even at 200 feet from the stage.*