

by Greg McVeigh

I'LL SLEEP IN SEPTEMBER

THE TOURING LIFE IS HARDER THAN YOU THINK

Editor's note: *With much of the country still firmly in the grip of winter, a little blast of summer might be what is needed right about now. For the past couple of summers, Greg McVeigh, who is currently marketing director of QSC Audio Products of Costa Mesa, California, has used his vacation time to go on the road as part of the road crew for Jimmy Buffett & the Coral Reefer Band. Some vacation! What follows are Greg's "memoirs" from his maiden voyage on the road. We hope his regular job is a little easier!*

My first night on the bus was a nightmare: getting into a bunk bed on a moving (or stationary, for

that matter) tour bus can be tricky. My assigned bunk was a top one and I had no idea how to get into it without making a complete fool of myself and waking up everyone else. That first night I sat up all night watching as each crew member—all veterans—gracefully hopped into his bunk. Finally, when all were asleep, I gathered my courage, my shoes and my Corona beer and ventured forth to my bunk. Unfortunately, my smooth, graceful hop turned into a sick, desperate lurch as the bus made a left turn. "I'm sorry I stepped on your chin," I said to the lighting director. "It won't happen again. Yeah, I'm the guy who's the salesman."



Jimmy Buffett takes it easy while his road crew gets blisters and eats bad food.

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But we're getting ahead of the story here. I survived Jimmy Buffett's "Flordays" tour. In fact, I not only survived it, I was asked back to work on his next tour, which I did. Not bad for a guy who couldn't figure out how to get into his bunk. It was the summer of 1986 that I realized I would never be able to tie a necktie properly on a daily basis. So I quit my job and threw corporate opportunity to the wind. My friend Ross Ritto at Sound Image suggested that a summer on tour working on Jimmy Buffett's sound crew might be just the thing to recharge my salesman's batteries. He was right.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

9 a.m.—A Wake-Up Call From Joey

Last night we were in Denver at Red Rocks Amphitheater. After the equipment is torn down—about 2 a.m.—we drive by bus to Kansas City for the next show at Sandstone Amphitheater. The trip is a long one; some of the guys on the crew sleep on the bus all

night while others play cards in the back lounge (or so they tell me). Somewhere between 6 and 7 a.m. we check into our hotel. I fall asleep around 7 a.m. thinking, "This is the life! Great hotels, fine food, nice towels. Sleep all day. Play all night. Life doesn't get any better than this!" But then at 9 a.m. comes the call from Joey. Shit.

Joe Ciccoline is Jimmy Buffett's production manager; sort of the "keeper of the crew." "Lobby in 30 minutes," he says. So suddenly I'm back on the bus with all my friends. The bus call is for 9:30 and we're expected to be on stage by 10 setting up for that night's show. The ride to the show is usually a quiet one. In some ways it's similar to a baseball team riding to the ballpark wondering what will happen that day.

9:45 a.m.—Breakfast at the Gig

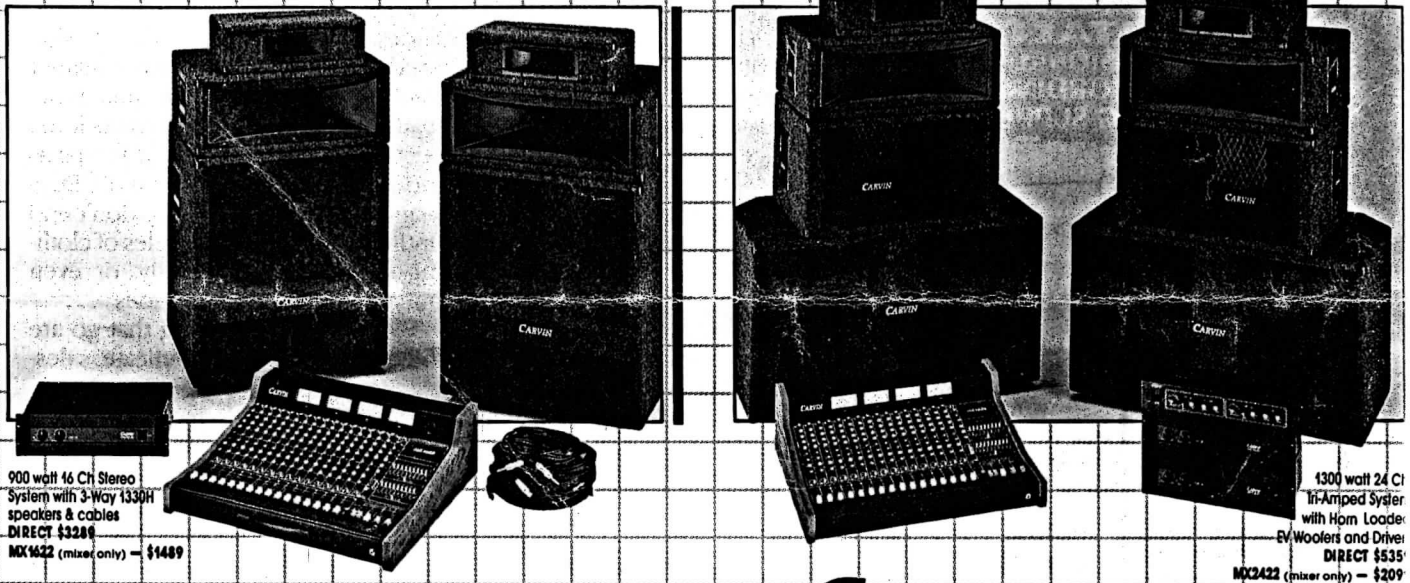
At every show on the tour, the promoter provides breakfast for the crew. This food ranges in quality from superb (bacon, eggs and salsa in Denver), to rancid (bug infested cold cereal in Biloxi.) The first meal often

sets the tone for the rest of the day. Donuts with little multi-colored rainbow sprinkles were many promoters' idea of a gourmet breakfast. The lighting crew has to eat fast because their truck will be unloaded first.

10 a.m.—Meet with the House Electrician

It is my first job of the day to provide the venue's house electrician with details of both sound and lighting power requirements. He will receive the tails (Cam Loc to bare wire) for sound and lights. Most venues have a stage left feed for sound and a separate feed for lights on stage right. In addition to the main power feeds, a feed for motor power is run for the motors that are used to fly the lighting truss and the sound system. At the end of the day, the lighting crew will collect all of the tails and pack them.

By 10:30, the first of two trucks is unloaded and the lights are assembled on stage. During the time that the lights are being built, rigging points for sound are being determined and executed under the direction of Ross Ritto, owner of Sound



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Image, and house engineer Don Jarvis. Every hall is different so the rigging arrangements differ daily.

11:30 a.m.—Unload the Second Truck

Once the lighting truss is raised to head height, the truck containing the sound system and band gear is unloaded. Local stagehands take the equipment off of the truck and are directed by Buffett crew member Johnny D. After the truck is unloaded, the local crew is divided up to work with the Buffett crew on various tasks. A blue Mylar floor is rolled out, keyboard and percussion risers are assembled, and AC distro with feeders for stage right (band) and stage left (power) are run. My part of this controlled chaos was to run the AC distro. One of the highlights of the tour for me was clearing up the mysteries of electrical power. I never knew how the heck all of that stuff was plugged into the local power! Suffice to say that it isn't done with one long orange extension cord.

The late morning and early afternoon is spent unloading and placing

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stage monitors (12 in all), matching microphone stands to microphone bases to microphone clips, and finally to microphones, and interfacing the on-stage monitor system.

2 p.m.—Lunch

The trick here is to get to the lunchroom just before the local crew attacks

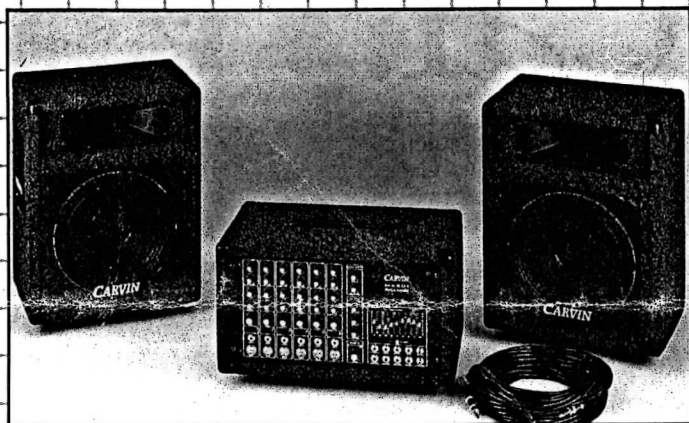
the spread! Why we have to go through this exercise, I really don't know—generally the local boys want meat and potatoes, bread and Jell-O. We tend to stick to the lighter foods i.e. tuna and salads. Lunch for us is quick; a lot of work remains.

3:30 p.m.—Stacks and House

By this time the PA cabinets are being raised into the air. The house console is being hooked into the input and output snakes. The band gear is set up and by 4 p.m. a system check is conducted. A CD is played over the house system and Ross turns on and off every power amp in the entire system. Once satisfied that all is well with the amps, full range program music is played and Don EQs the house.

4:30 p.m.—Line Check

This is the time of day when every input to the house console is checked. This is generally an exciting, if unfulfilled, time for me. My job is to play every instrument and speak into every microphone. As an ex-musician, the chance to play Jimmy Buffett's guitars



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or Matt Betton's drums over a huge concert sound system is a dream come true! My joy is usually short-lived, though, as Don generally needs less than a strum to get the sound that he is looking for. I plan to issue a Jimmy Buffett/Greg McVeigh *Sound Check Greatest Hits Album*. Look for it at stores near you! After all systems have been thoroughly checked and re-checked, the remaining flooring is laid out over the exposed monitor and subsnake cables. With 12 musicians onstage, quantities of Absolut, Corona and Mount Gay rum being consumed, and a new interest in wireless systems, the surface of the stage needed to be as clean and obstacle-free as possible.

5 p.m.—Dinner

I am sick of talking about food. Some is good and some is atrocious.

6:30 p.m.—Doors Open

The crowd filters in. In some cities it's faster than in others. Once a decent sized crowd is in, music is played through the house system. On this tour, the sound crew has a large part in selecting what music will be played. Lately we have been partial to the new Warren Zevon album, as well as Joe Walsh and Level 42. As showtime nears, a CD of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* is played. The crowd responds to the timeless music, as the band prepares to go on stage.

8 p.m.—SHOWTIME!

This is the time when *the band* works. I spend the first three songs onstage watching for any problems. I am sorry to say that I rarely had any unusual situations once the show started. The band, crew and organization are professionals who have been together for over a decade. Because of this togetherness and teamwork, disasters are rare. I have been through the Ross Ritto course on the Seven Critical Points (or is it eight?) on a microphone stand. I made it a personal crusade to see that none of the 40 or so mic stands fell down. The bottom line is that the show opened on time, the people loved it, and few problems were incurred during it.

10:30 p.m.—Show is Over

After the first encore of each show,

Jimmy informs the crew if he wants to play one more or two more songs. As soon as the final song is completed, tear down begins. The first thing that I do each night is take Jimmy's microphone out of its stand and put it away. You'd be surprised how many well meaning fans want to jump on stage and take that mic. Once that is done, Joey once again assigns members of the local crew to work with us to dismantle the show and pack it in the trucks. The basic idea is to undo in a few hours what has taken eight hours to assemble. The idea is to tear down all of the band gear and sound onstage so that the lights can come down and be packed. Setting up the show is akin to running the Boston Marathon: intense, yet slow and methodical, pacing yourself for a long night. Tearing down the show is a sprint. How fast can you go for a short distance? The sooner you pack it up, the sooner you can get on the bus and head to the next city.

1:30 a.m.—Let's Get Out of Here!

A movie, the back room with the card players, maybe some pizzas, and a bottle of white wine for Kino and me. We'll be in Houston in the morning!

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS & ASSORTED MEMORIES

Shoes. God, you live in them! What used to be trendy \$85 white leather Reebok uppers become miserable leather leeches that want to suck the very life out of your feet. It seems as though you never take them off. Days begin at 9 a.m. and usually don't end until 2 or 3 a.m. Other articles of clothing can be changed daily, or even hourly, but those damn shoes....

Fingers. The first thing that go are the fingertips. Those delicate salesman's order-writing fingertips. Cables, microphones, stands, monitors, *everything* is labelled with little pieces of gaffer's tape. Tear it off the roll and then tear it down the middle into neat little pieces. After hours of this activity my fingers were a blistered mess. It's a great way to cure nail-biting.

Comedy and Catering. Often, the food was so bad at these shows that the crew decided to deduct \$500 from the catering budget to hire a local comedian to entertain us at dinner. These shows were a highlight of the tour, with the comedy ranging in

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phones in some of the studios. "They weigh me down too much, and put too much pressure on my ears," he says. "I like to use the smaller Walkman-type phones, but they just don't have the power that most cue systems put out. I wanted something to cut the power down. So I took apart one of the cue boxes from a friend's studio, analyzed the circuit and copied it into a miniature box. All it has is left and right volume controls, a stereo/mono switch and a mini jack for my small headphones. I made a cable with a mini jack on one end and a standard 3-conductor jack on the other. I plug that into the cue system and then I just clip my little box on my belt. It's really nothing but a copy of the standard box. It works OK, except on some of my synth patches the low frequencies don't always come through as well as I'd like. It also works well when I'm working with a string section and I want to hear a live sound as well as the mix."

Conni Ellisor, a contractor and leader of the A Strings (a recording string section in Nashville) says her members bring their own headphones to sessions. "I find that [having your own phones] eliminates one of the unknown factors," she notes. "You have so many things to deal with: the studios' cue system, the way the engineer works and differences in the kinds of tracks you're working with. It's like listening to the same monitoring system if you're an engineer. Most of us prefer Sennheisers. They seem to have

the best bass response.

"I prefer to have the engineer run the cue system in split mono mode with strings on one side and the track, particularly the rhythm and pitch instruments, on the other. Then we have the left earpiece off so we can hear the sound of our own instruments. Not all contractors agree about this, but I think it's important to have vocals in the mix, because a vocalist can shift the pitch center and I need to be aware of that. I like to monitor the strings, not only so I can hear my section, but because in most studios you don't have a sense of the room when you're recording, and you can get that through the cue system. And I like to hear the strings without any echo. We very much need to have our own individual control over the cue mix because different people in the section need to hear different things.

"I believe that the job of my section is to play as one instrument, as a keyboard would. So you can see that it's very important for each of us to have control over what we're hearing on the cue system. We tune from the cellos, who get their pitch from the bass, so we ask for more cellos and violas in our mix for that reason."

The lowly animal is stirring. ■

Paul Potyten is associate editor of Mix, and co-leads the progressive Latin band, Canoneo, which is currently working on their third album. He also composes, arranges and produces music for commercial and industrial applications in his spare time, if any. He is not related to Paul Motian.

SOUND ON STAGE

—FROM PAGE 124, TOURING LIFE

quality from awful to hilarious (like the food). I believe this was a first among touring crews.

The Biloxi Shrimp Incident. After a series of disastrous meals in Biloxi, Mississippi, a local contact with a shrimp boat was hired to provide us with a fresh shrimp dinner. (What else would Jimmy Buffett's crew want?) The shrimp was delivered to the venue in time for dinner, as promised. A crew member who shall remain nameless (Ross Ritto) hooked his foot on a cable while carrying the shrimp, and fell. Not just fell, but had his feet fly out from under him. The shrimp flew

all over the amp racks, Ross' clothes had to be burned, and most of the audience was subjected to the smell of fish throughout the night.

CONCLUSION

I wish that everyone involved in professional audio sales and/or marketing could spend a summer on the road. The insights and knowledge gained are invaluable. Daily finesse under ridiculous conditions is the norm, rather than the exception on a tour. Thanks to Ross Ritto and the Jimmy Buffett gang for allowing a salesman to look at touring. Also, thanks to QSC Audio for giving me the time to go out and remember why we are in the business. ■

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