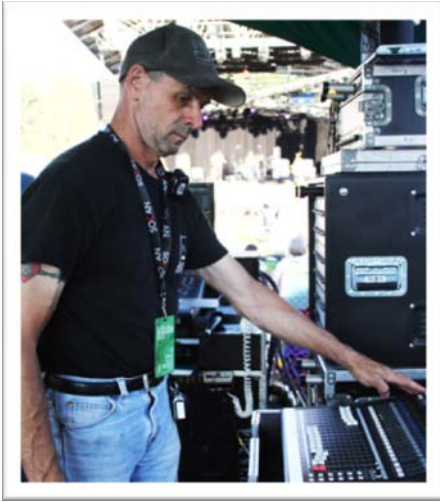


# Audio Alfresco: Bob Groza on taking it outside

By Kevin Young



Since, he's worked every kind of outdoor show there is and understands the challenges facing technicians in the great outdoors intimately; tight schedules, brutally short turnaround times, the logistics of dealing with multiple stages and systems, disappearing promoters and headliners and, of course, weather. There's little you can do about some of those issues other than be prepared, he says: "We're still at the mercy of the environment, but on the technical end, these days it's much smoother."

Groza points to the rise of digital consoles and the increasing depth of digital control as the most important factors in eliminating the hassle that was a routine part of multi-band/multi-stage festivals in the past. "Changeover between acts was like running a triathlon. It used to be an exercise in finesse just to chart sound check settings. There was a sea of tiny pieces of tape fixed onto the tops of every

channel strip control and a variety of marker colors documenting the clock positions of the knobs for each act. And then you had to back that up on paper in case the tape fell off. Now FOH engineers show up with their shows programmed for a variety of consoles, walk in with a PCMCIA card or USB key and have total recall."

Consequently, the need for standalone equipment is greatly diminished. "You don't hear someone say, 'Hey, we need an Eventide H3000 here.'" Additionally, with the increasing reliance on plug ins and software platforms like Yamaha's Studio Manager, engineers can rewrite mixes in the comfort of the tour bus instead of spending hours building and patching racks and racks of gear. "And if all else fails," Groza says, "guess what? You've got your last show to fall back on."

Back in the day, too, it may have sounded great near the FOH mix position, but it was far harder to ensure the rest of the dirty big field you were in was getting adequate coverage and quality sound. "Now with tablets, you can walk all over the venue and have total control."

These days Groza still covers a lot of ground during outdoor gigs, but his role isn't mixing. "It's to be a familiar face, make sure all the gear is there, that everyone's happy and to respond to any special requests or questions." That's particularly important at multi-day festivals like Guelph, Ontario's Hillside Festival; a three-day, five-stage event featuring a highly diverse lineup of artists and genres ranging from indie-rock and folk to hip hop, jazz, world and electronic music. "At Hillside it takes more time to get from the front gate to the island than it takes to get from Highway 401 to the gate, so we bring spares of everything we might need; USB keys, toilet paper, everything," he says, laughing. And he did so again in July 2013, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hillside and Westbury's 15<sup>th</sup> year providing production.

Over the years, Westbury has deployed a variety of systems for Hillside ranging from Meyer MSL-3s to Adamson's MH225 and B218 rig, to EV MT4s and, recently, EV's X-Array and EAW's KF760/761 line array. This year, with the exception of a Yamaha MC3210 for monitors on the Island Stage, the remaining boards deployed were Digidesign and Yamaha digital consoles.

While advances in technology mean the likelihood of having a "first note anxiety attack" when the band you're mixing first takes the stage is more remote, some challenges remain constant in outdoor/festival environments and Groza has a few tips for dealing with them.

Number one: “Remember people’s names. There’s no reason to spend a day working with someone and calling them ‘Hey you.’ If you want people to work with you, treat them with respect and call them by name.”

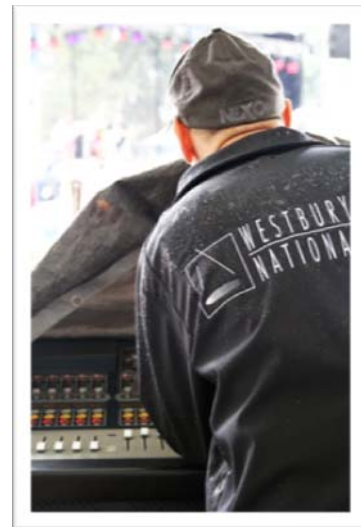
Secondly: Ensure everyone working the gig is as prepared as possible. The chances of a show going off the rails are lessened everyone knows the production schedule and has a firm grip on start times and the length of changeover between each act. So, if something does happen to throw your schedule off, a band that’s held up at the border, for example, you’ll have helpers around to deal with the situation. More hands just make work easier, so you have to talk through the issues as they arise.”

Finally: Gear can die, suddenly, and unlike a human a system rarely tips you off ahead of time by saying something like, ‘You know, I’ve had a shooting pain in my outputs all day’ or ‘My stage right front fill just feels... funny.’

Okay, given the monitoring capabilities of modern audio gear that’s not entirely true, but that’s another topic entirely. Bottom line: the popularity and availability of equipment are worth considering when you’re tempted to specify hard to replace technology for a gig, Groza says, recalling a late 1990’s tour where the opener rarely played because the headliner’s console was often in pieces on the floor until doors.

Groza references Digidesign and Yamaha gear as being particularly well supported. “With Yamaha, within two hours of most places in North America you can get a power supply or a replacement console.” And Westbury’s Yamaha gear, both newer products like the CL5 and older analog desks, remain popular. “We still have a pair of PM4000s and they’re bigger than the flight deck of the USS Nimitz, but they still go out.”

The most important factor in ensuring any gig is successful, however, is how you relate to others – artists and colleagues alike – and deal with the inevitable issues that arise when a gig goes sideways, Groza says. “Through the worst weather and the best weather, be respectful and agreeable. The whims and requests from artists – cater to them and remain calm. A friend of mine always told me, ‘The moment you lose control you’ve lost the battle.’ It’s a team effort. If you’re going to avert any potential disaster, everybody has to be on the same page and talking. Communication is the most important thing.”



**A:** Main Stage FOH set-up including Digidesign SC-48 and Yamaha LS9 consoles, along with SMAART and Tablet controls.

**B:** Rain or shine, Bob Groza checking in on the Main Stage mixing console at Hillside Festival.

**Photos:** [jeremychanphotography.com](http://jeremychanphotography.com)