



Production Profile

No Soundcheck, No Headroom, No Problem

Black Eyed Peas and Pussycat Dolls Take (And Make) Their Hits on the Road

by Bryan Reesman, Photos by Alicyn Leigh



Live music is already a challenge in the modern world of multimedia concerts. Dealing with a new venue every night, multiple crews, gear issues and the requirements of different artists is certainly not easy. Now imagine you're on a tour with the Black Eyed Peas, a hot hip-hop crossover group that in concert features four singers, four live musicians, backing tracks, samples and a variety of instruments. Then imagine that there are almost no soundchecks ever.

The Peas' FOH engineer David Haines knows all about mixing live without a net; he does it every night. Luckily for Haines, he has worked with the Peas since 1996. "They were signed the same month that I graduated college," he recalls. "I was studying audio. I got a job at Paramount Studios, and I helped record their first album in '97. Then we did our first tour in '98, and now here I am."

Running a DigiDesign Venue D-Show with 48 inputs, Haines has his hands full, as does monitor mixer Tony Cooper with a PM5D running 48 inputs. "We actually have more than 48 channels," explains Haines. "We swap some things out during different points in the show. There is a lot of line level, direct input stuff."

The Peas have eight people onstage. There are four singers--Will.i.am, Fergie, Apl.de.ap and Taboo, who all use Sennheiser Evolution wireless mics--plus four musicians that include drummer Keith Harris, guitarist George Pajon Jr., and multi-instrumentalists Tim Izo (flute, sax, Akai MPC 2000XL sampler, acoustic and electric guitar, and percussion) and Printz Board (trumpet and Rhodes, Motif, and Moog boards, plus a Korg MS2000, which is used in place of electric bass). Board replaced their bass player, who left three years ago, and sometimes plays bass lines and trumpet simultaneously. Their amps of choice include QSC Quietflight 2 PL236A, QSC Quietflight 6.0, and Lab.Gruppen fp 6400, with Lake Speaker Management System/Software.

An immediate issue on the Peas tour has been the sound level coming offstage, particularly as some venues they have played on this tour have had dB limitations. "We did a show in Atlanta where it was 95 dB max," reports Haines. "Then we did North Carolina, outside of Raleigh-Durham, where it was 92 dB. Those were a bit of a challenge." He adds that the Hollywood Bowl is around 98 dB. The trick is that the Peas usually play around 105 dB. "I don't think I need much more than what they're limited to, but it's annoying having a lid on it and not being able to ride the dynamics." During sound check with their techs in North Carolina, the guitar and keyboards already hit 95 dB with all Haines' monitors and P.A. off. In those cases, they needed to get the band onstage in order to get an idea of what the show level would be like.

Soundchecks are fairly rare on a Peas tour, and Haines estimates that the singers soundcheck about 5% of the time, while the four-piece band (called Bucky Jonson) are there 25% of the time. The FOH engineer attributes a number of factors to this, including the group's hectic touring schedule. He says that one year they did 455 shows in 365 days. That's an average of at least 8 shows per week.

"It's okay for me to be exhausted," asserts Haines, "but for the band to be doing that many shows they need to get some sleep, so we learned to get by without them for soundcheck more and more, and now we've found a good balance. They also have a lot of other projects going on, and with the John Lennon studio bus with us on this tour, it gives them a chance to get some recording done while we're out here." He observes that the Peas can tour so much without breaks because they get "75% of their writing and recording done on the road, literally. The studio bus flies in formation with ours, allowing our guys to work through the night."

When asked about the tricky nature of minimal soundchecks, Haines looks at the soundcheck issue with a different perspective. "Without the band, it gives us more time to focus on problems," he says. "I have a digital console and so does our monitor man, so there are not necessarily a lot of things that will surprise us as far as what's coming from the band. Our variables have to do with the acoustics of the room, the wireless equipment and the frequencies for that day. Without having the band, it makes it easier for us to focus on those issues, instead of the band showing up and it turning into rehearsals, and management showing up and worrying about how the band sounds at rehearsal, which is never how they sound during the show. They're going to sound consistently one way at sound check every day and completely another way at shows.

On top of the mixing improvisation involved, the band also dictates if songs will deviate from their original path. Production manager/designer Anthony Randall says that there are multiple backing tracks running through Digital Performer. "We've got two Digital Performer systems running on Macs, and we play the A system, with the B system as a backup," he explains. "Of course, it's triggered by Keith, our drummer. Then we have an offstage tech that just sits

there and maintains it through the show and makes sure it's all working. He'll just play the beginning of the song--say they're doing "Where Is The Love." It has maybe 12 tracks of samples or strings that are coming offstage into the song. Then if they decide halfway through that they want to go off into a freestyle section of that, they can stop it on a certain bar, go off on freestyle, then come back into the song on the next verse. The drummer triggers it all. Will decides. He is the band leader, and they have their little signals."

Once a concert starts, Haines' biggest challenge is balancing Fergie's vocals with the rest of the band. "It's not so much that she's not a powerful singer, because she has a lot of dynamics and likes to go from really soft to really loud," Haines remarks. "It's tricky when the band is playing full force, and she'll go back and forth depending upon the part or how she's feeling. She'll have a lot of dynamic range, and sometimes it's tricky to get her to project over the volume that's coming offstage with the band we've got. The guys are fine because they're all right on the mics, and they're loud. They can walk right in front of my P.A. and I'll have no problems with feedback, but she goes off the mic more. She doesn't want to get lipstick on the mic, and she wants for the cameras to be able to see her mouth. She likes to sing sideways on the mic sometimes and right under to the P.A. There are times when this band is playing 120 dB onstage."

To resolve this issue, Haines sometimes resorts to a trick like panning her off to the side of the P.A., depending upon the circumstances. He notes that there are times when the subs will be located right under the P.A., and Fergie loves standing in the corners. "There are a lot of shows where I have to watch her, so I can't focus on the rest of the band as much because I need to keep my eye on her, to see where she's going and what she's doing with the mic," Haines states. "So that can be my biggest challenge. There are other days when there are room anomalies. That's a big issue lately, [like] low-end rumbling clouding the mix."

Loud bass has become an issue at concerts these days, a fact that Haines is well aware of. "I try to make sure I have my subs on a separate aux and just send the instruments that I need down there, especially below 100 Hz," he says. "I try to be careful what I send down there and even do it song specific. I choose for which songs those instruments need to be down there, and not have them sending to the subs throughout the whole show unless they need to be there. There are times when I save the real low end for the last two or three songs. I do that in general with the entire mix. I try not to push it until the end. You don't want to hear deafening levels for the whole show. It depends who you're mixing, but I try to keep it relatively tame until the end, then start pushing it so people are really feeling it the last two songs. I don't want you to feel like you didn't get their money's worth, that your body didn't shake at some point in the show, but I also don't want you to hear it the next day."

Surveying the Theater at Madison Square Garden prior to the Peas' performance, Haines feels coverage is easier because the room sounds good since it has a lot of soft material, is sloped, and has few hard surfaces, with no parallel walls for sound to bounce off of and create "nasty standing waves," and the ceiling not being parallel to floor. "Acoustically it seems to be a great room, and it's small enough where you really don't have any acoustic issues, even if there were parallel walls or hard surfaces."

On the flip side of the Peas' intricate set-up and performance, sexy opening act Pussycat Dolls have a more stripped-down approach that is quite the opposite of the Peas. The six vocalists take the stage with their 500 Series G2 wireless mics from Sennheiser, dancing, shimmying, and singing to backing tracks. "On this tour, it's basically six girls [with live mics] and a Pro Tools rig," declares the Dolls' tour manager and live mixer Bryan Cross. Handling a support act with a 30-minute set, Cross found it more cost-effective to mix everything from his monitor position with a PM5D by using and referencing the Fritz, aka the Neumann "Dummy Head."

Fritz is literally a gray felt replication of a human head. "It's a binaural head, and it's out in front of house," says Cross. "It hears like you and I hear. If you put a set of headphones on, and do a wireless tap of your headphones and walk 360 degrees around Fritz while listening to that signal from the two ears, you'll hear in your head that 360 degree imaging. If we're having a conversation like this, and your head is the microphone, that's exactly what you hear imaging-wise. It's amazing. It's absolutely phenomenal."

Cross is able to do the whole gig from backstage. He sends all his mixes pre left and right down to house, then has Fritz return two tracks to him, which are split. Half of it goes to SmaartLive and half into his console for monitoring. "I have a set of JBL 2834s out there, feeding me what Fritz is hearing, and [I'm getting] a visual that on SmaartLive," he remarks.

The only complaint that Cross has is a little stand noise that results from hitting the subs heavy. "You literally get 100 Hz coming through the mic stand, and I'm working on the idea of putting a suspension mount on the head, just to alleviate that," Cross muses. "After watching that versus getting my regular measurement mics next to it, I just zero the graph for that, if there's 100 Hz roll off. It's amazing. I can't wait to get into the studio. I'm just going to use that, a D112, and a snare mic to track the next drummer I work with. I'll set the head right behind the drummer, and he'll mix himself. I believe in it that much. I've always wanted to get one, but the price tag was \$9,000 for the mic. So now I can thoroughly justify it to my mortgage company."

