



FEATURE

Photo: Olivia Desanti

INTERPOL LIVE

AT takes a ride with Interpol's
FOH engineer, Harley Zinker.
Just don't touch his water.

Text: Mark Davie

► Slow and trembling, like a junky trying to build a house of cards, a hand moves deliberately over the crowd barrier towards a stash of bottled water near the FOH mix position, its path closely monitored by two dilated pupils the size of ten cent pieces. “Hey! ... Hey! Get your hands away from my stuff!” bellows Harley Zinker, FOH engineer for Interpol. Harley’s warnings become increasingly dire until the perpetrator staggers away with security on his tail. Apparently he doesn’t make it very far: one of Harley’s friends reports with a chuckle moments later that “he spewed his guts out just round the corner”. “Well, he should learn how to handle whatever he was on,” is Harley’s frank observation. Too right. The other punters agree with nodding heads. After all, the gig hasn’t even started yet.

Harley is an entirely good-humoured man. But this encounter is a glimpse of how seriously he takes the art of sound. There’s no way Harley’s going to let some ‘off-his-face’ punter get too close to the gear he needs to do his job, *especially* when that gear relies on an iLok jutting out right next to that bottle of water.

A couple of hours prior, sitting in his hotel room overlooking the Melbourne CBD, his enthusiasm for sound is obvious. In the past 10 years he’s circled the globe touring with the likes of The Strokes, The Killers, Radio 4 and Le Tigre and he loves it. But the Harley story begins in EMI’s mailroom in New York.

MAIL ORDER SOUND

Harley’s is an interesting tale, one that can be pinpointed to a singular ‘turning of the tides’ encounter. It’s the late ’90s, the halcyon days of the New York music scene had come to an end and major labels were taking a dive. Like many, Harley reluctantly turned his back on his studio work to take a job running the post room at EMI records in New York. Before email took over, the mailman was at the hub of operations, and Harley met his fair share of label

types. One of those – an A&R guy for Capitol (a subsidiary of EMI) by the name of Dave Ayers – ‘discovered’ Harley in the way only A&R guys can. “You have to get out of here,” Dave decided. “We know you’ve worked in studios, we know you’re pretty smart, so we want you to come on tour and do the sound for this band we’ve just signed.” “Okay,” was Harley’s reply; an uncomplicated response that’s opened doors for him around the world.

Having never been on tour before, and never mixed a live band, the label packed him off to the now-defunct Brownies, a little 200-capacity club in New York, for a two-day boot camp on live mixing. At the end of those two days, Brownies wound up offering him a job too. So far, so good. The next day, he set off on his first tour with recently signed band, Verbena. Returning from the tour, Harley started mixing sound at Brownies and took any freelance gig that came his way, working his way through every club across the city, whether people paid him or not – if it was a gig, he’d take it. Eventually, his relentless drive paid off, and he left the mailroom and took up sound as his full-time gig.

INTERPOL SURVEILLANCE

One of the many bands that graced the Brownies stage was Interpol. The relationship started off as the occasional request for a show here and there, ‘Okay’; then across the ocean to London for a few days, ‘Okay’; then a tour across the US for three weeks. ‘Okay’ was Harley’s ready reply. No one quite knew how successful that tour would be, and three weeks snowballed into 17 months of solid work off the back of the first album. And, in a sweet twist of serendipity, just three days prior to heading out on tour, Brownies closed.

Mark Davie: How did you cope with that change from being a house guy at Brownies to being on the road and constantly having to adapt to new environments?



Daniel Kessler plays it how it is ‘on the record’.

Carlos D gets into the music, he also gets into Munster-style vaudeville hairdos.



Photo: Olivia Desjant

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I hear so many people say ‘I hate overheads’. Well, if it’s a smaller room, maybe you don’t need any overheads.
”

Harley Zinker: It was a learning process and it still is to some degree. In the beginning the band never played the same size venue twice. We went from 350-capacity clubs where I was doing monitors and FOH from the same board, to 1100-capacity venues with proper PAs. So each step up was just a natural progression. But I was up for the challenge, and they were up for allowing me to be up for the challenge. I know many bands that would have taken on a more experienced person, but I’ve been fortunate in that regard – they’ve been pretty trusting and allowed me to do my thing.

MD: Right, because how else do you get that chance?

HZ: Exactly. They’ve afforded me this opportunity and that’s gone all the way from carrying nothing but a vocal mic or a small rack of outboard gear, all the way to multi-track, full production and full PA.

MD: What was the most difficult aspect of the transition from small club systems to full-blown PAs?

HZ: I don’t know if anything was more difficult than anything else. There are fundamentals, and those fundamentals are relevant no matter what size venue or facility you’re at. For example, being able to identify frequencies when you hear them is a great skill to have and will help out regardless of the venue. Then there’s the basic understanding of signal flow and gain structure which remain the same regardless of what desk you’re on. It just comes back to the fundamentals, and if you have that stuff you can pretty much do anything.

Saying that, one big difference in moving from smaller venues to larger venues is that it’s less

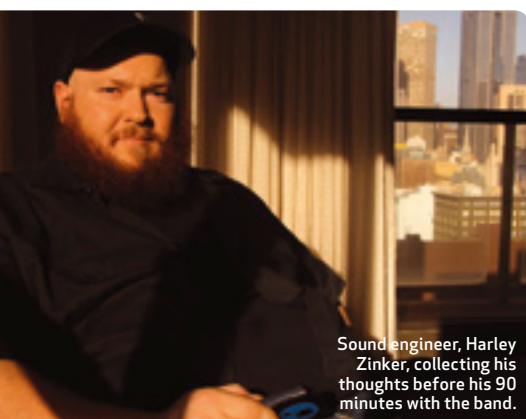
about the volume coming off the stage and more about the PA, so the job becomes more about true mixing. That was somewhat of a challenge, and it still is, when tours bounce back and forth from larger venues to smaller ones – it’s a different mindset.

MD: I’d imagine ‘true mixing’ wins every time?

HZ: Sure. I prefer not to have to fight the stage sound, but if I have to deal with it, so be it. It’s part of the show and I’m going to incorporate what’s coming off the stage into the live performance. Everyday is something different. You never know what’s going to happen. So as much as it’s highly repetitious, and the same thing everyday, it’s the same *different* thing every day.

MD: Speaking of ‘different’, how do you keep the undesirable ‘X’ factors to a minimum?

HZ: If we get the stage sound right, then I don’t have to do anything corrective; everything I’m doing is enhancing what’s going on rather than fixing something. For this to happen everybody in the crew works pretty closely. The backline guys try to make sure everything is right when it’s coming off stage; the jumps aren’t too big from one pedal effect to another, and the same with keyboard patches – smooth transitions from one thing to another are important. The tones of the instruments are all what they should be, and we’ve spent a lot of time over the years getting it to that point, so that myself and Bob Lewis, our monitor engineer, aren’t fixing anything in that regard. That’s half the battle right there. You can’t polish a turd, as they say. If they play it right and the instruments are set up properly then that’s it. If you listen to the band’s performance, their parts are pretty individual; you can hear the separation and the



Sound engineer, Harley Zinker, collecting his thoughts before his 90 minutes with the band.

definition, and if they're playing it how it should sound, I don't need to fix anything.

MD: What's the measure of 'how it should sound'?

HZ: I use the record as a blueprint and that's what they want – the record as a blueprint. But obviously it's a live show; it should be bigger than that. To me, I view the band as a big rhythm section; it's big drums and a monstrous bass sound with the guitars sitting on top of that. They're not a pop band, so the vocals shouldn't be over the top, everything should be seated and in its place.

COPPER-FREE MIXING

MD: What console are you using for this tour?

HZ: I'm a die-hard Digidesign fan. I use a Profile – a compact version of the D-Show. I use quite a few stock plug-ins plus a few extras. For example, there's an EMI Chandler reissue compressor plug-in I've been using on the kick drum. URS makes an API-style EQ plug-in that I use on Paul's vocal and the snare, and there's a Neve 1073 clone on a couple of other channels. Probably my favourite thing is the Crane Song Phoenix. It's a one-knob, analogue tape saturation emulator that adds harmonic distortion and allows me to place the vocal in a really interesting place. I'm also a fan of the Serato Rane frequency-sensitive compressor.

Everything's onboard; I don't use any outboard whatsoever. I just keep the extra plug-ins on a USB stick. For the four or five extra plug-ins I have to load in, it maybe takes 10 or 15 minutes, so setup time is minimal. I've got a default scene stored and that's my starting point everyday – flat EQ, faders down.

MD: Sounds like you're not shedding any tears for old-school analogue consoles?

HZ: I've been a digital desk person for a while, before that I had a Yamaha PM5D, which I used with a lot of outboard. Our PA company in the US, Firehouse Productions, are big fans of digital technology, so prior to this tour they asked me to check out the Profile and tell them what I thought. Initially I was hesitant, but now I absolutely love it. The Profile is easy to get around... and it's small, so it's allowed me to bring my console into festivals and places where I'd normally have to use a house console. But best of all, it sounds great. I think the biggest contributor to the sonics is the fact the A/D converters are on stage [with four BNC connectors linking it to FOH]. That way you don't have that extra 100m of copper. An SM57 sounds different when you take out that 100m of copper. In fact, everything sounds different.

MD: You're using a V-DOSC PA for this tour. Are you a die-hard L-Acoustics fan as well?

HZ: I've gone back and forth between JBL Vertec and L-Acoustics V-DOSC and I happen to be using V-DOSC in Australia. It works for what I'm doing with this band: it's punchy. I think just about everybody makes a good box these days, it's all in how you set them up, which is the system tech's job, and it's all in how you tune them.



Digidesign Profile at FOH. No outboard is used. Strictly plug ins.



Sam Fogarino's kit has Sennheiser e604s on toms, Audio-Technica AT3035s on underheads, an Audio-Technica AE3000 on hi-hats, Audio-Technica AT3031 on ride, Audio-Technica AE2500 on kick... and Colonel Angus on his perch.



Fender amps all round for vocalist/guitarist Paul Banks with an Audio-Technica AE4040 on top and a Sennheiser e609 on the bottom.



With two Ampeg SVT bass heads, nothing would do but an Ampeg SVT Tube DI, the Radial is a spare. All DI boxes are not equal.



Custom Paul Cox switcher on playback rig. Instantly switches from one playback computer to the other in the event of a glitch.

MD: How's the system today?

HZ: I'm pretty happy with it. The Johnston Audio guys we're working with are fantastic; it's been a pleasure to work with them. The gear's been great, they've given me everything I've needed. It's nice to be able to fly 8000 miles away from home and feel like it's just like any other show. It's the same gear with good people that know how to operate it; everything's working, and all the issues have been addressed. It's nice in that regard.

UNDERHEADS

MD: What else do you bring with you other than the desk and plug-ins?

HZ: Audio-Technica has been helping us out with microphones. I love the AE2500, which is a dual element kick drum mic – it's got a condenser and a dynamic in the one housing. I've also got a lot of Audio-Technica large diaphragm condensers. I use AT3035s as 'underheads', AT4040s on guitars, and AE6100 hypercardioid handheld vocal mics – they sound fantastic and have great gain-before-feedback. I still use a Shure Beta 57 on snare, just because nothing sounds like a Beta 57 to me. It's mainly just lots of mid-priced mics – nothing really fancy – and some of these things I've had for 10 years, while some I've only had for a couple of months. It's a case of 'the right tool for the right job'; choosing microphones is like a painter choosing brushes.

MD: Why 'underheads'?

HZ: I just want the cymbals from those mics – I don't want the whole kit – and with underheads I get less bleed. It's not like we're doing a studio recording. There's a time and a place for something more ambient, but this just works out pretty well for me, and Sam the drummer likes it better in his in-ears as well – it's just cymbals, and everything else is close-miked. I have two underheads, and I mic the ride cymbal from underneath as well. Then I send those three to a subgroup and compress that pretty hard to get things to pop a little bit. Sightlines are improved as well – you don't have overheads hanging over the kit – I hate mic stands. So anywhere I can get a clip or a clamp or a claw to bolt onto a cymbal stand there's less in the way, less to break. I hear so many people say 'I hate overheads'. Well, if it's a smaller room, maybe you don't need any overheads. Maybe the vocal mic is picking up enough cymbals. It depends on the room.

MD: Do you still enjoy your work after being on tour for six years with the same guys?

HZ: Yeah, I do. I don't enjoy living out of a suitcase though. I like flying, but I don't like sitting next to Bobby Cher [crew member] when I fly. When we check in, everybody in the crew spreads out. Not that we don't like each other, we just don't want to sit next to each other. I had a six-hour middle-seat adventure and I was not happy. Apart from that, I like the art of tuning a PA; I like the show; and I like the 90 minutes I get with the band. That's what I really enjoy. I like the fact it's highly creative and it's highly technical at the same time, and each facet relies on the other. I think I have one foot in the technical camp and one foot in the creative camp – that appeals to me. My only regret is getting into it so late in life [he's 38]. I mean, I've been doing it 10 years now, but had I started a lot younger I'd be that much further along now... or maybe I'd be making furniture in the woods, who knows.

INTERPOL-ISHED

Just before the band hits the stage, Harley walks over to his lighting compatriot and in a well-rehearsed ritual they gently butt fists like boxers in recognition of the marriage of light and sound that turns good shows into great ones.

As the night wraps up, and punters shuffle out the doors of a previously packed Festival Hall, a young couple show their gratitude to Harley with a healthy thumbs-up. Humbly, he shakes his hands in a 'comme-ci, comme-ca, so so' fashion. He doesn't think it was his night – not bad, but not the best. But if the healthy chatter and smiles all round are anything to go by, then the punters disagree. ■