

Thunder Audio

A Small Company Doing Big Things

In January 2009, Paul Owen stepped from behind the monitor desk for the last time after 23 years on the road with super group Metallica. Since then, he has been able to use his 30 years of road experience to guide Thunder Audio into becoming a Premier player in the touring production world. Owen joined the team from Livonia, Michigan 10 years ago “purely by accident,” he says. **by BILL ABNER**

As Metallica was passing thru Detroit for a State Fair date, Owen had the opportunity to chat with Thunder owner Tony Villareal. After some discussion about how they both would do things with the band and for the business in general, Owen was offered a chance to become a part of Thunder and to have an influence on how they would operate the business and provide audio for Metallica and others.

That “accident” has been fortuitous for both parties. “We’ve come from being a small regional sound company doing one-offs, to a large international company competing with the big boys out there,” says Owen. And as if Metallica weren’t a good enough example of its success, how about Steely Dan or Allison Krauss? Not big enough? How about Diana Ross, Dolly Parton or Marilyn Manson? All of these

acts and a page full of others have signed on with this “small” regional sound company.

“Small,” however, could be a misnomer for one of the largest Meyer distributors in the country. With close to 200 Meyer Milo boxes on the Metallica tour, in addition to all the other shows Thunder has out on the road, “huge” would be a more appropriate adjective.

So how does a company with all of these tools approach a show such as this year’s *Death Magnetic* tour? “Metallica has been doing in-the-round shows for years, but in 1994 we got involved with Meyer Sound,” says Owen. “They came in and shot the rooms for us with their MAP program. We experimented with the system on some Rod Stewart shows and had a lot of success with it, but we knew the SPL levels would be a lot different for Metallica.” One area it experimented with in particular was with the placement of the subwoofers.

The midrange and highs coverage was pretty easy to obtain through line array technology, but with regards to the sub distribution, that’s something that the band’s FOH engineer, legendary ear “Big” Mick Hughes, really wanted to get right. During a few promo shows in Europe, along with Meyer designers from Germany, Thunder flew a sub array in the middle of the arena under the scoreboard that consisted of four columns of Meyer HP700 subs in a circle, 10 boxes deep with no other subs on the floor. According to Owen, the results were “spectacular,” and this is the first time they’ve ever been able to achieve totally even sub coverage in an arena.

“With Meyer’s *Compass* and *Galileo* programs, we’re able to steer the bass columns up and down and focus them where we want them in relation to the arena we’re in,” said Owen. Thunder has since brought the design on back to America, where the team has been able to use it in about 70 percent of the arenas where the show has since played.

Another innovation that this group of pros has taken advantage of is the use of fiber optics to control the PA. Owen went on to

say, “In the past we’ve had to run just miles and miles of copper heading up into the grid. Now we come out of the Midas XL8 into the *Galileo*, and then we go analog out of the *Galileo* into 4 A to D *Apogee* 16 channel converters. Then we go *Lightwiper* fiber optics right the way up to the grid, into 4 more D to A converters in each corner of the grid where they then distribute the signal to the PA.” The only things heading skyward now are cam-locs for power and fiber optics. It’s come a long way, baby!

Those innovations alone have resulted in less weight roaming around the country in trucks, less weight in the sky and quicker load in and load out times. “They can load out this whole system now in just over an hour,” brags Owen.

Probably the biggest sign of the times on this show is the ability to record, mix and distribute the show to the web immediately. Using the Midas XL8 and sending it into an IR box located in the dressing room area, Mike “the ProTools guy” sits back there on an SSL console with 48 channels of show coming at him and mixes the show for immediate upload to the Internet. So the fans can now leave the arena, go home and download the show they’ve just seen and been a part of.

But even with all of these new-fangled gadgets, and fiber optics, and digital consoles and whatnot, there’s still a touch of the old school. The monitor desk of choice still is the Midas XL4. “There’s just nothing like it. We keep trying to decide which new digital desk will take its place but so far we keep coming back to the XL4,” says Owen.

Bottom line, Owen says his company is still just a small company that’s able to do big things because of great tools, great people, and great service. “Nowadays, with the technology out there, any company can be a great sound company. It doesn’t have to be a big hulking organization to do a great job and be successful. We also owe a huge debt to our manufacturers such as Meyer and Midas. The products they’ve been giving us over the last four or five years have been hugely successful and allowed us to be successful as well.” ☺

