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(A long list of artist names is visible in the background of the advertisement.)

Mixing Sturgill Simpson's 'A Sailor's Guide to Earth' Tour

by George Petersen ▪ in Production Profile ▪ on 15 December, 2016



Sturgill Simpson's 'A Sailor's Guide to Earth' tour photo by Steve Jennings

Sturgill Simpson is one of those artists who transcends a simple label or tag that defines his music. By his own admission, he is, and always will be, a country artist, but mixes his country influence with a blend of Americana, soul, funk and roots rock to create a sound that is distinctly Sturgill Simpson. And for his recently completed tour, supporting his first major label release, 2016's critically acclaimed *A Sailor's Guide to Earth* album on Atlantic Records, Simpson has broken new artistic grounds as well. Besides himself on guitar and vocals, this time he's incorporating a three-piece brass section into his band, in addition to his more familiar touring lineup of keys, bass, drums, slide and electric guitar.



Sturgill Simpson's 'A Sailor's Guide to Earth' tour photo by Steve Jennings

The first North American leg of the “A Sailor’s Guide to Earth” tour kicked off May 5, 2016 at Austin’s Moody Theater. It then continued on with a string of mostly sold-out theater shows, but along the way made some festival appearances, both in Europe and the U.S. Simpson joined Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, Neil Young, Dave Matthews and Alabama Shakes to perform at Farm Aid 2016 on Sept. 17 at the Jiffy Lube Live amphitheater in Bristow, VA, just outside of Washington D.C. The tour wrapped up last month with two sold-out shows Nov. 19-20 at Oakland, CA’s 2,800-seat Fox Theatre.

Handling the tour’s audio needs is Special Event Services (SES), which has main facilities in Nashville and Winston-Salem, NC. With this particular tour, like many others going mostly to larger theater venues, SES Nashville was supplying front-end and monitor gear and crew and utilizing existing or provided sound systems at each venue stop.



The FOH Position

FOH engineer David Loy, who joined onto the Sturgill crew in September and mixed the tour’s remaining 38 dates, first got the audio bug from hanging around his musician father’s shows. Later, the technical director at his dad’s church “had me learn audio the proper way, spending time actually teaching me signal flow rather than just pushing buttons until I heard stuff,” Loy recalls. He later went on to do some work with local sound companies in North Carolina.

“I knew I wanted to do audio, but wasn’t sure if I wanted to do studio or live sound. Some studio producers my Dad knew told me to check out The Blackbird Academy – the Nashville school that John McBride started. I toured the school and was invited to shadow John to watch him mix a show he was doing with Martina McBride in Myrtle Beach. He gave me some great advice – to get out and mix some live shows, get to know people, meet band members and if I wanted to do studio work, I could do it down the road after I had a live resume.”

As it turned out, McBride gave Loy some pretty solid advice. “Looking back at it now, I probably couldn’t take it in the studio because I don’t have patience for it and I really enjoy the live world. That was a step that brought me to Nashville. I started at The Blackbird Academy in January of 2015, graduated in June of 2015 and have done live sound since.”

After working some smaller live gigs, Loy worked for Aubrie Sellers for about a year. “She did about eight shows on the West Coast opening for Marty Stuart,” Loy notes. “Those shows were really relaxed, and I got to hang out and learn from that crew. At the time, Marty’s monitor engineer and tour manager was Phillip Clark. Phillip started working with Sturgill this year as production manager and gave me a call. I went for it and it’s been super.”



Sturgill Simpson tour photo by Steve Jennings

Stepping Up to the Challenge

According to Loy, one of his chief challenges on this tour was dealing with the P.A. *du jour* — a different sound system every night. “Sturgill likes to sing off-axis, which is part of his sound, and he gets a lot of P.A. in his in-ears. So most of the night, I’m mixing the live show to sound like the record, but I’m also trying to make sure that the rejection of the P.A. onstage is as minimal as possible — especially subs, which can really muddy up his mix. Some nights it was fantastic, like at the Ryman Auditorium [Nashville] or at the Fox in Oakland, where he was far enough back from the P.A. — but in other venues — Portland [Keller Auditorium] and L.A. (The Wiltern) there was a lot more P.A. bleed on stage.”



Sturgill Simpson tour photo by Steve Jennings

An Alternative Approach

One solution – at least to the inconsistencies between venues/sound rigs every night – came from a tip from production manager Phillip Clark, an experienced audio engineer in his own right. “Everybody has their usual sound check songs – so instead of playing Steely Dan or Toto, or something like that, I would play some tracks off Sturgill’s record,” Loy explains.

“Phillip suggested that I try tuning the P.A. to the record, and his reasoning made a really good point. The perfectly recorded and mastered songs I had been using sounded even, pristine and beautiful. Sturgill made his record sound very transparent, but also very raw, and on some tracks, like ‘Breakers Roar’ – his vocal sounds very low-mid-rangey, like 250 to 315 to 400 Hz, and that’s how he sings it live. And there are some songs like ‘Between the Lines,’ with a lot of brass, where he jumps up an octave vocally, making it more thin and more ‘country.’ So I started tuning the P.A. to those songs, where I can get that nice baritone sound for ‘Breakers Roar’ and then mix to that high-octave country sound and still make everything sound consistent.”

One thing that helped was the choice of consoles. “The majority of this tour was done on DiGiCo SD9’s. One day, Phillip asked Dalton [VanVolkenbergh, monitor engineer] and I if we would be okay changing to SD10’s with SD Racks over fiber. I love DiGiCo, and we definitely said yes.”

The console upgrade was put to use right away. “I love the SD10’s extra fader banks, and I use a lot of macros during a show. I don’t use a lot of snapshots, because I like really using my hands during a show, and with this show we only have about 30 inputs, so it’s very easy for me to handle it myself with ten fingers. I’m keep my right hand on his vocal fader for the entire show, because of the way Sturgill uses that mic, singing on it/off it and utilizing the mic to get the sound he wants in his ears. I could just compress it and crank it up, but that doesn’t sound very musical to me, so I just use my finger to ride the fader to keep him on top throughout the show.”



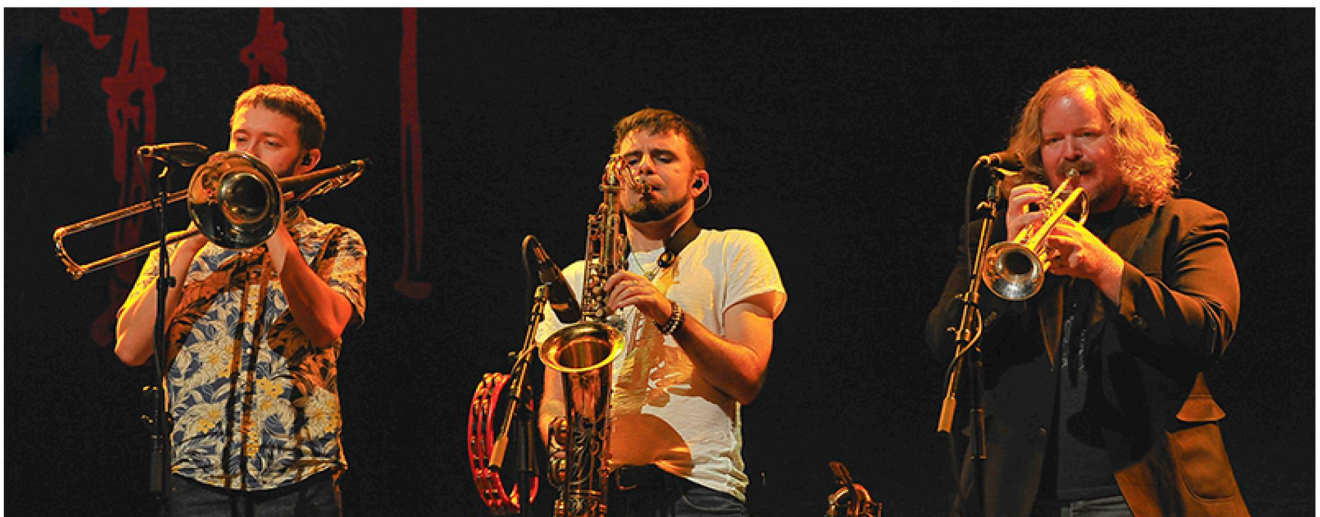
The somewhat-atypical country keyboard rig of a digital Mellotron, Wurlitzer piano, Moog Sub Phatty and a Hammond B3. Photo by Steve Jennings

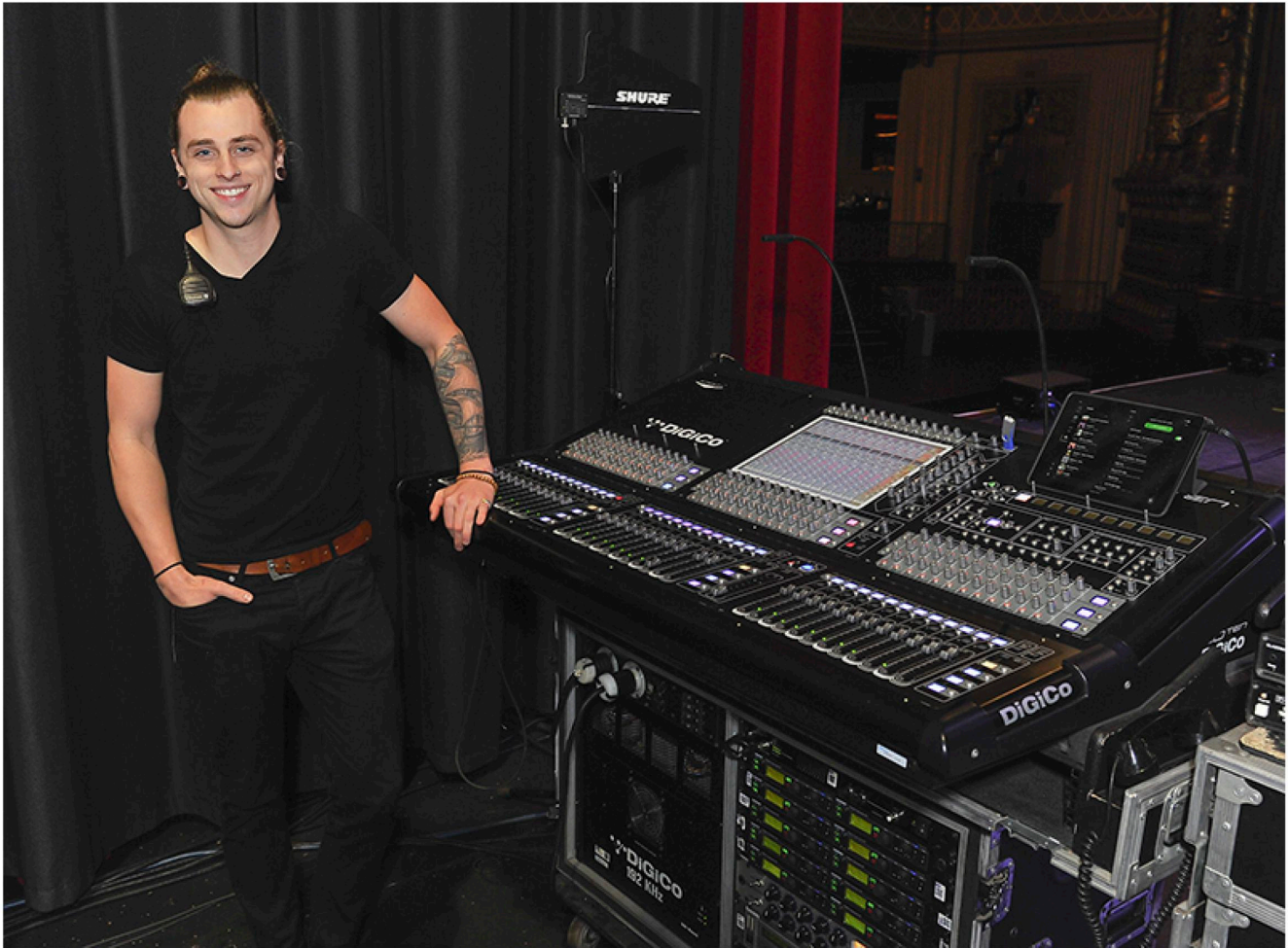
Miking

“For the longest time, Sturgill had been using a Beyerdynamic M-160. It sounded great in the in-ears and in the recordings, but for some reason, it wasn’t working out front. It was almost like a room mic, with a ton of drums and brass whenever he stepped back from the mic. We tried a couple different mics – including a Shure KSM8 – but it turns out the Shure SM58 worked with the in-ears and gave some beef and body to his vocal, the way he likes it.”

Also new to Sturgill’s regular guitar/bass/steel/organ/drums tour lineup was adding a horn section to play the brass parts on the *A Sailor’s Guide to Earth* album. Here, Loy turned to Sennheiser MD-421s. “They sound good on everything, but sound great on brass.”

Most of the instrument miking was fairly conventional – mainly Shure SM57s and KSM137s, with some Sennheiser 604s used on the toms. The single-12 Ampeg bass amp was miked with a Shure SM52, combined with a Radial JDI direct box. Nothing too out of the ordinary there.





Monitor engineer Dalton Van Volkenburgh. Photo by Steve Jennings

Meanwhile, at Monitorworld

Handling monitors was Dalton VanVolkenbergh, a veteran of previous Simpson tours. He got into the pro side of the biz while studying recording at the SAE Nashville school and worked for SES in Nashville. “They started putting me out on gigs – from live music to convention stuff – and soon I was doing more live than studio work,” he recalls. “The SES people are really nice, like a big family, and are always looking out for each other.”

As with Loy, VanVolkenbergh is mixing on a DiGiCo SD10. “I love those consoles. Everyone has their own bias, but arguably it’s got the best sound out there.”

Besides swapping vocal microphones, Simpson’s vocal chain also changed for this tour. “With this new record, with a lot of new sounds, he wanted the vibe to be different,” VanVolkenbergh says. “In terms of plugins, I’m running a plate, a reverb, a delay and an outboard Eventide H3000 in a rack. I’m using that on his voice pitched up 12 cents and one pitched down about 6 cents. That’s a cool thing I’m running on vocal on a couple songs. I also have his whole mix running through a big stereo tube comp, the Summit DCL-200.”

VanVolkenbergh is running eight monitor mixes from the SD10 – for Simpson, the three horn players, keyboards, guitar, bass and drums. “We try to keep the stage noise level down because Sturgill’s mic is so hot and picks up everything on stage,” VanVolkenbergh notes, adding that one helpful aspect is “everyone is on Future Sonics Ear Monitors with Shure PSM-900 transmitters. Other than Sturgill’s acoustic guitar, that’s all the RF we are running, so wireless is never a problem.”

Of course, an experienced crew and great gear always make life easier in the touring lane, but for VanVolkenbergh, everything comes down to his guiding philosophy. “If you dig the music, and you’re out there every day doing what you love, it’s not really a job anymore – no matter how cliché that sounds.”



This well-used Leslie cabinet was miked with a pair of SM57s. Photo by Steve Jennings

Sturgill Simpson "A Sailor's Guide to Earth" Tour
Sound Company: SES Nashville



Bass and guitar amps were miked offstage. Photo by Steve Jennings

AUDIO CREW

- Artist Manager: Marc Dottore
- Production Manager: Phillip Clark
- FOH Engineer: David Loy
- Monitor Engineer: Dalton VanVolkenbergh
- Vendor Rep: Michael Brammer

P.A. SYSTEM

- Supplied by each venue

FOH GEAR

- Console: DiGiCo SD10
- Outboard: Waves Soundgrid Server
- Drive Processing: Lake LM44

MONITOR GEAR

- Consoles: DiGiCo SD10; DiGiCo SD9 for support acts
- Outboard: Summit Audio DCL200 stereo tube compressor; Eventide H3000
- Stagebox: DiGiCo SD-Rack
- Networking: Optocore loop between the SD10's; SD-9 feed is via MADI
- Recording Interface: DiGiCo UB-MADI
- IEM Hardware: 10 channels of Shure PSM-900
- IEM Earpieces: Future Sonics
- Instrument Wireless: Shure UHF-R
- Hardwired Mics: Shure SM58s, SM57s, SM52s, KSM137s; MD 421s
- Stage Snakes: Whirlwind W1
- Direct Boxes: Radial Engineering JD-I

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