

GEAR RENTALS:

AFFORDABLE

WAYS TO

BOOST

YOUR IMPACT

BY KURT ORZECK



FOR AN INDIE MUSICIAN IN 2014, making a record or putting on a performance can be as simple as having a computer equipped with Pro Tools or a similar digital-audio program.

But when it comes to making a *great-sounding* record, or putting on a high-impact sonically impressive live performance, another factor comes into play: gear. Top-notch microphones, pre-amps and audio interfaces are essential, industry experts say.

While the notion of having to rent or even buy multiple pieces of equipment might seem looming for indie musicians, there's some good news: They can make records that don't sound cheap, on the cheap. And they can sound great on tour without lugging heavy pieces of equipment.



Don't Cut Corners

Gary Ladinsky has learned a lot about pro audio since he started working as an engineer with the Record Plant Studios in Los Angeles in 1971, and during his time working with Van Morrison, the Moody Blues, Cheap Trick and other iconic rock bands.

His biggest piece of advice for indie musicians? Don't cut corners with rental gear.

"IF I'M AN ARTIST AND IT'S MY ALBUM, I WANT THE BEST EQUIPMENT POSSIBLE, SINCE THE ALBUM IS GOING TO BE AROUND FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE."

— **GARY LADINSKY, DESIGN FX AUDIO**

"Would you want to pull out an album 30 years after it's made and have it sound crappy and distorted?" he asks rhetorically. "If I'm an artist and it's my album, I want the best equipment possible, since the album is going to be around for the rest of my life."

As the owner of **Design FX Audio**, which

Continued on next page



THAT COULD BE THE BIGGEST gear-related dilemma that an indie musician faces—and his decision could break the bank.

James Trunko—drummer for self-described "outlaw biker hard-rock band" **Dead in 5**; **Crud** (also featuring Sponge singer Vinnie Dombroski); and **Mound Road Engine**, a metal gang for which he plays double-bass drums—suggests that his peers opt for the rent-to-own scenario. Doing so allowed him to make payments on an agreed-upon purchase cost, instead of plunking down a large amount of cash all at once.

Trunko is particularly keen on a Yorkville 350-watt P.A. with an integrated mixer and amplifier in one portable head that he bought on a rent-to-own basis from Music Castle in Royal Oak, MI. The conveniently sized P.A. has a six-channel head with two full-range Samson speakers on speaker stands.

"I/we use the P.A. primarily for band rehearsals and small shows, where it is only necessary to amplify the vocals, above the volume of the guitar amps, bass amp and drums. The P.A. is not powerful enough to run a full drum set, guitar amps or bass amp through," he says. "On occasion, I have run a small amount of bass drum through it. But again, it does work great for running just vocals through—and then adjust the volume of the guitar amps and bass amp, to get an 'even mix.'"

Prior to purchasing the Yorkville 350-watt P.A., Trunko had to rely on other musicians' "crummy, half-broken-down P.A.'s," he says. But then he decided to throw down about \$50 a month to rent and eventually own the Yorkville. He also ended up buying his own speakers, stands, mics and cables—not to mention, on the lighting front, DMX-controlled LED par 64-thin-pate lights and a Chauvet Obey 40 DMX that a couple of his friends use to control them.

Trunko adds that his wife **Dana Forrester**—who plays bass for **Dead in 5** and **Crud**—

followed his gear-buying lead by purchasing a Line 6 G55 wireless transmitter for her bass.

"It works great and frees her up from being tied down to an ever-tangling guitar cable!" he exclaims.

While Trunko raves about the rent-to-buy option, indie musician **Jeff Kempiak**—who only performs occasionally, due to a day job—offers a different rental tip for his peers: Do your homework and plan accordingly.

"I almost include rental fees on a rider, but that doesn't always translate to us making money on the rentals. Most of the time we are lucky to break even on it," he says. "Back in the day, venues or fest organizers never balked at a reasonable rider. Nowadays they don't want to see extra fees, period. I've found it better

to get an idea of what we will need to rent and try to include rental fees in the band's fee upfront. Give a little more wiggle room for negotiations as well."

Over the course of his career, Kempiak has rented P.A.'s, mixers, speakers, amps, keyboards, lighting systems, special effects—even fog machines and a van.

But typically, he rents Peavey amps, EV speakers, Shure wireless mics and Denon mixers, which can range from \$125 to \$1,000, depending on whether he's renting a given piece of gear for a one-off show, or for touring or the duration of a days-long festival.

Additionally, Kempiak says he has rented amp sims for recording "with great results."

"I have a Fender G-Dec that makes for real easy recording with a USB output," he adds. "I have tried using the G-Dec live, and it's just not as easy to switch between tones as it is with pedals and a solid tube amp."

Kempiak also suggests that indie musicians pay a little extra for delivery and setup.

"I have worked with [Second City Music in Chicago] for probably 20 years," he says. "They deliver, set everything up, make sure it works, make sure we understand how it works, then come pick it up at the end of the night. That is totally worth the extra money to dish out." **MC**

"I'VE FOUND IT BETTER TO GET AN IDEA OF WHAT WE WILL NEED TO RENT AND TRY TO INCLUDE RENTAL FEES IN THE BAND'S FEE UPFRONT."

specializes in gear rentals for audio recordings, Ladinsky is proud to say that his company was one of the first to commit to Pro Tools.

"We could see the writing on the wall," he says.

What Ladinsky has found over the course of Pro Tools' lengthy dominance in the recording field—it's been in vogue for about 10 years now—is that once musicians realize they have a great recording system on their hands, they discover they want equally strong microphones, which are harder to come by.

In fact, according to Ladinsky, a Telefunken ELA M 251E large-diaphragm tube condenser mic can run upward of \$25,000.

And that's where a company like Design FX Audio comes in, helping musicians to fill in the gaps without breaking the bank. Ladinsky's company charges only \$150 for a daily rental of the aforementioned Telefunken, and charges only \$125 for Neumann KM-54s, KM-56s, M-147s, M-149s, U-47s, M-49s, M-50s and U-67s; and Sony C-800 Gs.

"People want a good front-end coming into their digital recording system," he says. "Especially for vocals, you want to get the best sound into the recording machine, as clean as possible. You don't want to have a poor signal that you have to manipulate and fix."

Beyond tube microphones, Design FX Audio's other popular rentals include mic pre-amps, converters, virtual systems and reverb devices.

Ladinsky's company also rents out speakers and amps like Genelec 1030 6.5 inches, 1031A 8 inches and 1032 10 inches; KRK E8 8-inch Monitors, S12 Subwoofers and 15-inch three-ways; and Yamaha NS10s, MSP10s, MSP5As and PC2002 Stereo Power Amp 240 watts.

"COMPUTER SYSTEMS WILL CONTINUE TO GET MORE ADVANCED, BUT TO GET QUALITY SOUND, YOU CAN'T SKIMP ON SOME THINGS, LIKE MICROPHONES." —TRACI BRADFORD, AUDIO RENTS

"I only buy the things that people want to rent," he explains. "The industry has gone through a lot of changes, but people are going to continue making records and will hopefully want to us the best stuff possible, so it sounds good in the future."

Old Becomes New

Indie musicians who have already discovered the value of high-quality mics and other gear have likely found a common denominator across the rental items: They're vintage.

Traci Bradford of Audio Rents—as the largest and oldest pro audio equipment rental house in Hollywood, specializing in recording and post-production equipment, and offering



audio-recording gear stretching back to the 1970s—says its most popular rental is the Neumann U87A. It can cost about \$3,000 to buy but only \$50 to rent per day.

"Computer systems will continue to get more advanced, but to get quality sound, you can't skimp on some things, like microphones," says Bradford, seconding Ladinsky's sentiments.

As for mic pre-amps, Audio Rents customers tend to opt for the Avalon

VT737sp, a Class A mic pre with EQ and compression that also costs \$50 per day.

"If you want to go higher-end, a lot of people are using the Neve 1073 [which runs \$70 per day]," she says. "It has actual modules taken out of an old mixing console from a recording studio and put into a powering supply. It's super-duper vintage."

Bradford adds that Audio Rents is also delving into audio interfaces, into which musicians plug mics or guitars that feed into their computer. However, they're not renting out as many effects boxes, which have tapered off due to computer plug-ins, she notes.

While **LAFX Recording Services** hasn't been around as long as Audio Rents, the closely held 15-year-old company prides itself on having stuck with analog gear in the early 2000s while its competitors overindulged on digital equipment that didn't stand the test of time.

"Younger artists are wowed by the vintage-ness of tube microphones and tape machines," says owner **Anne Vicari**.

Lex Marasek, the company's rentals manager, says artists continue turning to mics that are vintage because "it doesn't get any better. There's some places where technology has hit a break wall. Pro Tools gigs like hard drive converters have gotten very good, but what hasn't caught up is some of the original Neumann mics that demand a high price tag."

Hitting The Road

While indie musicians in the studio may be going into the way-back machine in search of the best quality microphones, those hitting the road have their sights firmly set on the future. With road expenses like van rentals, gas and setup becoming ever more costly, artists are looking for smaller-size gear.

Enter the in-ear monitor, which is quickly replacing traditional, large monitors.

John Hoik, back line manager at **Third Encore**—which offers back line rentals, cartage and a storage facility, in addition to five fully equipped studios—says that, in the touring world, gear is going digital and becoming smaller, lighter and more affordable.

"What's being phased out are actual physical wedges," he says. "In-ear monitors are easier to travel with and are becoming more affordable. Five or six years ago, only Michael

Jackson and Justin Timberlake could afford them, but now everyone can."

Beyond in-ear monitors, digital boards are also shrinking in size, getting so small that musicians can bring them on airplanes as carry-on luggage, Hoik says.

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Drummers who perform live can use playback systems—often in the form of laptops with digital interfaces—for tracks that require instruments that can't be re-created live, sending the feed to the front of the venue, according to Hoik.

"There might be a certain synth pad sound going on in the chorus of a track that you don't want a keyboardist to play, so you'd play along to a click track instead," he says. "Artists can't always afford to take four singers on tour to sing backup on one song."

Baker Lee, audio production coordinator of **Studio Instrument Rentals US** (which calls itself the biggest and best-equipped full-service music equipment rental and production facility in the industry), says that powered speakers have become popular across the board among touring artists, having taken off in use starting about five years ago.

"With powered speakers," Lee explains, "[There's] no need for power amps—plug and play." While they can come in various sizes and capabilities, and can be used in a line array for live shows or for a studio as monitors, he points to the Behringer X32 console—which costs about \$2,300—as being one of the more inexpensive options.

"The consoles are not as large as some of the analog and also all the outboard gear is built into the console, making it so an engineer can mix without external racks," Lee adds. "I'm not sure if things are more affordable now, but one can certainly get more for their money."



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GEAR TALK WITH RAMI JAFFEE

LIKE GEAR AT A CONCERT,

Rami Jaffee—one of rock’s go-to keyboard sideman—can often fly under the radar. But his contributions are as numerous as they are impressive. Jaffee playing the Hammond B3 organ on the Wallflowers’ self-titled debut in 1992, regularly records and tours with Foo Fighters, and has also lent his talents to Pearl Jam, Pete Dinklage, Soul Asylum, Stone Sour, Joseph Arthur and Coheed and Cambria.

To boot, the keyboardist co-owns **Fonogenic Studios**—a recording studio and performance space in Van Nuys, CA—with musician Ran Pink.

With more than 30 years of experience tickling the keys in both studio and live formats, Jaffee spilled about his favorite pieces of gear and imparted some gear-rental advice for budding indie artists.

• What types of gear and backline equipment would you recommend renting or buying for up-and-coming artists who don’t have a lot of money to spare or are looking for the most convenient options?

Great question!!! I’ve mentioned new keyboards that kinda rock and even new pro audio gear by boutique companies, BUT these pieces are definitely not cheap! There’s so much cool stuff that is very reasonable in price and amazing sounding like Audio-Technica microphones (I’ve been using mine for two decades on drums and keys and vocals ... super affordable and badass), the Microkorg is not even \$500 and it smokes fat ass synth sounds like its elders. Apogee makes super affordable recorders like the duet or the one and it sounds incredible. I mean, press-the-soft-limit-and-turn-that-shit-up incredible!

• What specific pieces of gear and backline equipment—for both touring and recording—do you use for each music project for which you perform?

That’s a wide wall of keyboards we’re talking about, but you will almost always see a Hammond B3 organ and a Leslie speaker hanging around. That’s become my favorite toy, but touring with the new Mellotron M4000D has been a highlight out with the Foos.

In the studio, I’m open to all things that make people smile ... everything from an old Marxophone to a Stylophone I bought from Urban Outfitters, but mostly organs and pianos

of various vintage. Lately, I’ve popped out so much playing with random side projects (After School Special, Jonny Kaplan & the Lazy Stars, etc.), and I’ll pop a Nord Electro into a Quilter amp and make some great noises.

• Which pieces do you rent and which do you own? Why do you choose one or the other?

I own most everything I play, but if I have a session at Henson Recording Studios and their Hammond is fired up, I’m game to play it.

• Can you talk a bit about why you favor each of those pieces—what they bring to your sound, what practical advantages they have, etc.?

I favor classic instruments mainly in their purer forms. I feel that with older gear I get a certain “help” from their imperfections that people really seem to connect with. But just the same, if I have some new gadget Guitar Center Nord-type thing, I can manipulate it using my memory of the vintage sound of the real deals. Just have to use your ears and have a damn good imagination.

• Which pieces have you used throughout your career and which are new additions? Why have you held on to some and brought in others?

The Hammond B3 organ launched my career and will never go away. It always teaches me things that inspire me to play every day. This doesn’t close me off of trying new keyboards, especially with amazing boards out all the time, like the Microkorg, the whole line of Moog and even new Oberheim stuff. I’ve even been messing around with the new Buchla stuff. Fun.

• What trends have you noticed among your friends in terms of gear? For example, are you and other musicians transitioning to wireless in-ear monitoring systems and mics, and smaller boards?

Trends are strange these days. There’s always some smaller newer something that is very musical and easy to carry or set up, but

most of my loaded peers seem to hang on the original recipe stuff because they can afford it. I’m the same way. I’ve made so much loot playing these damn things, I almost feel like I owe that gear to keep it nice and healthy at any cost. Obviously, to the up-and-coming musician, it’s killer to be able to grab a small Nord and have pretty great organs, electric/acoustic pianos, clavs and some grindy amp knobs to have at your fingertips in a minute’s time!

• Talk about analog versus digital. Do you prefer one or the other, generally or for specific types of gear and backline equipment?

Funny question, because I really started to master the digital world by using plug-ins side by side with their analog counterparts and really finding settings that were warm and right on. It just takes a tiny bit of time and using your ears to get something magical, especially if you’ve been lucky to have had a career in the ‘90s when it was ONLY analog, so you’d know what warmth actually is. I’ve been blessed to play and record with people like the Foos who are in a mad tape/analog revival. So again,

I’m around so much warm analog action that when I get to my Apogee converters and have some compressor plug-in up, it’s only a matter of a few seconds of twiddling that I hear something spot-on to goodness.

• Do you see analog gear and/or equipment eventually being phased out completely?

Analog is having such a nice comeback right now, I wouldn’t say goodbye just yet. I’m sure modern companies are not happy, because unfortunately the world is moving more and more into smaller and disposable gear. The patents are out. If there continues to be purists for the analog movement, they will keep those vintage pieces alive as well as boutique companies making great new analog gear. **MC**

“THERE’S SO MUCH COOL STUFF THAT IS VERY REASONABLE IN PRICE AND AMAZING SOUNDING.”

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