

Arlington Acoustic Jam

And a great mandolin pickup for just that situation...

THE ARLINGTON GUITAR SHOW always provides enough subject matter for several columns, and this year's show was no exception. I could do a laundry list of the outstanding instruments on parade, including a \$35,000 D'Aquisto mandolin, \$110,000 Gretsch White Penguin, and a stunning 1959 Cherry Red Gibson Les Paul Custom (I didn't even ask the price).

But I've got something else up my sleeve; I'd like to discuss the proper way to amplify an acoustic bluegrass band.

The Acoustic Jam

The Arlington show used to have an acoustic jam on the second floor of the hotel, with players such as Charles Sawtelle and David Grisman in attendance, but that was way before my time. After a hiatus of at least eight years, show organizers (the Four Amigos) decided to resurrect the acoustic jam for Friday night in the Arlington Wyndham's sports bar. The "jam boss" for the affair was Mike Fuller with his band The Bluegrass Solution who began the evening with an hour-long set before bringing other players onstage. Kelly Jones and I joined them for some bluegrass before Harlem Slim performed a short solo set of acoustic blues.

Although it was fun to play with Mike and his band, the sound onstage and in the bar made it difficult to relax and concentrate on the music. In a word, it was bad. Not only did some very fine-sounding acoustic instruments sound nothing like themselves, but it was also exceedingly difficult for players to hear each other on stage. The resulting music wasn't nearly as tight as it could have been, given the caliber of the musicians present.

The simple answer would be to blame the sound man, but that would be wrong. If you give someone the wrong tools for a job, you can't blame them if it turns out badly.

Given the right equipment, the jam could have been much better. For example, a single microphone could have been used, instead of the lateral array of mics.

Keeping Sound Reinforcement Simple

Bluegrass music is all about working as an ensemble. Bill Monroe used the term "working in tight." His band would play in close physical proximity to each other using one centrally located

microphone. Peter Rowan recalls Bill turning to him before a song and saying, "You crowd me now." Pete would play with his shoulders rubbing against Bill's, sometimes pushing towards or being pushed away from the microphone's sweet spot. Some bluegrass bands, like Open Road or Del McCoury's band, still use this single-mic setup. They don't do it because they're being nostalgic; they use it because it works.

A single microphone setup is both elegant and practical. By using one full-range high quality cardioid-pattern condenser mic, you can capture every sound within a (roughly) 120-degree angle. This kind of mic is designed to be flat and harmonically neutral, unlike dynamic vocal mics. Most dynamic mics also have a limited harmonic range, a tipped-up presence region, and work best a few inches from a vocalist's mouth. If you want to capture the true sound of an acoustic instrument, a condenser microphone makes far more sonic sense.

The primary physical advantage of a single-mic setup is that band members are forced to be close enough so they can hear each other without stage monitors. This eliminates problems created by "dead" stages where the sound doesn't travel very far. Also, this method allows the band to mix itself. When a soloist needs to be louder, they just move closer to the microphone. Experienced one-mic bands like Del McCoury's are in constant motion, as soloists dodge in and then slide out as their solo ends. After a bit of practice, this microphone choreography becomes almost second nature. Even in jam situations, players who have worked with a single-mic setup have little trouble adapting to making music with new people. Just as bluegrass music has certain protocols (such as the length and order of solos) working with a single mic has rules that make it easy for players to work together.

Sometimes, bands use variations on the single-mic setup. The most common upgrade adds a pickup to the stand-up bass so it doesn't have to be quite as close to the main mic to be heard. Another change adds a second cardioid microphone a foot or so apart from the first. This allows players to be spread a bit farther apart, in addition to creating a stereo mix. Some bands, like Rhonda Vincent and the Rage, use two cardioid microphones about six feet apart with a distinct group of musicians around each microphone. Rhonda and her guitarist,

Audie Blaylock, share one mic, while the banjo, fiddle, and mando player share the second mic.

Since Rhonda and Audie do a lot of duets, this arrangement allows them to hear each other regardless of the stage conditions.

The ultimate single-mic setup employs pickups on each instrument in addition to the two cardioid microphones, so that not only can the front-of-house engineer dial in a carefully panned stereo mix, he can also give each solo a bit more definition. For this arrangement to work successfully the FOH engineer must know the material very well, so he can anticipate who will need their levels boosted during each song. The late Frank Edmundson, who worked with Allison Krauss and Hot Rize, was a master of this technique.

Perhaps next year, the Arlington acoustic jam could have a pair of Audio Technica 4033s, or Shure KSM44s, or AKG 414s, along with a central direct input (DI) box instead of an array of Shure SM57s and SM58s. It would result in better sound and, even more importantly, better music.

Does Schertler Make the World's Best Mandolin Pickup?

About nine months ago I reviewed a new Martin D-16RE with a built-in Schertler Bluestick pickup system. Since I play a lot more mandolin than guitar, after the review I asked Schertler to send me their DYN-M pick-up which is made specifically for mandolins. I've been meaning to do a short review for several months now, but kept putting it off, primarily because once I finish the review I must either send the pick-up back or buy it.

The DYN-M pickup system is deceptively easy to use. Merely attach it to your mandolin and plug its XLR output jack into either a Schertler's Pre-A II preamplifier, onstage DI box, or directly into a mixing board microphone input. It attaches to the top of a mandolin with special putty that leaves no residue, but stays put.

The pickup is a miniature moving-coil condenser microphone that works just like any microphone – it picks up sound waves. The trick is that the putty creates a seal around the DYN-M so it is isolated from extraneous sounds; it only

hears your mandolin. The DYN-M's physical design makes it very resistant to airborne feedback.

Finding the right placement spot requires a bit of trial and error, but with most mandos somewhere slightly below and behind the bridge works nicely. In the last couple of months, I've only had one chance to actually use the DYN-M on stage. Since my group plays using a single-mic setup, most times I haven't needed to have a direct feed for my mando, yet when I did use the DYN-M onstage, it worked great. I plugged into a DI box, which ran into the mixer. The sound man had no problem getting adequate gain, and the final result was I sounded like I usually do, only louder. I've used the DYN-M at home on several high-end mandolins including my Gibson F5 fern, Hilburn F, and Weins F5. In every case, the resulting sound was very close to the way the instrument sounds without a pickup, and when I removed the DYN-M there were no signs of its presence on the mandolins' finishes.

You could use the Schertler DYN-M on an acoustic guitar, but Schertler has a special version called the DYN-G specifically designed for guitars. The DYN-G looks identical to the DYN-M, and the principle is certainly the same; perhaps only the name has been changed to protect the innocent.

The retail price for the DYN-M mando pickup is \$395. While not inexpensive, it accomplishes what no other mandolin pickup can – supply good sound along with easily installation and clean removal. With a DYN-M, mando players can be assured they'll be heard in any stage situation. And unlike other fine pickups (i.e. the Pick Up The World), one DYN-M will suffice for any number of mandolins, as long as you only play one at a time!

My personal debate is whether I need a DYN-M enough to spend \$395 for something I'll only use once in a blue moon. I'll probably buy one, just because when I do need a mandolin (or guitar) pickup, the DYN-M can do the job so elegantly.

For more, visit schertlerusa.com.

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