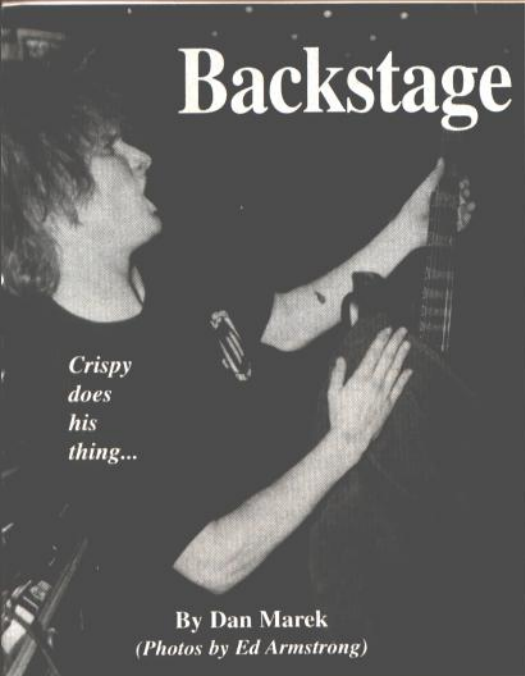


Backstage Pass: The Real Life of a Roadie



Crispy
does
his
thing...

By Dan Marek

(Photos by Ed Armstrong)

The stage is set and the audience has gathered. Anticipation settles on the bustling crowd until lights flash over their heads and sweep to the stage. The band walks on, and the first note is met with cheers and applause. The fans sing along to their favorite songs and the band lives up to its hype—the show is perfect. Going to a concert can be a magical experience, but many fans do not know how much time and effort it takes to put on that perfect show. The daily process of setting up sound and lighting equipment can take weeks of early mornings and late nights. From guitar technicians to tour managers and roadies, a touring company has the most underappreciated job in the music industry.

"Every day some kid looks at me and says, 'Dude I want your job,'" says Crispy Conrad, who has worked as a guitar tech for The Cult, Stevie Wonder, Fuel, Terence Trent d'Arby and Buckcherry. "What he doesn't realize is that I came in at 10:00 in the morning to set up my shit and I won't be done until 2:00 in the morning. What he really wants is the lifestyle that he thinks I lead. Everybody always thinks that roadies just drink, party and have sex all day long, which really isn't true. The worst part of it is guys thinking that I'm really not doing anything, when in actuality my day lasted a hell of a lot longer than theirs did."

The Local Crew

"When you do something like the Spice Girls, you have twelve trucks come in at a time," says Mark Kurkman, manager of roadie crew Roadrunner Productions in Arizona. "You have about fifty people out there working on it, plus the traveling crew of about ten." When the unloading begins, workers paid an average of \$10 an hour separate the equipment by what section it will be used in. Then they will split up and start on more specific jobs. "When we unload the tents and unpack the equipment, we start to line up the truss, line up the speakers, and fly the motors so we can hang the speakers from the grid," says Aaron Forjan, who has been a stagehand for seven years with bands like Black Sabbath and U2. "We have a lighting crew, an audio crew, depending on the band they might bring a couple girls for wardrobe, and there is the steward," Forjan says. "The steward makes sure everybody does their job, signs everybody in, makes sure everybody gets fed,—he just kind of runs around like a chicken with his head cut off makin' sure everybody is happy."

The Traveling Crew

"Usually when the band comes they have a stage manager and a production crew that does all the computers and booking," explains Forjan. "Then they have all the guitar techs, bass techs, drum techs, a sound engineer, a lighting engineer and a monitor engineer. They usually bring a lot of people with them, depending on how big the band is and how big the production is."

"I spend most of my time doing set-up, tear-down and maintenance," Crispy says about his guitar work. "I change strings daily. It's a good 45 minutes just to change a set of strings and get them show ready. I set up all the time. If you keep up on the little stuff, that's less you'll have to do when you have to sit down and do something big." Getting things done right the first time is an essential part of limiting the stress levels. "You're there looking at 10,000 people that are looking at you some dude, and this dude is looking at you because his shit doesn't work," Crispy says. "We've all had it happen, but we just kind of go with it. There are some guys [musicians] that take it better than others. Some guys will flip out and chew your head off, but then there are guys that are like, 'No problem dude, just get another guitar when you get a minute.'"

"There are a few of the performers that are really cool," says Bono, a veteran stagehand with Roadrunner Productions. "I think that James Taylor is one of the coolest ones. He'll come out after his meet and greet and shake hands with all the stagehands. Bonnie Raitt was really cool too; but there have

been some real assholes too. Like the Goo Goo Dolls, they're very primadonna. That's OK though, we'll just run into them again on the way down."

It's up to the tour manager to make sure the band is comfortable on the road, but many times they're met with requests that are not possible to pull off. Who hasn't heard the famous "brown M&M" story? (In the '80s, Van Halen supposedly signed agreements that each venue had to supply a large bowl of M&Ms with every brown one picked out.) "Ten years ago people got away with stuff like that," says John Calleo, who has been a tour manager for Stevie Wonder, ZZ Top, Clint Black and Tracy Chapman. "Today it's run more like a business. Those ridiculous demands aren't taken seriously anymore—because, well, you tell the artist, 'It costs money to get someone to pull all the damn brown M&Ms out of there.' That affects the ticket prices. The expense that you have to put into the show reflects in the ticket prices."

Problems

No matter how many preparations are made to make things run smoothly, there are still certain problems that will occur.

One of the more dangerous jobs on the crew is rigger. Riggers climb a rope to the lighting trusses above the stage to arrange individual cans so they will shine in the right place. They walk along a two-foot truss tightening cans and making sure each one is perfect. "It's a real risky job because you're up there pulling up all the heavy stuff, and it's your responsibility to make sure nothing falls from the grid, because if something falls it could hurt someone really bad," says Forjan.

Even if the jobs are all done perfectly, many problems can occur after the audience arrives. "Riots breaking out and kids getting f**ked up is probably the worst problem you can face," says Kurkman, a stagehand manager. "I've watched my guys get tore up because sometimes the crowd is not very friendly. I have to tell my guys to try and be professional about it, but that only goes so far."

"You come to work, even if you're having a bad day," Crispy says, "the lights go down and you hear those people. They're screaming and focusing their energy towards the stage, and even though they're not focusing it at you, you get the residual energy that's in that direction. That adrenaline high is what has had me out here bustin' my ass doing long hours day in and day out for 15 years." **ZZ**