

living on the road.

Tour busses turned inside out



Living on the road: Tour busses turned inside out

By Dan Marek

Photo of Patty Taylor (above) by David Soto

Traveling between shows can be a long and tedious task for musicians. Although technology has created more opportunities in transportation, most bands still keep their feet steady on the ground by traveling in what may seem like a dinosaur—the tour bus.

With new high-end electronic equipment, the dinosaur has evolved into a half-million dollar vehicle that can be customized to specific requests to make any band feel at home, at a rather high-end price.

“Man, we got to keep tours goin’ just to keep the bus movin’,” said rapper Ice-T. “These things can cost up to a grand a day. That’s some major overhead to get over, just to keep your band rollin’.”

To give an idea of what living on the road can be like, we’ll take a short walk through the 45-foot chariot, from the driver’s seat to the back lounge, and meet the member of the traveling team who acts as a mother, housemaid, and even make-shift doctor.

The not-so-prehistoric tour:

“In the basic bus you have a front lounge when you walk in (usually two couches, a bath, a kitchen area, TV, stereo, and a refrigerator), then a privacy door that separates eight, ten or twelve bunks, a bathroom and there is another door to what we call the ‘rear state room,’ which is usually a lounge with a U-shaped couch, TVs, VCRs, DVD players, a desk, ice chest, in-motion satellite system— anything to make them comfortable,” said Patty Taylor, owner of Taylor tours in Phoenix. “We try to keep up with all the new electronic devices; there are two 32” TVs, two stereos, and the average bunk has small TVs inside, so each bus has 14 TVs in it. The type of people using our busses need the best electronic equipment on the market, because some of them might record their set for the night and come back and listen to their mistakes on the bus.”

If a celebrity decides to customize a bus to their own standards of living, they will either buy a bus or sign a long-term lease in order for the conversion companies to create the bus of their dreams.

“We had a bus custom built for Whoopi Goldberg— she doesn’t fly at all— she sent us two antique Russian couches that she wanted us to put in there,” said Taylor, whose company has leased busses to musicians from

the Red Hot Chili Peppers to Dr. Maya Angelou. “She had them shipped from an antique place in New York; they were still stuffed with the original straw and horse hair, so we had to redo the cushions. We had to take the windshield out to get ‘em in because they were huge. So we had 200-and-some-year-old Russian couches in the front lounge, and a lot of antiques and paintings that we built into the bus for her. We get a lot of strange requests like that.”

Typically, musicians lease busses for a shorter amount of time, and will pick out a model that meets their needs best. Most companies offer a range of styles to meet the needs of the band. “On the higher end, which is primarily what we do, a late model Prevost will go for anywhere between \$400 and \$500 a day. The Mercedes of the industry is the 2001 XLII Prevost, the top of the line. During peak season we’ll probably get \$600 a day for those. The group also pays the driver for fuel and weekly expenses like doing cleaning, bus washes, recharging the generator and doing laundry.”

Driving and babysitting:

“Besides the equipment, the drivers are the biggest asset because they’re wearing so many hats,” Taylor said. “They have to know the equipment, be somewhat mechanically inclined, a safe driver, a babysitter, a nursemaid, and a good personality because they deal directly with the bands.”

“After a 400-mile drive— that’s seven hours— you check in to the hotel. I get a room, and they get one room,” said Tom Follis, who has driven busses for bands for over 20 years. “The tour manager uses their day room to do his paperwork and stuff. I usually get an hour or two for a nap, then we go down to the venue about two or three in the afternoon to set the bus up. I clean the bus, service it, get some food, then try to get seven hours of sleep. Then I get up about two in the morning and start all over again.”

Although the driving is a long and tedious task, Follis says it’s not always the hardest part. “Dealing with all the different personalities is probably the hardest part,” Follis said. “Last year I dealt with 12 groups [performers’ entourages], from Billy Idol to George Jones to Ellen DeGeneres— that’s a lot of personalities. I have to do a lot of adapting.”

Taylor added, “Tom had been out with this band Corrosion of Conformity for four months. Tom is 60 and he has to deal with all these young kids. You have to be able to relate to someone with purple hair and their nose pierced.”

“Corrosion of Conformity can really mess up a bus,” Follis said. “One night stands, staying in the cheapest hotels we could find— it’s not the best tour you’d want to go on. My biggest problem with them was their constant partying. We were even at Mardi Gras... they would sit up in the bus till three in the morning, two guys crawling into their bunk drunk, beer bottles all over the bus. I do normal clean up, but I don’t clean up after parties. They were all drunk; we couldn’t roll with all that, so I cleaned it up and charged ‘em 50 bucks.”

Corrosion of Conformity aren’t the only band to party hard on the road. Videodrone, another “hard-rock party band” as Follis puts it, will go to any expense to keep the buzz going and the beer flowing.

“Videodrone had the bus smelling like a brewery,” Follis said. “So our first day off I called a steam cleaner out and cleaned the bus. The bus was all wet, and then the band called me on the phone saying, ‘We can’t get on the bus, our keys won’t work.’ The cleaners had to airlock the bus because it was all wet. I told them it’s got to dry before you use the bus, and they said, ‘We want to party.’ I told them, ‘Well, if your tour manager calls me and says you can go and party on it all wet, I’ll do it, but that means we’ll have to clean it all over again next break. She called and said, ‘It’s their bus so let ‘em use it.’ Two hundred dollars later we cleaned it again.”

Cleaning the bus can be an overwhelming task, especially for bands new to the game. But as Taylor mentioned before, a lot of the drivers take on the role of babysitter and nursemaid as well.

“I had one young man [who could not be named]... when we were crossing over into Canada I said, ‘Get rid of everything you got. Do not try to hide it on this bus— they know every hiding place, so if you got anything illegal get rid of it,’” Follis said. “This young man got rid of it by taking it. He was ricocheting off the walls. We had to pull into a truck stop just to get him well enough to cross the border, because he was really high on some bad drugs. I asked him what he took and he said, ‘I don’t know,’ then I asked how much he took and he said, ‘five.’ He thought it might have been Ritalin, but he had no idea. He was a sweet young man, but I even had to bail him out of jail because he got caught shoplifting at a Flying J truck stop.”

While Corrosion of Conformity and Videodrone may be extreme cases, Follis says the majority of tours are more laid back and comfortable. “90 percent of the guys are nice and try to take care of the bus,” Follis said. “The drivers have to understand that they’re on tour, they want to have fun, and they want to party, so we bend and try to take care of them.” **ZZ**