

Tori Amos: On Tour with Nexo and SSE Hire

By Keith May



Tori Amos

(Editor's note) After hearing Keith May rave about the Tori Amos concerts that he saw, I made arrangements to visit the tour's Los Angeles stop, at a lovely old theatre, the Wiltern. When SSE Hire's Mike Rose came out to the barricade to escort me in, he looked somewhat familiar. Then, when I saw him standing next to Mark Hawley at FOH, I said "I know you guys!" They had travelled together with an English band that I had hosted at San Francisco's Warfield Theatre, when I was FOH systems tech there, a decade ago.

Mike and Mark are quite a team. They punch the mix out into the room like troupers, Tori's show is not a drawing room recital! There is a very two-fisted approach to the audio. The room is filled with a surprisingly three-dimensional piano sound, and super-strong vocal.

I described it to audio friends afterwards as the mix being up to the point of resonating, then reined in minus that crucial five per cent, so that it is stable throughout the show. Achieving this kind of balance takes a lot of experience, to walk that close to the line and not go over it. It is also a powerful gift to the fans, and the kind of presentation (combined with an excellent set and lighting) that reminds one of why people go to concerts in the first place.

Mark uses a stereo pair of 414's on the piano, augmented with a third one positioned just over the bass strings. In the afternoon, while Tori soundchecked, I stood with Mike in the aisle near the top of the venue, and when she would come down on her left hand, the impact was amazingly intense. Mike confirmed that he and Mark are very happy with how the Nexo cabinets function to make that possible.

At the end of the night, I had the pleasure of meeting John Penn of SSE Hire, and talking about arcane topics like doghouses and mults and meter bridges. SSE is concerned with the details of touring packaging, they know how crisis situations can erupt, for example at a festival, when you need to get past the mults and re-patch your actual XLR's in the back of a desk. SSE makes a doghouse that enables you to do that quickly, without fighting unwieldy doors and masses of cables.

I'd like to thank Jim Sides of Nexo USA, for making it possible for Keith and I to meet these gentlemen. I had very little knowledge of Tori's music prior to the show, I could not have asked for a better introduction. Mark and Marcel work with her at a level of sincerity and understanding that very few engineers ever spend long enough with a given artist to develop. Quite illuminating, guys, thanks again!

- Chris Kathman

March 1, 2002

Tori Amos: On Tour with Nexo and SSE Hire (Cont.)

Mark Hawley (FOH), Marcel van Limbeek (monitors), Michael Rose (FOH systems tech) and Andy Yates (monitor tech) explain why how they work together, to actualize Tori Amos' sonic vision, using [Nexo](#) speakers and SSE Hire equipment, on her solo tour.

I caught up with Hawley, van Limbeek, Rose and Yates at the [Paramount Theater](#), a beautifully restored theater in the heart of downtown Oakland.



Mark Hawley

Hawley & van Limbeek have been working with [Amos](#) since 1995 and have recorded and mixed three of her studio albums. In spite of the fact that "Strange Little Girl", her new album, features a full band, Amos opted to do a solo tour to support the album.

Often, the sound of a good piano is taken for granted, but Amos' piano sound was heady and complex. Hawley clearly understands how to make the many layers of her playing translate live.

To achieve her sound, he uses three [AKG 414](#)'s (1 stereo pair & 1 extra at the low end "for a bit more "oomph!" says Rose) to mic the piano. The processing used on the stereo pair is a Focusrite Red 2 (dual EQ) & a [Red 3](#) (dual compressor/limiter) "to fatten it up a little bit".

Processing on Amos' piano in the monitors consists of a Lexicon PCM 91 reverb, a Yamaha [SPX 990](#) and [SPX 1000](#) for additional effects, and a Roland SDE 3000 (with a footswitch so van Limbeek can manually tailor the length of delay to match Amos' tempo fluctuations when she's not playing with a drummer). At FOH, Hawley uses a combination of Lexicon [480L](#), PCM 91 and SDE330 on the piano depending upon the song.

Sunday night, the piano sound was nothing short of amazing. It was warm, present and articulate. But when I talked to Hawley after Sunday night's show, he was displeased with the piano sound.

He said, "it's a real challenge mixing in that room because the natural acoustics are bizarre! I didn't want to do too much with the effects tonight because I was afraid of muddying up the sound." He continued, "it's funny, after six months in the studio making something perfect for posterity I just want to get on the road! After six weeks on the road I get fed up with the rooms and I just want to get back into the studio!"

Cool Note: Because of the way they record every show, by repatching they can play back yesterdays show so that it comes up on the board routed to the previous night's channels. This allows them to do soundcheck based upon their optimal sound the previous night.

Photos by Ken Berger



Camco Vortex amps

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Nexo cabinets

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Nexo cabinets

Hawley invited me to come back and attend Monday night's show, to see if I could hear the difference. Sure enough, on Monday night, the piano sounded even clearer than it had the previous night, but Hawley had solved his low end quandary. It was effortlessly authoritative and delicate. When Amos dug in it sounded like the piano's hammers were also striking distant drums, but when she played softly the notes floated gently out to us. All the effects were blended into the acoustic signal so seamlessly that they never sounded processed.

In addition to her prowess as a pianist, Amos is also a gifted and emotive vocalist. Hawley agrees, but explains "that makes my job harder and easier. Because she has such an incredible dynamic range I have to use an unbelievable amount of compression."

Amos sang into a Neumann [KMS 150](#). Amos' vocals are processed in the same way both in the monitors and the house. After being pre-amped by a Focusrite Red1 the signal goes into a Focusrite Producer Pack and then into a [Tube Tech CL 2A](#) compressor.

The Producer pack compressor is set with a slow attack and fast release with the Tubetech set the other way around to act as a limiter on the rare occasions in which Amos exceeds 7 or 8db of compression on the Producer pack, "which only happens when she really yells!" says Hawley. The vocal then goes to a [BSS 901](#) for some EQ specific compression, usually in the 200 – 250 Hz range.

After the compressors/limiters, the vocal signal goes into a Lexicon 480L (for reverb), a Yamaha SPX 990 (for a slight chorusing effect and pitch change to broaden the sound of her voice) and a [Roland SDE 3000](#) delay. Some of the effects returns are compressed using the vocal signal as the sidechain. Amos' voice acts as the compressor for the effects loops; once triggered, they could trail on indefinitely, but as soon as Amos starts singing, her voice compresses them out. Like her studio recordings an ethereal, otherworldly element was present and yet, her voice always sounded dry. She never disappeared behind the effects. I could clearly hear every breath and every smack of her lips.



Outboard racks, monitor world

A [t.c. electronic](#) graphic EQ is used on every output in the monitors. "it's a great sounding EQ and it's very static during the show," says Van Limbeek. Amos listens to four wedges set up as two stereo mixes, one for her vocal and one for the piano and rhodes. Van Limbeek has the same four-wedge setup at the monitor position.

The monitors are custom made by SSE and are their 12PM model. The monitors are powered by Camco Vortex 4 Power Amps and the digital crossovers are [Klark Teknik' DN 9848](#)'s. One rack goes to van Limbeek for monitors. The piano & Rhodes share one rack and one rack is for the Wurlitzer. They use a [Drawmer 1960](#) compressor on the Rhodes at both ends, and a [Summit TLA-100A](#) compressor on the Wurlitzer for the monitors and a Behringer [MDX-2200](#) on it at FOH.

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