LE STUDIO MOBILE – A recording Legend on Wheels

August 2011, Bob Reardon from Sonic Distribution USA talks to Guillaume Bengle from Le Studio Mobile about his career in the field of professional mobile recording, in present and in the past.

Sonic Distribution USA, owned by Bob Reardon, took over the distribution of MUTEC's professional audio products in the United States and Canada during this year. Due to the fact that Guillaume Bengle with his company Le Studio Mobile is a long term MUTEC customer, Bob grabbed the opportunity to talk to Guillaume about his career in general as well as his experiences with the digital clocking of his equipment using MUTEC's iCLOCK.

Guillaume Bengle (GB), Bob Reardon (BR)

BR- First some introductions. I'm speaking with Guillaume Bengle owner and founder of Le Studio Mobile, one of the top mobile recording operations in the Americas. Let's get some background on you and on Le Studio Mobile. Certainly you have quite an illustrious career providing recording services for clients like Bryan Adams, Sting, Paul McCartney, Miles Davis, Cirque du Soleil and the last Winter Olympics, and the list keeps going. Why don't you tell us about Le Studio Mobile's beginning?

GB- In 1979 I had my first truck. I was doing radio recordings and we used to carry everything into the venue: The console, the recorder, and in those days the recorders were quite heavy. It became obvious that we needed to put everything into a truck and stop carrying the gear inside the venues. The truck then evolved from one-inch 16-track the first year to two-inch 24–track, the standard in 1980. The basic "box" stayed the same but the insides and the equipment were modified many times. In 1987 or '88 I think, we changed the truck itself, which is an easy operation, just changing the vehicle. About three or four years ago, it became obvious that the truck was too old and no longer possible to maintain, so I built a new one, which is the one you see now in the pictures.

BR- So it was in '79 that it became obvious that you needed a truck for remote recording. I remember the very modest mobile recording I had done and even with that equipment it was truly laborious to bring it into the venue and set it all up. Was it very common in '79 to have made the transition to a mobile truck, was this when everyone began switching over?

GB- It was not that common, but there was one big truck in Montreal which was operated by Guy Charbonneau and is now called Le Mobile. He was here in Canada but left for California around the beginning of the '80s. So I was alone in Montreal for a while, and then other trucks came in. At the same time people in Toronto were doing the same. We did albums of course and radio shows. Then television producers realized that if they wanted to do serious outside work, they needed an audio mobile. They used to plug into the house console, but soon they realized they couldn't do that and get minimum audio quality.

BR- How has the type of customer and the client evolved over the years. Did you start out in music or broadcast events, how has your customer base evolved over the years?

GB- We used to do around 70% radio, 15% albums and 15% TV. In the 80's most people had a small TVs with a 2-inch speaker and producers just didn't care about audio quality. That all changed in the 80's, but I had to fight for quality. I told them that many in their audience had started to listen to TV through their stereos. These changes happened here between 1980 and 1985.

BR – Ah, I spent years in audio post for video so I understand being on the audio side trying to convince the video people that it is more than just pictures.

GB- Yes, that took a while, it was tough. But now big production companies know that if you do a serious TV show you need an audio mobile.

BR- How has surround become a factor? How does surround production fit in for you?

GB- Most of our productions now are done in surround except for some live shows. If you're doing something like the Juno Awards that is all rehearsed, then of course it's done in 5.1. But if you're doing TV shows like one we just did, a full 2 ½ hour Fourth of July type special, all live, it's tough enough to do it in stereo. But most of our productions now are in 5.1

BR- Now let's talk a little bit about the recording media. Obviously you have a very interesting perspective, starting with tape formats and have transitioned to tape based digital data storage formats and hard drive stored media at this point and changes in consoles technology also. Could you describe a little bit what you've seen and what your feelings are about those.

GB- When you do live recording most of your jobs are going to be mixed outside so you have to be compatible. It's exactly what you described. Compatibility used to mean 2-inch tape 24 tracks, and then it went to 48 tracks on HI-8: We had PCM 800 Sony recorders, 6 of them. Of course we are now on hard drives with four X48s from Tascam plus a Nuendo 48-track system, used mainly for post-production.

BR- How about the consoles, are you still in the analog domain or have you gone digital with your consoles?

GB- We went with our customers. We used to have a Soundcraft 32-input console and we could do most shows with it. The last time we did the Juno Awards in analog, the Junos you know is the equivalent of your Grammys…

BR- (Laughter) Yes, I am at least that aware of my Canadian neighbors!

GB- Well the Juno Awards are probably the biggest show in Canada every year. I'm somewhat afraid to say we've been doing that for the last 25 years. We did our 25th Junos this year.

BR- Congratulations on that, that's wonderful.

GB- I don't know if it is (more laughter), …. no I'm kidding, yes it is wonderful, thank you. Anyway, the last time we did the show in an analog way, FOH was using four Yamaha PM4000s, enormous analog consoles; Same for monitors. In the truck we had my own main Soundcraft 32-inputs, on the wall I had another 32-input Soundcraft and another one beneath that, plus another one under the main one. It was ridiculous. We went all digital at the same time. First we went with one Yamaha DM2000 and we now have two of those in the truck. So we can handle 144 microphone channels at a time and go from one setup to the next in an instant.

BR- Ah, yes. Now, with the enormous track count made possible by modern digital storage, how many digital tracks are you capable of or could you use. Are you using 96 tracks?

GB- I have five 48-track recorders in the truck ready to be fed, but we always double up, for safety. The real track count is 96 and doubled, that is why we have four X-48s. It's not like the old times when you saw the Studer meter moving in "repro", which meant that something was on tape. But the X-48s have been very reliable for me, they've never let me down. We still double-record and it's easy, the consoles can feed all the machines at the same time. As you know we have no second chance, we can't tell the audience: "Please come back tomorrow and we will try again".

BR- Well that's what the live guys have always said to the studio engineer: "There's no rewind button". I've seen John Newton's (Soundmirror) set up here in Boston, he does the BSO. He has enormous amounts of data redundancy because the cost of the orchestra is just fantastic compared to even a pretty expensive recording cost.

GB- But in our case it isn't even a question of money, the show is tonight and the people are not coming back tomorrow. It has to work. It's as simple as that.

BR- Yea, so how does the digital clocking figure into all this gear. How did you get involved with MUTEC and how does it figure into your system?

GB- MUTEC is our main and only clock right now. If we're doing let's say radio, album, CD we use the iCLOCK's internal oscillator as reference. If we're doing TV, the iCLOCK is locked to the video reference, NTSC or Tri-Level. The output (word clock or video) is distributed to each of our digital piece of equipment. I say that because in some systems it goes from the clock to one piece of equipment and then to another in a daisy chain.

BR- Which iCLOCK model do you have?

GB- iCLOCKdp

BR- So the model with "redundant" or often called a back-up power supply?

GB- Yes of course. There are 8 outputs from the iCLOCKdp, that isn't quite enough for every piece of digital equipment in the truck so we modified some video DA's, two of them, to be able to carry word clock. That's how we feed our equipment. By doing it this way if one of these channels would fail for any reason, it would only affect that piece of equipment.

BR- So you're using a distribution amp to multiply the multi outputs of your iCLOCKdp to feed every device directly, in a star configuration?

GB- Yes, two video DA's (distribution amps) to be precise, again modified for word clock. The other part of your question was when did I hear about MUTEC. I was doing a show in Los Angeles for NBC, we were live and I had a good clock, I thought. That clock's advertising said that if the video signal was lost in any way the clock would go on providing word clock in any situation. We learned the hard way it was not true. We lost the video signal and that machine stopped sending word clock. Luckily that was during a commercial break, we fixed the problem in a second and there was no harm done. Right then, I decided I needed to find a clock that would provide me word clock whatever happened. After some research I found the MUTEC iCLOCKdp. We tried to make it fail, but couldn't. You can short the reference signal, lower the voltage, put it higher, the iCLOCKdp will provide good word clock. It has never failed providing a proper signal. Because as you know if we lose word clock, we lose everything.

BR- Yes I can relate to that, it's enough to put the fear of god in you when the clock goes out and you are in the middle of a live show. Certainly it's supposed to freewheel over any video reference errors and pick back up the sync, providing word clock seamlessly to all devices connected to it.

GB- The unit tells you that it has lost its reference signal, a red light flashes, but it goes on giving you word clock, so you can go on doing your show. Most mobiles that I know have switched over to the iCLOCKdp because of the reliability and dependability. It has been engineered with an understanding of video and broadcast requirements.

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BR- There is nothing like the pressure of a live broadcast and the reality of no–redos to focus your criteria.

GB- In a studio, it is different: You can go again if there is a problem and it's not the end of the world, but for my application dependability is everything.

BR- Let's look at how the gear gets used some more. At last year's Montreal Jazz Festival, you did the featured performance by the Brian Setzer Orchestra. I was at that big show with my wife, the full big band played Brian's high-energy music wonderfully, the crowd loved it. I'll bet that kept you busy with all those performers on stage. How many channels was it.

GB- Yes of course we were busy, but you know being able to handle easily 96 tracks and 144 inputs built in, we are not afraid of many shows, even the biggest ones.

BR- And the experience of so many high level shows must make it more routine.

GB- Is is never routine. Here is a good example of a big show: We did the opening and closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics Games in Vancouver in 2010 and that was two different 96-input set-ups, and we could switch from one set of inputs to the other in a few seconds.

BR- That must have been an interesting job.

GB- Yes. We were there for a month and a half. We did the two big ceremonies for the opening and closing, feeding the whole world. We were the main source for all networks worldwide. At the same time we were there doing the daily medal ceremonies and evening music shows with a different band or singer every night. We used the second set of inputs for these music shows so we could switch set-up quickly and easily. So, with all that going on, the days were quite busy.

BR- How big of a crew do you have for these jobs?

GB- It of course depends, as it really varies with the job. In the truck there is usually one engineer and myself and two guys on the stage. On some shows the customer asks us to provide much more audio services than just the recording. So sometimes I also hire and supervise the entire audio crew. For example, one day a couple of years ago, I had 3 mobiles going all on the same day. I had my mobile mixing Paul McCartney in Halifax, the second time we had done McCartney, and I had two other mobiles in Montreal at the Jazz Festival. I was very busy coordinating and supervising this all at once and it involved a large staff.

BR- It must be very satisfying working with prestigious acts like McCartney, Sting, Bryan Adams, Celine Dion and the many others you have worked with.

GB- Yes, though at the time you are focused more on getting the job done right rather than who is a big star. One that does stand out to me is McCartney, because his music is timeless, so that was an especially good time.

BR- Are there any other shows or performers that stand out you could comment on?

GB- One of my best memory was Daniel Lanois. He showed up without his engineer and he asked me to mix. He is very talented: I felt honored and I enjoyed mixing his music. Miles Davis also stands out as extraordinary: He has been so influential in modern music, and it was a great concert.

BR- Guillaume thank you very much for telling us about Le Studio Mobile, its background and the interesting work you have been doing.

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