

FEATURE

# GIGPIGLET'S TOUR DIARY

## PART ONE – EAST COAST USA

We hitch a ride with Brooke Fraser during her tour of the US, and get the low-down from FOH engineer, Gareth 'Gigpiglet' Stuckey, about the venues they've encountered along the way.

**Text:** Gareth Stuckey  
**Photography:** Scott Ligertwood





The last week or two have been pretty intense.

It's been nearly three years since Brooke Fraser toured, and she has a new band (again). Some of the job is just as I remember it (having mixed Brooke since she was 19, some eight years ago) and some of it's all new. The upcoming shows are a mixture of big NZ theatre gigs (she's 13-times platinum in NZ) and a US tour that ranges from 200-capacity club shows, to 1200-seat theatres. A couple of Australian and UK promos (leading up to next year's tours) have been thrown in for good measure too, as well as rehearsals and an album launch show in LA.

*Hey Hey it's Saturday* was interesting before we left. (I don't even want to talk about my program getting lost in the Digico SD7 one ad break before going live-to-air). Then it was back over the ditch for a quick theatre tour of NZ, back again to Australia for the ARIAs, then straight onto a flight to Houston, Texas. To be honest I needed the sleep on the plane... it also gave me time to do some accounts [how *rock 'n' roll!* – Ed.].

Part of me is terrified of the coming five weeks – I haven't done a club run like this in a long time – while the other part of me is looking forward to the experience.

To guard myself against what are going to be many and varied production values, I'm touring a rack of gear for Brooke's vocal channels (she has two positions on stage – a centre position when she plays guitar, and a keys position). Brooke is probably the quietest singer I have ever mixed so the rack has two purposes: it ensures I have quality gear to get a great vocal sound, and secondly it means I know I'm covered to troubleshoot bad-sounding rooms and systems, and get a vocal out there no matter what. To this end I have (everything in stereo to cover both positions) a Midas XL42 preamp/EQ, followed by a BSS402 comp/limiter (not used) and de-esser (used drastically!) and finally a Klark Teknik DN3030 (the one before the 360... with photo resistors, but to all intents and purposes the same thing). People always ask about the graphic and think I'm joking when I answer them. What the graphic lets me do is tune a vocal very specifically, and notch out feedback issues to get gain from a quiet singer – without hacking up the house graphics (and hence ruining your great mix of the band).

### HOUSE OF BLUES – HOUSTON, TEXAS

**Tuesday 9th November:** The tour starts here. And hopefully it's a sign of things to come. After an evening off to help us acclimatise to the new time zone (ie: stay out late drinking) we pull into the House of Blues in Houston, Texas. House of Blues is a very established touring venue – you can do a tour of the US playing only House of Blues venues, and you'd still have a good time. Some of them are 'well famous' (like the LA House Of Blues on Sunset Boulevard) while others, like Houston, are new (purpose-built) venues that extend the chain.

For our 2pm load-in, even though my freight (backline from LA and flying gear from the NZ tour) is late, we arrive to eight loaders. Eight! And let's not get the wrong impression here; I didn't book these guys. They are *House Staff* who are there to help get the gear in! After we're loaded in they become bus boys or glassies, but for now they're our loaders.

The venue is immaculate – with full in-house backline, Soundcraft Vi6 consoles at FOH and Monitors, a Soundbridge Acoustic Labs Xyon Line Array (built by a local Texas company) that doesn't exactly look the part, but as soon as I plug in, it sure sounds it!

The house crew here couldn't be more helpful: FOH, Monitors, patch guy and lighting all look after us exceptionally well. It's no problem to patch in my rack of gear (even though they have a digital core, they put my vocal channels through the returns loom so that I can have them analogue to my preamps).

We were booked to play in the small room here, but as it sold out we moved up to the big one and as such it's not totally full, but it's a healthy crowd, who absolutely love it.

The Soundcraft Vi6 is an unbelievably cool console. I haven't actually taken one on a proper tour yet – I've only used it at one-offs – but I've updated my rider to request it as my first choice digital console from now on. The fact that I've walked into it (at Festivals etc) and still loved it speaks volumes about its useability. The first time I saw one was in NZ last year on another tour, when, due to some weird Claire Brothers header patching, the touring console couldn't be used at Vector Arena, so they brought in a Vi6 from a local hire company. I got to soundcheck on it, and then do a gig for 20,000 people. For its useability alone, everything is directly in front of you on the touchscreens (yes 'screens' plural: one per bank of faders – I love that), but the control knobs are actually built into the screen, so the parameter you're controlling is changing wherever you're changing it (just like analogue), rather than turning a knob somewhere while looking somewhere else. And that's without even talking about how damn good the thing sounds.

### THE PARISH – AUSTIN, TEXAS

**Wednesday 10th November:** That was Houston. This is Austin. The Parish is a cool club upstairs on the main strip ('Dirty 6th' they call it). I commented to someone that it reminded me of the Mercury Lounge where I played last time I was in Austin. Well, turns out it *was* the Mercury Lounge... it had had a very nice renovation done to it, and a new PA. Well, when I say 'new' I mean EAW 650s – that had seen better days. Certainly not my favourite. There's a Midas Verona at FOH, but curiously they've built the mix position up on a little platform where it's very boomy and resonant, which isn't indicative of the room sound at all. It's a small stage (think: the Annandale in Sydney), but there's still a monitor console – an A&H GL2200. The house crew are great: the FOH guy invites us back to his studio and says we can stay anytime. The lighting girl does a smoking hot show (maybe cause she's smoking hot?) and there are crew to help us get the gear up and down the stairs... what more can you ask for at a 400-capacity show?

### HOUSE OF BLUES – DALLAS, TEXAS

**Friday 12th November:** We were in the small room tonight – Josh Radin was in the big one. This show used powered EV boxes that sounded like vomit. There was a Yamaha M7CL at FOH... I really love the M7 (I like to think of it as the best car in its class. Sure it's not a Mercedes, but it's not meant to be). I started using M7CLs a few Brooke tours ago – maybe five years back – because we didn't travel production at that time, and it was one of the few consoles I could get everywhere (and move without loaders). Once I settled into what I could do with them, I started using one with Thirsty Merc, and I still use one for Tim Finn. Every function I need is here on this board, and its all one button press away. In fact, you don't even have to press a button: you can just push on the knob (ie. the EQ knob you're about to turn) or touch the screen. I think I fell into loving these consoles because of how much I like my old Tascam D8000 studio board – similar layout. The trick here is the Channel view: once you select a channel, you have control over *all* its functions. There's a knob for every auxiliary, a full EQ section and so on. The other huge benefit is that there are two banks of faders (upper and lower) so all the channels are laid out in front of you. There are no layers to page through (just like the D8000 – nostalgia! Maybe I *will* buy it back) and as I tend to be a very busy mixer, these two points make the console very useable for me – I can be everywhere all at once.

Tonight, though, there's no monitors console so I'm sharing the board with Nolan... good times. Surprisingly, we don't get in each other's way too much. We double-input Brooke's vocal channels so I don't mess with his ears, and the ease of access

already mentioned means that he can get to most of what he needs to do, while I fader mix to my heart's content (and never have to 'take the layer away from him').

The EV system is underpowered. The show is heavily sold out, and I struggle a bit. No fun.

### **WORKPLAY THEATRE – BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA**

**Saturday 13th November:** Well, I've never been to Birmingham... and I may well never come back. This is real America here.

The house guy, Davey, was a true old rocker who had toured with everyone – well, at least he said he had. Who knows how many of the stories were true. He remembered the Coogee Bay Hotel though! The Workplay Theatre looked like the *Thunderstruck* film clip – all levels and wire railings. Davey's system was EV "all time aligned" and spread all over the shop: centre fill, outfill, balcony delays, under-balcony delays. He'd bought a fancy new dbx Driverack, you see, and I think he just wanted to use *all* the ins and outs on it. The FOH console was a Soundcraft Series II, which was fine. I know they're old now but they sound great. They're simple and just get the job done. Soundcraft pioneered the '8 & 8' style console – and it's stuck around. Must be good for something...

There's an M7CL at monitors – but the mixes came back into my console to be sent down the core to the amps... via my auxes. As in, Aux 1 is getting sent out of the M7CL, up to me on the core, into a channel input, and then sent via Aux 1 on my console, down the core to the amps. "What?!" Yeah, I don't know either. Maybe they only have the monitor console

in there sometimes and this is the easiest way to integrate it without messing up the patching. I dare not ask, for fear of a long story from Davey about why it's so.

### **THE BELLCOURT THEATRE – NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

**Sunday 14th November:** We arrive on time, as advised, but there's still a show on in the cinema. And of course the PA hasn't been loaded in yet. Ouch! Today will be fun.

Once we finally get underway, Nolan and I try and make things happen quickly with the local guys. We've got a Digidesign Venue SC48 at FOH, which will be controlling monitors as well, and proprietary Nashville three-way boxes – which sound pretty damn good: I think they're pretty much an EV Mongoose with a different badge. As there's no time to soundcheck properly, due to the mess up with the promoter and times, and with Nolan and I sharing a console, I let him go for it. I figure if he runs soundcheck, and gets the band happy, all the gains will be set (which I can't change anyway or I mess monitors up) then, when the show starts, I will just fly by the seat of my pants and make it work. Hey, at least I can hear what I'm mixing – unlike Nolan.

I think the theory worked okay tonight... at least we started on time. First song was rough as guts, but once I got it under control it wasn't too bad. Campbell Smith (Brooke's manager) and Marshall Altman (who produced Brooke's first record) were both here for this show, and both gave me a good review, so it can't have been too bad. Because the band were happy with their monitors they played a great show – and that's the first hurdle. Doesn't matter how good it sounds if the band plays badly.

I remember Bruce Johnston (Oasis FOH engineer and former owner of Johnston Audio) speaking to me at the console probably 10 years ago – I think it was during a Machine Gun Fellatio gig at the Forum, or it may have been a Big Day Out somewhere. Anyway, Bruce said: "This isn't mixing, this is damage control!" Now I don't think he necessarily meant it the way I've since taken it on board, but if you ask me, mixing live sound *is* damage control! Sometimes there's just a bit of cleaning up to do; at other times it's a full-on state of emergency! The guys that are good are the ones that can act fast, and solve problems (ie. make bad things sound good) on-the-fly. You don't get the option to run it again, so you'd better have it sounding pretty damn good by the end of the first song!

### **VARIETY PLAYHOUSE – ATLANTA, GEORGIA**

**Monday 15th November:** The same Texas line array as Houston. These *really* are good sounding boxes. Best night so far for me: an M7CL at FOH with insert cards and a bunch of dbx160s as inserts. Exactly how I love to run them. The console was run off an Apogee Big Ben master clock. Everyone says this makes them sound better – I don't know about that. I'd have to A/B test it. It certainly wasn't night and day: it still sounded like an M7 to me! What I *did* notice, however, is that the gain pots didn't click when you turn them (I know it's quiet but that's always bugged me). So you *can* use a Yamaha M7CL for a live recording/broadcast after all, provided you clock it with something... nice.

### **JAMIN' JAVA – VIENNA, DC**

**Wednesday 17th November:** Yep. Back to reality. Tonight there's JBL Venue series cabinets hung on their side... please people, don't do this! It's just a



disaster – the horns go everywhere they shouldn't. There's a Yamaha LS9 at FOH, which has a computer hook up, so I share the board with monitors: me on the surface, and Nolan on the computer. Having said that, it's only a 200-cap venue. At least the PA has been maintained, and there's a house crew to help out, making it a great night. Everyone is lovely; I have the best lunch *and* dinner all on the house (of course) and beers afterward until we have to leave.

### **ROCK 'N' ROLL CLUB – WASHINGTON, DC**

**Thursday 18th November:** Tonight the FOH rig consisted of four of the wedges hung across the front of the stage. There are six sends of monitors – so that means there was more monitor power than FOH. And it showed.

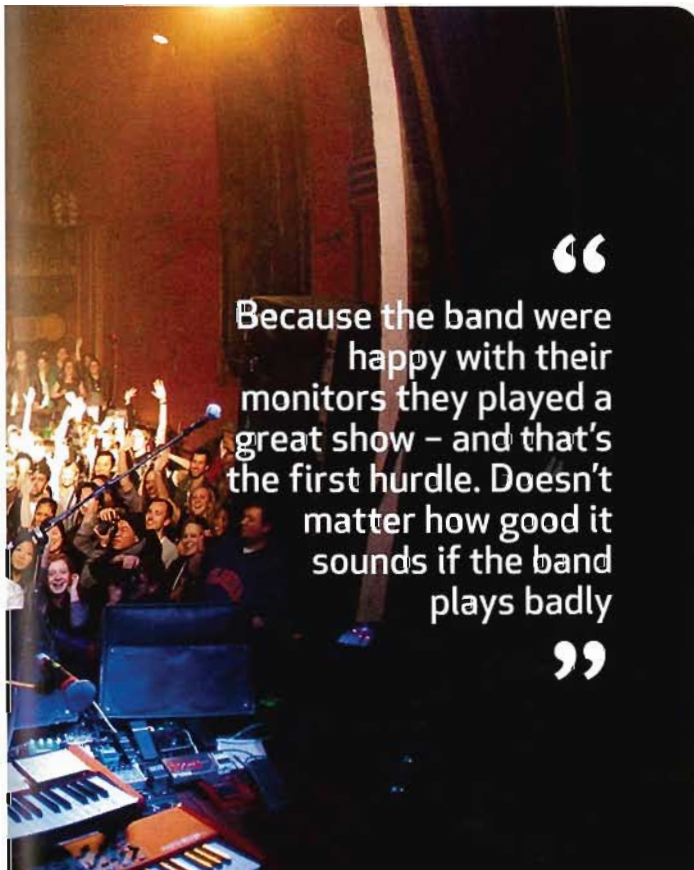
We had a Digidesign SC48 at FOH though... 'cause that's 'cool', right? Doesn't matter how shit your stage and speakers are; if you have a 'state-of-the-art' console it's all cool, right? If I'd been in charge of the budget, I would have bought an LS9/32 instead, or even better, a secondhand Soundcraft K2 or something, and spent the rest on some decent boxes. This setup was like having a studio with ProTools HD but the only monitors available is your iPod dock. What's the point?

### **HIGHLINE BALLROOM – NEW YORK, NY**

**Friday 19th November:** 450-cap venue. JBL Vertec rig (the old ones) with delays for the balcony, extra subs on an aux, a Yamaha PM5D at FOH and an M7CL at monitors. Three house crew, plus two loaders. That's right folks, *five* guys (well actually three guys and two girls), two risers (so we get to put the keyboard setup up as it should be) and a full moving lights package.

We reverse-parallel parked our bus out the front on 16th Street. That was a sight to behold (and yes, a couple of New Yorkers got angry about being held up.)

There is a hospitality waitress. That's right, a waitress that comes upstairs to the (comfortable, with nice lounges and free internet... like there is everywhere) dressing room to take our orders for dinner (which is on the house) and make sure we're all right for a drink. This is a 450-capacity venue people – this is the size of the Annandale Hotel. Compare specs. Something is out of whack in Australia for sure. No wonder we perceive American crew as angry. They probably are! They come all the way to Australia with their band and get what? Zip!





“

mixing live sound is damage control! Sometimes there's just a bit of cleaning up to do; at other times it's a full-on state of emergency!

”

#### **CAFÉ 939 – BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS**

**Saturday 20th November:** Tonight it's another 32-channel M7CL with monitors delivered from FOH and a grumpy house guy who turned up late and then didn't want me to load my program because "all his settings would be lost". After a good 10-minute chat about how he could save his settings (to one of the many blank snapshots available) and recall them after I was gone, we got underway.

This was a great case of: "there's no point putting in a digital console unless there is someone there who knows how to use it." Even though this is the smallest show on the tour (200-cap) there's still a flown Meyer PA, and six sends of UPM monitors. Yes, it's half the size of The Basement and there's a Meyer line array in there!

#### **CAFÉ LIVE – PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA**

**Sunday 21st November:** After staying up late working on the bus (it was Monday business hours in Australia) I rise from my bunk at the very respectable hour of 3pm for load in. We roll in to a venue that sort of looks like it could be an RSL (as we know them in Australia) or maybe a cabaret club, or maybe a very fancy school hall. Whatever it is, it certainly doesn't look like a music venue, except that there's a bunch of crew waiting to help us with the gear. A Clair Brothers PA flies in the roof (the old ones – the first line array they made) and there's a Midas Legend at FOH. This will actually be the first time I've used a Legend the way it was designed. The (slightly bizarre) split monitor section on these allows you to have all your monitor sends running post their own small fader; each band of EQ can be selected to apply to the monitors or not, and there are a further two bands of EQ dedicated to the monitor path.

#### **THE OPERA HOUSE – TORONTO**

**Tuesday 23rd November:** The border crossing into Canada was uneventful... by which I mean we had to get up at 9am in the bitter rain and cold and stand on the street while the police searched our bus, and trailer, and counted the merch... They were big and tough blokes. But, of course, all our documents were in order, and after the usual tough guy questions and comments we were all allowed in. Even Aaron, the Mexican drummer, got through (though they did select him for a 'random' bag search and pat down).

We were playing at the Opera House (after the original venue sold out and we upgraded), which evoked thoughts of plush furniture and polished wood (well it does for me). What greeted us on our arrival, however, was actually much funnier than that. While the system was great – a Midas H1000 (my favourite console) and an Adamson line array at FOH, with an A&H ML4000 with some crazy homemade '80s cabinets for monitors (though they were powered by Bryston 4Bs), the place looked like it hadn't been touched since 1981. It was an old cinema theatre, strangely converted: raw stone floors, big gothic chandeliers, and a proscenium arch that looked like it was from an Adam's Family set. Nothing was clean, and there were no lights anywhere. This was a classic basement rock club, except that it's a 1000-cap 'Opera House'. Soundcheck was all good, though there was some crazy bottom-end weirdness that was hard to control. Not just boomy – it was as if there was a three-second reverb, turned way up in the mix, but only on the subs. The house guy assured me it would go away, and I believed him. A very knowledgeable, friendly fellow; we talked about the touring he'd done with big metal bands down in Australia. He knew the Metro, the Enmore, that "horrible place" (his words)

– the Hordern Pavilion. “Some crazy tennis centre or something in Melbourne was my favourite.” I suppose he meant Rod Laver Arena, and it’s one of mine too.

I guess it’s just experience, but one of the things in live sound mixing you really need to get your head around is what will happen to a room when it’s full of people. Some rooms stay pretty well the same, some get lots better, and some get lots worse when you add a thousand “portable sound absorbing devices” or “meat blankets” as this particular guy referred to the punters. I like to have a good play around on the graphic EQ during soundcheck – pulling and pushing things to see what happens: what resonates, what bites, what feeds back. Even if you don’t need to do anything about it yet – it’s nice to know where things are if you need to quickly grab them once you start your set. In this case – I picked that this was going to be a great room once it was full. It ‘felt’ like it was going to clean up (because the boom was reverby, not resonant – if that makes sense). Brooke and I discussed after soundcheck what to expect – even though she’s on in-ears the room still changes her experience as a performer. And come show time, right we were. All the bottom-end issues went away. Completely. The room was tight... and dry.

## **LINCOLN HALL – CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**Wednesday 24th November:** The last night of the East Coast run, and everyone is excited. This show (like the rest of the tour now) is 100% sold out... there’s a queue out front when we pull the tour bus up for load in.

This place is a purpose-built venue. Apparently it’s been open less than two years. It’s only a 600-capacity venue: downstairs is all standing room, and upstairs is tables and chairs with dinner service. The food is amazing, the staff downright lovely, and there are a couple of loaders to help us get in (thankfully, since it’s a long push down the alley in the sleeting-trying-to-snow cold).

The system is immaculate. Everything is clean, neat and tidy. The room is treated. It’s a d&b Q1 system hanging (too) high, with a Venue SC48 at FOH again (I’m learning to do what I need to on them), a Soundcraft Series 5 monitor console, with a load of proprietary wedges. There’s a great lights show with a dozen movers, and video if you want it. There’s the usual three crew (FOH, monitors and lights) on hand, as is Ryan Adams’ FOH engineer, who turns out to be the FOH tech! I recognise him from the show at the Enmore the year before last. We immediately start chatting about all things audio; how good the d&b system is, the fact that it’s too

high (he agrees, but they wouldn’t buy another two boxes-a-side, so to cover upstairs and down they had to hang high, and J it hard), why they have an SC48 (“everyone’s rider is Digi”), and why an M7 can be so much better and so much more useable. He toured a Yamaha M7CL with Ryan (the same way I use them, with lots of outboard).

Soundcheck is great, though I talk more than mix. I hardly have to, though. I pull some frequencies out on both Brooke’s vocal and the mix bus that he says he’s never seen anyone do. The room is so well treated, no-one usually needs to be pulling out 6.3k and the like. I point at the Midas XL42 and say – “yeah, well, you’ve probably never had to put 70dB of gain on someone’s vocal either!”

I love this show: the band is great, system is great, I have a great mix, there’s a rack of shirts upstairs in the dressing room from a local T-shirt shop – “free to band members: one each please. Love from Threadless T-shirts” – we couldn’t end this leg in better form. It’s Thanksgiving tomorrow and everyone is talking about turkey. Next it’s on to London before we return to the West Coast of the US, and Part 2 of the story. I better get this off to my editor before the AT boat sails! Out. ■