

Circuits

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A Musical Theme Park for 60,000

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At 1:30 a.m. on Friday, the Bunny looked a bit ill.

Outside the gates of what was once Loring Air Force Base, thousands of fans were lined up in their vehicles, ready to enter It, a weekend-long music festival featuring Phish, the popular improvisational rock band. A big part of the festival plan was the Bunny, Phish's name for the 100,000-watt FM radio station that the band had leased for the weekend. At 6 a.m., the Bunny was to go on the air with a mix of music and public safety information for the tens of thousands of fans who were expected to arrive by Saturday.

But the Bunny wasn't hopping.

The troupe of seven D.J.'s were ready, graffiti-covered trucker hats and all. The pink shag carpeting and red party lights were in place in the trailer behind the stage that served as the Bunny's temporary studio. The problem was that the high-speed T-1 data line that was meant to convey the audio signal from the trailer to a radio transmission tower about 15 miles away still wasn't working. The line had been struck by lightning earlier in the week, and although local technicians had given assurances that the line was functioning, the signal to the tower was still garbled.

That was why Jeffrey Rosenberg, the station's 36-year-old chief engineer, was madly plugging, unplugging and ripping open cables in the middle of the night in search of a backup plan. Maybe, just maybe, he could stream the station's signal through his laptop computer's Wi-Fi wireless card over a microwave link to Houlton, Me., about 55 miles away, then over the Internet, through a Web page and over the cable modem at the transmission tower to get the Bunny on the air. Not quite textbook radio engineering, that.

At 2:45 a.m., Mr. Rosenberg was still making frantic adjustments, and air time had been moved up from 6 a.m. to 3 a.m. "We have thousands of kids out on the road, and we have to advise them that we have filled the entire holding area," said David J. Werlin, president of Great Northeast Productions, Phish's partner in the festival. "We cannot open the gates

until 8 a.m., and we have to tell them that they should pull over wherever they can -- a Wal-Mart, a Home Depot -- and they won't be hassled."

Fifteen minutes later, with fingers crossed, the Bunny finally stood up, shook itself off, and went on the air to the beat of T-Rex.

"Jeff truly MacGyvered what was meant to be a fairly straightforward system, and he did it at a critical moment, when we really needed the Bunny to go on the air," Jason Colton, a longtime member of Phish's management team, said the next day. "In some ways, that was the touch-and-go moment for the whole festival, and he made it happen."

In some ways, advanced digital technologies made the entire festival happen. While the record industry frets about the financial impact of music trading over the Internet, innovative bands like Phish are embracing the latest technologies to create spectacular live concerts and phantasmagoric festival experiences that are more like computer-controlled theme parks than like the rock festivals of yesteryear.

Digital systems may have been the farthest thing from the minds of most of the roughly 60,000 fans at the weekend festival, who paid \$137.50 each to attend. But they were all served by advanced technology, whether they were listening to the crystalline sound system, gazing at the intense light shows, exploring the participatory art installations tucked into a forest grove, listening to the Bunny or burning custom CD's. Many bands use technology in their stage shows; Phish may be the leader in employing technology beyond the stage.

"Before the Phish events, festivals in the U.S. didn't really have much else in terms of ancillary events, and Phish really stepped it up in terms of the décor and the decoration and the other activities," said Richard Goodstone, a partner at Superfly Productions, a music festival production company based in New Orleans that was not involved with the festival. "The real difference between your normal rock festival like Lollapalooza and Ozzfest is that there's a lot of music, but now we're trying to make it a complete experience in terms of the activities that really interact with the patrons out there, so it's not just a one-element kind of event."

In this remote corner of the country a 400-mile drive north from Boston, a place where ornery moose are a leading road hazard, technology allowed Phish to create a wonderland in the wilderness.

Walkie-Talkies and Wi-Fi

"This never could have happened without all of these experienced people," Trey Anastasio, Phish's guitarist, said on Saturday morning. "It's all unbelievable what they pull together for all of us, even down to the plumbing, which, when you think about it, is pretty amazing."

Like plumbing, much of the technology used to produce the festival was not visible to most people. Much of it was not flashy or glamorous, either. But when a staff of 1,000 people is working with a budget of millions of dollars to create a temporary environment that is going to be as populous as the largest city in Maine, flashy doesn't get the job done. Reliable does.

"From the point of view of logistics, safety and coordination, all of this technology has been essential," Mr. Colton said. "We have to bring in everything for 1,000 people who need to be communicating all the time to make this work."

There seemed to be two essential logistical ingredients: walkie-talkies and Wi-Fi Internet access.

Walkie-talkies, generally from Motorola, have become so ubiquitous at concert sites around the world that they would be conspicuous now only if they disappeared. The festival staff here used at least 400 of them.

"The technology only helps me in that it allows me to have four conversations at once," said Kristina A. Birkmayer, the logistical guru of the festival's visual design team and one of its leaders. "I normally have the walkie-talkie button pushed on, a normal phone in each ear, and I'm doing something on the computer and also dealing with however many people are hovering around."

Wireless Internet access, though of more recent vintage, is becoming no less essential. By allowing production companies to dispense with cumbersome wiring, Wi-Fi allows more computers to be connected. The production staff here took over the base's old control tower and its offices to serve as a nerve center. In almost every room was a computer.

"In my industry, it first happened with fax machines, then cellphones and maybe laptops, and now the epiphany is, 'How did we live without Wi-Fi?'" said Mr. Werlin of Great Northeast Productions. "From an operational standpoint, it enables us to communicate more effectively with each other, with sourcing gear, with researching information." The concert producers hired a local Internet company, Pioneer Wireless, to bring in two separate connections providing high-speed Internet access (5 megabits per second) over advanced microwave links.

Those circuits were then distributed to various locations by long-distance wireless connections to individual Wi-Fi base stations. A reporter's Wi-Fi-enabled hand-held device confirmed that most of the heavily trafficked backstage areas had wireless Internet access.

Dean Budnick, editor in chief of the online magazine Jambands.com and editor of the festival newspaper, All About It, which published 7,500 copies on Saturday and Sunday, used those wireless connections to communicate with the paper's designer in Boulder, Colo.

"It's pretty extraordinary that I never met him and we were just sending big files back and forth all night, and at 8 a.m. our time I went to the local printer here to look at the proofs," he said Saturday afternoon.

For Marji A. Blea, the festival's administrative coordinator, Internet access can even let her reassure a nervous parent.

"I had a mother calling this morning and she was so concerned about her son and that he wouldn't be able to get home from the show," she said. "While we were on the line I was able to get on the Internet, get the bus schedule, and let her know her son would be O.K."

Bright Lights, Old Gadgets

At midnight Friday, Cavan Meese was in some deep stuff.

Heavy rain plus heavy construction had combined to create mud that crept up around Mr. Meese's ankles as he unpacked long spools of blue computer cable onto a makeshift sawhorse in the middle of a place called Sunk City. That was the name concert organizers came up with for the collaborative art and performance space that took over a pine grove in a corner of the concert grounds.

The name was apt. All around Mr. Meese, a 25-year-old lighting designer from West Glover, Vt., trenches snaked through the quagmire that glistened under the harsh industrial lights. Mr. Meese's job was to lay the cables in the trenches so they could be used to control the advanced light-emitting diodes, or L.E.D.'s, inside the streetlamps that lined Sunk City's byways. Newer L.E.D.'s can emit an eerie glow and can be controlled and manipulated by centralized computer systems.

"I've got to see this thing working before dawn," Mr. Meese said, his cowboy hat sheltering him from the last remaining raindrops.

One of the centerpieces of Sunk City was Oddzilla, an installation that married old televisions displaying Godzilla movies to a three-piece band anchored by the Noise Monster.

An imposing rack of antiquated electronics, the Noise Monster is "an amalgamated instrument that I built 10 years ago and have constantly evolved," explained its creator, Steve Tremblay, 34, an artist from Burlington, Vt.

At the festival, the Noise Monster included an old Fisher VCR, a Soundesign receiver, an Atari 2600 game console, a Yamaha noise generator from the mid-1970's, an ancient cassette player, a synthesizer from the mid-1980's, an eight-track player and a turntable with a built-in disco light. Mr. Tremblay's band, which also included a live drummer and bass player, produced a hypnotic sound that seemed like a cross between Captain Nemo's Orchestra and the Captain Kirk All-Stars.

Not far from Oddzilla, John B. Bisbee ran a very different sort of installation. A lecturer in art at Bowdoin College, Mr. Bisbee had requisitioned 10,000 rolls of masking tape that he handed out to concertgoers in the deepest part of Sunk City's forest. Spontaneously and collectively, the fans created an evolving maze of corridors and cul-de-sacs.

"I think what's so cool is that this whole thing is a beautiful cocktail of high and low technology," Mr. Bisbee said of the event. "It's a permeable membrane that they've created to allow these various forms of experience to co-exist. Hey, I've got 10,000 rolls of masking tape. What could be lower-tech than that?"

Making Music to Go

The House of Live Phish, by contrast, was certainly not low-tech.

Early this year, Phish and nugs.net, an Internet music company based in Los Angeles, collaborated to open www.livephish.com, a Web site that allows users to download audio files of Phish concerts within 48 hours after they occur. The site typically charges \$9.95 to download an entire show in MP3 format, and a higher price -- usually \$12.95 -- for a higher-quality format.

The concert organizers collaborated with Apple to open the House of Live Phish, a sort of next-generation Internet cafe. Using one of 20 iMacs, concertgoers could not only surf the Web and send e-mail, they could also burn free custom CD's from the 154 live Phish tracks that were loaded on each computer.

Although they waited to use the iMacs in lines that began at 30 minutes on Friday and stretched to two and a half hours by late Saturday afternoon, fans seemed unperturbed. Referring to the remote location and the horrendous traffic jams outside the site, Andrew Grabel, 28, said, "I spent 27 hours in the line to get here, so two hours here is nothing."

Jason Pinsky, a 30-year-old technology consultant from Brooklyn who was running the House of Live Phish, said visitors burned almost 2,000 CD's over the weekend.

The fans are not the only ones who seem to be enjoying new forms of digital music. Brad Sands, 33, Phish's road manager, said that portable MP3 players were allowing the band to mine its own musical heritage more deeply.

"All the members of the band have these little Sony speakers and iPods," Mr. Sands said. "They have like 300 original songs, and traditionally, there was no way for them to just pull something up. Now Trey will sit in his hotel and scan songs and say, 'Hey, that's a cool song and we haven't played it in 10 years or 5 years. Let's play that.'"

Masters of the Airwaves

"Let's play that" was heard fairly often at the Bunny, and although the D.J.'s had carted hundreds of LP's with them, that refrain usually meant turning to one of two iMacs with iTunes software.

While Mr. Rosenberg's Windows laptop and Microsoft's Windows Media software were crucial in getting the station on the air, the Apple hardware and software let the D.J.'s serve up an eclectic mix of funk, rock, jazz, folk and electronic music.

The station also simultaneously broadcast Phish's live sets. But its primary mission was public safety.

"First of all it's informational," said Neil L. Cleary, a 31-year-old musician from Burlington who, as Tad Cautious, was the station's head D.J. "When you're creating a huge city, it's vital to have a mass communication system, because you can't talk to fans on the P.A. system saying things like, 'Please do not ride on top of your vehicle.'"

But while Tad Cautious and the other D.J.'s -- Rubes, D.J. Cooley, D.J. Rickshaw, Pistol Stamen, Gary Turismo and D.J. Sleepyturtle -- spent most of their time in the studio, Rosey the Roving Reporter spent much of the show out in the field. At previous Phish festivals he used a tape recorder. Here, however, he was equipped with a cigarette-lighter-size MP3 recorder from which he would later transfer his interviews to a PC for editing.

"I want to talk to people who have worked, are working, or people who bring something unique to the show," said Rosey, otherwise known as David Rosenstein, a 30-year-old renovator and musician from Brooklyn. "The key is to put them completely at ease and still elicit some kind of spontaneity. The MP3 unit just makes it easier for me."

The Main Event

Of all of the technical systems at the festival, by far the most obvious to the fans were the expansive lighting and sound systems. In some ways, however, Chris Kuroda, the band's lighting guru, and Paul Languedoc, Phish's main sound engineer, take radically different approaches to the technical tools of their trades.

While digital mixing boards are becoming more widely available, Mr. Languedoc, like many music lovers, is sticking with analog technologies.

"People are coming out with digital consoles now, but I'm not convinced that's the way to go for me, at least right now," said Mr. Languedoc, a reserved, almost professorial 43-year-old. "Digital is better for some things. It's more flexible. But I think analog still sounds better. Analog is generally more equipment, and you have to be more careful with your signal integrity, but if you get it right it just sounds better."

Mr. Languedoc took 50 separate audio feeds from the stage and mixed them down to two channels, which were fed into the band's massive speaker system. Separately, that two-

channel mix was leavened with some additional crowd noise and provided to the team at LivePhish.com. Kevin Shapiro, the band's archivist, said the band also retains a 40-channel digital tape recording of each concert.

But while Mr. Languedoc is proceeding cautiously with new technologies, Mr. Kuroda, 37, is enthusiastically embracing the cutting edge while trying to avoid getting sliced.

"These are new light consoles for us, and we can set them up whatever way you want," he said before Saturday's concert, stroking two \$30,000 digital consoles from MA Lighting, a German company. "This button can run a cue or run a chase or turn something red or do whatever else you want. It gives us complete flexibility."

Mr. Kuroda said that until recently he had been wary of new digital systems because they can crash, potentially ruining a show. His new consoles, however, can be networked to each other so that if one crashes, the other can take over.

He said that the technical flexibility of the new systems allowed him to focus even more on improvising with light.

"The technology allows you to not focus on the technology," Mr. Kuroda said. "At 99.9 percent of the shows out there, all the lights are pre-scripted. You just hit the button and say 'Go.' But for us, we have to find the right thing for that particular moment." The fact that a high-definition film crew was recording the performances added complexity to the lighting requirements. (A separate documentary crew from Wiggle Puppy Productions in Chicago roved through the crowd using lightweight hand-held digital cameras.)

In the end, It was all about the music, but technology allowed the artistic experience to bloom far beyond the stage and, more important, allowed the logistics behind the festival to come together. Hadden Hipsley, Phish's production manager, may have best captured the festival's overall approach to technology.

"You always have three backup plans instead of one," he said. "You always focus on what will fail rather than what will work. If you look at every situation from the light of what could possibly fail, what you're left with is solutions."