Gretchen Menn

on Managing Stage Volume and Saving Your Ears

PAUL HAGGARD

BY MICHAEL MOLENDA

AS SHE PERFORMS IN A LED ZEPPELIN TRIBUTE band (Zepparella), an acoustic duo (Lapdance Armageddon with *GP* L.A. editor Jude Gold), a two-guitars-and-drums instrumental outfit (Sticks and Stones), and her own solo act (her latest release is *Hale Souls*), it's actually very strange to see Gretchen Menn *off* stage. Her punishing gig schedule has certainly taught her a thing or two about stage sound, and here Menn shares some knowledge about wrangling those ever-present volume demons.

How do you set your stage volume?

Amps tend to sound better when they're at a certain level, but it's not enjoyable to me if the volume is obtrusively loud. However, as I play with really powerful drummers, I'm never the one setting the overall volume of the band. My guitar volume is always beneath the level of the drums.

Where do you position your speaker cabinets?

A lot of guitarists put their cabinets right on the floor, but that typically requires you to route the guitar through the monitors if you want to hear yourself adequately. I don't like to count on monitors, so I put my cabinet on top of my road case so the speakers are hitting me at ear level. I angle the cabinet slightly towards me, and I move around the stage to see where the good spots are for feedback, where I can stand and *not* get feedback, where the guitar is going to sound louder if I'm taking a solo, and where I'm not going to be right in my own beam if I need to hear the rest of the band a bit more.

Do you tend to increase your volume throughout a show as ear fatigue sets in?

Oh, no. I can count on one hand the number of times I've turned up on stage. Hearing yourself too well is almost as bad as not hearing yourself well enough. It messes with your attack, and you start playing self-consciously.

You're very conservative with effects. Is that because they can blur the stage sound and cause players to crank up the volume to compensate?

Yes. I like articulation. I like to be able to hear what I'm playing. Running a lot of reverb, delay, and modulation can sound very squishy—especially when you're standing close to your amp and wearing earplugs.

It's not smart to risk hearing damage, but a lot of guitarists avoid wearing earplugs because they can diminish the clarity and impact of mid and high frequencies.

I use them every rehearsal, every soundcheck, and every performance, so I'm used to how everything sounds when I wear them. It's like my hearing internally calibrates to the earplugs. My preference is for a warmer sound, anyway—probably because I'm often standing close to the cymbals—and the stage volume is usually so loud that it's not like I would be hearing better without earplugs.