

Recording | Johnny A. | Live

By [Fletcher](#) | November 2006

I first met Johnny A. when I was hired as front-of-house mixer for his band, Johnny A.'s Hidden Secret, in 1980, and we've kept in touch ever since. It wasn't a surprise then, when he called me in April 2006 to chat about recording a live album for commercial release. Johnny said, "I want to close the door on the last two records, and my fans have been saying things like, 'I love your records, but I really dig this raw thing you bring to your concerts.'" [At press time, the album was still being mixed, and no release date had been set.] So four concert dates were set for the beginning of July at the Iron Horse Music Hall in Northampton, Massachusetts, and we planned to record them all. We started the process by having Johnny's band down to my Mercenary Audio warehouse—where we could critically evaluate microphones, mic preamps, and everything in the signal path—for a day of getting sounds followed by a rehearsal. Then, we packed up the equipment, drove to the club, and recreated the exact same setup to work as a location-recording rig.

We selected the iZ Technology RADAR V as the digital multitrack for the gig because I knew it wouldn't crash while running non-stop for 90-plus minutes to record each performance. I've been involved with too many Pro Tools rigs that crashed during live recordings, and I decided I'd never go through the pain of explaining that to an artist ever again. We tracked at 24-bit/96-kHz, and, each night, we backed up the tracks to the RADAR's internal hard drive and a redundant SETA drive. I'm a firm believer that digital data does not exist until there are at least two backups to the original recording. Given the often tenuous nature of live recordings, I was pleased I'd be working with Johnny's excellent FOH mixer, "Shipp"—especially as we were going to be sharing several microphones. It was important that our mic selections worked both for Shipp's live mix in the venue and for my recording rig.

Drums and Bass

For the kick drum, I placed a Sennheiser MD421 inside the shell to capture the attack, and positioned a Josephson Engineering e22S on the outside of the drum to capture its "note" and resonance. The MD421 was sent through a TAB-Funkenwerk V-78M mic preamp and a Toft Audio Designs EC-1 preamp/EQ/compressor. The e22S ran into a Pendulum Audio Quartet II, where 50Hz was boosted via the unit's Aggressive mode EQ. The snare drum was also double miked, with a Shure SM57 pointing at the top of the drum, and a Microtech Gefell MT71S aimed just above the bottom rim at a distance of three inches. Both mics ran into a Phoenix Audio DRS-2 mic pre/DI. The SM57's job was to get the "whump" of the drum, while the MT71S was tasked with capturing the crack of the snares. A Josephson C42 was used to mic the hi-hat, Shure Beta 98s were employed on the rack and floor toms, and all these mics were sent to an API 3124MB+ mic preamp.

For the drum overheads, we used two unmatched tube condensers: a Horch RM2J positioned on the floor tom side of the kit, and a Microtech Gefell UM92 handling the hi-hat side. The result was a truly wonderful stereo image of the entire drum kit, and the cymbals sounded clear, balanced, and opulent. A little extra sparkle was added with some high-frequency shelving from a Thermionic Culture Earlybird 2 preamp/EQ.

The bass signal—from a Music Man Bongo strung with flatwounds—was routed to a Radial Engineering J48 MK2 direct box, a Great River Electronics MP-2NV preamp, a Great River EQ-2NV equalizer (where a cut was made at 390Hz, and a boost added at 47Hz), and a prototype Chandler Germanium Tone Control EQ (where boosts were made at 70Hz and 800Hz). The result was a cross between a Donald "Duck" Dunn tone and a James Jamerson tone, and it was one of the best bass sounds I've recorded in a long time.

Johnny Guitar

Johnny doesn't use speaker cabinets onstage. Everything is taken direct, and he listens to himself through the stage monitors. His guitar goes directly into a Dunlop 535Q wah that's plugged into a Radial JD7 signal distribution amp with one input and seven outputs. The first JD7 output runs into a TC Electronic G-System, and the right and left outputs of the G-System go to two Marshall JMP-1 Tube MIDI Guitar Preamps set for clean sounds. The speaker-emulated outputs of the JMP-1s go through a Radial JD-6 six-channel direct box to two super-clean GML 8302 mic preamps that let us maintain the exact tone Johnny dialed in from his rig. One set of the "clean" JMP-1 signals were routed to the house sound system, and the other was sent to the RADAR system.

As a safety precaution, the next JD7 output was sent to a prototype Empirical Labs David Derr DI. This was a direct feed from Johnny's guitar in case we needed to reamp the signal to get a better—or different—sound during the mixing phase. Two more JD7 outs were assigned to two Marshall 6100 30th Anniversary heads that were only fed to the RADAR via a Chandler TG2 preamp. Also going solely to the recorder was a third JMP-1. This unit was used to engage—via MIDI switching from the G-System—a series of BK Butler Tube Drivers set for different levels of gain. MIDI channel switching for the Marshall heads was also controlled through the

G-System. The output of the third JMP-1 was plugged into a Great River MP-2NV, along with the Shure 55SH Johnny used to talk to the audience.

The Room

To me, the selection and placement of the room microphones are the most critical aspects of recording a live performance. For Johnny's gigs, I set up mics designed to capture different characteristics of the room sound. A Microtech Gefell MK-221 and Josephson Engineering C617 hung directly over the center of the stage to pick up the stage sound. Then, a Neumann SM 69 stereo FET condenser was set to its "M/S" (Mid/Side) setting to capture a wide, phase coherent stereo image. Finally, a Royer Laboratories SF-12 stereo ribbon mic was placed in the center of the room, just in front of the mixing console, to capture a sense of depth, space, and dimension. I sent the SF-12 to a Drawmer Electronics 1969 tube preamp, and dialed in a touch of compression to make the room sound a smidge larger than it really was.

The happy accident of the gig was discovered during the second show on the first night, when Johnny forgot to switch off the Shure 55SH after he spoke to the crowd. The mic subsequently recorded his monitor mix, and the sound was absolutely fantastic, adding a lovely depth and dimension to the recording. After all the planning, sometimes what you don't plan gives you the coolest sound.

JOHNNY A. ON HIS WAH MOVES

"I wanted a lot of tonal options because I didn't want to compromise my guitar tone," says Johnny A. about the multi-faceted rig used to capture his live sound. "But the one signal that wasn't designed to be reprocessed at the mixdown was my Dunlop 535Q wah. I could never retrack my wah manipulations in the studio because they're part of my expression during the performance—just like my hand vibrato or my use of the Bigsby on my guitar. What I do with the wah is based on pure emotion. I'm from the Hendrix sound of wah, so I use the pedal to make my notes more vocal sounding. It's a lyrical, rather than a rhythmic approach, and that style of playing just can't be reproduced."
—Michael Molenda

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