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# Pro Setups



Alex de Grassi gets his massive live guitar sound by mixing the RMC pickup in his Lowden L32C with an external mic.



# Performing guitarists of every stripe reveal how they get their signature sounds

By Julie Bergman

**W**hen you're ready to start performing, you'll need to choose a setup that gives you the sound and options that work best for your act. If you're playing quiet fingerstyle guitar in a café, for example, you might opt for a simple rig that reproduces the tone of your acoustic guitar nicely and doesn't give you much volume. If you're playing in a loud rock band, on the other hand, you might opt for a feedback-free acoustic-electric guitar and an amp with some serious wattage to compete with the drum kit.

A good way to determine what approach might work with your music is to check out the equipment that touring professionals are using. I spoke to a variety of artists about their favorite gear—Paul Brady, Bruce Cockburn, Guy Davis, Alex de Grassi, Phil Keaggy, Tony McManus, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, and Andrew York—musicians who play anything from Celtic to classical and use everything from unamplified instruments in cathedral-like halls to a multitude of processors that add color to their sound. No matter what style of music they play, all of these musicians agreed that the reliability and portability of their live gear is as important as the sound and playability of their guitars.

## Paul Brady

Premier Irish singer-songwriter Paul Brady relies on the rhythm of his Lowden acoustic guitars to drive his live performances. He tours with an O32, an O22, an L38, and a borrowed D22, swapping guitars for easy access to alternate tunings. He plays solo or accompanied by bass, electric guitar, keyboards, and drums. In both situations, he eschews effects units. "I go bareback a lot of the time," he says. "I've tried pedals at various stages in my career, but I've always felt that less is better between the signal and the audience." Brady plays with a flatpick and bare fingers and strings his Lowdens with D'Addario phosphor-bronze light-gauge strings (.012–.053).



Paul Brady's Lowdens power his high-energy live shows.





Although he was recently using an on-board blender and pickup system equipped with an internal mic, Brady is going back to the configuration he used before, an EMG under-saddle pickup with no internal mic. "My style demands that I play pretty loud on stage," he says, "so I can't use the microphone without getting a lot of feedback. I'm the rhythm in the band. The way I play guitar is like the way a drummer plays a hi-hat. I cannot perform a song to someone else's rhythm. I can only perform it to my own internal rhythm, or my natural connection with the song is gone." He runs each of his guitars through a single line. "The soundman knows which guitar is which and switches it over to different channels," Brady says. "He uses slightly different EQ on each of the guitars out front."

## Bruce Cockburn

Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn tours solo at least as often as he goes out with a full band. For many years his main acoustic guitar was a custom Linda Manzer ([www.manzer.com](http://www.manzer.com)) with a small, deep body and a blue finish, which he usually strung with light-gauge D'Addarios. A couple of years ago he traded it in for another Manzer guitar with a European spruce top and In-



JULIE BERGMAN

**Bruce Cockburn traded in his blue Manzer for a spruce and rosewood model with a tapered body.**

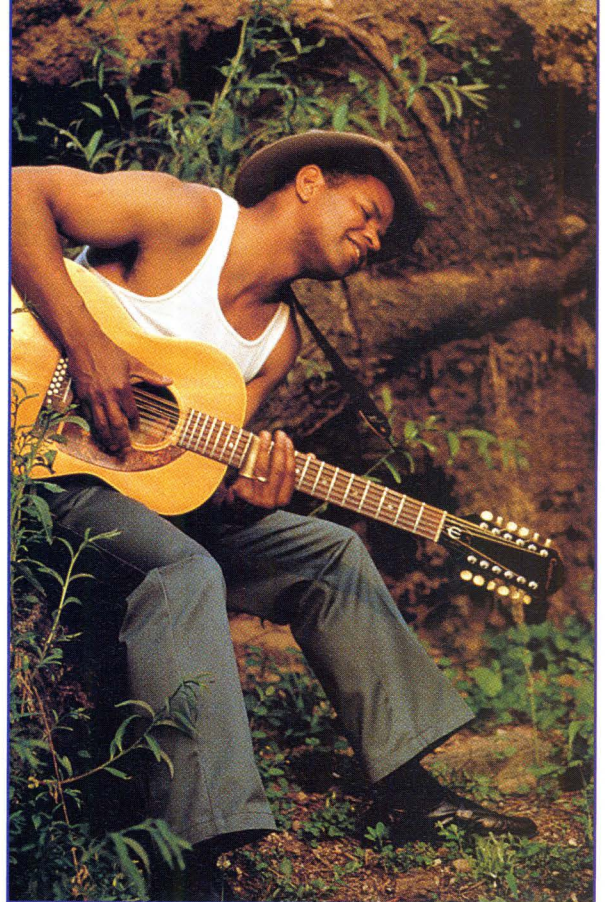
dian rosewood back and sides. Its body tapers slightly toward the bass end, which makes it more comfortable to hold. "The blue one was a particularly deep guitar that I liked for its bottom end," says Cockburn, "but after ten years it was wearing into a nerve in my elbow."

Cockburn's current Manzer is fitted with a Fishman Acoustic Matrix pickup, a Prefix Pro preamp built into the upper bass side of the guitar, and a mic mounted inside the soundhole. The pickup and mic signals go to separate jacks in the bottom of the guitar. The house mixing board receives the mic signal directly via an outboard preamp, and the pickup signal runs to the house through Cockburn's rack and pedals, the same setup he uses with his electric guitars. Cockburn also travels with a Dobro, which is equipped with a capsule from a Shure SM58 mic (inside the body) and an old Telecaster neck pickup.

Cockburn's live setup includes a rack-mount Lexicon Alex reverb unit ([www.lexicon.com](http://www.lexicon.com)), a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler ([www.line6.com](http://www.line6.com)), and Boss digital delay and tremolo pedals. He uses the Line 6 and the Boss for different

lengths of delay or reverse delay. He sometimes sets the DL4 to play quarter-note triplets. The signal path starts at his Boss chromatic tuner.

Cockburn takes a vocal mic along, but he sometimes uses what the house provides. For stage monitors, he says, "I don't want any reverb coming back at me. I want to hear unobstructed voice. On the last tour I used in-ear monitors for everything, including audience. It sorts out stage clutter and feedback."



THOM WOLKE

**Guy Davis has added a Bill Lawrence soundhole pickup to his Gibson 12-string.**

As for the house mix, Cockburn says, "The guitar has to be audible, because it's a huge part of what I do. When playing with a band, the bass and drums have to be reined in a little bit to allow for that. Having grown up with Jimi Hendrix as one of my role models, I like guitars loud—the louder the better, short of crass bad taste and feedback. And when I'm playing solo,

**"I like guitars loud—the louder the better," says Bruce Cockburn. "When I'm playing solo, the guitar has to be right up there with the voice."**

the guitar has to be right up there with the voice."

## Guy Davis

New York-based blues artist Guy Davis splits his time between music and acting and sometimes combines both, telling long, dramatic stories between songs. His live rig is a reflection of his roots in Piedmont-style fingerpicking and blues. He carries a few guitars with him on the



Keaggy runs the signals to a volume pedal and a Marshall Compressor foot pedal, a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler, a Lexicon JamMan for looping and layering guitar parts, and a Peavey two-channel effects processor for chorus and reverb. "There's a line that goes to the house out of channel 1 before the JamMan, then a line that goes out of the effects processor after the JamMan, so my sound person can mix the dry and processed sounds," Keaggy explains. This rig also gives him a lot of control on stage. "The system I'm working with is pretty compatible with both outdoor and indoor situations. Bad PAs, good PAs, I can create good sound and get by pretty well."

Keaggy uses whatever vocal mics the house provides, but he's very particular about monitors. "I need to have good clarity on the monitors," he explains, "so I can listen to the loops I create." He uses GHS phosphor-bronze strings (.012-.054 on the Olsons and .013-.056 on the Langejans, since he tunes it down a whole step).

## Tony McManus

Premier Scottish instrumentalist Tony McManus is on the road constantly touring Europe and the U.S. His main gui-

tar was custom-made by Scottish luthier William Kelday (pages.zoom.co.uk/kelday/). It's a small-bodied 000 12-fret with cocobolo back and sides and a European spruce top. The guitar is fitted with a Mimesis magnetic soundhole pickup and an AKG internal condenser mic, a system which is now manufactured by Fishman as the Rare Earth Blend. McManus splits the signal into two mono signals with a stereo-to-mono Y cable and EQs them separately. "The mic on its own can sound a bit midrangey," he says, "and the magnetic pickup adds a lot of bottom end and warmth to the guitar. I tend to roll the top off the EQ of the magnetic pickup.

It's a useful sound but not pleasant on its own. The blending of the two gives me a reasonably accurate guitar sound. I usually run the magnetic pick-

up about half the level of the internal mic."

McManus also owns a Magician model Fylde guitar (www.fyldeguitars.



Tony McManus alternates between this William Kelday guitar and a Fylde Magician.

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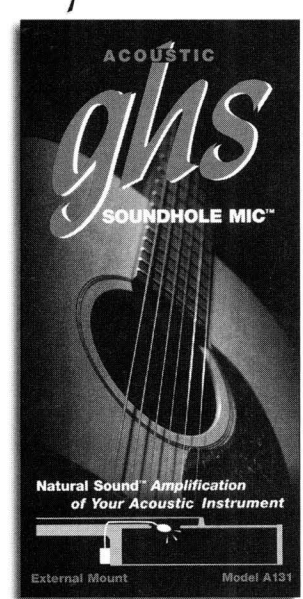
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Gillian Welch and David Rawlings eschew pickups in favor of Shure microphones.

com) with a cedar top, walnut back and sides, and a Headway under-saddle pickup. The type of show dictates which guitar McManus uses. "I play in Europe with a couple of big bands," he

says. "The Kelday guitar is a very delicate fingerstyle kind of machine, so in the band setup I use the Fylde." He strings both guitars with D'Addario phosphor-bronze strings (.013-.056).

He uses whatever the house provides for a DI, and he prefers to use a Shure SM58 or Beta 58 on his voice. He steers clear of effects boxes, saying, "I'm not all that interested in chorusing or flanging. I love to listen to people who do, but I love the sound of my guitar and I want that to be heard rather than an effects box."

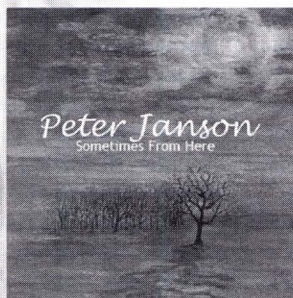
## Gillian Welch and David Rawlings

The old-time duo of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings has been performing since 1992, and their live setup reflects their original take on traditional roots music. Welch and Rawlings didn't gravitate toward an uncomplicated setup because it was consistent with their musical aesthetic, however. They did it because they thought it sounded best. "Our live setup is pretty straightforward," says Welch. "Neither of our guitars has a pickup."

Welch plays a 1956 Gibson J-50 that she bought in 1996 and a 1917 Vega Senator open-back five-string banjo. Rawlings plays a 1935 Epiphone Olympic archtop. Welch strings her Gibson with D'Addario medium-gauge phosphor-

## Peter Janson

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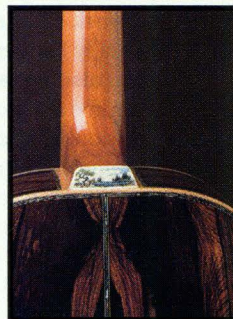
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bronze strings, and Rawlings uses Darco light-gauge strings. They travel with just their instruments and a few Shure SM57 and SM58 microphones. "There's enough variation from 57 to 57 that there will be one that's really right for each room and PA we play," Welch explains. "That's how we EQ." She points the mic at the upper bout of her guitar, right where it joins the fretboard. Rawlings points his mic at the lower f-hole of his archtop. "On my guitar, you've got to be able to feel the root motion from the low notes I'm playing," she says, "and there has to be enough sustain. And then Dave's guitar has to be able to sit in about the same place as my vocal. It has to be an answering voice to the lead vocal and not have muddiness get in the way."

Welch often uses an SM58 for her vocals and another 58 for the banjo. For 300- to 800-seat halls, she and Rawlings prefer to play without monitors. "We like to work off the house and hear what's actually happening out there," she says. "You also get a clearer picture from the four live mics on stage if you don't have the double image of the monitor sound coming back in them." They also steer away from effects, except for house reverbs. "We like those really cheap reverb units that a lot of the clubs have, and we just kind of set them on the default program," says Welch. "But the best thing is to play in a hall that has natural reverb."

As for the mix, Welch says, "The guitar and banjo are the whole band, so it's a pretty egalitarian mix. Everything's pretty front and center. We don't like being panned stereo—there's too few of us to be separated."

## Andrew York

Classical guitarist and composer Andrew York performs as a soloist and as a member of the LAGQ (Los Angeles Guitar Quartet). Less amplification is better in York's estimation, but he wants to be heard. He plays nylon-string guitars built by David Daily of Sparks, Nevada ([www.dailyguitars.com](http://www.dailyguitars.com)), one of which is equipped with a Trance Audio



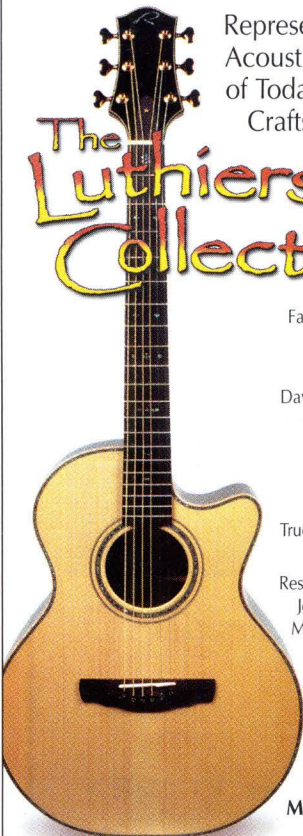
RORY EARNSHAW

**When he needs more volume, Andrew York amplifies his David Daily classical guitar with the Trance Audio Amulet pickup system.**

Amulet pickup system ([www.tranceaudio.com](http://www.tranceaudio.com)), which uses two Acoustic Lens soundboard transducers and an outboard preamp. York typically supplements that with an external Neumann KM 184 small-diaphragm cardioid mic. As for mic placement, York says, "I point the Neumann close to the bridge or a little toward the soundhole. That's what I find best for nylon."

The LAGQ has normally used four Neumann KM 184 mics for concerts, but the addition of larger venues on their itinerary is giving them second thoughts. "We're playing the Hollywood Bowl soon, and we're looking into the possibility of having everyone using the Trance system and mics," says York.

Traditionally, classical guitarists have resisted the use of built-in pickups, but York was never a purist. "It's really thrilling to hear a big sound you can walk around in," he says. "Sometimes I'll do a European tour and play in a small chapel that sounds great unamplified, but if you're playing for a thousand people, a little amplification is important. If someone coughs and you lose a measure because of that, it's tough!" York uses Lexicon studio reverb and prefers the Large Hall or Concert Hall setting. "In a club, you want that reverb because you have no ambience to speak of," he explains. "If the house has a decent reverb and the hall has no noticeable ambience, I'll use it." ■



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