

Mixing Glam with Grit

Inside the Sonic World of The Struts

FOH engineer John “J3” Allen and monitor engineer Zach “Bear” Bair are the sonic architects behind The Struts’ electrifying live shows. Mixing with precision, creativity, and Yamaha RIVAGE PM5 consoles, they adapt to every venue with finesse. From mic choices to plugin mastery, their teamwork and emotional mixing style elevate the band’s glam-rock spectacle into an immersive experience—proving that great sound is as much about feel as it is about tech.

When The Struts hit the stage, it’s not just a concert—it’s a full-blown glam-rock spectacle. With frontman Luke Spiller channeling the flamboyance of Freddie Mercury and the band delivering a sound that’s equal parts Stones swagger and modern pop-rock punch, their live shows are a masterclass in energy, charisma, and sonic impact.

But behind the glitter and grit is a finely tuned audio operation led by two engineers whose chemistry and contrasting styles make the magic possible. FOH engineer John “J3” Allen and monitor engineer Zach “Bear” Bair are the sonic backbone of The Struts’ touring machine. Their partnership is built on trust, precision, and a shared obsession with sound—and it’s powered by Yamaha’s RIVAGE PM5 consoles and supported by Nashville-based vendor Worley Sound.

Together, they’ve built a rig that’s as expressive and dynamic as the band itself. And whether they’re mixing at Madison Square Garden or in a sweaty 800-cap club, they’re doing it with a blend of analog instincts, digital finesse, and a healthy dose of rock ‘n’ roll attitude and humor.

Mic Choices That Matter

For J3, mic selection isn’t just about specs—it’s about survival. Touring with a band as loud and theatrical as The Struts means every mic has to earn its keep.



John “J3” Allen during show, Photo credit: Lacy Jae Allen

His strategy is rooted in reliability, rejection, and musicality. For Luke’s lead vocal, J3 swears by the sE Electronics V7. “Its curve is like a 58 with better output and rejection, as well as a tighter pickup pattern,” he says. “Perfect for a loud rock stage.” That’s no small compliment, considering Luke performs exclusively on wedges and side fills—and doesn’t soundcheck.

The mic package is roughly 60% sE, with additional Sennheiser and Shure models filling out the kit. But it’s the guitar setup where J3’s creativity really shines. Adam Slack’s rig includes three amps and four mics, arranged in stereo pairs that J3 punches in and out depending on the moment.

“I can reshape Adam’s guitar tone depending on the moment—aggressive, mellow, rhythm, lead. It’s all about the emotional arc,” he explains.



Zach “Bear” Bair during a sound check

One of his favorite tricks? A bullet mic on a tiny Magnatone amp that he affectionately calls the “snot machine.” “It’s beautiful when he turns it down and it cleans up,” J3 says. “I can punch in and out all night.”

Plugin Power: In-the-Box and Loving It

Both engineers are unapologetically in-the-box—and proud of it. The RIVAGE PM5’s plugin suite has allowed them to ditch racks of outboard gear and external servers, streamlining their workflow without sacrificing sonic quality.

Bear’s favorites include the Portico II Master Bus Processor (P2MB) and the SPX Amp Simulator (Amp Simulate) plugins. The latter was a happy accident that turned into a game-changer.

“We were struggling with Jed’s bass tone,” Bear recalls. “I threw the Amp Simulate on as an experiment, and it gave his bass a whole new sonic quality. I won’t go back.”

Bear also uses the Eventide SP2016 reverb for drums, and the Bricasti Y7 reverb for Luke’s vocal. Band-passing the Y7’s Vienna Hall preset for Luke’s vocal—gives it a unique character that cuts through the wedges without overwhelming them.

Bear agrees. Having worked as a console tech at Clair Global, he’s seen enough plug-in servers crash to know the value of simplicity. “I’ve learned to use the tools I have,” he says. “And with RIVAGE PM, those tools are damn good.”



Photo credit: Madeline Northway

Adapting to the Room

From 800-cap clubs to 3,000-seat theaters, The Struts play it all—and J3 and Bear adapt accordingly.

“Stage size impacts cymbal bleed into vocal mics. We’ve even used plexiglass shields to tame the cymbals,” J3 says.

In smaller venues, the band’s visual style creates unique challenges. J3 notes, “I hate to block the drummer, Gethin Davies, so I use underheads instead of overheads. It’s not ideal sonically, but it works for the show.”

Bear adds, “With Yamaha’s plugins, I’ve had to make fewer adjustments than I did on my previous console. The mixes translate better across venues.”

They also rebalance stage volume, tweak reverb decay times, and adjust wedge levels to suit each space. And when the room is too live?

“I shut off the reverb,” J3 says with a laugh. “You’re just taking a bad situation and making it worse.”



Photo credit: Madeline Northway

Mixing for Emotion

The Struts' show isn't just loud—it's theatrical. J3 and Bear mix for impact, not just clarity.

"When Luke's on piano and Adam's soloing, I bring in reverbs and delays. The crowd stops jouncing and starts listening," says J3.

Bear manages crowd mic levels to enhance interaction without distraction. "Luke loves hearing the crowd," he says. "I bump the audience mics post-fader between songs for the rest of the band, so they don't throw off the beat."

And yes, sometimes the crowd claps off-time. Bear's solution? More hi-hat and snare in the mix to help the band stay locked in.

One standout moment came during the band's 10-year anniversary tour, when they performed their debut album top to bottom. "We had acoustic guitars, piano ballads, and all these dynamic shifts," J3 recalls. "It gave me space to really shape the mix emotionally. Those are the moments I live for."

Advice for the Next Generation

J3 and Bear are passionate about mentoring young engineers. Their advice is grounded in experience, humility, and a few hard-earned lessons.

J3 encourages engineers to follow the doors that open—even if they feel unprepared. "I got here by mistake," he says. "Trust when life points you somewhere. And share your knowledge. The more you



Zach "Bear" Bair

offer, the more you'll receive."

Bear emphasizes connection and self-care. "Don't be afraid to ask questions. Be genuine. And take care of yourself—physically, mentally, emotionally. It's just as important as staying in the game."

And if you're wondering whether you should take that gig you're not sure you're ready for? Bear's answer is simple: "Take the risk. You'll grow into it."



John "J3" Allen during show, Photo credit: Madeline Northway



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