

Bruno Mars 24K Magic Tour

("FOH on-line" Written by Kevin M. Mitchell)



New FOH and Monitor Engineer Keep the Party Going
For the Bruno Mars 24K Magic world tour, the purpose is to party.

"The vibe for this show is very much based around throwing the biggest party that we can, plain and simple," says FOH engineer Chris Rabold. "Bruno's known for his meticulous work ethic and attention to detail, and this show is a prime example of that. There's not a sound, a move, a lighting/video/pyro/whatever cue that goes down that he didn't have some hand in. Everything has a purpose."

Rabold and monitor engineer Ramon Morales have a couple of things in common: they are both working on DiGiCo SD7s; this is their first world tour with Mars; and they both say they aren't tired of hearing what has to be the most radio-friendly song of all time, "Uptown Funk." ("Surprisingly no — Thank God!" says Rabold. "Epic song, still love it," says Morales.)

Glance at Mars' touring schedule, and you'll likely break a sweat — it's pretty grueling. After kicking off in late March in Belgium, the tour trekked throughout Europe and the U.K. in April, May and half of June. Next came the big (and current) North American leg, which runs from July 15-Nov. 11. A series of shows in South America then follow, with gigs in Mexico spilling into 2018. Then the elaborate production heads to New Zealand and Australia from late February through March.

Rabold says he and the crew are keeping up with no problems, though for him, the day-to-day challenge is keeping Mars' vocal out and on top of what has evolved into a powerful band mix. "Bruno's constantly on the move, and there's no track vocal to hide behind either," he says. "It's all very real, and with that much movement, keeping the mic in a consistent spot is rarely something you can count on. So retaining not just level, but tonality... that's the challenge."

#Random Circumstances

Rabold grew up with both Bowling Green, KY and Chattanooga, TN as home towns, though he's made Athens, GA his permanent address for the last 20 years or so. At 19, through a "random set of circumstances," he found himself working for Widespread Panic. "There was no lower rung on the totem pole — I loaded the single truck, sold merch, helped set up and break down mics and stocked coolers." The experience inspired him to go to Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, TN, where he studied in their Recording Industry program. He would work with Wide Spread Panic again, a little further up the proverbial ladder this time.

"Then, again, through a set of random circumstances, I have found myself working with artists in all kinds of different genres over time," Rabold says. Indeed: Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Kenny Chesney, Florence + the Machine and Norah Jones, among others.

Rabold first got a call from the Bruno camp last summer and went to Los Angeles, where he began rehearsals for Mars' 24K MAGIC show. Rabold mixed for a few private shows and that big Saturday Night Live gig last October. He parlayed all that into mixing for this world tour.

For the current tour, he and Morales rehearsed at CenterStaging in Burbank with just the band for a while before moving onto Rock Lititz where they did full production rehearsals for a few weeks. Then the tour began its nearly three-month run in Europe, and they brought that exact show over to this continent.

At FOH, Rabold is mixing nine musicians including Mars through the DiGiCo SD7. "There are a couple of desks I like to use, but I mostly default to the SD7," Rabold says. "It's functionality and flexibility are what make it my choice. Sound wise it's basically invisible to my ear. That's cool because it allows me to pretty much do whatever I want sonically for better or worse! There's not a pre-baked sound I have to work with or around." He adds he appreciates the board when he's in promo, as that is an intense, scrutinized process. "Bruno will want 10 things in five seconds, and the desk is just so fast with regards to that. I use quite a lot of snapshots — again, because it's just so quick — and that capability also really matters." He and Morales are running both SD7s at 96Hz.

They are using the Clair Cohesion system on this run, as Clair has been Mars' provider since he needed the big systems. This is Rabold's first time out with it. "I wasn't sure what to expect with the rig, but I gotta say, I've been really happy with it, and we've had good results. If I had to describe it one word I think I'd say 'solid.'" He adds that, although he originally found it to be brighter than his general preference, he's been able to use the system's functionality to adjust it to taste — and the tweaks have been well worth the effort. "You can more or less do whatever you want with the entire frequency spectrum," Rabold says. "Clair's been great about giving you tonal options on this one. For me, I don't want to hear a PA system at all, once I'm mixing. In fact I can't stand that. I want to hear music, not a speaker. We found ourselves at that point with the Cohesion quickly."

In Rabold's work with previous artists, he's usually relied on just plugins, but his preference is to mix in some hardware when budget and logistics allow it. "It gives me the options I like to have to get creative." For plug-ins, he relies solely on Waves when he's on a DiGiCo board. "I'd love to do more but that gets a little complicated, so I just stick to that platform."

Hardware-wise, he likes to try out new products though when it's show time, he tends to stick with his tried and true. "For me that's usually stuff from API, Sonic Farm and Empirical Labs. I've had some fun with the Rupert Neve MBP on this tour. That's a new one to me. My favorite bits of gear over the last few years, however, have been several different pieces from Overstayer. Once we get into mixing and the creative process, I love tools that offer color. When it comes to the stuff I put in a rack, I'm not looking for just dynamics control. Jeff Turzo at Overstayer has really nailed it in this regard. Can't say enough good things about his products. It's truly art what he does."

Rabold says his mic preference is so strong it determines his choices regardless of the genre he's working out. On drums, that includes Shure, Telefunken and Mojave. The guitars have AT4050s, SM57s and Royer 122s. The Leslie gets Sennheiser 906s and a Beyer M88. Horns have DPA 4099s, and DIs are Radial, except for bass, which gets an Avalon U5. "All vocals are Sennheiser 9000 series, except for Bruno who, in the end, has decided to stay on his old 5235. He's just comfortable with it."

#Monitor World

Morales grew up in Houston, which he still calls home. As a kid, he pursued being a guitarist with local bands for a while, but along the way he got more interested in mixing sound. "That was just as fascinating for me as playing in a band, maybe a bit more," he says. "I soon started to get into mixing a bit more. At the time, I really did not know much about mixing, but still tried to get my hands on a mixing board any chance I could." In college, he tried studying architecture but it didn't stick and ended up at the Art Institute studying recording. From that he nabbed an internship at SugarHill Recording Studios and eventually got hired as an engineer.

"One of the engineers there was mixing FOH for a regional Tejano band, The Hometown Boys, who were pretty big at the time, and one day he asked me if I was interested in mixing monitors for them, and of course I said yes," Morales says. It was his first real touring gig. "I was mixing monitors on a Peavey Mark 3 16 channel mixer, which had two aux sends and one reverb send, and I used the faders as another mix." He was still working the studio as well and happened to work with Destiny Child as the band, comprised of Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams were scoring their first number one hit, "No No No." Morales notes that, during the days that the band was not recording, "I would sit with Beyoncé's dad, Mathew Knowles and work on show edits for them.") Morales would end up mixing FOH for their tour and a few years after.

In the early aughts, Morales moved to mixing monitors, and along the way he's worked with Mary J Blige, Mariah Carey, Usher, Lady Gaga and Ricky Martin, among others. "I got a call asking if I was interested in mixing monitors for Bruno, and I couldn't say no to such a talented artist."

The show had a lot of rehearsals, but they were spread out between one-offs like the Grammys. "We lived at CenterStaging for the first part of the rehearsal, then we moved into Rock Lititz for the production rehearsals," says Morales. "That was nice, because it's a great facility, but also you're next door to your audio provider," he adds, noting how Clair is an anchor tenant of the Rock Lititz complex.

The DiGiCo SD7 has been his choice since it was introduced. "The layout is great," he says. "Everything is where it should be, and it sounds great. I love it." For this tour, he's using Universal Audio plugins. "So far they have been great. Having access to some of the great-sounding plugins changes everything. Universal has a great selection and so far, they have been reliable. Input wise, it's a ton of stuff, as it's a pretty big band up there; and output wise, it's extensive, too. When I went to redo my session structure, I had one channel left for DSP — I never thought I would get to this point, but we're here! Like Chris, I am running at 96kHz, which takes up more DSP, of course, but it makes such a huge sonic difference, so I always want to work there."

Morales has very little outboard beside his SD7. Mars' vocal goes through an Avalon 737 'for a little warmth," and the setup also includes a Bricasti M7 reverb and TC system 6000, which Morales spreads across different engines. "I'm using some of DiGiCo's reverbs and the delays," he notes. "And on certain inputs, I have been using the dynamic EQ and compressor, and it's all working great. The sound quality is really good, so it's a fantastic combination."

Everyone on stage is using JH Audio IEMs. Most have the JH16v2, with Mars sporting the JH16. The wireless system is a Shure PSM1000. As far as Morales' work during the show, he says there are certain fader moves he does for the musicians. "It's a live band, so sometimes things do change a bit, and you have to be ready for that."

The tour continues its five-show a week party through November in North America. Bruno "wants the people to walk away having had the best night they've ever had in their life," Rabold says. "That's not an overstatement either, that's the literal goal of the show. It's a lofty one for sure, and admittedly a lot of work. Watching the success of the tour and the reaction of the crowd has been really rewarding now that we're finally out on the road."

Bruno Mars 24K Magic Tour Crew FOH Engineer: Chris Rabold Monitor Engineer: Ramon Morales Sound Co: Clair Global Systems Engineer: Chris "Sully" Sullivan RF Tech: Paul Tobey Monitor Tech: Scotty McGrath PA Techs: Bobby Taylor, Andrea Espinoza	Gear FOH Console: DiGiCo SD7 Speakers: Clair Cohesion System (CO-12/Mains, CO-8/Side Hang, CP-218/Subs (flown) Amps: Lab.gruppen Processing: Lake, SMAART Plugins & Hardware: Waves, Overstayer, API, Empirical Labs, Neve	MON Console: DiGiCo SD7 Wireless: Shure PSM1000, Jerry Harvey Audio IEMs Mics: Sennheiser 9000 Series (vocals), 5235 (Bruno Mars vocals), Mojave, Shure, AT, Royer, DPA
--	---	--