Cable Keeping

Every soundco has cables, endless numbers of them. From snakes to mic patches to speaker cords to AC power distribution. And like most newbies, you all start with the usual whatever-is-handy approach to transporting them--old roadcases, milk crates, suitcases, steamer trunks, plastic totes, etc. This article describes the art of cable keeping, and how the big soundcos do it.Sometimes we just don't learn, but typically, plenty of clues are dropped by those witnessing your load-in ritual. Sayings like, "How many trips are you gonna make?" or "Hey, it's getting cold in here. Wanna hurry up?" What those less-than-polite comments should be telling you is that you are not very efficient in getting your gear from the gig rig into the venue.
So to resolve this, the natural way to do it is consolidate those suitcases and tubs into bigger storage items. And the natural path to this involves work trunks, work boxes or work cases. Whatever you call them, it means cases on wheels that hide all those cables for fewer trips in and out. And you do not have to go my way with custom cable trunks, as many case makers and pro sound retailers offer standard-size trunks that are nothing more than spaces to fill with the necessities of gigging.

For example, the two figures in this article are cable trunks built for me specifi- cally for stowing cables and related items. For my "C" rig, I have three such cases with inches tall. They all have dolly boards, and castor cups for stacking; although with cables, it would take two to four roadies to stack them. All these cases are constructed with lower "wells" and two upper trays for smaller items.

Cable case one has slotted sides to the well for main snake storage, and the trays mostly hold XLR patch cables and sub-snakes. Case two is everything AC, with bigger 12-gauge AC cables in the well, and short patches and quad box breakouts in the trays. Case three has a well-divider in the long dimension for keeping K&M tripod mic stands on one side, and Speakon patch cables are on the other side (arranged in order of length). The trays on case three hold mic pouches, extra mic clips, windscreens, DI boxes and the beloved muso convenience store inventory (spare drum sticks, drum keys, guitar and bass strings, batteries, guitar cables). And the whole mess moves in only three trips using one person.

Cable Rolling

For smaller cables like XLR patches, I teach my cable-rolling helpers to coil in about 7- inch circles using the over/under technique. The technique is better shown than described, but depends on a lot of common sense and a bit of Navy seamanship. Generally, you attempt to get the cable loose from all others and wrangle it somewhat in a straight line. You grab one end with your holding hand, and the other hand grabs about 2 more feet of cable back to the holding hand. As you coil the cable, you alternately twist the cable one way and then the other, with your thumb and fingers making cable half-turns as each coil is formed. You will notice that the far end of the cable will not be twisting if this is done correctly, as it prevents looping and tangles.

Now, on to the subject of cable ties. My cable ties have been the evolution of my rolling cables since the early 1970s. Back then, Velcro was still too new and tape left way too much residue. And if you knotted your cables, you quickly found out they would not last very long. But being of practical means--and also an office janitor between gigs--I had a ready supply of yellow Glad garbage bag plastic ties perfect for mic and guitar patch cables. As my occupations improved and my source of free cable ties dwindled, I switched to Velcro ties.

But the yellow Glad ties were easy to spot after gigs, and had reasonable life spans; even today, I still have a few in use. But today, I have given up the fancy cable ties for "gecko tape."My half-inch yellow gecko tape is still made by Rip-Tie Inc., but comes in 150-foot rolls with hooks on one side and loops on the other. By cutting 6-inch lengths of this tape, I have cable ties that cost barely a nickel each and last through dozens of gigs. I make it a habit to stash all ties near the snake patch box for easy tracking at the end of the night. Fig.1 shows my 7-inch coils of XLR patches with yellow ties in the trays.

Taming Snakes

Coiling up snakes is straight seamanship; just figure-8 the snake in the cable trunk, leaving about 10 to 20 feet of patch box hanging out until the rest of the snake is stowed. Fig. 2 shows my less-than-perfect figure-8 stowage of the snake cable. By using the figure-8 technique, no tangles or twists occur when extracting or retrieving the snake cable. And the extra bit of patch box and cable is for leaving the case at monitor beach and pulling just the required amount of snake to FOH, leaving the rest stowed neatly.

AC and Speaker Cable

These beefy 12-gauge cables with black jacketing get a similar treatment as XLR patches get, but in a 12- to 15-inch coil size. But I have a little tip to share with you. If you can get some theatrical black "trick" line, cut healthy lengths of it (about 2 feet) and square knot the middle of the trick line on one end of these kinds of cables next to the connector. If you can tie your shoes, then you can tie off the coiled cables quickly and toss them into your cable trunk. If trick line is

not handy, then black boot laces will make a nice substitute.