

MARK OAKLEY:

JEWEL'S ACOUSTIC ACE



AS JEWEL'S NEW GUITARIST AND MUSIC DIRECTOR, Mark Oakley faces many sail-or-fail situations, like today's live appearance on the *Rosie O'Donnell Show*. But he says he seldom gets uptight: "I'm never nervous, even in a situation like playing on Jay Leno, where if you screw up, you're screwed. It's just pure excitement."

Part of Oakley's confidence stems from his years with two famed Nashville ensembles: the Sam's Place house band and the Prime Time Country band — groups that have backed such artists as Glen Campbell, Wynonna, Faith Hill, Dolly Parton, Amy Grant, Billy Ray Cyrus, Delbert McClinton, and Michael McDonald. "Those bands would play behind a different artist every night," recalls Mark. "We would have to learn a new set of songs for every show."

Yet Mark says he relishes the opportunity to focus on a single group, as he previously did while serving as SHeDAISY's bandleader. "I suppose it's more challenging to play with a house band, but it's often not quite as much fun as being part of a regular group, where you get a chance to get into the comfort zone with the material. Plus, everyone in Jewel's band is an amazing musician, and they're all fun to be around."

In fact, Oakley insists, "fun to be around" is practically a job requirement for session and touring musicians. "If people don't want to be around you, you're not going to get called no matter how good you are. You find if you work with the top session guys in Nashville that in addition to being amazing players, they're always great guys."

Another thing that makes the Jewel gig fun is the fact that the singer doesn't insist that the musicians reproduce every song exactly as it appears on disc. "I've been with artists who freak out if you don't play everything exactly like the record," says Mark, "while others, like Jewel, want you to be creative. She lets the musicians be themselves, which is a lot more fun than replicating everything every night like a robot. I think that's better for the audience, too. If every arrangement is exactly like the record, they could have just stayed home. I'm not talking about completely changing everything—obviously, there are signature parts that people want to hear. I'm referring to subtle things that keep the music from sounding stale."

Oakley estimates that he plays acoustic for 60% of Jewel's current show. When he does, he straps on a Yamaha CPX15N. "I have two of

them, and they're both amazing," he says. "I've noticed that a lot of guitars that sound good plugged in aren't so great when you track them acoustically in the studio and vice-versa, but these guitars are great both ways. Their sound is big, warm, and woody, which I vastly prefer to the overly bright and cutting sound you get from a lot of acoustic-electrics. Remember, it's always easy to brighten up your tone with EQ, but you can't fake bigness and warmth if it's not in the guitar."

Live, Oakley runs the guitars through a Yamaha AG Stomp acoustic guitar pre-amp. "The CPX has both a piezo pickup and an internal



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microphone, which you can blend. But when I plug into the AG Stomp I use mainly the piezo, because it's such a great-sounding combination. I usually use one of two AG Stomp programs. For strumming, I have a setting that is fairly compressed and has very little reverb. But it's good to have a little more volume for fingerpicking because you don't want to have to play too hard, so I have a separate setting with a boost and less compression. Either way I keep the EQ pretty flat, because the guitar just doesn't need it."

Oakley has one crucial piece of advice for young players who hope to someday be where he is: "Get out and play in front of people as soon as you get a little playing under your hands. Almost every successful musician I know was playing in a high school band and whatnot. Don't sit in a room practicing scales for the first six years of your musical life. Nobody ever masters everything they want to do on guitar, but you can at least share what you have as it comes."