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SEL: BALTIC HERO

**"I NEVER HAD A BUSINESS PLAN ON
HOW TO TAKE OVER THE MUSIC WORLD;
EVERY DAY I JUST DID WHAT I LIKE MOST
IN LIFE, MUSIC."**

Those of you not residing in and around the tiny country of Lithuania may be saying, 'who on earth is SEL?', upon reading the above headline. However, bear with us. This artist is not only a superstar in his homeland and surrounding countries, but he sold out Troxy in London last year, and has another show coming up in our capital this September, so some of us Brits are getting him, too. Born Egidijus Dragunas (no, I can't pronounce it either), this charming artist gives us an insight into his magical musical world. And what a world that is.

We're not so familiar with Lithuanian music here in the UK. Could you tell us a bit about the scene?
[smiles] Lithuania is very small, but it is a country of very talented and musical people. We have so many great young artists in Lithuania, but little work has been done to make them visible to the rest of the world, as historically, Lithuania is a very young country, independent from Russia only a little more than 20 years. Before then, musicians could not create freely; there was neither the culture, nor the music freedom, and it was restricted and censored. Then the new phase began, and Lithuania became free and independent. We began to create by ourselves, and of course, we have been learning from Western Europe and the USA markets a lot. The state grew, and the music culture grew as well.

For an artist that's been established for two decades, to still attract 20,000 per show is pretty phenomenal, especially in such a small territory...
Yes, and the market is also attractive because

we do not have competitors in Lithuania. There is no other group that can attract an audience like this, and this is not good for a performer seeking to move forward. This is why, when a few years ago we received the first offers from foreign companies for production and management work, I realised there was no need for any of this. I have a lot of ideas, and I want to implement them; I am very happy that we still receive such offers, as it inspires me as an artist, but today we have concerts in America and Europe, and although not on that scale, they're always successful, and I am very happy about it. I cannot tell you why we are not only still in the market, but actually still growing – it's incredible. I never had a business plan on how to take over the music world; every day I just did what I like most in life, music [smiles].

Tell me about the Troxy show in London. What was the reaction of the UK audience to your music, and how did it differ to that of back home?

We already have a concert planned for this year because of last year's success – that'll be on September 5 – and frankly, I am already excited about it! When we arrived in London, we did not plan to have such a success. We evaluated our possibilities as pretty real, but after the concert, the club manager came to us and said, "we prayed to God that during the event, the balcony on the second floor wouldn't break down!" He said he had seen a lot of concerts, but never something like us, including the reaction of the audience, so that was amazing. It was one of the biggest and most memorable compliments, and one of the best evaluations of our work. Of course, all this emotion is also closely related with the fact that the audience was really amazing, exceptionally energetic, and friendly.

You recently performed your annual show in Klaipeda, which I understand is a Lithuanian seaside resort?

Yes. Concerts in Klaipeda are always very summery, and people have a very good

attitude. Despite being in the open air, it holds only 18,000 spectators, and currently, our band needs space, and could easily have filled 30,000. For me as a performer, it is very important that my home country's infrastructure of touring places is developed. At the moment, I am working a lot on this issue; I proposed to the Lithuanian politicians to cooperate, and this is relevant not only because our band fans would fit into concerts, but also to attract more foreign musicians, which would also be an additional income to the state, and would generally improve the image of our country.

The greatest strength to me at shows like this is that I work with a very professional team, the best in their fields. The music needs to be perfectly clean, and the sound engineer must meet very high standards. Music is no longer just music; you can create well, and attract maximum audiences only if there is a good synthesis of music, sound, visual, and light.

How important is social media to SEL, and do you use it to interact with your international fanbase?

You know, a month ago we started working with one Lithuanian PR agency, and its specialists said to me, "Egidijus, do you know, the post in your Facebook account has been read by a very similar number of people as President Dalia Grybauskaitė's post?" I do not give importance to such things, but I realise that now I have the opportunity to influence a very large number of people. And the time has come when I want my influence to create a value. During the first week in September, we will perform in Vilnius, Mountain Park. We are planning to invite the President of Lithuania, and sing together our national anthem. Why is this important? Because I want to show young people that no matter what you do in your life, whether you are making business, or you are some kind of music hooligan like me [laughs], that everything in life starts from the respect to your country. Whether I will be working in America or any other country, the respect to my country will always be the most valuable. I want to publicly declare this during my concerts.

I personally supervise my Facebook and Instagram accounts, and I love the speed to access information. If I come up with an idea, or have a strong emotion, or I want to criticise someone [laughs], I can do it in an instant! I like to personally interact with the fans; I wonder how they live, what they think, what they liked in the concert, and they also express our weaknesses. Lithuanians are quite restrained people, but our social media is really active. Each post on Facebook is viewed by 100,000 people, and in Lithuania, this is about one-fifth of the population of our capital city, Vilnius. SEL now has 183,000 Facebook fans, and over 50,000 on Instagram.

What kind of relationship do you and the band have with your sound team?

No Noise is my sound team, and they are great experts in their field. They started out as voice-over artists in small discotheques, and over time they have become excellent professionals. I saw their potential a long time ago, so I boldly invested a lot of money to make their team stronger, to offer professional tools, which they could also use with me, and create the best products on the music market. Now we have our own private recording studio, which offers excellent working conditions, and I think that my investment to the team has paid off, because we have 100% trust. If you're surrounded by faithful people who will not do you any folly, you learn to love and respect each other.

So what next for SEL?

Well, we are constantly looking for innovation. Sometimes I feel like an inventor, because I think that we should try something completely different. I do not like templates, and I don't understand the word impossible. Our team spends a lot of time in the recording studio, and this is a wonderful time where a lot of good ideas are born. We are now recording our first English-language music, which will be presented to Europe, and we will wait for an evaluation [smiles].



MAKE NO NOISE

For five years now, Lithuanian sound company, No Noise, have been responsible for taking care of all things audio for SEL, their country's most successful artist. We catch up with company CEO, Kestutis Dulinskas, to find out about the company's working relationship with the artist, the dos and don'ts in today's industry, and the recent outdoor SEL show in Klaipeda.

What were the main challenges at Klaipeda, and how did you overcome those?

We had to cover the entire area evenly with equal tonal balance, and we wanted the sound to be designed with the impression that the artist is standing nearby from any listener's perspective, so it hits you right in the face. One of the priorities of the No Noise team is to work effectively. We have several expressions for new employees and the crew: 'the point and essence of set up is the takedown', and 'the function is bread, and aesthetics, the butter' [smiles].

We like that! Were there any major noise restrictions to deal with?

There were no restrictions, but we always try not to overdo it. In Lithuania, we have an idiom for 'overdo', which basically translates to 'don't bend the stick'. [laughs] We have enough SPL, but people in the audience still have a chance to talk out loud. Our system has almost no distortion, our phase curve is from 400 Hz to 10kHz at a 10-degree range, so we have a very bright and clear sound with a high dynamic range, and that spectacular, punchy attack.

Sounds good to us. In terms of audio technology in particular, in the last couple of years, has anything been particularly 'game-changing', in your opinion?

All digital technology has improved significantly over the last couple of years, no question, but actually, the major technology leap was felt with Powersoft amplifiers, notably the X8. No Noise uses eight of these Powersoft X8s, and although it seems like just eight amps, it actually equates to 64 channels of 3kw/4ohm - it's 192 kw in total. That is a truly astounding power to size ratio! We chose to work with Powersoft X8 for several reasons. One is its multifunctionality: one and the same X8 is used for all systems: line array, subwoofer, monitor, and side fill. Then there's the innovation: such impressive possibilities of DSP; a three-phase power supply; the Dante network; a Matrix; and an especially good dynamic range. Even at high sound pressure,

a big sound is very easy on the ear; and in almost all systems, barring the subs, we use the FIR filters.

So overall, our investment in X8 is fully justified. We have less racks, which means less footprint, and a quicker workflow. We also hope to get eight Powersoft M Force subwoofer speakers by next summer; that would be another huge audio leap for us! Our whole system works on a Dante network – that's consoles, amplifiers, and radio – so it's less cables, and of course the audio signals do not degrade at all through A-D/D-A converters. One thing I will also say is that we are eagerly awaiting the arrival of nanotechnologies in the audio industry!

With such up-tempo, electronica, bass-heavy music, how important is the quality of PA system and amplifiers used in your live shows?

With SEL, we're looking at audiences from 7,000 to 20,000, and difficult stage design decisions, so the PA should be able to reproduce the entire frequency range in the far distance. HF waveguard (line array) construction is very important, as it must be capable of outputting the sound very evenly, and to great distances.

Certain songs dominate the synthesised low frequencies, so power amplifiers are essential, as they have to be capable of supporting the load for a long time. We are very satisfied with the X8, which perfectly carries out this work, has not only the best sound in the high register, but also keeps superb speaker control at lower frequencies. The X8 is the best amplifier on the market today, and is able to serve all levels of audio equipment, from the smallest frontfill to a 2x18 sub. There have been situations when we put 12 pieces of 2x18 on just one X8... That's impressive, isn't it? [smiles]

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DYNAMIC RANGE, AND
OVERALL INNOVATION."**

