

Southpaw Steel 'n' Twang's itinerary St. Louis-New York 2.-13.9.2015

Southpaw Steel 'n' Twang was given the honor of being the first Finnish band to be invited to St Louis to attend the 44th International Steel Guitar Convention..

The flight to St Louis was a relaxed one, although all in all it took 22 hrs. At the Marriott Airport Hotel our SST-team (us boys in the band and our record company executives, Jyri & Aija Lehtonen) were welcomed by Michael Scott Jr. He took us to his room to have a few words about events and some night snacks. Later, our drummer, Tero Mikkonen and I, found a warm pool at the ground floor gym to soothe jet lag a little.

On Thursday morning the convention was getting ready to start. The main event was to be held in the Marriott Ballroom and the staff guys were carrying a bunch of Peavey & Telonics steel amps onto stage as well as all other band equipment.

We found a few SST t-shirt boxes in the antiquity machine room (all those great old lap steels:)), they had been printed on location to lessen costs. In the Ballroom we had our own corner to set up a stand and spread our merchandise to wait for later activities.

Performances began in the afternoon. Opening festivities were to be the next day but there were some evening shows for Thursday: Western swing, a steel guitar school band and Southpaw Steel 'n' Twang:))!! We checked out some early afternoon performers and then it was time to go out to the pools to relax a little before the show.

Later, doing our sound check, I found out my stomp box power source to be too weak - that smaller currency, 110 volts!! I had happily forgotten that! ... Another performer saved my ass by lending his extra power source, thanks to him we were able to begin on time!! The evening show was on the waves via Michael's SteelRadio.com and later, he modestly presented streaming numbers during our performance: 540 211 listeners of which the US listeners' share was 432 860.

The music played at the convention was in general various versions of country which numerous, extremely skillful players played to the houseband's solid backup; I have to admit being a little unsure if our music would be liked or not; maybe it would be viewed as breaking musical barriers, maybe just seen as something unfit for steel. In the end there was positively polite applauding and many came to thank us for our fresh attitude!! The SST team ate dinner at the lobby bar and everybody was very enthusiastic.

I started my mornings by running a few miles in the gym, that and a freshening swim in a cold pool were exactly what a guy needs to carry on!! Air conditioning was very effective almost everywhere, going out was almost like from a fridge to an oven. JP Mönkkönen, our bass layer, almost fell sick but luckily kept the symptoms at bay with a dose of meds.

On Friday morning the actual convention began very patriotically, where a war vet carried the national flag to the stage. The band played the national anthem and there were speeches about freedom and US armed forces overseas doing their duty. Americans are proud of their country and ... being Americans!!

During the midday section there were new talents and seasoned musicians, all very talented ☺. We also had a day off where a local steel man Steve Hitsman kindly took us to Pancake House, drum & guitar stores, and Walmart ... yeah we had a cultural day:)! The Marriott was pretty far from downtown so we never made it to the Eero Saarinen designed Arch or any other sightseeing, being too tired after that round.

Jet lag kept nagging me, my inner watch went off every morning at 5 am.

The last convention day began and in the smaller meeting rooms there were, like the day before, concerts and workshops. Now and then it went right to the jazz bag and that, if something, really sounds cool on steel!!

Many steel guitar and accessory manufacturers had their spots along the lounge area and a delightful mishmash of music and talk filled the air.

SST had another show on the main stage. Before us played the great Doug Jernigan who rightfully received a standing ovation. Our set was the last in the afternoon program and a notable crowd stayed. I guess our interpretation worked well as we got people on their feet and clapping their hands! The main theme of this year's ISGC was naturally the recent passing away of Buddy Emmons, many players had his tunes in their set list and we played "Hold it" as a lap steel version..

The last show of the event was a Emmons-tribute but we didn't hear that as Firebrand studio man Brian Scheffer came to pick us up. The next day would be the first recording day and we had to carry some of our gear to the studio.

The next five days were spent very simply: getting up, running, swimming, recording in the studio, back to the hotel via 7/11 and go to bed. We had 15 songs and everything was completed except a few overdubs which were to be recorded later in Finland. Brian is a nice guy and a seasoned pro and our thoughts about the whole process met very well. We played the instruments in the same room, amps were isolated. Most stuff was played live, some ugly spots were cleaned. Vocals were done after that...

Johnny B Goode; I've played it so many times, I think it was the first rock' n' roll song I ever learned:).. being a young shy kid I went to the woods so nobody except the squirrels could hear me! These delightful facts flooded me when we visited Chuck Berry's statue during a break and had some lunch in the Blueberry Hill Club, Berry's regular gig joint...

Our days were so full of intense work that on Thursday evening we were still recording the last little things before a scheduled horn session which was a disappointment because some of the guys hadn't bothered to check my charts before the session! Sight reading didn't work either and the session had to be stopped right at the beginning... not very professional, I have to say. Well, we knew that would be quite easy to do in Finland a little later.

Luckily Brian had been a steady, trustworthy bedrock during the sessions, we were happy to thank him and get ready for New York City - all recorded data was bounced for later overdubbing and mixing in Finland and all gear was transported to the Marriott.

The Friday flight was a sleepy one. We had been busy the evening before - not partying but packing all our bags, gear & T-shirts. There were still some left - so everybody got to bed quite late or early...

The taxis were crawling in the Manhattan afternoon jam. Finally we found ourselves in Tryp Hotel and were ready to conquer New York. Well maybe not but hungry we were and a taco restaurant near the Empire State Building helped us to solve that problem. Sitting there I again thanked the whole team for the trip, especially Jyri and Aija; all they have done for our band, just unselfishly digging the music. I have enormous respect for them!!

We took a taxi to the Friday night gig. The Alphabet Lounge looked like a shady underworld headquarters with its red facade, dark windows and hardly recognizable name sign ... inside there was a quite typical, cozy music club: along bar desk, mostly standing space and very loud pop.

There was no bass amp, JP accepted a monitor version with stoic calmness. Our set was after a 80's style synth pop band; some people were in the bar and one of them had been in St Louis and wanted to hear more of our playing!

Scott Mitzner and his band, High North, were the last to perform with interesting progressive instrumental music with all bass lines played with a "stick" instrument. Scott had wonderfully arranged our NY gigs and it was great to see him again and meet his wife Vera!

On Saturday it was cool be a tourist for a while, relaxing and just wandering around with nothing particular to do. The whole bunch went to Greenwich Village to attend a street market; searching Matt Umanov's guitar store we bumped to a street guitarist, who besides playing some cool jazzy chord stuff, guided us to Electric Ladyland studio just around the corner - yeah, Jimi's place way back!!

Umanov store was also found at last: cool old guitars with Hank Williams as background music, lefty corner; could a lefty ask for more? Well, yes, a fatter wallet ☺! Would have taken that Gretsch along! Two girls were checking guitars and they listened to me playing it for a while and started chatting. They said they liked it and would be checking our evening gig in Brooklyn. Jyri happily wisecracked about me having to play all the music stores in Manhattan to get us an audience - sure!

Muchmore's was also a cozy, homely live joint. The gear was ok, no air conditioning. Our song Water fitted well that sweaty gig ☺!

Scott, Vera and those guitar shop girls were amongst all the other music enthusiasts. That performance was the best during our stay in the US. The guys dug us and we sold a few cd's. Wouldn't it be cool to play a few more gigs in the States? Maybe one of these days ... aw, for sure:~)!

Anthony Gomez, a noted guitar player, was there and he told us he had been in Helsinki with his band during a city festival! We packed our backline, said goodbye to the lovely staff and headed back to Manhattan..

Sunday was a travelling day: a lot of flying and back in Finland. A great trip, great contacts and this beautiful world got a bit wider again!

Ville Leppänen