

# Sound check

## Phil Duncan, Australian Touring Services founder

BY KIRSTY BROWN

Phil Duncan has more than 30 years experience getting tours from A to B and back again. In 2002, he started his own company, Australian Touring Services, to provide smarter, faster, safer and more cost-effective solutions for getting bands around Australia. *The Music Network* catches up with Duncan for a chat about his rapidly expanding company and the challenge of working across such a large country.

### If a stranger asked you what your company did, what would you say?

We're a boutique freight-forwarder that specialises in touring entertainment, theatre and film into and out of Australia. We are a logistics provider to these industries. We look after all facets of transport; from the time it leaves its international port of export, we bring it in to Australia, do the customs clearances, put it into one of our tour trucks and tour it around Australia, then we put it back into export mode and fly it out of the country.

### How big is your team now?

We have 37 permanent employees; we have 20 prime movers, 47 trailers, and four local teams on the ground in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Brisbane.

It seems that a core group of you have been working together for years, particularly yourself, Chris Nicholson and Terry Turner (who recently passed away).

We were all at the old ANSETT-owned entertainment company. That went broke in early 2002 and so we started ATS in February 2002. We got it off the ground ourselves. We started in 2002 with three laptops, three mobile phones and my wife's Ford Explorer

*[laughs]*. We left our transport middle-management jobs, looked at each other and said, "Shit, what have we done?" *[Laughs]* But our growth has been extraordinary – from that through to where we are today, in which we really are the only dedicated industry tour trucking company.

### How long did it take for ATS to hit its stride?

We fought tooth and nail for the first couple of years. It was very, very tough. But acceptance grew and they saw the quality of our gear – which all is obviously less than seven years old. When they saw that and the fact that we brought in 48ft pans, we introduced single-piece ramps, we clearly demonstrated that we were prepared to invest in our business.

### Does touring technology frequently evolve?

We've been innovative in bringing in those 48ft pans. In 2000 we went from 40ft to 45ft, in 2002 we took it to 48ft and we're dabbling today in some big doubles. It's all about capacity – dollar for your kilometre.

### What are the challenges of touring such a large country?

There are the ever-changing and vague fatigue management rules and there are the new 'chain of responsibility' laws, which we work on together with the RTA and the promoters to ensure we get it right. Today we have to do a lot more double drives.

You've toured everyone from Pink to Andre Rieu and, of course, the Big Day Out. Do you have a personal favourite?

Andre Rieu was the biggest production to tour the world! We



picked it up in Germany, brought it from Germany into Australia, toured it through and sent it back. For a little Aussie company, we were very proud; it had a total of 224 containers! It was certainly the hardest thing we've ever done as a company, but it was a great challenge to get it around and we

were happy to hear he's coming back in a reduced size soon. We've done a couple of Rolling Stones tours – I would've done those for nothing!

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