14th edition
PALM SOUND & LIGHT AWARDS

Nikhil Pai - *Outstanding FOH Engineer of the Year 2026*

*For **Nikhil Pai**, great live sound has never been about personal glory. It is about serving the music, supporting the artist, and creating an emotional connection between the stage and the audience. Recognised with the **PALM Sound & Light Award** for Outstanding FOH Engineer of the Year 2026, Pai speaks to **PALM Expo Magazine** about the foundations of his career, the realities of life on the road, and the philosophy that has guided him across decades of live production.*



After decades spent ensuring artists remain front and centre, Nikhil Pai steps briefly into the spotlight as he accepts the PALM Sound & Light Award 2026 for Outstanding FOH Engineer of the Year

Solid Foundations

There are some amongst us that find their passion, early on in life, and Pai was no exception. "While in college, I used to play bass and sing in a band and every time we did a concert, I used to be fascinated by the sound equipment, especially the audio console. One thing led to another and soon I was learning the nuances of the equipment. Unbeknownst to me, the seeds had been planted for a career in live sound."

In 1997 he founded **Orpheus** in Hyderabad, a sound and light rental company. This fostered a deeper appreciation of the many moving parts that drive the success of a live production. "I sold the company in 2008 when the rigours of touring made it difficult to tour and run an organisation," he explains. "But having worked in all aspects of the organisation gave me a tremendous insight into the administrative and management sides of the business and that in turn dictated the way I function at live concerts. I now understand the key business aspects that govern our concerts thanks to my days in Orpheus."

Mixing For An Audience

Like most auteurs of sound, Pai has a signature workflow that lends his work gravitas. "I speak with the artist beforehand and get a sense of what they envision for their music and try and translate that to the audience to the best of my abilities." The philosophy runs deeper than technique: "Music is emotional and every concertgoer perceives a concert differently, primarily governed by what emotion a song brings up in that individual. My job as a FOH engineer is to translate the artists vision for their music to the audience. I do not mix for myself. On the contrary I am mixing for the audience. If I can bring out that emotion in the audience, I consider my job well done. And of course, I always strive to keep the main artist front and centre because that's who the audience has come to watch and listen to."

Laying the Groundwork

"The process of getting a gig started happens days or even weeks before I reach the destination of the show. It starts off with getting in touch with the vendors who have been engaged to provide us with the equipment and backline," he clarifies. The process typically involves two vendors working in tandem. Once logistics are in place, a series of calls ensures that every detail in the technical rider is met, with any equipment substitutions cleared by the band beforehand. From there, he builds the show file offline, inspects the equipment on site, performs a system

check, and carries out a line check alongside the monitor engineer ahead of the band's arrival.

Soundcheck is deliberately restrained. “As long as I'm happy with the general sound and gain of the instrument, I move along. And that is because weather and the number of people attending a concert influence sound.” With the groundwork complete, all that's left is showtime!

"When the concert starts, the first song is usually when I make my final touches to the mix depending on factors like weather, the audience etc. Then the whole concert is spent making very minute volume and EQ changes if needed." The workflow, he says, "stays consistent irrespective of the artist, venue or scale of concert."

Quality Across Scale

While many engineers adapt their approach depending on the size of the audience, the stature of the artist, or the scale of the production, Pai maintains a consistent philosophy. For him, the goal remains unchanged regardless of the venue or the headcount: delivering the artist's vision as faithfully and effectively as possible. Whether mixing for an intimate gathering or a large-scale concert, he relies on the same principles and standards, allowing consistency to become a defining characteristic of his work.

“The idea is always to present the artists vision to the audience in the best possible way. The challenges, may be unique. Whether it is a concert for a few hundred people or a few thousands. The approach is to do my very best with the given set of challenges. The only difference being the acoustical challenges in an indoor concert and the challenges the weather brings with it at outdoor concerts."

Consistency does not imply predictability. Every venue presents its own set of variables, requiring engineers to adapt in real time. From room acoustics and PA deployment to environmental factors and infrastructure limitations, live sound remains an exercise in problem-solving as much as it is in mixing.

“Acoustically challenging venues, insufficient PA coverage, badly setup PA's and weather and humidity challenges in outdoor concerts are a common challenge at every gig or the other. Perfection at a concert is a myth and you have to do your best with the given circumstances and challenges.” For Pai, this adaptability is what separates theory from practice.

Team Efforts Here & Abroad

Regardless of the role he occupies, Pai views live production as an inherently collaborative endeavour. “You cannot function alone without the support of the other crew. For example, as an FOH engineer, you are also dependant on the effectiveness of the monitor engineer and the system engineer.”

His perspective is informed by a career that has spanned nearly every major discipline within live sound. Beyond his work at front of house, Pai has served as a **Monitor Engineer, Systems Engineer, Technical Head, Technical Director,** and **Consultant,** giving him a comprehensive understanding of the demands and responsibilities associated with each role. This breadth of experience has shaped the way he approaches productions today. “I can put myself in the other persons shoes to help understand and run a successful concert,” he explains.

That ability to see the bigger picture has also served him well on the international stage. “The opportunity to work with international artists came about when they got to hear my work and liked my attitude and approach. My approach to gigs with those bands is no different than my approach to gigs in India.”

Among the many artists and projects he has been associated with, a select few stand out as particularly influential milestones in his journey.

“I think working with **The Aristocrats** and **Jack Gardiner** have had the most profound impact on my career." Having witnessed the industry's evolution firsthand, Pai is equally optimistic about the progress of India's live production ecosystem. What was once a market constrained by limited access to world-class technology has transformed into one capable of supporting productions at the very highest level. For Pai, that growth reflects more than just advances in equipment. It speaks to the maturation of the industry's technical expertise, infrastructure, and production standards, positioning India as an increasingly capable destination for world-class live events.

Always Room For Improvement

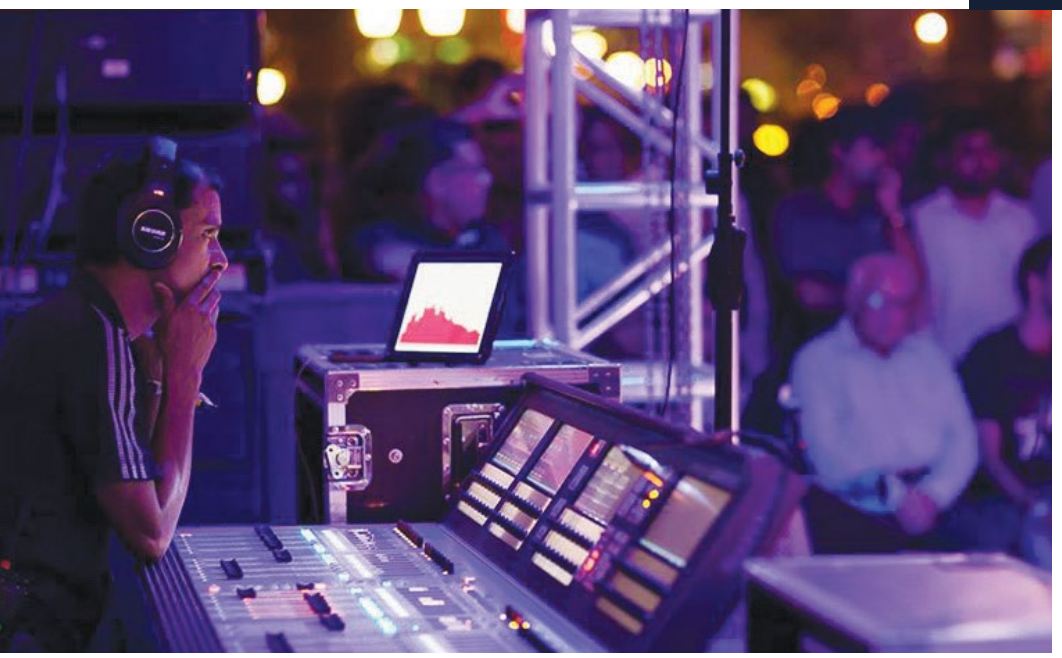
"The audio world is changing at a rapid pace and in-depth knowledge of networking has become essential for you to succeed in audio and lighting," Pai elaborates. His commitment to continual learning is reflected in his training across leading professional audio platforms, including **Avid VENUE**, **SSL Live**, **Waves SoundGrid**, **Dante**, **Adamson**, **NEXO**, **JBL VTX**, and **Rational Acoustics' Smaart**, spanning the disciplines of live mixing, system optimisation, audio networking, and loudspeaker deployment.

"During the pandemic when gigs had shut down, I decided to use that time to upskill and get certified. I am of the firm belief that upskilling and learning is a never-ending process that is needed for success in your field of expertise."

Asked which certifications matter most, he says they "all have their place in our ever-complex world of audio engineering," but adds: "just certifications without the practical knowledge of how a particular piece of equipment works is of no relevance. Practical knowledge and experience trumps certification any day!"

Reflecting on the win, Pai conveys a feeling of elation:

“It is an extremely wonderful feeling to get recognised by the industry and your peers. Having been in the industry for close to 30 years, it’s humbling to receive this accolade. I shall continue in my quest to better my-self on a daily basis!”



Nikhil Pai at the console during a performance by legendary guitarist John McLaughlin, delivering the mix behind an unforgettable live experience