Simple Minds

Live at the Engine Shed, Lincoln University campus

words & pictures by Steve Moles

Like an easier Leeds O2 Academy and with a bigger stage, the Engine Shed on Lincoln Uni’s campus is a nice place to see a band. The ceiling is a bit low, so it was a squash for lighting designer Stephen Pollard to get his entire touring design in here, but his HSL crew managed it. For sound, Pawel Zakrzewski, system tech for Britannia Row, did an excellent job. The long, brickwork sides of this old, rectangular Victorian industrial space are broken up by small buttresses and other physical intrusions; only the balcony of the end wall (a modern addition with brightly coloured fascia and glass-fronted balustrade) threatens serious reflective problems, but is easily avoided by a well-hung system (can we say that in print?). Arguably, the only shortcoming of the venue (trim height aside) is catering: Popcorn set up in front of the bar beneath the balcony, and had, of course, to strike camp before doors at 7:00pm. But then, I’m sure they didn’t mind the early finish to their day, even if at the expense of a rushed meal schedule.

As for Simple Minds, did I mention in last year’s Coldplay review (see LSI October 2012) that German promoter Marek Lieberberg was singing their praises? Well he might: affirmedly back in their pomp, their new single Broken Glass Park is a lesson to any ageing band contemplating a reignition of their career in later life. It is at once recognisably Simple Minds - cascading chorus, a neat little five-note keyboard hook, and Kerr’s gritty vocals - but with a decidedly contemporary feel. The fact that it was a power play on BBC Radio 2 tells you everything you need to know about the band’s demographic - there weren’t many Uni students here tonight - but that matters not. This 30-date tour of the provinces was completely sold out, and the return bout in the autumn, supported by Ultravox, visits the major arenas and is already nearly sold out.

Production

James Maillardet is a classic case of rigs to riches. Having once rigged (“and I still mark out the points every morning and supervise the rigging”) he is now production manager for Simple Minds, with Basement Jaxx and Kasabian also under his belt. As he so correctly observed: “When you rig, especially on big tours and you’re in the roof a long time, you get to see a plan view of the venue, and if you watch closely you’ll see the ebb and flow of all the departments as they load in, and spot where all the cluster-f***s occur. You see immediately where the flow of the day can be improved.”

It was also the case that several members of the crew with whom I spoke, and my old and very dear friend John Ward, a truck driver with Redburn Transfer, all endorsed Maillardet as a good PM: “He’s very hands-on, he stage manages the day as well.” It’s only two trucks, but with a half-gallon show going sometimes into pint-pot venues, such help is invaluable.

“I’ve not toured with HSL before,” said Maillardet, “just seen them at the odd festival. The guys are good. It took a couple of shows to get a routine worked out - everyone has their own way of doing things and you have to adapt to that when you make a change - but now everything is working very well. Brit Row I’ve used many times before, so that’s a very comfortable arrangement. I set up a deal between HSL and Brit Row so that HSL provided all the rigging; Brit Row were happy to do that and it makes for one unified system. On a tour this size, little economies like that, in terms of truck space and simplicity, make a difference.

Lighting

At face value the rig looks simple enough: front and back truss, the front with just six moving heads and seven ETC Source Four profiles (no gel). LD Stephen
Pollard teases in the profiles at maybe 40-60% to lift out the band members from what is overwhelmingly a backlit show. Sadly, after more than 35 years, Simple Minds have not warmed to the spotlight: but maybe that’s part of their charm.

The back truss is another matter: vertical GP12 trusses hang beneath with horizontal scaffold pipe cross branches; every vertical space left to right, top to bottom, is packed with movers of various types and the occasional strobe. The floor space is little different, or looks that way, but Kerr still has space to prowl the stage. It’s all very old school in that respect.

HSL lighting tech Matt Brown ran through the kit: "Robe 600 Wash on the front truss; the back wall has Clay Paky Alpha Beam 700s, Robe 600 Spots, Atomics, and 14 Sharpys. It is a bit slow to rig the back wall: we can’t leave the truss/scaffold pipe trees assembled, so it’s a bit of a building site each morning as we put it all back together - up four foot; hang the lights; run the cable harness; then up another four foot and repeat.” Brown and his crew-mate Gary Rees seem happy enough, though Brown has trouble keeping his trousers up - something to do with fashion, according to Maillardet.

"Stephen helps with the load-in,” continued Brown. “He gets the crew to feed the lights to us as we build the back wall and he spends the time making sure all the floor lights are properly positioned. It’s really nice to work with an LD that knows what he wants and is prepared to help you achieve that.”

There was a case in point this day, as from 2:00-6:30pm Pollard scrupulously went through every single cue in his grandMA, checking that the compressed confines of the Engine Shed stage didn’t obscure the looks he had created. “The floor pack comprises more Alpha 700 Beams; two Sharpys on towers to back sides; some four cell Moles (also found on the back wall), Robe 600 Spots and Washes, and four Robe 2500 Spots.” If nothing else this is a big, beamy show.

Pollard eventually leaves the desk and we settle into a pre-show beer and chat on the bus. I’ve known Pollard since about ’79/’80 when he came over from the US (though he’s Canadian by birth) with the Psychedelic Furs and used Brit Row, which had a lighting department in those days. I think he has a rotting portrait of himself locked away somewhere, because a few touches of grey aside, he seems not to have aged a bit.

He says: “I picked up the Simple Minds gig about a year later. I’d finished theatre school in Toronto and moved to New York. In fact, I’d just finished the first US tour of a little band called U2 when Simple Minds appeared. They wanted someone who could do lights and drive the truck; I was that man.”

It’s easy to see where Pollard gets his hands-on load-in instincts from. “This was around the time of their third album and we got on so well that I moved to the UK for all of the ’80s and most of the ’90s.”

Such lengthy relationships with bands are rare - how does Pollard keep himself and his contribution to the show fresh? “I have a style, that’s what I do. Then as new technology comes along I adapt it to my style. That said, I don’t like LED moving heads, it’s not that I necessarily like to stick to analogue, I just find looking at LEDs is...
not pleasant, for me or the audience. They’re OK if you want that modern look,” there was an unmistakable disparaging tone to this statement, “but if you get a proper washlight in its place, it’s going to be a better look.”

He has chosen a fair assortment of mid-size movers from two main manufacturers - Clay Paky and Robe: “My approach is all about symmetry - start with symmetry and then move off to one side into asymmetrical looks. That’s how I first fell in love with AutoCad, when I realised you could plot half the rig and then use the ‘mirror’ function.” It was a laugh-out-loud moment, but not without credence.

“I like Clay Paky because their lights do fun stuff; the prisms allow you to do funky things. The 700 has a prism, rotating gobos and iris; you can overlay gobos and the focal point is close enough that both will pretty much stay in focus. The Sharpy is about scale. That narrow beam is unique, and add in the prism and the split beams are even narrower. They are a lot of fun and bright as hell. In fact, I do so much beam work out into the hall I have to be careful. You must be kind to your audience. I don’t want to be assaulting people.” Hence an afternoon touching up every focus. “The band’s audience is older now, so you can’t give them the full barrage. The Robe 600 also has a bright output for its size, and they have proved reliable. In fact I have no issues with the reliability of any of the lights.”

As said, the show is predominantly backlit - even the two house spots on Jim Kerr and Charlie Burchill are at perhaps 50% fade. So is it just about creating pictures in light? “The band inhabits the
architecture of the beams. Apart from teasing them out with the Source Four profiles, I don’t do guitar, bass and drum light per se. Each look is a variation and the band work within that. The output from the lights, be they Alpha 700s or profiles, is an environment and they can move in to or out of it. I do a light show and the band rock out; the two combine and complement each other. If I get a good look for a song then I will use that a basic template again and again.”

For the arena tour later this year, Pollard will redesign, “a lot more 2500s and I’ll bring some video on to stage. I like the 3D architecture possible with that. I used VersaTubes the last arena tour, covered with neutral density so they appeared black when not running. It wasn’t quite what I wanted to achieve so I will look to something new this time; but what I don’t want is the band playing in front of something that looks like Windows Media Player, so a content-driven display will not be for this band. Going back to what you asked earlier about freshness, when I reassess a design, like I will be later this year for the arenas, I remind myself what it was that first struck me about any given song. I remember the reason I did a certain thing and then I revisit that stimulus. That means for the audience, most of whom have been fans for as long as I’ve been with the band, they will see something that is at once familiar but interpreted in a new way. That is, after all, what the musicians do on any live show.” You can’t argue with that logic.

Pollard’s show is satisfying in that he has worked hard to exploit every feature of his equipment to wring new looks for each song. A static montage of beam looks in two colours and white is typical; animated variously by scything shafts from the Sharpys scanning the auditorium, or colour chases pulsing through one instrument type within the tableau. Some of his work is cheeky, a little flutter from an amber shutter chase mimics the paradiddle that punctuates the chorus from Glittering Prize, ‘shine the light on me’. It’s all good stuff.

Sound
The tour is using the L-Acoustics KARA system. It’s the first time I’ve had the opportunity to hear it as a full system, and very nice it is too. Nine a side off a ceiling trim barely 20ft is not bad, and as system tech Pawel Zakrzewski said, “a system with a 110° horizontal spread, it’s quite astonishing for its weight and power. Compared to dV-DOSC you have more low-mid, which is much easier to control by the array morphing. Ideally you would fly it with the dedicated subs above; without them you lose low-end impact in larger venues.”

This didn’t prevent FOH engineer Olivier Gerard getting all the impact he needed from SB28s on the floor each side. “The KARA is also smoother in the top end,” continued Zakrzewski. “I still love V-DOSC, but KARA is a big surprise. The rigging is really good, quick and you can rig this by yourself. We use half-ton motors and you can still fly 12 cabinets a side, just 344kg including flybar. The upgrade software in the LAB8s means balancing between the three systems is much easier and smoother.”

The three systems being dV-DOSC for front-fills, ARCS for near-field cover, off acutely to each side, and the KARA mains. It wasn’t so easy to move around this audience during the show, but what I heard in sound-check certainly bore out Zakrzewski’s assertions about smoothness; transition between the fields of the various different elements was easy on the ear, even if it exposed the lackings within the dV-DOSC that the newer KARA design has undoubtedly addressed. “Yes I would have liked KARA for front-fill,” Zakrzewski concurred.

Olivier Gerard, or GG as he is more commonly known, is from Belgium. By his own admission an acolyte of Patrick Demoustier, he has served his time at EML. “I gradually took this gig over from Patrick as he became busier, becoming full-time in 2012. The last tour, 5x5, where they revisited their first five albums, has been a key feature in how I approach this show. We did a lot of work in order to get the sound and atmosphere of those early recordings. I did a lot of research on the reverbs, AMS etc. That was really important.”

Gerard recorded every show from that tour and mixed the Live CD that came from it. “This was my first album - quite an intellectual exercise. All the recording via MADI from my Soundcraft Vi4. But now you have a Midas PRO6 out front? “It was always my intention to go with the consoles Brit Row owns, and it was a good opportunity for me. Of all the leading digital desks, this was the only range I didn’t know. It sounds good to me and is good to operate.” Quite an understatement. Gerard revealed later that the band has 70 songs in the current repertoire. “After I went to Midas for training I took the desk home and spent 15 days programming every song. I didn’t want the show to suffer.” And how did all that hard
work pan out? “Simple Minds has a career of more than 35 years - they are not just a blues band - so I had to do a lot of work building in the reverbs and delays, putting the basic tools in there. The two days of production rehearsal we had in Dublin at the start of the tour was more than enough to finesse what I had programmed.”

Desk aside, how easy is it for a Belgian raised at EML to switch to a UK supplier like Britannia Row? “When you tour like this the most important thing is the support, and Brit Row is really efficient at that. I also like the fact that the company has a strong identity - that gave me the confidence to try the KARA. I had used it for one-offs with other bands, but this is my first tour with it. The decision was simple: we looked at the mix of venues, we knew what we wanted to achieve, and the claimed versatility of the KARA has proved to be true; we have even had good results ground-stacked.”

Gerard, like Zakrzewski, drew attention to the low-mids, “so important for this band. I’m quite happy with the system and mechanically it is quick to rig. Pawel is a good tech’. I ask him how he wants to do each room, and then leave him to it.”

And what of the mix? “The band is drum, bass, keys, guitar and main vocals, with one BV. Only Charlie the guitarist has wedges - a pair of d&b M2s. We have his backline cabinets off-stage in another room, otherwise I would be dead: he is very loud. The bass stack and drums are not so much a problem, but when Jim strays into the guitar position it’s around 113dB.”

But surely Kerr is enough of a professional to avoid submitting himself to those sudden shocks into his IEM mix, let alone considering what you’re dealing with out front? “Oh no, he does like to run around, he will even point his mic into the wedges. But the thing is they have been doing this a long time; they know how to handle any situation. Jim has a weird mic technique, he has special moves where he might put it off to one side of his mouth pointing the capsule almost toward the audience. He is deliberately changing the sound of his voice.”

A feature the Shure Beta58 he uses never fails to capture. It’s odd, but Gerard manages.

“I use Heil Audio PR 31 for the high volume, distorted guitar, and from Cascade a Fathead ribbon mic for the clean guitar. The drum kit is all Beyer, except for an Audio-Technica 3000 top and bottom on the snare. There’s an SM91 in the kick with a Beyer TG70, but the 91 is just for the monitor mix; and a Yamaha sub-kick mic in front (the SKRM-100SFV; looks like an 8” Tom head). The keys are all DI’d; the bass is through a Manley and an AT4041, the big studio mic. The bass player uses a lot of effects and the
Manley keeps the warmth through that. I also have a multi-channel Tube-Tech compressor on the bass - very useful if the room is boomy. I use an Empirical Labs Distressor for EQ, and I also have an SPL Transient Designer for the drums - a sort of compressor/gate where I can easily alter the gate for good, punchy drum sound. Oh, and a Bricasti for the vocals and a R4000 TC for the drums. All other effects and delays come from within the desk, apart from a TC Vocalist for doubling. To create my mix I listen to the music as a whole - yes, the vocals is the first connection the audience makes, but you can’t just place the vocals always on top; the keys and guitars have to marry to the vocals, it’s what the audience expects to hear. Sometimes the bass has to be much louder than anything else; other times something else. There is a purpose for everything; there is a logic to it."

There is certainly a lot of detail revealed in the playing. "It’s a passion for me. It’s not so much the sound or the technology, but the music. I can always work with another console or system, but the music must come first."

There was a tangible momentum from the band this night, right from the first number. The audience at the front stage barrier told me that was how it would be. "They have rediscovered their energy," said one, "for me, they’re better now than they have ever been."

That’s probably all about improvements in technology. For someone my age it’s easy to look back and say of course the band were more energetic when they were young and fresh; but they probably sounded terrible by comparison and the lights were just PARs. Time is no fair judge on that score. But to see a band raise their game back to those levels of energy is no bad thing: opening with Broken Glass Park was a triumph and they never looked back from that point. So a band on vital form, and with the application of modern show technology it is indeed a better experience.

Audio Kit List:

Microphones
Selection of Audix, Shure & Sennheiser microphones, plus Radial DI's

FOH Console
Midas PRO6

FOH Effects
Include Tubetech, Empirical Labs, SPL, Avalon & Bricasti units

FOH Speaker System
L-Acoustics KARA, dV-DOSC & SB28 sub-bass

Monitor Console
DiGiCo SDB with external delay effect unit

Monitors:
Wedges & IEMs
d&b M2 wedges & Sennheiser 2000 IEM systems

*Gear-wise it’s all pretty straightforward. There are eight ways of IEMs - all Sennheiser 2000 series - and as well as Charlie’s monitors I also have a pair of M2s for listen wedges. To replace a rather large analogue mixer they were previously using I’ve added an Aviom card, so I can feed sub-mixes to the drummer which his tech then controls as before. I’ve used the SD8 for a while, notably with Jamiroquai. For me, the feature-set is perfectly suited to IEM mixing, with the relative snapshot groups as an example. Of the 24 auxes available I’ve ended up using them all; as well as the band there are 10 into the Aviom and with things like subs and thumpers they soon get used up these days, even with a small number of people on stage. A key thing for me on mons is to keep it simple and keep it consistent; and with the SD8, the Sennheiser system and the d&b wedges, you can go around the world and get this gear anywhere.*