ALIVE AND KICKING

TOURING INTERNATIONALLY SINCE THE LATE ‘70S HAS ALLOWED SIMPLE MINDS TO PERFECT THE ART OF PERFORMING TO A LIVE AUDIENCE. THEIR LATEST TOUR SEES THEM TRAVEL THE COUNTRY - IN SUPPORT OF THE RECENT CELEBRATE ALBUM - AHEAD OF AN ARENA TOUR AT THE END OF THE YEAR. CONSISTENTLY INFLUENTIAL THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREER, THE SCOTTISH BAND’S CONTINUED IMPACT ON AUDIENCES WAS EVIDENT AS THEY VISITED LIVERPOOL’S EMPIRE THEATRE. TPi’S ZOE MUTTER REPORTS ON A LIVE PRODUCTION CELEBRATION.

Considered by many to be one of the most successful rock groups of the past 30 years - and with an immense collection of anthems under their belts - Simple Minds’ announcement that they would be embarking on a 28-date UK tour was met with a tremendous reception from the fans. Kicking off in Belfast - and with every show split into two halves, with no support act - the tour saw the Glasgow band play set lists of back to back hits at each venue.

“The band have fairly strong opinions when it comes to the live production, which is really helpful,” said Production Manager, Maillardet (Kasabian, Erasure, a-ha). “They’re not the kind of band to just turn up in production rehearsals and say ‘Oh that looks great’. I know lead singer Jim Kerr was keen to get some video element into this show and we looked at it, but the budget we’re trying to work to and rigging weight limitations meant it would have been difficult to squeeze video into the rig. We’ll probably hold off until the arena show later in the year.

“We’re doing a pretty comprehensive tour around the provinces in the UK. The few places we’re not going like London, Manchester and Glasgow, we’ll visit on the arena tour. This was intentional and we will then up the ante a bit and incorporate some video I expect. I don’t think there will be massive on stage screens and lots of heavy video content because I don’t think this is the kind of band to want that.”

**A MULTI-TALENTED TEAM**

Maillardet’s rigging background was invaluable on the production, as it has been on his past shows. He elaborated: “I was a rigger to start with and then the first touring band I worked with as production manager was Basement Jaxx because they wanted someone who could do production and knew about rigging too because they were touring a large screen.”

Celebrate has been Maillardet’s first on the road experience of Simple Minds, after he was approached by their management at the end of last year. He then took on advancing the tour and preparing for rehearsals at Loudroom in Dublin. “Simple Minds were playing festivals at the end of last year and did a stint in Australia so they already had a core team of backline and sound engineers,” he continued. “The only other new person in the team, apart from the audio and lighting techs, was Dan [Ungaretti] on monitors, who started at the same time as me.”

The current touring production is similar to the size Maillardet has worked on in past years with other artists, with this theatre-style show being his preferred size of gig. “I always find theatres more challenging, but I enjoy them. With an arena or stadium tour, while you might have a lot more trucks and people to manage, it is easier to tour there because you generally put the whole rig in and it’s the same sort of package most days. When you come into these venues, doing a club one night and a theatre
the other, it is all about how you’ll make it a bit smaller or larger to fit,” the PM commented.

"Our LD, Stephen Pollard, is very hands-on in the morning, which is good. He is extremely precise. He has been with the band forever and a day and the design he’s created is based around a back wall of lights and a front truss with half a dozen moving lights. The back wall is more complex and has three vertical trusses hanging off it, which is pretty stacked with fixtures and about two tonnes in weight."

"The risers are the bands own and the slatted wooden fascias that are included in the production design have been used on previous tours and tweaked by Steve. Lighting supplier duties have been taken up by HSL, who I’ve worked with us for a number of festivals but not tours. Steve was keen to work with Mike Oates and they have been fantastic so far.”

AN ADAPTABLE PACKAGE

The PM went on to discuss the audio component of the tour and the decision to work with Britannia Row as supplier, providing an L-Acoustics sound system. “I’ve used them for a number of years with other acts and they’re supplying the L-Acoustics KARA PA, which was something our FOH Engineer, GG, was happy to use,” he explained.

“It’s worked out so well, it’s really lightweight, provides excellent audio quality and is an adaptable package we can fly in any of these venues, where usually you’d be restricted by weight limits. To prepare for this tour the band spent around 12 daysin rehearsal. We then carried out three days of audio production rehearsals and then one day in the Olympia Theatre in Dublin as our full production rehearsals with the lighting rig and risers. It’s a lovely old theatre, but it’s a bit like the theatre out of The Muppets - it’s really tall and there’s quite a small and steeply raked stage.”

Other challenging venues included the Caird Hall in Dundee, which could only take 500kg of weight on each house grid. Therefore the crew needed to ground support everything, with HSL setting up bases around the stage. Maillardet’s background in rigging meant he was very hands-on in this department and the production did not require a tour rigger. The PM does the mark-up at every venue and runs through the...
The first truck is fairly rammed and the second used them for other artists such as Simply Red. Simple Minds’ management had previously employed Redburn Transfer directly, but Redburn Transfer and Germany-based Coach Trucking and bussing was supplied by issues.

wherever you are, regardless of the power to see the show you should see the full show because we believe if you’ve paid for a ticket generator into Margate for the same reason much a full 200 Amps so we had to source three-phase supply for lights. We use pretty come to mind - that have only had a 125 Amps there’s been a couple - Lincoln and Aberdeen quite a lot of lights for these sizes of venues and “Power has been a bit of an issue, we have respectable two hours.

set-up with a local rigger, while supervising the Tomcat trussing, Lodestar motors and hoists and ensuring the PA is flown correctly. To make the tour run more smoothly the PM chose HSL to supply the rigging equipment as well as lighting fixtures.

“I have to admit I slightly underestimated the time it would take to load in and load out. Based on my experience of this size of venue, type of production and number of crew, I thought load out would be a couple of hours. The first week we were towards three hours because I underestimated how much backline we had. The drum kit’s fairly large and our drummer likes to have lots of options with him; we pretty much have half an arctic full of backline. It’s no reflection on the techs’ abilities, but it does take a while to pack all that down. The back wall of lights is also quite time consuming. Everything sped up after a couple of weeks though and we are now at a more respectable two hours.

“Power has been a bit of an issue, we have quite a lot of lights for these sizes of venues and there’s been a couple - Lincoln and Aberdeen come to mind - that have only had a 125 Amps three-phase supply for lights. We use pretty much a full 200 Amps so we had to source additional supply,” he added. “We brought a generator into Margate for the same reason because we believe if you’ve paid for a ticket to see the show you should see the full show wherever you are, regardless of the power issues.”

“Trucking and bussing was supplied by Redburn Transfer and Germany-based Coach Service. The tour marked the first time Maillardet had employed Redburn Transfer directly, but Simple Minds’ management had previously used them for other artists such as Simply Red. “We have two trucks and the drivers are great. The first truck is fairly rammed and the second is to the ceiling for at least half of its length. Stephen’s done a really good job and it’s a good looking show with a lot of lights at the back so you can get the arena look even in smaller clubs,” said the PM. “Coach Service was a connection with the management company too although I have used them a number of times before; they are very smooth drivers.”

“Popcorn was a supplier I brought to the table. I’ve used Wendy Deans for pretty much all my touring over the past decade and was keen to get them on the tour again.”

BROAD RANGE OF MATERIAL

Audiences at recent Simple Minds concerts have experienced the live sound mixed by Belgian audio engineer, Olivier ‘GG’ Gerard. GG began his career in the live music industry as a PA Tech in Brussels, which led him to tour with a selection of French and Belgian artists. “I first worked with Simple Minds in 2008 on the 30 Years Live tour - replacing long-time engineer Patrick Demoustier from EML Productions because he had other work commitments,” explained the FOH engineer.

This year Simple Minds changed audio supplier to Britannia Row - a company that has experienced equipment on tours in the past. GG’s console for the current production was the Midas PRO6, which he hadn’t experienced before. “It’s a fantastic sounding desk,” he continued. “I had to re-programme all the songs that were in the console I used previously, however. Simple Minds have about 70 songs so this was quite a big job.”

Onboard features utilised by GG included delays and compressors, although the engineer pointed out he uses outboard features more often for any compression needed. A combination of the Tubetech MMC 1A multiband compressor and Empirical Labs Distressor for bass and vocals were used along with Universal Audio’s SPL Transient Designer and transpressor for drums. “For effects I use TC Electronic Reverb 4000 for the drums and Bricasti M7 and TC Helicon for vocals,” he added.

The band asked GG to multi-track record all concerts via a MADI recorder with Reaper software, something he also did for the SX5 Live European tour so they could be made into a box set. “We used a selection of the best versions from the last tour so this process could be repeated this time around, with a view to releasing a live album,” he explained.

Simple Minds’ extensive music career provided a broad range of material to work with and rehearse - perfecting the ‘80s sound when required for certain tracks. “I did a lot of research into the reverbs required for this,” he said.

“I have a scene for each song because it can change between tracks; some are punk, some are pop and others are rock. This means there are a variety of sounds you need to recreate so I have my scenes all programmed and then mix on the fly.

“A typical Simple Minds song is a wall of keyboard and guitars glued together, which you have to recreate when they perform live to convey the true colour of the band. I work with 44 inputs and when the sound leaves the desk it goes through an Avalon VT-747SP compressor and then into the Lake LM 44 and LM 26 processors.”

Microphones on tour were predominantly owned by the band, which included models such as the beyerdynamic TG D70d and Shure SM91a for the drum kick, Manley tube DI and Audio-Technica AT 4040 for the bass, two Cascade Fathead and two Heil Audio PR 30 for guitars. Radial DI’s were used to pick up the keyboards and Shure Beta 58’s were chosen as vocal mics.

“The guitar mics work really well. I also use an Audio-Technica A3000 on the snare top, which is great. The PR 30’s I’m using on the guitar effects have also been matching up really well to the ribbon mics,” said GG.

Also featuring in the assortment of microphone kit were Shure SM58 for vocals, beyerdynamic MC 930 overheads, MC 950 for ride, beyerdynamic TG D70d for gong, TG 52d on floor toms, TG D58c for rack toms, Audio-Technica ATM450 cardioid condenser for hi hat and beyerdynamic M 201 TG on snare bottom.
Below: Fans at the sold out performance at the Empire Theatre, Liverpool, enjoyed a show split into two halves - with no support act - packed with the band’s best loved anthems.

ON THE ROAD: Simple Minds

GG continued: “I try my hardest to get the vocal into the mix and not on top of it. It’s a very loud band on stage and the wedges go up to a pretty high level and you need to keep the pressure, but not go too loud. I like to mix between 100 and 102dB, but not go above.

“The crew is fantastic and they are a great band to work with because they have respect for everyone and know all the crew well. As they are from the ‘80s they’ve had time to work out how to handle a stage, from stadiums through to theatres. I remember when we were playing a festival and people were looking to the big screens when the band before us were playing, but then when Simple Minds came on they just looked at the stage.”

KEEPING ON TOP OF THE BALANCE

When Britannia Row took on the account for the tour, Monitor Engineer, Dan Ungaretti [Jamiroquai, Peter Gabriel] also joined the production crew at the beginning of this tour. He chose to mix using the DiGiCo SD8, a console the engineer had selected for Jamiroquai’s live shows.

“I’ve worked with DiGiCo for a long time so I’m familiar with the surface. The SD8 - and DiGiCo’s in general - are really well suited to this type of music,” he commented. “You have a lot of flexibility with the routing and the snapshots feature is perfect for in-ear mixing. They sound really good, which sets them apart from other manufacturers.”

Prior to working with the team, Ungaretti was informed the band previously toured a large rack mount analogue mixer for drummer, Mel Gaynor, which the monitor console sent mixes to for the drummer tech to mix down and tweak during the show. “Now I’ve gone over to DiGiCo I’ve swapped that rack for an Aviom D-16c card and Aviom A-16CS control system. The idea behind this was if we played more shows across the world we wouldn’t have to freight a large rack around,” he explained.

Ungaretti worked with eight ways of in-ear mixes - comprising mixes for the band and a pair of tech mixes - along with some for a pair of d&b audiotechnik M2 wedges used by guitarist, Charlie Burchill. “They’re all very experienced musicians and he just prefers to have that feel opposed to in-ears when he moves around the stage. For the drums we also have 10 mixes - some mono and some stereo going into the Aviom system,” the engineer added.

Sennheiser 2000 Series IEMs provided by Britannia Row were chosen for the tour as the band has a history of using Sennheiser equipment. “They’ve worked with a mix of G2, G3 and 2000 systems before, but I went with the 2000 because I’ve used them previously and they give a lot of flexibility in terms of RF and frequency allocation,” commented Ungaretti.

“I wanted to make sure there were no RF issues and it gave me the best scope for staying problem free.

“FOH Engineer, GG, gave me a lot of information when I came onto the tour and as there are only five band members on stage it’s been quite straightforward. The biggest challenge during the show is spill into the microphones; the BV’s are positioned near the drums and behind Charlie’s wedges. Jim [Kerr] in particular – being the front man - tends to move around a lot. Sometimes he’s in front of the in-fills, other times he moves near Charlie’s wedges and other times he stands near the drum kit.

“I need to keep on top of his balance because as he moves around he picks up other instruments so it’s a case of having to tweak the mix as he finds different spots on stage.”

A SOPHISTICATED SYSTEM

Touring with the Simple Minds audio crew were PA Technicians, Dave Lockyer [Small Faces, Ed Sheeran] and Pawel Zakrzewski [Jamiroquai, Cliff Richard, Simply Red]. Lockyer started working on the audio aspect of Simple Minds’ shows on the last European tour, for which Britannia Row just supplied control systems. Said Lockyer: “This year the kit we provided was extended to the full audio system - the L-Acoustics KARA - which I rig while Pawel works on the predictions.”

Zakrzewski continued: “The KARA system is perfect when you are struggling with weight limits in venues. We have 24 boxes - so 12 boxes a side - and we can fly them on half tonne motors. That was the main reason we went to KARA; other systems would have been too heavy for 60% of the venues.”

Joining the KARA boxes were eight L-Acoustics SB28 subs, 12 dV-DOSC for fill and four L-Acoustics ARC elements, alongside the pair of d&b audiotechnik monitor wedges on stage. Zakrzewski continued: “It took a little while to get into the swing of it at the first two shows in Dublin where we used a house system with some stacked KARA. We then had to adapt
everything to our system, which required some tweaking at a couple of gigs. It’s been really good working with James [Maillardet] because he used to be a rigger so he’s been really helpful with day to day load-ins.”

When moving between smaller theatre-style venues to larger halls on the tour, the PA team encountered some demanding buildings with multiple levels of seating. “Every gig has to be spot on for us and Simple Minds so we work really hard to make each show perfect,” continued Zakrzewski. “They give as much as possible to the audience so we have to do the same.”

The KARA system was arranged in stacks of three and, according to the PA technicians, incredibly easy to rig. “I use a lot of the L-Acoustics products and KARA is so light. For rock bands it’s a great PA,” he continued.

The live shows also benefitted from a sophisticated system using full Dante from FOH. “We use Lake LM44’s so the sound comes straight out of the desk to them, before being distributed stage left, where we have another three LM 26’s. We then have a stage right wing with the same set-up; it’s spot on,” explained Zakrzewski. “A couple of years ago Brit Row made the decision to standardise all systems so they have the same package. We then have the L-Acoustic LA Network Manager for the amps and the app for the tablet, which makes it really flexible.”

AN ELEMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

With a diverse history of designing international concert productions for the likes of Linkin Park, Adele and U2, Production Designer, Stephen Pollard, offered a host of innovative design concepts for the Celebrate tour. Designing for the band comes as second nature to Pollard, who has created their live visual schemes for 32 years.

“I don’t really get a directive from them; they just let me do what I do because I’ve designed for them so many times. They trust me to come up with something appropriate. For example, the nature of this tour meant it had to be flexible because we were playing different sized venues, including some that are quite low and quite narrow,” he elaborated.

Pollard examined the plans for each venue prior to the crew heading out on the road and looked at where they might encounter problems with height or depth of stages. “Where width was an issue I only lost two lights. The whole lighting team from HSL have been really great throughout the whole process and taken good care of me,” he added.

A working history with the band spanning over three decades has enabled Pollard to become well acquainted with their songs, meaning colour schemes for some tracks have remained similar throughout the years. “For some songs I’m using colours that are a no-brainer. For example, if you’re lighting a song called The American you’re going to use red, white and blue, Blood Diamonds will be red. Belfast Child, which is about the troubles in Northern Ireland, has turned out to be red because of the conflict and the blood spilt,” he said.

It was important that the beam work involved in the lighting design had a certain element of architecture to it. Rather than the band playing in front of a video wall, Pollard wanted them to inhabit the architecture of the lighting, which was also part of the reasoning behind the addition of smoke and haze. “The beams and the different instruments I use allowed me to layer. A lot of people say it looks a bit like tartan when it starts to crisscross, so it is a sort of weave effect,” said Pollard. “A lot of the beams go into the audience as well so I spend a lot of time in the afternoon before the show making sure nobody is getting a Sharpy in the face. I focus into the front of balconies, the ceiling and aisles. It’s often an older audience, which is why I take extra care not to blind them and spend a long time focussing.”

Fixtures selected to bring the lighting designs to life included 24 Clay Paky Alpha Beam 700’s, 16 Clay Paky Sharps, seven Source Four 19’ Profiles to light the band and 14 James Thomas Engineering 4 Lite Molefays. “I like using the Clay Paky Sharpy because it produces a cool narrow beam and has great gobos. As these are narrow I then use the Alpha Beams to add more of a chunky beam. We also have some rotating gobos and prisms from Clay Paky utilised in the show. You can play around with the colour temperature of the lights too and the great thing about it is that you can turn it into a wash light,” he commented.

A selection of Robe fixtures - 20 Robin 600 Spots, 12 Robin 600 Washes and four 2500 Spots - also played a prominent function in the overall design. Pollard continued: “The Robin 600’s were chosen for the tour partly because they have some interesting gobos and I didn’t need a really bright profile for this because we are playing theatres. However, when we go into arenas I’ll probably go for something brighter.

“I basically only have seven lights illuminating the band - the rest of it is all for effect. To this I added eight Martin Professional Atomic 3000 Strobes, two Martin Professional Jem AF1 fan, two Martin Professional Jem ZR33 smoke machines, two Reel EFX DF-50 diffusion hazers for effect.”

Preferring to operate consoles he finds to be intuitive, the LD opted for the MA Lighting grandMA, set up like “an old school rock desk”, with a page dedicated to each song. “It’s so easy to programme and I prefer to control the show completely myself. For an act like this, you just can’t press the yellow button,” he added.

Although video did not feature in the current run of gigs, when Simple Minds’ live show progresses into an arena tour at the end of the year Pollard expects the production design will incorporate screens either side of the stage, dedicated to magnifying the band. “Any other visuals will be more for texture, probably using no concrete imagery and just for lighting effect,” he elaborated.

A CERTAIN CALIBER OF ARTIST

When trying to ascertain what life on the road is like with a legendary act such as Simple Minds, you couldn’t go far wrong by asking longtime LD, Pollard. Working with a band that has such a vast fanbase that allows them to continue to play live anywhere in the world is a joy, he explained. “This band had a chance to evolve
Below: A DiGiCo SD8 was chosen for monitor world, whilst a Midas PRO6 was at FOH; Dramatic beams of light create the perfect backdrop for the performance; FOH position at Liverpool’s Empire Theatre; According to PM, Maillardet, the audience at Simple Minds’ gigs always leave "beaming happy".

and garner the loyal fans they have in so many different countries and it’s nice to be associated with that caliber of artist.”

“Jim Kerr is one of the best lyricists I’ve encountered and Charlie Burchill is one of the most interesting and versatile guitar players I’ve seen. Drummer, Mel Gaynor, is so incredibly powerful and keyboard player, Andy Gillespie, is so technically adept and comes to the table with multiple ideas. They have an excellent bass player, Ged Grimes, too.

“I’m very fortunate they allow me to embellish what they do. Simple Minds don’t need gimmicks; they just go and rock out and I play along. The audience are totally into it and that’s what we get at each show. You could say playing at Wembley, Live Aid or the Nelson Mandella Concert were the highlights, but we do these great shows every night and that’s the real satisfaction.”

Production Manager, Maillardet, concluded: “Simple Minds are so friendly and happy to talk to all the crew. They take the time to want to talk to you, not just the usual pleasantries. This tour has sold out everywhere we’ve gone, so much so there is a real struggle every night for the last few guestlist tickets. The audience always leave beaming happy and the band really enjoy it, which is wonderful to see.”

TPi

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