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Essex Appeal

Steve Moles goes for a change of pace this month and discovers “the civilised face of touring,” with David Essex live at the York Opera House . . .

Words & pictures by Steve Moles . . .

For me this was a bit of nostalgia, not because I'm a closet fan of David Essex from the 70s, though I find his mellifluous tones pleasant enough. No, this was a trip to my roots - touring as I once knew it. One truck (Redburn Transfer), a two-truss lighting rig (PRG), a ground-stacked PA (Britannia Row), sandwiches from Marks & Spencer for lunch (Mel Bush has gone upmarket since I last toured with one of his acts) and the whole production is loaded out by the time the pubs shut.

All those things are entirely acceptable in the modern context, while the addition of a crew bus (Trathens) shows an acceptance that crews driving themselves around in minibuses was a dangerous ploy in the 70s. Frankly, it's remarkable that, to my knowledge at least, no-one ever piled a Volkswagen LT into the central reservation, though that was due more to the reviving qualities of little blue pills than the ability of roadies to defy sleep. But I digress: this is the civilised face of touring and it's to all our benefit that in such circumstances it is entirely possible for a 63-year-old man to be on the road - and I'm not talking about the main act . . .

Sound

"I don't do technical", was the opening remark from Howard Griffiths ('H' to his friends) when I arrived at the backstage door. But after a hurried retreat to Plonkers Wine Bar for an after-dinner shandy, he soon warmed up. Griffiths, by reputation, has been Essex's house mixer for some considerable time: "I've been doing David on and off for 22 years," he said. "I started my career with country music, my first act to mix was either Billy Jo Spears or Tammy Wynette - I forget which. That must have been 30 years ago."

He's not alone - Gavin Wright on monitors is equally long in the tooth: "H and I, we've known one another

since the days of ESE, Paul Winters' sound rental company. That's where we both learned to use the first Soundcraft Desks 30 years ago". (Have Soundcraft really only been going that long?) "But I haven't been doing David quite as long as him." I'll leave you to decide which of these two venerable sound men is the 63-year-old . . .

Griffiths is unusual in that Essex is the only live act he works for these days, which leaves him out of the swim of steady touring, and that in turn means he has to keep up to date with equipment by other roads. "I really fell out of touring when I took the job to mix Buddy in the West End. Initially they asked me to do it for three months; I ended up staying five years. By the end of the run I had lost contact with all the tour managers I knew and work just wasn't there."

Urged on by his wife, Griffiths took the plunge and moved to Normandy where he's lived ever since. "I'd never come back now, quality of life is so much better there." But that doesn't mean he hasn't earned his chops and deserves his French idyll.

"I was FOH man in residence for Roger 'Chappo' Chapman and the Shortlist in the 80s," a fact which earns my undying envy: Chappo, if you don't know, was once the frontman of Family, a band of terrifying power. Chapman was an electric presence on stage, a cross between Rod Stewart and a Rugby prop forward; at six foot four he did more than anyone in music history to revive the fortunes of the UK tambourine industry in that era.

"I've also had long stints with Level 42, Jerry Lee Lewis and PreFab Sprout," he says - a pretty eclectic mix that surely leaves him qualified for anything. Would he offer any advice to young aspiring sound men? If you're going to do it, make sure you enjoy it. Young kids are probably much more technically proficient than me, but you've still got to love it to make it worthwhile."



The Soundcraft MH4 console at front-of-house.

Griffiths is using an L-Acoustics Arcs system from Brit Row: "This is the third tour with Arcs. Basically, I like the sound, it runs reasonably flat and it gives the coverage. It is very directional but if you've got enough boxes it's fine."

Griffiths and Wright put the whole thing up themselves, so in that respect it's a dry hire. "Brit Row are very good to us," said Griffiths, "it was they that recommended I try the Arcs - we'd been using Turbosound till then. I'll use anything Bryan [Grant] gives me; I've known him long enough to trust him absolutely. They really look after us; each

tour, they send someone out for the first couple of shows to make sure we're all comfortable, then away we go."

Grant revealed that they also do things like provide half-size flightcases and compact mains systems, "so we're not fighting with bloody great heavy boxes. That two-day bed-in is very important when you've not done any touring for a year or more."

Looking at the MH4 out front, the relationship with Soundcraft has sustained across the years? "I still think it's a good sounding desk and I like the EQ," said

Griffiths. "I don't really like Midas desks, though the truth is I've hardly used them and that's probably why! I have looked at digital desks, but I don't like the menu-driven aspect - I just like to see a red light pop up and reach across the board and deal with it."

That said, he did reach into his pocket and pull out a USB stick: "I've had a play with a DiGiCo - pushed the faders, not dug down into it, but I have the show here if I ever need it. But besides the EQ, it's the familiarity on the Soundcraft I like. They were state-of-the-art back in the ESE days, we had all JBL speakers with the old Crown amps, and I've grown up with the desk."

As you might expect, Essex has assembled a band of professional musicians who've pretty much stuck with him over the years. "They're all very good, the bass player has been there 24 years,". They're good players and the levels onstage are comfortable, David is on a Shure Beta58 and his voice is as good as ever, it all makes my job easy."

There are no in-ear systems here, this is all old school. "It's all wedges and side-fills," confirmed Wright, who mixes monitors from a Soundcraft MH3. "Mainly [Turbosound] TFM-350s for the band, except the drummer and bass player who have the bigger TFM-

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450s for the low end. Side-fills are Turbosound Aspect. I do nine mixes in total - bass; two for keys; guitar; Left Right for David in the fills; his wedges - vocals only; and two mixes for drums, headphone and wedge. The drummer takes a headphone feed off the desk, puts it into a little mixer of his own with a couple of keyboard inputs and adjust it for himself. To be honest, it would be easier if they were on in-ears, but they're all pros and know where everything goes. I work to get the best out the room, and then concentrate on getting the stage to sound even, so they all hear pretty much the same thing."

So there's quite a lot of balance to the monitors for this act? "They're all different mixes, they all get to hear what they need, but overall I aim to have it sound as one; that way no-one is struggling for anything."

Wright, unprompted, returns to the question of advice for new entrants to the business. "H and I know one another, respect each others' way of working, and trust each other to do the right thing. In that respect it would be difficult for either of us to change now. That builds up over a long period of time: camaraderie like that is an important part of what makes touring such fun. For example, we have one truck, Andy Barr from Redburns is the driver. We've had him several times now and always ask for him. He's the best - nothing

ever gets left behind. There's great value in knowing you can rely on each other."

Lighting

By way of contrast, Justin Goad is only on his second outing with David Essex and is a much younger man, but he too relishes the camaraderie to which Wright and Griffiths referred. "It's really nice for me, and my rigger Jay [Mobbs-Beal, even younger than Goad]. It's like being part of a family and I really like that."

The family atmosphere extends throughout the tour: "The opening act, Si Genaro, even comes in and helps us set up. In fact, he's probably the hardest working man on the crew," something Genaro readily admits in his banter to the audience this very evening. Genaro may not be the next Bob Dylan, but as an opening act he's exceptional - sunny, open-hearted and, by the end of his 30 minutes the crowd all warmed to him; one or two even bought the CD in Foyer during the break.

Goad is a jobbing LD: "I've done design on the last couple of tours for Billy Ocean; I also do a lot of theatre; I mainly work out of the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich," he says. He also has a rather interesting string to his bow. "I've just done three months in New York at a Performing Arts summer camp. It's my second year doing it and it's very rewarding."



From top: Gavin Wright (monitors) and Howard Griffiths.

Justin Goad (LD).

Jay Mobbs-Beal (rigging).

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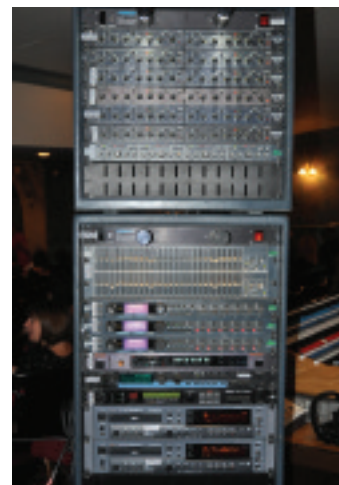
He found the job ad' in the back pages of The Stage: "There's me and a team of six from US theatre schools. The camp is for aspiring actors in the 10 to 18-years age range; we provide a professional lighting context for them to work in. It's hard, we present 14 musicals or plays every three weeks so it's intense, but great fun." And, of course, it provides Goad with a wealth of experience compressed into a really short time-frame.

"For David I'm given an open brief," explains Goad. "Basically I design to budget; the only limitation is David doesn't like light in his eyes from the sides. PRG provides all the kit, they've been associated with David for quite a while through the account manager, Mick Healey. My design is pretty straightforward; front truss has four ETC Source Four profiles for key light on the musicians, and four VL5s for front wash and occasional audience light. Rear truss has five 6-lamp bars of PARs with a three-colour wash with a focus downstage centre on David, and broader coverage down onto the band. I also have four more VL5s and five VL6Cs evenly spaced across the downstage chord."

He also has four more VL6Cs on the floor, and a set of six Codos across the back wall. Not too shabby for a small provincial tour? "No, Mick and PRG have really looked after us. The kit is in good shape: I have to do all the tech'ing and so far all I've done is replace a fading gobo. I must admit the automated lighting is nice, but I like the contrast with the PARs. They give me the ability for smooth transitions using just a single colour while the band set up for the next song. I use all the combinations for the different songs, sometimes just PARs, no VL5s, sometimes the other way, sometimes both."

Essex has a history in Theatre - has that been an influence on the way you focus, colour and operate the show? "We do have a good chat before each tour and David spends a lot of time defining the mood he wants to create with each song. This tour is quite a contrast to the last - that was the Happy Ever After tour and the album artwork of heavy red drapes and tassels set the stage. This time there is no album; we've gone for bare back wall wherever possible - unfortunately not here."

Right: Howard Griffiths' FOH rack.



Essex Note

FOH sound engineer Griffiths: "Normally David tours non-stop, 60 days and almost as many shows, but this tour is a bit broken. That's because he was going to put 'All the fun of the Fair' into the West End, but it's been postponed till April of next year. When it came to booking the tour at short notice the slots on this circuit just weren't there; so we just had a week off. Nice really." And a good sign that whatever the portents, the provincial theatre, the town hall circuit is as busy as ever.

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Nevertheless, although you won't see them in the photos (first three songs only) Goad does work the back wall, not just with colours from the Codas, but also simple effects such as break-up gobos slashed across from the floor VL6Cs on the sides. Rendered in a dimmed open white I noticed for one number, that produced a pleasing sepia tone backdrop to the stage. "When it's bare brick wall we stack a couple of upturned flightcases back there - it's a simple way to bring the sense of theatre into the show," said Goad.

Goad has the luxury of an Avolites D3 desk: "Avo is the desk I prefer - I could do this with a Pearl to be honest and it would take less seat space, but we had the D3 for the last tour, and this time around with no rehearsals at all, the fact I have it is a blessing. I had quite a few of this show's songs stored; I'd have needed to re-plot them for a Pearl. This way, I had something to work with right from the start. But both desks are equally usable for my purposes."

That aside, the only other kit is a Cirro Stratus hazer and couple of Lycian Starklite followspots, "though with these theatre shows they often stay in the truck and we use house spots."

Goad treats each song differently, if not radically so. This is not rocket science - he's workmanlike, a heavy red (Lee 106?) wash from the rear, contrasted by floor VL6Cs cross-stage, is typical. What he does do is sustain the focus on Essex in a variety of ways: it's not always followspots - frequently he singles him out with light from behind, and then just lifts from the front enough to

Equipment List

Lighting (PRG Europe)

4 x Source Four 26° lens
 30 x PAR 64 can black
 5 x PAR bar 6-light black
 6 x Thomas 1000W 1-cell cyc light
 1 x Avolites Diamond 3 console
 1 x 48-way Avolites ART2000 dimmer rack
 8 x VL5 wash luminaire
 9 x VL6C+ spot luminaire
 11 x CM 500kg chain hoists
 2 x Lycian 1.2K HMI followspot
 1 x Cirro Strata CS6 mist generator
 5 x Beyerdynamic DT headset
 5 x Icom RTS 2-channel beltpacks

Audio (Britannia Row)

1 x 40 channel Soundcraft MH4
 2 x Yamaha SPX 900/990/1000
 1 x Roland SDE 3000
 1 x Lexicon PCM80
 6 x channels of Drawmer DS 201 noise gate
 4 x channels of BSS DPR 402 comp/limiter
 2 x BSS FCS960 dual graphic
 2 x BRP system management system
 1 x Two station intercom
 16 x L-Acoustic ARC speakers
 8 x L-Acoustic sub-bass cabinets
 1 x 32-channel Soundcraft MH3 monitor console
 10 x Channels of Graphic EQs
 12 x bi-amped Turbosound TFM-350 wedges
 2 x Turbosound Aspect
 2 x Turbosound Aspect Lows

remove the wrinkles and reveal the (still) seductive twinkling blue eyes.

Should he do anything different with a bigger budget? "I'm not certain I would; maybe a few extra 5s and 6Cs on drop bars beneath the trusses. But I've found even on the bigger stages we've played on this tour - Birmingham Symphony Hall, for example - the VL6s still cut it." He's absolutely right: in terms of lighting the show is well served, and Goad inserts just enough sense of drama to compensate for the more docile physical aspect of Essex's performance.

These shows are generally well sold, and there are plenty of them. And there's no denying on this evidence that Essex is a good entertainer, if a little wooden. (He does appear very stiff, though at his age that could be the dreaded arthritis, in which case he's to be applauded for making the effort.) Either way, his audience still love him; on their feet by the 8th number, they rarely sat down thereafter, and sang along with gusto.

What was especially pleasing was the intimacy afforded by such a venue, a thousand people split across the stalls and two circles of the York Opera House were all within talking distance. This was not U2, nor the return of Spandau Ballet, but it was an artist well presented without recourse to all the paraphernalia of the Arena apparatus that normally graces these pages. As such that contact, that intimacy, is profound. There was no mistaking the pleasure on the audience's faces, and that's the bottom line for anything that defines itself as showbiz.





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