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## New Blood

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# Peter Gabriel: New Blood

Live across Latin America, November 2011



Peter Gabriel performing at Auditorio Telmex, Guadalajara



Words by Steve Moles

Photography by Rob Sinclair

LSi covered Peter Gabriel's most recent tour when it commenced at the O2 Arena in London almost two years ago (see *LSi April 2010*). Now, it has spanned two thirds of the world, finishing up with a short flit around South America. When it began, some of the presentational aspects were - as is so often the case with Peter Gabriel - pretty challenging: so just how easy is it to transpose an unconventional showpiece into the less well-endowed corners of the globe?

When lighting designer Rob Sinclair first contacted me from South America it was to tell me that, "they're hanging the LED videowall with cable ties". Alarming as this sounded, the implication, as it transpired, was more about improvising to achieve a goal than it was about less-than-scrupulous good practice: "The fact is, the story from South America was one of really good people working very hard to get sometimes knackered equipment to work." That's not to say Sinclair wasn't concerned, as we shall see.

#### Lighting

This South American tour is very much a continuation of what LSi looked at when Gabriel presented his new *Scratch my Back* album at the O2 in 2010. Back then, Gabriel decided upon the musical format of 'no guitars or drums' - replacing them with carefully orchestrated backing - and applied it as a template to other peoples' songs ('and I'll scratch yours'). Obviously happy with the well-received results of his experiment, he later released *New Blood*, in which applied the same template to his own canon, a process that in fact emerged as he continued to tour *Scratch*.

"We've been on the road sporadically with this for nearly two years now," confirmed Sinclair, "and toured extensively in Europe and the USA, and made a 3D DVD during that time. Now, finally, we come to end in South America, a market of which Peter is especially fond."

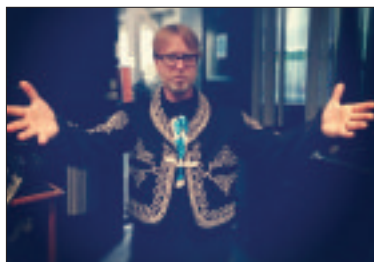
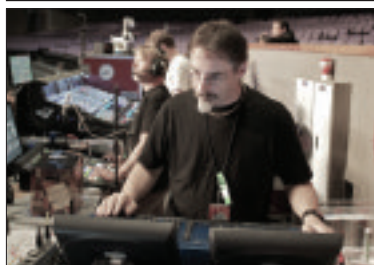
There was a tinge of sadness in Sinclair's voice, as there so often is when a lengthy touring relationship comes to an end, but also weariness: it was a long schlep. "I came here with him in 2009 for a short tour with his 'regular' band and was struck by how committed his fans are in this part of the world," said Sinclair. But then, I've never seen a South American audience less than 110% enthusiastic. The people of this continent embrace music as a visceral part of their very being: take away music and you rip out their heart.

Before delving into the whys and wherefores of the lighting, I asked Sinclair how the Latin audience had received the *New Blood* format. Did many of them come expecting the regular band? "It's certainly true that many of them turned up expecting the more familiar band, but they all seemed to go home satisfied. Peter is one of those artists where audiences know to expect the unexpected. The show was really well received."

"This is essentially the same rig we used in Europe," Sinclair explains, "a slightly smaller design in physical form, originally conceived to allow for the restrictions of the US shed circuit. We rented systems by country and just carried control and a few Lowell omnis." In Sinclair's case, control came in the form of the tiny Jands Vista S3, a desk so small he could easily slip it into his hand luggage if needed.

"For Latin America we sourced all lights, video, sound and rigging locally. The only thing we didn't have was the motion control - it would have been just too much to carry our own motors and control system for that, and an equivalent wasn't readily available in these territories." The general feedback I get from touring colleagues is that while a little shaky on the practice side, South America is these days fully equipped for 21st century touring..

Sinclair continues: "To me it appeared that much of the stuff we got to use was venue resident, maybe rented; it just stayed there as a pool of equipment and was supplemented by the odd extra. It was certainly the case that often we'd see guys who had worked all night de-rigging the



From top:

*Rythmn of the Heat* at the Santiago Movistar Arena.

Richard Sharratt, FOH at the Auditorio Telmex, Guadalajara.

Blue Leach at the Auditorio Nacional, Mexico City.

Peter Gabriel's engineer Dickie Chappell at the Auditorio Telmex, Guadalajara.

last show, only to then re-configure the gear for our purposes. As I said, these guys all worked extremely hard." And was that true everywhere? (The tour played Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico). "Pretty much, though there was a slight difference in Mexico. I've been coming to this part of the world quite regularly for the last few years and it's my perception that Mexico is really starting to get it together. PRG in Mexico under Sandro Arellano has made great strides: the gear might be as over-worked as it is elsewhere, but at least he now has a group of followspot operators who you can talk to directly, rather than through an interpreter. That doesn't mean they're fluent in English - you can't have a chat with them about the weather - but they do understand spot four, frame four, half body, guitarist, stage right . . . go."

How has the overall song content changed since LSi visited the O2? "The additions amount to five or six songs, *Secret World* and *Intruder* to name just two. These songs were introduced to the programme as we progressed. Peter might decide on a new piece to include; he'd discuss it with his arranger John Metcalfe, and we'd usually hear about it from Peter's right-hand man, Dickie Chappell."

Peter has always been a visually-oriented artist: did he get involved with the input from you and Blue [Leach, video director] on these additions? "Oh yes, but in the first instance he'd work with John [Metcalfe] developing the orchestration. Blue and I would work on our own ideas: we could sift what worked and what didn't before it reached the stage of Peter's involvement. That's what's so good about being on this tour - it never ceased to be a very creative environment all the way through. The new songs required content and

the only realistic way to do that on the road was to make that new content camera-led. In essence, Blue and I have assembled the camera vision with lighting to suit, and occasionally inserted some vignettes of recorded material."

So for recorded 'vignettes', you'd send ideas to studios? "No, far more basic. For *Intruder*, for example, we recorded some footage late at night in a hotel car park. In general we got one or two weeks' notice before we'd start discussions with Peter. At that point it became very much a three way conversation. Peter has great ideas and in my experience without exception - they're all *great* ideas. In production rehearsals he will sit out front and look at lighting cues; if time permits on tour he will do the same thing with new songs. He has a great eye for detail and that meant with a touring show already well developed, any new material added had to come ready for inclusion; nothing could look like an afterthought, and nothing did. When you add to a show like this it has to appear as the finished product."

What about the equipment and service you received? What could any European technician reasonably expect, were he or she to be visiting Latin America for the first time? "The big issue with lighting was lack of maintenance - that appeared to be not through negligence, but sheer lack of time; utilisation is very high."

So maybe these companies are under resourced, in that they can't cycle gear through an off-site maintenance programme? "There were other factors. I do think they have a lot of gear from the EU and US that has perhaps seen better days; but they also have a different way of working. For example, if

I asked for a truss of let's say, 20 [Martin Professional] MAC 2000 washes. They'd jump to it, rig the truss, mount the lamps, haul it into place, and then say, 'there you go'. Then I'd test the lights and find maybe 10% aren't working. They threw stuff up without testing it before hand. As a matter of procedure, I think they often responded with the old trick - they'd lower the offending lamp in and replace it with a working one, then re-rig the bad lamp elsewhere. 'Oh look at that', they'd say 30 minutes later, 'there's another one with the same problem'." Not the most efficient way to work.

"The really frustrating thing was that the simplest things could create problems. They might throw up 100 moving heads in the air and they'd all be perfectly addressed and ready to go, then it would take you all day to get a decent working smoke machine. In fact, following this tour I will in future add five good DF50s to my touring equipment list."

A strange omission for such a visually emotive effect: watch any South American football match and smoke appears to be built into the fans' life blood - but not in rock concerts obviously. "Followspots were the same. Often they'd rig them way off up in an auditorium, only to find the PSU was faulty or the bulb was blown." You have been warned . . .

But what of the cable tie videowall? "That was in Brazil. It appeared they'd just

purchased a collection of LED modules and flying equipment, but the screen shape we wanted exceeded the flying frames they had. The cable ties worked, they used lots of them and safety'ed off with ratchet straps, but it was a bit worrying as it was particularly windy that day. We made them keep the screen parked on the floor until doors. Fortunately, at sunset the wind died and it remained quiet all night. Another place we found the guys had rigged the screen but not plugged it up - and had then gone to bed. While the orchestra were tuning up before the start of the show we had guys abseiling in to plug it up, and when I say abseiling, they were actually lowering themselves down on ropes, no harnesses. However, what I learned that is most important is that they are really good, capable people who all worked very hard for us. As I said, I've been here a few times and it's getting better and better each time I come."

#### Sound

Richard Sharratt arguably had much more to contend with in taking the *New Blood* show to Latin America than other departments. Typically it would be a different PA system at each venue, unlike the consistent high-level commitment he received from Britannia Row productions as they toured Europe, and the acoustic environments varied wildly, although that can be equally true wherever a tour visits. The implication from Sinclair, that the equipment might be overworked and less

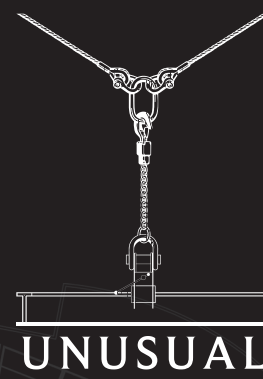
than well maintained, has much more profound implications for sound. Sharratt says: "We had one consistency on our side: all the critical control equipment, desks and stage boxes, were shipped down from the US by Firehouse, and we carried our own microphones. Firehouse's founder, Bryan Olson, was Gabriel's monitor engineer for many years and with an artist such as this, those connections run deep, so we were well looked after in that respect."

But what of the PA systems themselves? "Yes, the PA is varied. We started off with a show at a festival in Brazil using a JBL Vertec system. Rigged and tuned for a festival of varied artists, it was never going to be the subtlest of systems for what was virtually a turn-up-and-play show. For an orchestral presentation it was a bit 'barky' for our purposes. I don't think anyone would be surprised to hear that, but it was more than adequate for most other acts, and even so, it was obvious the audience really enjoyed the show and that's what matters."

He continues: "Elsewhere I got to use the big Adamson system (Y Axis line array) and also V-Dosc. In Europe and the US we used L-Acoustics' K1 systems from Brit Row and Firehouse respectively and I've always had good results with that, but the truth is the more important factor is the venue. In terms of system setting, sometimes we turned up and found the PA rigged but with completely

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Left: Peter Gabriel's performance of *Father, Son* at the Santiago Movistar Arena. Right: Blue Leach at work during the Santiago Movistar Arena show.

## Crew List

**Gary Trew** - production manager

**Dickie Chappell** - PG engineer

**Richard Sharrott** - FOH engineer

**Dee Miller** - monitor engineer

**Jimmy Nicholson** - monitor assistant

**Dan Lavi** - Pro Tools / orchestra tech

**Rob Sinclair** - LD

**Blue Leach** - vision director

**Patrick Gately** - stage manager

**Dave Cox** - lighting crew chief

**Steve Kellaway** - advance production coordinator

**James Pollock** - audio crew chief

**Neville Bull** - Catalyst operator / video content

**Robyn 'Aunt' Tearle** - video tech / pit camera

**Jim Liddiard** - video engineer / Robo cameras

## Local Crew

**SWU Festival Brazil**

**Caio Bertti** - LPL Lighting

**Cesar Favaro** - production manager

**Movistar Arena Santiago**

**Juan Pablo Cuadra** - production manager

**Estadio Geba, Buenos Aires**

**Jose Maria Goyeneche** - production manager

**Mexican Shows:**

**Nuri Gellis** - production manager

**Sandro Arellano** - PRG Mexico

**Abel Marcelin** - PRG's lighting crew chief

random EQ. Other times we hardly needed to touch it. In general, I would agree with Rob Sinclair, in that the equipment we encountered is over-used and sometimes a little chaotic, but that is more than compensated for by a crew who were willing and capable of responding to what we asked. I was very fortunate in having Jamie Pollock from Firehouse with us; we'd toured with him in the summer through the US and he had fitted very well with the rest of the Gabriel camp. He knew exactly how I liked the system to be EQ'd and, when needed, that's exactly what he did for me, even though ostensibly he was there to baby-sit the equipment that they provided. The fundamental for me is warmth, from any system. If you're going to put an orchestra through it, the essential character is warmth."

Rob Sinclair said the tour played one outdoor show where the weather was particularly windy - not ideal for a host of open mics on an orchestral stage? "It was worse than that; most of the shows loaded in on the morning of the show to be ready for a three o'clock sound check. Here we turned up at midnight, loaded in ready for a 9am sound check, and then went away to sleep. While we were off-site the stage was hit by rain of monsoon proportions. Inevitably, water got into many microphones; some of the phantom powered ones were, not surprisingly, unusable. The Schertlers fared badly: powered electronics is not happy in the rain. The DPAs fared better, and although we lost the Schertlers on the Cellos and Basses, we did have some spare 4099s with us from the live recording sessions at Hammersmith. Dickie Chappell had purchased the mics for the tour - for two years, it's well worth making that kind of investment. He did arrange for replacements to be flown over, but they got bogged down in Customs and ended up following us around without ever actually making it to the tour."

The music, in the absence of guitars and drums, is embodied by articulation of a more

delicate nature and Gabriel's song-writing is also typified by stark exposed arrangements, arguably more acute when played out by an orchestra. Does that make for a tricky balance with the livelier and more raucous Latin audience? "You're always going to hear the room coming through the system at some time during the performance. Buenos Aires was perhaps the worst - the venue was an open sports field, you couldn't really call it a stadium, though it did have low grandstands. But it was positioned in a fork in a railway line and there was a small airport nearby. Helicopters seemed to come and go all the time; the train drivers would sometimes pull up alongside and watch the show for a few minutes and they always hooted; in fact I think they were encouraged by Rob [Sinclair] who signalled that 'arm overhead pulling the hooter cord' thing at them. There's no solution to that, even if I could push the levels to extremes that might mask it, it couldn't work with this material as there are too many holes. *Father, Son*, for example, is four violins, three violas, two cellos and bass, plus voice, and there are long moments of silence in there - you're never going to mask ambient noise with that."

How were the indoor auditoriums?

"Monterrey was cancelled after some drug barons had a bus load of people killed and dumped in an underpass shortly before we arrived. Mexico may be in the grip of a wild-west era, but actually in Mexico City and Guadalajara you'd never have noticed. The Auditorio Nacional in Mexico City is a huge fan-shaped room with a massive acoustic; Auditorio Telmex in Guadalajara was similar, but a little smaller and much the drier of the two, and of course the influx of an audience helps that further."

Was there an element of pick-up on the musicians as you had done in Europe? "The same system; we had 21 musicians with us, leaders for each section, with a pick orchestra that took us up to 46 on stage. I'd have

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Steve Kellaway, Nev Bull, Blue Leach, Jamie Pollock and Pat Gately on the stage at Estadio Geba, Buenos Aires.

a steady group of musicians on the desk, one and two for first violins, violas, etc; couple of brass, woods and percussion, but some instruments were vulnerable to local players; if a clarinet solo went off that was all you had and the audience had to hear it. But with most they were very good. John Metcalfe would rehearse them in the day and if he felt there was a weakness he might tip me off to keep the fifth viola out of the mix, that sort of thing."

So managing sound in these circumstances is entirely about communication between you and the MD, and then responding to what you had, rather than cut and replace? "There's simply not enough time to substitute a musician and rehearse them in such circumstances."

Firehouse provides the desks, a DiGiCo SD7 for Sharratt, while Dee Miller mixes monitors for the musicians on a Yamaha PM5D and Dickie Chappell does monitors for Gabriel on an Avid Profile: not quite the perfect match for a suitcase whizz around Latin America? "For Europe, Brit Row put together what we called the wardrobe - a tall rack full of stage boxes. Firehouse packaged them separately. Both solutions worked equally well, the important factor is that we had such a complex line system you could never expect to put it together on the day with a locally supplied system, it would just be impossible. But by bringing that resource with you it worked fine. Both Brit Row and Firehouse contributed a lot of effort to make this achievable across mixed markets."

Having now completed the tour, is there some piece of technology you wished you'd taken with you? "Well, if I could start from the beginning, I'd like to try some Wave stuff on the SD7. I have yet to use any, but it has the reputation. I have yet to find an on-board reverb that has the warmth and body you get from a Lexicon."

#### Video

What Blue Leach was doing back in the Spring of 2010 when Gabriel first explored the live rendition of his *Scratch My Back*

album, was teasing our eyes in real time. While not his first venture into this domain, it was certainly his most adventurous. Like some crazed professor catching thunderbolts, he skulked between the lighting and sound desks, breathing life into video, manipulating imagery beneath the watchful eye of a tiny POV camera perched above a small, flat-screen monitor.

This was, back then, just one example of where Gabriel's desire to evoke (in a very literal sense) the content of his lyrics, was being realised. Leach spread sand across the flat screen, a live camera feed of Gabriel onstage played beneath it, then Leach's disembodied hands appeared beneath the POV camera and gradually swept the sand off the screen to reveal Gabriel. *Digging the Dirt* indeed.

Was it possible that he could take these visceral images and port them around the globe? "Well yes, I took all the little gizmos and artefacts I could squeeze in," he says. From what I saw back at the O2 in 2010, it would all have fitted in a couple of carry-on suitcases. "I was also really fortunate in that Barco lent me their new FSN. It's a PPU in

one small package, with the ability to easily split the desk from the mainframe so that I could be front-of-house. It was certainly the smallest desk I've used in a long time and proved a really good system - user-friendly and not overly menu driven; intuitive and a doddle to programme macros - quite an exquisite little desk. It did everything I needed it to do, and did it really well, with four of the Auxes and M/E banks fed to the Catalyst, the whole package was terrific. In terms of travelling, it was a box and half - for freight and weight it was spot-on."

Sinclair had already informed me about LED screens being attached to trusses using cable ties: did Leach have to endure any compromise when it came to presenting the show? "Control-wise it was all the same. The whole tour had unfolded rather as a series of three-week stints in various markets around the world. I was looked after by Creative Technology, with Paul Gilzene making sure I got what I needed, so from an operational point of view it was always the same. In terms of my input to the screen images, I found that - because of the fractured touring schedule - each time, just as I got to know it really well, the tour stopped. All the things I do are rather like that early 70s kids' TV show *Vision On*, with the artist Tony Hart." Leach recounted a considerable list: "My hands in surgical gloves that I poured red food dye over to simulate blood; a tin foil mask made by moulding to my own face as a template - then tearing it open to reveal the live camera picture beneath; wrapping a TV in clingfilm, drilling into it. These things all looked amazing on the LED and projection screens, *trés* Riot House circa 1979!"

"It was all very experimental. That said, by the time we got to South America I had just the right size and combination of flat monitor that I could make into a cube when needed. The Pinata cam that motors downstage centre from the roof for *Solsbury Hill*; robocams on stage; lovely Sony mini-cams attached to instruments - all this refined the



Overnight load in at the SWU festival, Brazil.



visual aspect of the effects. Dropping a coloured fluid onto a horizontal flat screen and filming the image of that screen from above to make the resultant image appear as if filmed underwater sounds easy in concept, but actually not just any old clear fluid will do: it has to be just right to give the illusion. For *Rhythm of the Heat* I changed from sweeping the sand aside with my hand, to blowing it with - yes, you got it - a McDonald's straw!

"I was also fortunate to find just the right mini-cams to place on the instruments. To have one on the nut end of a cello and a viola, and another on the slide of a trombone, all looking up at the musician for that delicious first-person feel to a live screen is great. The fact that the musicians were so cool about that type of thing was even greater. Those bullet cameras came from CT."

I called Paul Gilzene at CT and he was able to identify the cameras in question: "The normal Toshiba HDQ mini-cam. As ever, it's the application that makes them special." I took the opportunity to ask Gilzene about the Barco FSN. "It is very compact. Blue used one on the US leg and liked it so much he wanted one for South America. We didn't have them here in the UK but we asked Barco for a loan with a view to purchase and they were only too happy to help. A good, value-for-money product; Blue loved it - it did everything he needed."

And what of the screens? "Well, all a bit funky, they don't have the very latest, so we're spoiled in Europe and the US, but then last year's model is pretty damn good by the standards we all endured five years ago. As for the cable tie incident, what I needed might on occasion exceed what they had available; when they encountered such a situation they worked really hard to find another way to do it, and generally they succeeded. Sao Paulo was where they ran out of flying attachment fixtures, so they used ties, but they used hundreds of them, even in a fire it would take some time for all of them to burn through. That aside, the fact of where we were could throw up unexpected opportunities. Buenos Aires, where Richard [Sharatt] mentioned the stadium between railroad tracks and close to an airfield, was amazing. I had a manned camera in the pit taking a three quarter profile of Peter and by complete coincidence I had a Sledgehammer moment. The cameraman captured a close-up of Peter's head with a real train in the background, emerging from around the back of his head, just like in the original video years ago. The other big thing for me to deal with was cameramen. I hired local long-lens operators and they were always more than capable, but generally had little or no English. The lesson in communication was to develop a visual syntax. For the FOH cameraman I could communicate directly, turn around, gesticulate wildly, and away you go.

Otherwise, they had to teach me the odd Spanish word to get them to do something I had shown them earlier."

I asked Blue Leach, might we characterise Latin Americans as being highly receptive to the more left-field inclinations of your directing style? "Oh yes, I'd show them the bucket-of-sand effect and they certainly embraced it. They appeared happy to be part of something slightly madcap. That still meant I had to learn the basics, in Spanish and Portuguese, for up/down, left/right, and focus - but they got it. Mexico was best, I had the same guy for two shows and he really got it. You have to consider that in most situations cameramen are working to a defined role - one does close-ups, another three-quarters, one the wide shot. Here, I was asking them to do all three at the same time - as well as mixing the aspect ratios and shapes in which to frame during the show. For some cameramen that might be a hassle; for them the fact they weren't compartmentalised really excited them."

Of all the tales the three exponents had to tell, this last is perhaps the most revealing; Leach undoubtedly extracted significant local support for his efforts by revealing what the end product is all about, convincing them it was worthwhile and allowing them to realise they could contribute to its success. A powerful motivator in any language.

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