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## Florence & The Machine

The UK touring production



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# Florence & the Machine

Steve Moles talks to the crew at Manchester Apollo . . .

pictures by Steve Moles

Now here's a piece of work. Florence Welch has borrowed more styles than there are designers in Paris; at least that's how it first appears. Musically, she has been compared to many, and repeatedly accused of being derivative of Kate Bush. That's not unreasonable, but only addresses one dimension; she's far more than that.

If you pick between the pieces it appears that Welch has taken the late Victorian Arts & Crafts movement for her template. Maybe that's been said before in the music Press, I don't know. What is certain are the references scattered about stage; a backdrop that resembles a William Morris wallpaper design (perhaps it is?); the diaphanous dress in which she wafts onto stage; a harp sitting at the forefront of her musical structure. What could be more Gothic Revival, welded as it is onto contemporary rock and roll? What it all amounts to is this, music that is detailed, different and thoughtful, singing that plunders the depths of melancholy and the heights of melodrama. You may not find it to your taste, but you will not fail to be entertained by something within it . . .

## Production

Although I'd never met him before, I warmed to production manager Curley Jobson immediately. Like me, he enjoys lobbing the occasional verbal hand grenade into the conversation. I'd been at Manchester Apollo 10 minutes and made my introductions, we were walking across backstage when he casually tossed this one: "Did you hear about the truck fire? It happened in October, we were travelling across Scandinavia for a gig in Copenhagen and the whole trailer went up. We lost everything - desks, monitors, lights and backline."

A tight situation: promoters, rental companies, other production friends - they'd all be getting his call, but Jobson had a more acute problem, even for this extreme situation. "You just get on with it, you make the calls, but where do you find a harp on a Sunday morning in Copenhagen? In the end we found one, concert quality - with this kind of instrument what other quality is there? It took a while to gain the owner's confidence."

A harp is an instrument that demands sensitive handling - you're not going to sling it round your neck and hurtle across stage, but I suppose a nihilistic grunge band might set one on fire once in a while, so perhaps the owner had good cause. Either way, the day was saved. But it's symbolic of a general volatility about this artist: the tour is dramatic in so many ways and Florence seems to revel in it.

Jobson's youthful experiences (his brother is Richard Jobson of The Skids) led him to build a well-reasoned and self-evidently robust working model for production. But his management of the Florence and the Machine touring world has broken even his own rules. "We had just played Glasto' with Doves and stayed to watch Amy [Winehouse, another artist to receive the Jobson touch] and then we went home." Jobson lives close by in the West Country. "I watched the rest on TV and saw Florence perform. Her hybrid vocals, bit of Janice Joplin, bit of Kate Bush, and all the other influences she seems to be able to channel, was such a piece of wonder. As the cliché goes, I was blown away and thought 'I have to work for her'. Completely out of character - I'd never chased a job before."

He is nothing if not persistent, got the job and has been part of the Florence success since August of 2009. "From the start I've watched her get better every night. Since August









we've gone from playing little UK venues to multiple nights at Brixton. Next year we play a big tour of the UK in May. She sells out everywhere." I strongly recommend you try to catch that May outing yourself if you're the slightest bit intrigued.

Finally, although he didn't mention it directly, it emerged that the shift from little UK venues to the likes of Brixton Academy and Manchester Apollo has experienced not only changes in scale of production, but also in operators, not that this was planned. More chaos.

### Sound

The FOH engineer when I visited was Ian Laughton, but it had not always been so. "Damo rang me up," that's Damian Pryor who manages the tour for PA company Britannia Row Productions, "Dave McDonald, her existing FOH man, needed to go home, his wife was ill. I'd just finished a big two years with Razorlight and was looking forward to a break, but I thought, it can't hurt to do some cover. I'd been out for a few days and had slotted in rather easily, it was a bit embarrassing really. I knew two of the band from Razorlight and one of the others had toured with me before. It was all getting a bit too comfortable. Then Dave called me up and asked how's it going? As it turned out the fact was Dave wanted to stay with his wife for longer, so in one of those curious happy coincidences, we were both relieved it was going so well. Dave also mixes for Air, and they wanted him all next year [2010] so it's worked out rather well. Curly was also pleased the vibe had settled so easily and quickly. Some things are meant to happen, he said to me." Indeed they are, but what a lucky break.

I asked Jobson about the change of engineer. "I've never tried to impose a PA on any sound engineer. It's them who have to stand in front of it every night." Jobson, it should be pointed out, knows his sound, and runs his own studio. "I have used other companies over the years, for me it's built on

relationships and people come and go. Brit Row have helped this act no end; they have supported us beyond belief. In some ways it's because of Florence, she's that kind of act. Before Brit Row came on board and we were playing smaller gigs, Soundcraft supported us with two desks; now we're using Digidesign, but that's because of a change of engineers, and that's what was wanted. But we are extremely grateful for what Soundcraft did for us."

Laughton also sang the praises of the Soundcraft Vi6. "I inherited the Vi6 from Dave; it was a desk that proved fantastic when we were playing the smaller venues. The transition to something bigger has been really smooth. I don't worry about digital desks these days, they're all OK one way and another. But as with anything, you're better off with what you know and prefer, so once we moved up from using local PA to a touring system I migrated to the Digidesign - a D-Show with a stretch. The nice thing about the smaller venues was that it wasn't just the desks; we also toured all our own microphones from Sennheiser. Sometimes we'd get funny looks, but as soon as we turned on and played, they

realised that such consistency pays off: it always sounded good straight away."

The variety of venue sizes leads Laughton to an interesting approach to touring PA. "We're actually carrying three systems, ARCS (8), dV-DOSC (16), and V-DOSC (20), with the new L-Acoustics SB28 subs (12). We carry two drive racks, one small so we don't have to occupy half the room in smaller gigs where we're using just the ARCS. The V-DOSC system is run off Lab.gruppen amps, but the Subs and dV-DOSCs are run from [L-Acoustics'] new LA8. Specifically, I wanted the V-DOSC to address her voice. The three models from the L-Acoustics range gave me the variety of system approach to the very different gigs, and a certain consistency of sound between them. Frankly, the V-DOSC system is more fancy for her voice and that was my main reasoning."

'Fancy' - an unusual adjective to apply to a PA? "Her voice is phenomenal; 'fancy' because it goes places you don't normally hear. With this system, I can get the depth out of the band and put a fantastic vocal texture on top."

Laughton does a lot of work on her voice, "the dynamic range is immense, from really quiet whispers to powerful full throated delivery. I use a Fairchild 660 plug-in, and off-board I use an Avalon 737. The 660 is massively warm, and the Avalon is totally transparent. It's most useful to catch the slam when she really cranks up the power. On the mic' front we've changed from a Sennheiser to a Neumann 105, still out the same stable, so I hope they won't be offended! I did try a few others but this seems to have the perfect sensitivity for her range; I can capture those quieter parts and they're very important to the overall context. On the whispering side, when she's very quiet, I do add a lot of 3kHz and 8kHz to her voice on the Avalon just to fill it out, and then roll it off manually when she hits the







power. I could do with a way to automate that." I thought he made a good job of it personally, but does anyone have an idea on automating that function?

"She also has a lot of 2kHz in her voice, which I have to watch and ride." Laughton is not the first engineer to avoid that scratchiness which can emerge around 2k. "I have rolled it out of the system a little. I think it's acceptable; you don't really miss it in the guitars and cymbals." Anything else on her voice? "I also have three delays for her, a couple of Echofarm plug-ins and a Roland SDE330 off-board. They're just different sounds to run with what effect she's trying to create. It's subtle support - she creates the effect, I'm enhancing it."

And what about that other tricky voice in the band, the harp? "Dave gave me precise instructions on the harp, bless him. It's very prone to high-mid feedback, so I swept one side of feed across so it largely inhabits the stage left PA opposite from the instrument position. Now we are in the bigger gigs we have better stage positions relative to the PA, so it's not such an issue and I can bring it back to truer stereo image. The harp uses AKG C411s as pick-ups, with a B29L pack, which takes two feeds; positioned top and bottom of the sound box, they seem to capture the whole instrument, right through the mid, and quite easily."

This was no chamber-orchestra-goes-pop; it was a revelation to me that a harp could be integrated with drums, guitars, bass and keys and not only survive, but excel.

#### Monitors

Phil McDaniel had been on the tour for just one show when I arrived; fortunately, like Laughton he was known to a few band members, having also toured with Razorlight. "Chris Hayden, the drummer, I know - he's MD for the band - but they all seem settled, nothing seems to faze them, least of all my arrival. Cameron Blackwood, the regular monitor man has other commitments and had to leave, so I just stepped in to complete their last few shows. I've simplified what Cameron had in the board."




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## Equipment List:

### SOUND

Supplied by Britannia Row Productions

#### FOH:

48-channel Digidesign Venue (FOH)  
L-Acoustics V-DOSC elements  
L-Acoustics dV-DOSC elements  
L-Acoustics SB28 sub-bass elements  
L-Acoustics ARCS elements  
(according to venue sizes)

#### Amplification:

Lab.gruppen  
L-Acoustics LA8 (subs & dV-DOSC)

#### Stage:

48-channel Digidesign Profile (monitors)  
8 x Sennheiser G2 IEM systems  
d&b C7 drum sub  
Sennheiser & Neumann microphones  
AKG C411 with B291 pack (for harp)

#### Outboard:

Avalon 737 (FOH & monitors)  
Roland SDE330 (FOH)  
Echofarm delay (FOH)  
Fairchild 660 (FOH)

### LIGHTING

Supplied by PRG Lighting

#### Universal Floor Equipment:

1 x Avo Diamond IV c/w Showsafe  
2 x Avo Opto-isolated DMX buffer box  
1 x Avo ART2000 48-way DMX dimmer  
12 x Martin MAC 2000 profile  
16 x Color Kinetics ColorBlast CB12  
6 x iPix BB7 Cluster  
14 x Martin Pro Atomic 3000 Strobe  
c/w Scroller  
4 x ADB 2k Fresnel c/w Barn Door  
2 x Manfrotto Stands  
12 x PAR 64 - VN5P  
12 x 10-cell MR16 batten  
1 x Lycian 1.2k spotlight  
1 x ClearCom 4-way intercom  
6 x 8ft A-Type Truss  
6 x 2ft A-Type Truss  
6 x Truss Base  
2 x DF-50 Hazer

#### Flown Extras

(Manchester & London):

8 x PAR 36 4-lite - DWE  
8 x ETC Source Four 19° Profile  
8 x Martin Pro Atomic 3000 strobe  
c/w scroller  
8 x iPix BB7 Cluster  
6 x ACL 4-lamp bar  
4 x CM 1-ton hoist  
2 x CM 500kg Hoist  
1 x 8-way hoist control  
10 x 8ft A-type truss - black  
1 x 40ft Spiked Kabuki pole system  
1 x 40ft x 30ft Starcloth



So did you ask the band what they wanted, or what they were used to from Blackwood? "I don't query the musicians, I just do what I think they need and let them give me some feedback if it's needed. I took a basic page from Cameron that worked in sound check, stripped out all the external stuff. It's speed that matters, if you're quick enough they won't notice."

McDaniel inherited the Digidesign Profile, a desk he's more than happy with. "It's not a problem taking over a board like this, though I've ignored a lot of Cameron's programming; the last thing I should be doing is messing up all his stuff, and I prefer working this way. The stage is clean and free from wedges, except for a d&b sub behind the drummer. I have eight stereo mixes including myself, the back line techs, and five principals. They are all radio, Sennheiser G2, except the drummer who's wired in. There's something like 30 inputs, the mixes are similar to FOH, same ambience. I also use a 737 for her voice. Knowing a couple of the band has made this straightforward; I also know the Brit Row system pretty well. For a short-term visitor I get a good attitude from their crew, it's been like that since the first time I worked with them: it's a friendly environment for me to step into."

#### Lighting

From the unlikelyst of beginnings, the T-shirt industry, comes a new lighting talent that has got everyone at PRG Lighting paying attention. Ed Warren, who operates from the lighting design resource of his own company NextLevelLights.com (check it out, you'll be impressed) has, in just over a year, rode the vaulting progress of Florence and the Machine's rising star. "From little clubs to multiple nights at Brixton Academy, and six years ago I had no idea about lighting," he began.

Warren may not have had the length of exposure to lighting that his contemporaries possess, but he's certainly not short of ideas. The words 'instinct' and 'natural' spring to mind, though there's no mistaking Florence's influence on the lights and stage show. But interpreting and being sensitive to those ideas is paramount.

"My design is focussed around six towers," he says. These are vertical sections of 'A' Type truss, festooned with Atomic Strobes, VL3000s, MR16 battens, I-Pix BB7s, and a pair of PAR 64s, the latter rigged, it must be said, in louché disregard for lighting convention.

"I like to use a lot of prisms," Warren explained. "For example, I'm a big fan of very thin iris beams from the VL3000 - and then focus them in abstract geometric patterns to form a backdrop to the stage."

So too the aforementioned tower PARs, which shine out at unexpected angles, throwing all the performers into weird silhouette. It's a visual engagement with the audience that sits perfectly with Florence's instincts for the gothic revival. You might suppose a doff of the hat to *Twilight*, but I think you'd do disservice to Welch and Warren: this is a much more natural, less forced interpretation. Besides, she has much more of a blood curdling scream than the sallow cheeked ciphers in *Twilight*.

I asked Warren about the prospect of ever-larger venues creeping into the itinerary. How do you augment a fundamental design concept? "Me and Scottie Sanderson at PRG have a great relationship. For this leg I was told I could take my existing floor rig and add a front and back truss. In fact, Curly Jobson said 'ask for what you want'." Is he always so generous? "I did put in a high spec' assuming I'd have to trim here and there, but I got it all."



Jobson does credit PRG for their extra support: "It's a company I've been using for years," he said. "Though my relationship has traditionally been with Robin Wain, a man I find infectiously positive. Scottie is an amazing man for Robin to bring in; he has that same boundless energy. For this show we had from Ed a template, it was a matter of what we could squeeze in where, and it's proved very flexible. From my point of view, it's about quality of equipment, top class people and great attitudes - and that's exactly what we've been given."

Praise indeed. When I visited Warren at Manchester it was only the second day of his augmented rig: "It's been amazing; it all turned up yesterday, we plugged it in and it was all perfect - and my crew are second to none."

Watching him work out front in the afternoon, Warren may have still been elated from what, according to Jobson, had been a very well received show the previous night. That didn't stop him working away at his Avo' D4 Vision, plotting and tweaking. "It's all so versatile; the towers allow us to expand and contract; encounter a low trim and I just reduce the intensity to 50%."



Above, left to right:

Curly Jobson; Phil McDaniel, monitors; Ian Laughton, FOH

Right: LD Ed Warren at the controls of the Avolites Diamond 4 console.

That, it turned out, was one of Warren's hallmarks; he makes great play of varied intensity from his lighting rig, especially from the tungsten sources, and to a lesser extent the BB7s and VLs. Besides the PARs in the towers, he has four-cell Moles and four bars of P64 ACLs dotted about, all of which appear at some point in baleful glow mode - sometimes moody, sometimes leap-out-and-bite-your-bum magnificent. Rather like Florence, from one extreme to another, and with easy grace. Don't miss her.



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