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Massive Attack
Live at Leeds Academy

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MASSIVE ATTACK

Massive Attack Leeds Academy

Words & pictures by Steve Moles . . .

I've been to see this band just twice, once 10 years ago, and this autumn at Leeds O2 Academy. It's only now I've got a fix on what they are: Massive Attack manifest as the Borg in musical form. They operate as a collective, with no overweening ego taking centre stage. Far from it, their chosen performance milieu subsumes 'Self' into a dark morass of shadowy images.

While I might continue the metaphor further and cite a Borg-like, dark, industrial flavour to their music, that would be unfair, for while they may draw upon such influences, generally they produce works of startling beauty. This could be their undoing, for Massive Attack doesn't really lend itself to live performance, the musical structure places difficult pressures upon sound, and that absence of personality on stage leaves an awkward vacuum to be filled by production.

Lighting & Video

Before attending this show I took the precaution of contacting United Visual Artists (UVA), the creative company that has provided the performance environment for Massive Attack since 2003. Chris Bird, technical director and one of the founding members of UVA, has overseen the design; speaking from Mexico where he was working on various projects, he described the UVA approach as, "anything that comes out of UVA is never ascribed to one person *per se*, as it is a collaborative process where certain people are responsible for managing certain aspects, but they all come together to form the end result."

So in that respect UVA bears comparison with Massive Attack, a talent collective, but not in the politically pejorative sense.

Operating the show is Robin Haddow on lights (who we saw recently operating video and media servers on Snow Patrol, see L&SI May 2009) while video is operated by Icarus Wilson-Wright. Icarus is using UVA's d3, a software platform for performance video unlike any other, and one that is rapidly becoming the darling of the more adventurous producer - think Marco Borsato (L&SI December 2008) and U2 (L&SI Aug-Sept 2009) as recent examples. Icarus had been flying his d3 a little too close to the sun at the four venues preceding this one and spent most of the afternoon grappling with his system, but he did eventually, and courageously, make time for a quick interview before the show. But first, Haddow gave an overview of what this presentation involves.

"I used to operate part-time on previous tours for UVA, covering for shows here and there. They asked me back to operate the lights and run the show with Icarus; at this stage it makes more sense for the two elements to each have operators. For myself, I'm enjoying getting back to lighting. I programmed the desk, but the d3 also runs part of the lighting. We have a Luminex IP merging system between my Hog PC and Icarus's d3. It allows me to choose who controls what. For example, Icarus can control what colour the lights are, while I control position and beam size; so there are two things controlling lights. My Hog PC has a DP8000 which allows me to output directly in Art-Net, so I run straight to network, to Luminex, and at the final stage it converts to DMX. So I'm

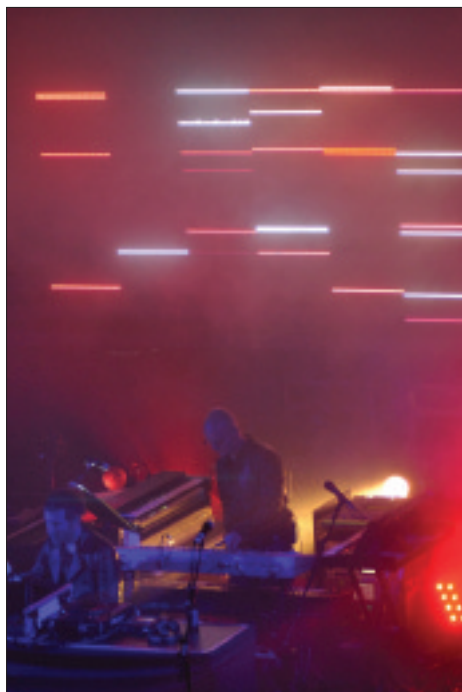
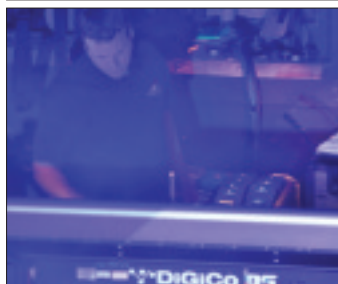


Photo: Louise Stickland



Crew from top:

Monitor man Danny Stead.

Dave Brace, FOH engineer.

Video operator Icarus Wilson-Wright (left) with lighting operator Robin Haddow.

running the show down a telephone wire - a bit scary, but of course there are spare lines. The Luminex merger is great, it's really easily configured to your needs through Windows Explorer. There are times when Icarus takes over full function of the lights, but the d3 is not so good on movement cues, so generally I do shapes, he does cool video."

Haddow did explain how on his previous experiences with this band he'd been running lights and video with d3 alone - no lighting desk - hence his observation on the d3's ability with movement cues.

The lighting is layered from backstage; at the rear is a 'wall' of eight vertical HUD trusses from HSL Group (who provide all the lighting kit for the tour, and crew). Each truss has four Robe RedWash LED lights rigged in line, and the whole set of 32 Reds is raised and lowered via a Kinesys system. Sadly there wasn't space for this element at Leeds, but Haddow has provided visuals of it from elsewhere on this tour (see picture on this page, top right).

There is then a horizontal row of VL3500 Wash lights, shining through a wall of horizontal rows of Barco O-lite, positioned just downstage of them. Imagine the VLs shining through a super-size Venetian blind (the O-lite) full width across stage, starting at shoulder height and maybe two metres high, and you have the picture. On the floor beneath the O-lite frame are Robe 250 Washlights providing a further textural tool. Then there's the band, and in an ever-so-slight nod to front light, there are two three metre stands, one either side downstage of the band, each with two Robe 700s on top, one Wash, one Spot. As I said, this band likes to be subsumed into the tableau: there's no star attraction here.

"No, not a lot of front light," continued Haddow, "but I do have some iPix BB4s on the floor,

around the keyboards and the drums so I can tone them up. It's all about depth, and the BB4s give me another layer in that respect. When these are working with the O-lite, they get the colour info from d3, like the other lights: similarly, if the O-lite flashes, the lights will too."

Coherent is the word; the prevailing visual impact is one of total coherence between screen usage and lighting. It's actually quite subtle in that you'd probably miss it did you not know it was being done this way, but it is very pleasing to see.

"I think it looks very cool," said Haddow. "At the same time, I can take control and do more traditional lighting; turn the O-lite off for, say, a VL strobing cue, for greater impact. The visual content is all made my UVA; day-to-day, Icarus adjusts things like levels, fonts, and inputs text, dependant on the local language."

The tour has been visiting foreign climes and somewhat wistfully Haddow reported: "Somehow Icarus always seems to get a very attractive female to do the translation work for him." It's tough out there on tour. Haddow continues: "Content also includes up-to-date news headlines; something that will elicit audience reaction, and then there are some politically angled messages." Thought provoking without hectoring; I rather enjoyed this aspect of visually communing with the audience.

So, what of the equipment and service from HSL? "The desk is great, using the Hog PC with the DP gives me real advantage. Clarity from the PC: because you can chose the processor you get something powerful as opposed to what is now a rather old unit in the original Hog III. So I can use a big touch screen display and pretty much organise the screen in a logical fashion that suits my needs; fast and easy.

"The Robe 250s - there are 15 of them with the O-lite - create a good effect used all together, not really powerful enough to work alone, but good in this application. The 700s I tend not to use on full power, and generally in blue, that's what the band wants."

He does get to use them in lighter colours, but only when Martina Topley-Bird sings: "I'm able to lift them up quite bright." Easily the brightest of the night. "Otherwise it's just Congo blue on the two main vocalists. But it's the mapping of video over the VL3500s I find incredible; it blows away anything you could do with a lighting desk. And the Robe Reds are a clever bit of kit, especially with the Kinesys system; again, Icarus puts stuff through them that adds a another layer of depth."

Haddow added: "There are also four [A&O] Falcon 3kW searchlights, but HSL have fitted Flower-type lenses. Positioned upstage they produce that typical refracted light effect, which is what Dee, one of the main vocalists, wanted as a theme to this show. In that respect the O-lite can produce a split-beam effect as well; it's a bit like having a big life-size variable gobo up there."

Icarus on the d3

As I said earlier, Icarus Wilson-Wright was under some pressure this day, housekeeping really, but emblematic of the technical aspect of operating the d3. "It's one of those things - because you *can* do it, you do," he began, and Icarus does like to push.

"You could work on this all day and night, it's that kind of thing; hard to put down, there's always something more. The

MASSIVE CREDITS

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Lighting supplier: | HSL Group (//hslgroup.com) |
| Sound supplier: | Wigwam Acoustics (www.wigwam.co.uk) |
| Design / d3 software: | UVA (www.uva.co.uk) |
| Video: | XL Video (www.xlvideo.com) |
| Caterer: | A Bit of a Mouthful (www.abitofamouthful.com) |
| Trucking: | FlyByNite (www.flybynite.co.uk) |
| Production Manager: | James Baseley |
| Tour Manager: | Dave Lawrence |
| Stage Manager: | Carl Martin |
| FOH Engineer | Dave Bracey |
| Monitor Engineer | Danny Stead |
| System tech (FOH) | Richard 'Basil' Ferneley |
| System Tech (Mons) | James Brown |
| Backline Techs: | Nick Sizer, Huw Williams, Sharon Bampton, Steve Hussey |
| Lighting Designer | Robin Haddow |
| Lighting Riggers | Christopher Roper, Andy Iliffe |
| Visual Prog & Operator | Icarus Wilson-Wright |
| Tour Assistant | Cameron Farzad |



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EQUIPMENT LIST

AUDIO

PA:

- 24 x Martin W8LC
- 8 x Martin W8LM
- 6 x Martin WTubs
- 12 x d&b B2
- 4 x Martin LC flying frames
- 2 x Martin LM flying frames
- 4 x Martin LC racks
- 2 x Martin LM racks
- 2 x Triple d&b D12 racks

FOH:

- 1 x Digico SD7 (56-ch)
- 1 x Digico Local Rack
- 1 x pair Genelec monitors
- 1 x Optocore multi
- 1 x 4-way BNC multi

FOH RACK:

- 1 x Waves Maxx BCL
- 1 x TC M6000
- 2 x SPX990
- 1 x dbx 120x
- 1 x Aphex C Aural Exciter
- 1 x TC Fireworx
- 1 x CD player
- 1 x CDRW
- 1 x ASL PSU

MONS:

- 1 x DiGiCo D5 (56ch)
- 1 x DiGiCo Local Rack (bnc to surface)
- 1 x Quad Rack c/w 4 x DiGiCo Stage Rack

IEM:

- 12 x Sennheiser G2 IEM transmitters
- 20 x beltpacks
- 3 x Antenna paddles
- 5 x Shure hardwired beltpacks

MICS:

- 2 x Sennheiser E901
- 8 x Shure SM57
- 2 x Neumann KM184
- 2 x AT4050
- 1 x AT4041
- 5 x Shure SM98
- 7 x Sennheiser E935
- 5 x AKG C414
- 1 x Shure B52
- 2 x Shure SM58
- 6 x Sennheiser Switched mics
- 6 x BSS AR116 di box
- 3 x Avalon U5 DI box
- 9 x tall tele boom
- 6 x tall round based boom stands
- 12 x small boom stands

COMMS:

- 3 x ASL b/p h/s
- 1 x Power locks to 125A 3phase female
- 1 x Socapex to ca-com speaker fan out
- 4 x Ca-com links



clever part is the way the software accommodates geometry. The d3 has three parts; the visualiser allows you to consider fixtures in a 3D environment. Here, that's especially good for the lighting fixtures - it respects the lighting positions. In simple terms, I plot the lighting positions on my display screen, relative to the O-lite in physical space. Beyond the visualiser is the actual process of delivery to the fixture; and third is the output where it respects that geometry of placement."

I didn't really understand what he was saying until he gave a more graphic description: "Take a flat piece of A4 paper and consider it a projection surface you're sending video to. Now curve the piece of paper," he made a sort of W, "now the d3 doesn't send the same 2D video, it now maps to the new surface shape, so from the front view the image appears coherent."

Coherent is a recurring expression from Wilson-Wright and Haddow, and probably best describes the video/lighting interaction. In simple form that's just tying colour from both media together; in complex form it's linking image streaming to the screen elements and the lights in the field of view. That might sound a bit arty-farty, but the effect is real and - as Haddow said - really cool.

"Because the band play live and work from a click-track, I'm able to get a rough idea of tempo, but I can't automate what I do to it, there's too much variation." (This is something Dave Bracey at front-of-house explains more fully later). "Chris Bird and Matt Clark [creative director] at UVA produced all the content, I do tweak the global positions depending on the

audience view, and I get to play with the text files, fonts and things. Luckily I can take an MP3 of each night's show and then work in the day on what I'm doing."

It becomes increasingly apparent that Icarus is obliged to operate on the fly in some respects, responding to the looser elements of the band's performance. As such, unlike a lighting operator who might spend the afternoon tightening up his desk cues, his afternoons are spent rehearsing his moves, his responses to the show. "I scribble notes on the set lists, they do things like get into a groove, and then repeat it for 32 bars. So instead of doing what I was intending - build then drop, build then drop - I have to find a way to build, and build, and build; I can't just keep looping around."

It could get pressured, but there's a fallback position: "Robin has ultimate control, he can strip colour, luminance and focus from me. If you want to look at d3 at the base level it does fulfil the standard media server role, and like say Catalyst, which has pixelMad, d3 can apply video content across LED fixtures. But this works in the 3D environment; it deals in non-standard geometry." Everybody got that? "I'm intrigued to see where it's going to go; it's nice to be at this stage in its evolution."

Sound

Dave Bracey has mixed Massive Attack for 10 years or so; for this tour he is using a Martin Audio W8M mid-size line array supplied by Wigwam. More on that later, but for this gig he's obliged to use the house d&b J Series system as installed by Adlib Audio. Wigwam won't mind, d&b is one of the three PA brands they carry.

"You couldn't put your own system in here, not practically. The installed system would be tricky to remove, and there's nowhere else to fly." But is Bracey happy to use the J system? "When I ran it up there were a couple of things I didn't like, I cut around 53Hz, and gave a little boost around 200Hz. Then once I got plugged into Rope, the d&b control software, I discovered that the house system EQ had put in a boost around 56Hz, and a cut around 200/250Hz, so I removed them all - my EQ and theirs - and it sounds good." There's an educational tool for every engineer there: listen to the house system, think where you might apply EQ adjustment, and then dive into the house system EQ and see if it tallies.

"We're far enough into the tour that I can do the show without sound-check," says Bracey. "After the first three or four I don't like to sound check; it becomes self-defeating. After three shows you've pretty much got the show all dialled up for venues full of people, touch anything at sound check after that, when the rooms are empty, and you're just messing with things you shouldn't."

I have a lot of time for Bracey: I've met several good mix engineers who eschew sound-checks, but few elucidate why and so rationally.

He adds: "If the band think there's a problem then obviously that's a different matter; but generally rooms full of people sound similar. If, night after night you're just doing little touches to the pre-sets then that proves it. Even with a different PA system, even moving festival to festival, the same rules apply."

Bracey is using a DiGiCo SD7, a desk he's been using pretty much since the first one came out of the box just over a year ago. "There are some radically different presets in here, there's lots of programming song to song. That's the challenge of this band, they're really different and I like that."

There are five musicians and five vocalists, who sing individually, in pairs, sometimes en masse - the voices come and go like spirits in the dark - so song to song this is a distinctly different performance. "If you listen to the albums it sounds really engineered, but it's not. And played live it's very live; there's nothing off hard drive or sequencers here. There are samples of course, but they might play for a bar at most. Programming you've got to be careful - if a vocalist doesn't come in at the right place, the band will follow around and come back to the same point. They're very flexible as a live band, even if they miss cues it still sounds like a well-sequenced show."

VIDEO

1200 x Barco O-Lite tiles
2 x D3 media servers
2 x Barco D320 processors

LIGHTING

15 x Vari*Lite 3500 Wash
32 x Robe 192.3 Red Wash
15 x Robe 250 Wash
2 x Robe 700 Spot
2 x Robe 700 Wash
5 x 4 Lite Molefay c/w M5 Colour Scroller
15 x Chroma-Q Colour Block 1
8 x Custom 10ft sections of 'RUP' truss
2 x Kinesys +1 Elevation
2 x Liftket 1-tonne motor

CONTROL:

2 x Wholehog 3 PC Systems

As indicated, the hard part is the voices, and not just the coming and going: "The fundamental character of the recorded voices on album is a whisper. Live that's just not possible, but they do tend to sing that way, so the loudest thing in the mic is often not the voice but the PA reflection from the room, especially in these smaller venues. The show runs at a respectable level so vocal mics are close to feedback and you have to focus on that all the time."

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MASSIVE NOTES

• Greg McKay, house technical manager at Leeds: "The venue has been flat-out since L&SI visited when we opened this time last year. There's something happening pretty much every night, the only quiet time has been across the summer months when the students aren't here. So we take the opportunity and service everything. It's an especially useful period for things like getting hoists tested and certificated, we can send them away for a few days and not worry. The capacity has been upped slightly, it's 1800 downstairs, just over 500 on the balcony. We expect to knock out the storeroom I use stage left on the stalls floor level, and open the floor a bit more, maybe another 100 people."

• UVA input: The louvred O-lite panels were mounted in 15 purpose-built frames, creating a wide screen view. Designed by UVA, the frames were built by XL Video, who supply all the video kit for the tour. Chris Bird of UVA explained: "UVA's proprietary d3 control software is supplied by XL Video, currently the only owner of d3 systems in the UK, but there will soon be more."

"Built around a 3D screen visualiser, d3 allows the user to import 3D models, build simple screens, animate content and playback, all in one system."

Elsewhere it is described as 'an integrated 3-Dimensional design, simulation and control package for stages, video, lighting and architectural applications.'

There is a sophisticated timeline tool within d3 which Icarus didn't have the opportunity to explain fully. For the show all tracks are pre-sequenced in d3, other than those which are lighting only: these are controlled by Haddow alone.

Luckily the onstage levels are muted, the keyboard player has his Fender twin in an isolation cabinet off stage, but the guitarists 'combo' is there, and so too the two drum kits, though one is electronic. "But cymbals and guitar do get in there, depending on vocal position. For the opening UK shows in Brixton we had the best sound ever, a big room so not too much back from the room, and big stage to lose the back line. Basil [Richard Fernely] my system tech, rigged 13 boxes a side in Brixton, four above the balcony, then the eight below in three zones, top long throw, middle mid, and bottom short. The ninth cab had the horn turned off to avoid reflections off the balcony frontage."

The tour is carrying the Martin WTub (under balcony) for fill, Fernely putting just two of these very wide dispersion boxes on the front edge of stage here. "The band don't have wedges so they don't like to see speakers all over the place. These are small and do a good job," said Bracey

Besides the SD7, Bracey has a few off-board tools, including a couple of Aphex 204s ("gives a little chorus flavour"), a dbx 120X, a sub-harmonic synth which he applies to the low end (d&b B2s in Cardioid array), a couple of Yamaha SPX 990s and six M6000 effects engines.

"On the desk, the thing I like is the Tube emulation on the inputs; you can drive it hard enough to make a channel sound dirty if you want to. A nice addition. A lot of things have popped up on the new Mach2 software; there are four pages of it in the blurb. I'm not using the dynamic EQ, which is now available on all input channels; all compressors can now be multi-band; and the reverbs are of higher quality and will go to extreme lengths: I run one for 10 seconds - you couldn't do that on a D5."



With all the attention focussed on the voices I posed the obvious question: any special mic selections? "No, I tried all that when I first worked for them 10 years ago. It doesn't really matter what you choose, fundamentally the PA is louder and is going to get in there. Instead I let them have three or four shows to settle in, then I gently work on them to sing harder; I usually manage to gain about 10 percent."

Monitor man Danny Stead agreed: "They [the band] all have talkback mics they can talk to me on; when one of them asks for a little rise in level on their vocal in their mix, Dave's voice appears, 'No', so I don't and they're obliged to sing a little harder instead." Stead has been with them since 2004: when he's not with Massive Attack he system techs for Status Quo - a complete change of audio scenery that keeps him chirpy, which he is on this evening.

"I mix using a DiGiCo D5, the ideal desk for this - essential in fact, I have a lot of mixes. Everybody is on in-ears, Sennheiser G2. I run on the new NET 1 network system; it links to laptop and automatically tunes the belt packs to the best available frequencies. It makes my life easier, I do a final scan 30 minutes before the band go on. As well as musicians and singers there are four techs on in-ears as well. They can be more demanding than the band," he joked. "With me as well there are 15 mixes in total. They are all different, there's no generic band mix, each vocalist likes to hear different things musically. Fortunately, we have three and half weeks of band rehearsals before the tour so I have plenty of time to set it all up."

Like Bracey out front, Stead experiences the same malign influence of PA back from the house due to the need for high input gain on the vocal mics: "Day to day, that's what I'm watching most. Believe it or not I do have ambient mics to give the band a bit of house; I haven't turned them on yet. It is quiet on stage, I don't get past level four on the belt-packs though I do think Wigwam do something to them that ups the level anyway. Running the show is pretty straightforward - little bit of reverb on the vocals, little bit of compression on the band here and there. It's all done within the desk; there isn't any room on stage for off-board racks, frankly."

Apart from having the band sing louder and solve the fundamental live sound problem, is there anything else he'd like to improve the show? "Another truck, we're packed to the roof and it slows the load-out." Just about every crew member I spoke with said the same thing.

This was a very atmospheric show. On reflection I have to admit that though their music is contemplative and introspective the live event is visually intriguing and entirely in keeping with the allusions of the music. Sonically, Bracey does a great job in what must be quite hairy conditions, especially on the odd song when he's got as many as four vocal mics open, any one of which could run away with itself any second. The Borg collective? Well not really, but a sum of parts providing a very personal experience.