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For Your Pleasure

Steve Moles visits Roxy Music's latest tour at the MEN Arena . . .

It is a sad fact that with each passing year I become more pathologically averse to visiting rock shows on Sunday nights. I know where it comes from - five years at boarding school, especially that homesick first year. Every six weeks or so I'd be allowed home for a weekend; Sunday was ruined by anxiety at the inevitability of return. I cried every time. So it was that I left for Manchester to see Roxy Music with heavy heart. Truth is, I have become accustomed to these Sunday mid-afternoon blues (Sunday shows are unavoidable in this profession) and I usually find the production team so welcoming that I soon forget my conditioned reflex, and warm to the task.

This evening was no different, but still tinged with melancholy as I was transported back to a rickety old quick-fit followspot tower in Bracknell sports centre circa 1971. Roxy Music topped the bill (I was working for some Charisma Records act in the support slot, I forget which). During Roxy Music's first number some young fool relieved himself behind the drape that shrouded my tower, and, luckily for him, blew the fuse to my power supply (rather than electrocuting his manhood), thereby releasing me to watch the show.

Later that evening while the band were still playing at full tilt, I visited the backline crew and discovered a couple copulating beneath the stage left PA wing; such were the security measures in those early days. You don't see that sort of thing now (more's the pity?). Looking around the Manchester Arena I wondered how many audience members, all of whom were of comparable age to me, harboured such visceral memories of their youth and this band. Then Bryan Ferry hit the stage and the entire room erupted as every person within it stood up and remained that way for the next 90 minutes. This might be the bath-hair rock generation and they do make Duran Duran look positively youthful, but they still know how to have a good time.

Production

Reputation precedes them in terms of presentation; Roxy (and not just Bryan Ferry) have that art school sensibility that sees them take inordinate attention to detail. As I began my interview with Nick Warren at front-of-house sound, he was briefly called away. "We always play one of Bryan's Motown compilations for the walk-in," he explained on his return. "Bryan now wants to ensure we always play 'Heard it through the Grapevine' as the track that preludes their entrance on stage."

As my afternoon unfolded it transpired that Warren makes a stereo recording each night for the band to scrutinise, "mainly to discuss their contribution to the show," he ventured. "It impresses me, their commitment to it. For example Phil [Manzanera] will say things like, 'would you like me to back my guitar off a bit at that point?'. We're

three shows in and already they've got most of the songs down, that's the ones they played at festivals last summer, but they're still refining the songs they've added since then."

Refining is what defines Roxy Music. Later, Alistair McDiarmid, director of video, said something similar about an ISO camera recording of the show the band will watch each night, and indeed I witnessed a debate between McDiarmid, Graham Feast (LD) Anna Boberg (video generation) and Isaac Ferry (Bryan's son and also closely involved with the video content) as they deconstructed parts of the previous show that they might build and refine. Of course, any show worth its salt goes through this routine, but it's not every band that takes such an active interest: Feast told me Ferry had asked for a percentage reduction in overall light levels after the first show, to increase the impact of the video imagery.

For production manager Des Jabir there is, he says: "No special consideration required for this show. The only difference is this band all have strong ideas about how they want it to look and sound. We spend a lot of time reviewing the set list, walk-in music, everything to do with audience experience - not just what happens on stage. I've been with Bryan for four or five years now and this is something he always does."

There is one distinct upside to Jabir's experience on this tour, "we don't have any stage set to speak of, which is unusual for an arena tour, and because the video is all projected rather than LED, we have the whole production in just four trucks. That doesn't mean it's a cheap show - far from it; the video is very impressive and the need to moderate the lighting for projection hasn't prevented Graham [Feast] from putting together a solid but economic show. Sound wise we have all digital consoles, that's a common saving these days, and the whole PA system, d&b J Series, fits in one truck." It's not just Jabir who has audio sensibilities: tour manager Levi Tecofsky was the band's front-of-house engineer when I last visited them on tour, nearly 10 years ago (see *LSi August 2001*).

Lights & Video

Video is the dominant visual medium here. That's not to diminish Feast's role as LD - in fact, the over reliance on video does make the LD's job that much harder - but as with Jean Michel Jarre a few months back (see *LSi November 2010*), this show is fundamentally sound and vision. Much as I really enjoyed, and indeed wallowed in the imagery, I did feel it a little unfair on the audience who had travelled to see Roxy Music, for strictly speaking the band never stepped out of the shadows. If you weren't at the front all you saw of them was distant and dark, however clever the images on screen might be. One argument says this is an immersive experience and in that context it worked wonderfully. The images were often of exquisite beauty, or mixed tantalising glimpses of ephemeral figures sliding





ghost-like across the screen; musicians from the stage mingling with movie stars live on screen - quite magical. But despite the elaborate variation, what video presented behind the band is a one-trick pony: Jarre might paint musical landscapes that suit such indulgence, but Roxy is still a rock band and we deserve at least a glimpse of the sweat, bump and grind - hey, these guys are legends.

The setting is simplicity itself. A 60ft by 30ft (18m x 9m) screen - a brand new purchase by XL Video from Harkness, director McDiarmid informed me - sits squarely across the back of stage, the lighting rig and PA system are both rigged higher than normal and cables are all routed well upstage to leave the performance area wide open, with unrestricted views of the screen from every seat.

"I'm very hands-on," began McDiarmid. Not unlike actor Javier Bardem (*No Country for Old Men*) in appearance, McDiarmid is one of those engaging characters you can't help but like. "I like to get my hands dirty; I still do engineering jobs and cameras." It later transpired he'd done exactly that on the Jarre show I reviewed. "That does mean I expect things to be done to my standard," and, of course, that means he knows exactly what is and is not possible. But judging by the general joshing and bonhomie at the backstage PPU, he is no bearish taskmaster. "I was engineering for Jon Shrimpton when he passed this to me during the summer run last year, and I've been involved in developing that show into the arena style you see here. Projection wasn't a big part of the festival tour, now it's huge. The content for the screen has all been regenerated for hi-def by Isaac [Ferry] and Anna [Boberg, of whom more later]."

This is obviously a big, collaborative effort; where did the concept to project rather than use LED originate? "Trusses are 32 feet above stage, PA rigged extra high - that's what I sold to Bryan. Graham then plotted the lighting rig from that point and has done a very good job. Projection done well still

looks stunning if you do your maths right," he said, "in the right place and with a good HD signal it looks amazing. When you consider the surface area the great thing is it's a fraction of the power of an LED equivalent, and a fraction of the cost."

The projectors are Barco FLM 20ks. McDiarmid estimated a power saving of approximately two thirds; "saves a lot on truck space too." But the reliance on projection forces compromise on the lighting? "Yes. But Graham, Anna, Isaac - everyone has been involved from the beginning and this is an unusual tour in that there's no battling between departments; everyone is very cooperative." McDiarmid has been doing this work for 25 years since he started as a lampie back in his New Zealand homeland. As he said, he's hands-on and has done most things - that surely helps on the cooperative edge.

"The content is dominant, but there is live camera work. I have three main cameras, Sony HXC100 today as we're recording, but generally D50s. Two on tracks in the pit, one hand-held on stage, I also have two Robo-cams and two mini-cams," (these latter in the typical musician POV position on drums and keyboards), "but I hardly use them, just as a get out of jail shot if needed."

He continues: "Content playback is on the Catalyst with Graham running it off his GrandMA2 out front. I have manual access to two layers on the Catalyst to manage the video effects. I do have a pre-set for each song but what I do is dependent on how the show is running. I have very high contrast, monochrome, and coloured looks always on call; which one I choose defines how it cuts through into the playback material."

This is the cornerstone of the show concept: the mirage of live shots mingled with the playback is the one sop to giving the distant audience a look at their idols. "We're still developing the defined look; that's what I mean by it being dependent on how the show's running. Atmosphere on stage and in the house is part of the determining process."

I questioned how he might sample that 'atmosphere', marooned, as he is, way backstage in the truck dock, isolated from the auditorium? "Sometimes that distance can give you more focus; you're less distracted by what's around you. From outside you can be more calm and thoughtful." Objective - good answer. "Besides, when you're cutting cameras you're always at some point of remove, you know the solos are coming, but otherwise you can only judge by what the cameras are showing you. We can all miss great things if they happen unexpectedly."

McDiarmid runs his show from the Kayak DD2; he also carries a second Catalyst back-up. "The other thing I have out, which normally sits at the XL Video warehouse if I'm not using it, is a piece of pre-rig we had adapted to carry the projectors. You could travel them in the truss, but they slide into their cages within the truss on Teflon runners so it's almost as fast to slide them in and out each day."

The visual aspect made this truss choice valid - no cages hung beneath truss, hiding behind abnormally deep borders, made the whole effect of high trim trusses neat and unobtrusive. "The projectors are doubled, four in total using 4:3 ratio lenses crossed



over; you can't really do it with 7:8 wide angle, I find the consistency of lens manufacture isn't precise enough - pin-cushioning means they are brutal to line up."

Before we got down to lighting, Feast began by introducing Anna Boberg. "She did all the visuals," he began enthusiastically, "you should really talk to her first." Feast has always been generous with his praise for the work of others, but this was not just his natural modesty. Boberg hails from Malmo in Sweden: how did she come to be involved? "Isaac, Bryan's son, searched the internet and found her. She's a VJ and commercial graphic designer," Feats explained.

Boberg, who speaks fluent English, told me: "I came in during the summer to work on the festival content. Bryan had a vision in his mind; it was my job with Isaac to adapt the content they already had." She has since contributed her own work as well (visit www.bopa.tv to find out more). Obviously a busy and talented individual, Boberg is also working for Philips on the Lumalive, a soft, fabric LED surface for which she is generating content to be applied in public areas - possibly hotel lobbies, airports, large business office atriums and the like.

How does this Roxy Music project work in practice? "I get given things Bryan likes," she explained. "A lot of the content is, if you like, a collage of old movies. There's also a lot of

Clockwise from top: Graham Feast (lighting designer); Production manager Des Jabir; Video director Alastair McDiarmid with Anna Boberg; The 'apprentice' Jack Murphy; Steve May (monitors); Nick Warren (FOH sound);

animation of shapes. He has given me loads of stills, I think about where in the songs and how they might work."

Isaac Ferry appeared at this point so I asked him how Boberg had been found. "Well I didn't see that much online, simply a website. But we called her to a meeting and she seemed perfect; very well organised. When we explained the concept it was obvious she was intelligent and knew immediately how we might achieve our goals. We wanted to merge content for the big screen; she talked us through a number of ways we could do it."

Were there other contenders? "The web search was for the top VJs in the world, it took about three hours to find there were really only two that interested us, and the other was based in Indonesia which we felt would be difficult. Anna had also done work with the Chemical Brothers. Her relationship with Bryan is excellent; she can pick up on the smallest influence he gives, like when he asked for some Turner."

JMW Turner (a personal favourite) was a leading English artist with a penchant for stormy seas and ships. The results achieved



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Photo: Steve Moles

"We have been providing Roxy Music & Bryan Ferry with sound, backline and staging equipment for over ten years, it is great to have the opportunity to be working with such a fantastic band"

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by Boberg were very effective, going beyond the literal use of his work; Turner's artistry imposed a double thematic edge to the evening, his use of golden amber light coloured many images not of his making employed for this show; and his use of ghostlike imagery, spectral visions emerging from misty origins, prevailed throughout the night and to great effect.

So where to the lighting? "My brief from Bryan was minimal, keep it dark and moody, make small embellishments and leave it there; so it's very straight forward. It's not flat however, we do lift things for the more up tempo numbers and it's materially brighter, but the accent is subtle. Lite Alternative have provided the system. The main instruments are Martin TW1s for my main key light - they're incandescent, which is exactly the quality of light needed for this sort of show. Beam work comes from MAC 700 Profiles and MAC 2000 XP Washes. I also have some four-cell Moles, but their use as audience blinders is completely minimal. There are NovaFlowers on the floor behind the band."

He continued: "My main tool is four truss spots, SuperBeams, an incandescent beam light adapted to be operated as a followspot. It's a big, parabolic reflector with a 1200W bulb and no colour changer. There are two in each L-shaped truss. I control intensity from the desk. As with everything, I'm monitoring the rig and spots against the screen." The screen is rendered bright enough and Feast could let slip the fader a little higher, but as he explained, Ferry asked for it to be darker.

This was the first time I've seen the GrandMA 2 on tour: how does Feast like it? "I find it generally user-friendly. It is in my opinion faster and easier to get around than the old GrandMA. The older desk didn't do it for me, I know it's a good console and many people like it, but this suits me better. I run all the media content off here," but not from the MA server system? "No, off the Catalyst. I find the operational routines of the desk entirely to my liking; it suits my own internal logic perfectly." You can't say fairer than that.

This must be a frustrating position for any LD to be in; fortunately Feast's enthusiasm for his work is undiminished and he applies himself to this show as earnestly as he has to other designs of his I've seen in the past; and in fairness, there are at least moments when it gets to wink through and make a mark.

FOH Sound

ML Executives has provided Roxy Music and Bryan Ferry with sound, backline and staging equipment for over 10 years now. "It's great to have the opportunity to be working with such a fantastic band," says ML's managing director, Gary Marks.

FOH engineer Nick Warren took over this gig from Chris Privet Hedge (out on Simply Red for the past two years: see *LSi February 2011*) and looks like he is now mixer in residence. What I heard confirmed his suitability: it was loud but textured, and he repeatedly visited level peaks and then retreated just as quickly, applying a wide dynamic range to delivery beyond that of the band, but only ever enhancing it.

"ML Executives provide all the service and the control system, though I have asked for d&b J Series for PA. It's the system everyone is spec'ing at the moment and I love it, so Wigwam - in very gentlemanly fashion - are providing racks and stacks. The system allows me to be a lot more flexible. I'm recording the show using Pro Tools off the Digidesign [now Avid, please note] Profile, a nice easy shoe-in. Bryan [Ferry] archives every show, and has done so since early days. Visit his studio 'Studio One' near Olympia and you'd be amazed - he's got everything, some amazing old keyboards. They even tried bringing an old Mellotron out for this tour because there's such a strong drive to be authentic to the original recordings, but on that occasion I managed to persuade them to use samples." Warren is young enough never to have endured the agony of dragging one of these monsters up the stairs at the Sheffield Penthouse Club, but somehow he must have known?

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"I'm doing everything in the desk, except for trying out the TC 6000 multi-reverb. Having made the switch to mixing digitally I don't see the point in then ignoring the desk's functionality. I'm either going digital or I'm not. Yes, the TC unit sounds better than the reverbs in the desk, but what do you expect from an off-board tool that costs six grand? I've been doing some odd stuff in the desk with plug-ins; auto panning, a Reel tape delay on top of a Reel tape flanger, but the band does most of the work on stage. I still come out the board analogue, via the XTA 448s to the d&b amps. I just don't have faith in digital snakes."

Ancient instrument sounds apart, how are the band to mix? "If you run a desk like this you know when you're in the sweet spot, but you can slip off it badly just as quickly with this as you can with any digital desk. There are another seven musicians including BVs up there besides the original members. For guitars I'm using a Shure 57 and a 4050 on both of them, and put Ollie [Thomson] and Phil [Manzanera] to left and right, to help with the separation. There are two keyboards as well, so it's more about what you turn down to make it work; you don't want them all fighting for the mid frequencies." Less is more: the most effective plays in mixing are the simplest; it should be stencilled on every desk.

Warren continues: "I do a lot of vocal riding: there are several open mics up there and getting a bit of added percussion from the BVs - they use a cabasa and tambourine - is unavoidable. Paul Thompson on drums holds the thing together: I have a Sennheiser 901 in the kick/bass drum, I just prefer it. Besides top and bottom [Shure SM] 57s for the snare I have a [SM] 98 for the rim shot as well; a [Sennheiser Evolution] 604 on the toms; [AKG] 414 for overheads; and [AKG] 451 on the hi-hat.

"The sax' mic is unusual, an [Audio-Technica] AT3050; really it's a tom mic. It gives me the

full sound of the instrument but there are limitations - it can hit the Sennheiser radio pack [with a bit too much signal] so I'm looking to put a pad in there. Bryan's vocal mic is an AT4047, another unusual choice; it's the only thing that can catch his quiet vocal and manage the harmonica when he suddenly whips it out, which is often. It's the only condenser mic that can cope. I use a lot of protective compression in the desk, BV and sax' especially, brick wall limiting its only function."

Warren does sail close to the wind, but it's all the more exciting for that. "Plug-ins I like are the Impact for Keyboards, and Smack for the Bass. The band cue themselves, so although I have detailed notes on a cue sheet in my laptop, I don't use a lot of scenes in the desk." Having a toe in each pond doesn't seem to detract from Warren's ability to produce a good show.

Monitors

Much to my surprise I discover monitor mixer Steve May has been with the band 10 years,

though it seemed only yesterday when we first met. "I'm using a [Yamaha] PM5D for the simple reason that out of all of them I find it's the easiest. I did think about a DiGiCo SD7 as I'm using all 24 out - I have to double the channels to the tech feeds - but we were so far into rehearsal by the time the channel count had built up that I didn't want to change."

He adds: "There's nothing unexpected in the monitor hardware: Sennheiser G2 in-ear systems, L-Acoustics 115XT wedges, 14 of them - and I'm using ARCS for side-fills with SB218 subs. Bryan, Phil and Andy all like to have ears and wedges. For Bryan I have two back wedges; he gets a full mix from the front, just vocals from behind. He also has a pair of wedges for his piano and another pair for the keyboards. They're a good wedge - Bryan was sponsored by L-Acoustics way back when and has stuck with them; he has eight of his own.

Expanding on the wedge theme, May reveals: "There are three wedges I like: the 115s, Clair Brothers AM12s, and the M4 and M2 from d&b. Bryan likes a full house mix - all I push and pull is the sax and guitar. I do mostly know when he's going to move across stage. I did try him again on in-ears for the summer 2010 leg - he used them once for two songs in rehearsals in 2001 - but they're not for him. I think the thing is, and it's true for many musicians, especially the older ones who've been brought up on wedges: with in-ears you can't walk away from it. With a wedge set-up Bryan can step away from a guitar solo to exactly the point where he's comfortable. Same with his rear wedges, if he just needs a little lift of his own voice, he can just lean back for a second."

We all got to lean back for a second - well, 90 minutes actually - but it was a blissful backward glance to a remarkably varied and influential musical legacy.

