

SCOTTISH ROCKERS BIFFY CLYRO WERE ON A ROLL IN 2010 AND THEIR FIRST-EVER UK ARENA TOUR WAS NO EXCEPTION

RACHEL ESSON REPORTS FROM MANCHESTER...

ARENA ROCK REVOLUTION



Upon arrival at Manchester Central Arena to meet the crew on Biffy Clyro's concise eight-date tour of UK arenas, I found them battling against the elements. The early December onslaught of snow and below freezing temperatures had been causing problems not only on the roads, but also for some of the production equipment.

Head carpenter Glenn Binley explained that the oil in the hydraulic lift had frozen and that they were having to run heaters next to it all day in order to thaw it out. "Hydraulic oil freezes and turns to the consistency of candlewax in the pipes," he said. "We had to steal the heater from the lighting team who weren't too happy!"

The Scottish rockers have been releasing records for around 11 years, steadily climbing the charts before hitting the big time with their fourth album, *Puzzle*, in 2007, which went gold in the UK. But it's their latest, *Only Revolutions* — nominated for a Mercury Music Prize and reaching No.3 in the UK chart — coupled with

greater airtime play on the likes of Radio One, that has seen their fanbase grow to the point where they can sell out a UK arena tour.

Supported by Futureheads and the unsigned Holy State, Biffy played hits like 'Mountains' and 'That Golden Rule', alongside new material such as 'Many Of Horror' and 'Bubbles'.

BEATING THE BUDGET

Biffy Clyro's management and tour manager Neil Anderson were introduced to The Production Office (TPO) whilst they were working on the Muse tour, when the band appeared as a support act at Wembley Stadium. TPO was subsequently booked to produce Biffy Clyro's eight-date tour and production director Keely Myers was very pleased with what they'd achieved within the given budget.

"If you haven't got a long period of time on the tour, often your start up costs are more than what's being generated in income. It's the first arena tour for Biffy and everyone really wants to

make it work for them as they're a great bunch of people," she said.

"We've tended to do higher end arena tours and I think the assumption is that we don't do smaller productions, but in fact we do tours on every scale with varying budgets. We've approached this production differently and have provided one of our 60' x 40' standard rolling stages to help out with meeting budgets."

With minimal pre-production time and a week's scheduled rehearsals at Wembley Arena, the team from TPO, which also included Paddy Hocken, Steve Spencer, Zoe Buttling and Phil Broad, called upon the resources of their core suppliers (Brilliant Stages, Neg Earth, XL Video and Skan PA) in order to prepare as much of the set as possible before rehearsals.

TPO worked with set designer Misty Buckley, who has worked on many gigs in TPO's portfolio including the recent Tokio Hotel tour, and lighting designer Oli Metcalfe. Together they produced a design influenced by the ideas of



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magicians and illusionists, and a stage that resembled that of an old, grand Victorian theatre. The main stage and centre thrust into the audience was decorated as a monochrome infinity floor, whilst upstage hung theatrical red drapes, covered for the first half of the gig by white sails which then lifted, with a huge, gold-framed mirror (made by Steel Monkey) acting as a projection surface in the middle of the set, rigged on two Kinesys hoists.

“Misty has been great in coming up with ideas, creating sketches and models, and bringing it all together,” said Myers. “It evolved into not going too theatrical and instead bringing in a bit more production that the band are used to in order to balance it with a rock’n’roll look.

“Malcolm Birkett has also been fantastic. He worked with Misty to produce CAD renderings of her drawings and the overall set.”

Brilliant Stages built all the on-stage risers and carried out further modifications to the TPO stage specifically for the show. “We’d normally build bunkers for the tech wings but on this we didn’t have the budget, so Brilliant came up with the plan to use castors that attached to standard 30.5cm truss [supplied by Neg Earth] and 8’ x 4’ decks [supplied by TPO], so their brain power has helped us a lot. Brilliant Stages always do a fantastic job,” said Myers.

Binley, who headed up TPO’s trusted carpenter team along with Scott Turnbull and Magnus Harding, unloaded the two and a half truckloads of kit and built the stage for each gig.

Aico Boshoven from Mojo Barriers in Holland managed the implementation of all the 1m aluminium barricades that lined the front of the

stage and thrust, as well as helping out with the set up of soft goods.

“Glenn is a funny guy and we make a great team,” he said. “I think that’s why we’ve been put together and why we’ll be working for TPO on the Take That tour in 2011.”

“Brilliant very kindly let us set up the stage and let our cars do all the tweaks they needed to do with our rolling stage. We also did lots of tests with the drapes down at their warehouse and at LH2 Studios, when Dan Wiseman from Neg Earth came down to assist us, which was really helpful as we went into rehearsals with a clear idea of how we were going to achieve everything,” said Myers.

The red drapes and sails were on a Kinesys hoist control system provided by Neg Earth, who also supplied all the truss and rigging. The set

also included a High Speed Roll Up system containing a laser voile, from Showtex.

Head rigger Phil Broad, who often takes up the role of production manager for TPO, as he did recently with Tokio Hotel, said: “Neg Earth are great; they are very easy to work with and amenable. They provided the very adaptable Kinesys hoist control system, operated by one of their guys, Luke Radin.”

SAVING TRUCK SPACE

Also helping to ease pressure on the budget was a new double decker truck belonging to supplier Stage Truck. Gary Workman (lead truck driver), managed the eight trucks on the tour. Instead of needing the usual one and a half trucks to pack the PA, one double decker could do the job.

Stage manager Paddy Hocken explained



Right, clockwise from below left: Production assistant Zoe Butling; head rigger Phil Broad; Neg Earth flight cases already unpacked; Stage Truck’s new hydraulic lift truck; the carpenter team — (top row) Magnus Harding & Aico Boshoven (bottom row) Scott Turnbull & Glenn Binley, with stage manager Paddy Hocken far right.

Above, clockwise: Neg Earth supplied lightbulb feature surrounds the band on the B stage; the video team, Fergus Gordon, Bruce Selkirk & Wolfgang Schram; video director Paul 'Eggy' Eggerton; video world; a Barco FLM projector; lighting operator/programmer Alex Luthwaite; lighting operator Jamie Thompson.



"The XL8 and the Pro6 are getting very close to the analogue sound, but there are still too many lights and screens!" FOH engineer Jonathan Lucas

that all the control gear, cable, looms and cases were rolled on to the top shelves, which was then hydraulically lifted up to roof height making room for all the speaker carts underneath.

Hocken and the TPO team have previously used Stage Truck's double deckers on the Muse tour and will use them again on the Take That tour next year.

Stage Truck's Ian Williams commented: "The double deckers are not a new concept as they have been around for many years and used mainly by the major supermarket chains. However as far as we are aware they are new to this industry and we believe they are a huge asset to a tour.

"On the few tours we have placed them on this year they have worked extremely well."

VARI*LITES & VISUALS

Lighting design for the show was by Oli Metcalfe, who then handed over to programmer and LD Jamie Thompson, who has worked with Biffy for around five years, following his stint with Feeder. He said the look was very much of a "big rock show", and that the biggest challenge was to ensure the lighting didn't bleach out the video and vice versa.

The lighting rig was predominantly Vari*Lite with VL3500 Washes, VL3000 Spots and VL500s, along with Martin Atomic Strobes. "The 3500 is fairly new and they're brighter than any light we have," said Thompson, "they're really

reliable with good optics."

Over the end of the B stage was a circular truss rigged with VL500s and strings of 'Socapex' light bulbs that hung low over the stage like a chandelier of festoon lighting (produced by Neg Earth) — an inexpensive but highly effective addition to the set.

"This is my first time with Neg Earth and they're all really good guys. Dave Ridgway has been really helpful; they let me go down and play round with WYSIWYG, hopefully I will do more stuff with them in the future," he continued.

A grandMA2 lighting desk at FOH triggered the lights and also the Catalyst that stored the video content that fed the projectors. Thompson hadn't used the console before, so embarked on two weeks of intensive learning before the tour. "It's a fantastic desk but I think it will be even better in a couple of years once they've ironed a few things out," he commented.

"Most of the show is pre-programmed because of the video, two stages and all the different elements. This is one of the reasons why we used the grandMA2 because it's really good for cue stacking."

Thompson was assisted by lighting operator Alex Luthwaite, crew chief Ian Lomas, and technicians Antti Saari, Mark Cooper, Luke Radin and Andy Thompson all from Neg Earth.

XL Video provided a full HD video system and projectors for the tour, and also put forward video director Paul 'Eggy' Eggerton, who has

handled Stereophonics and Kasabian in the past. Eggerton used the in-built effects on the Grass Valley Kayak to add distortion to the I-Mag projection screens that flanked left and right of the stage, because, as he said, "for a band like this you need to cut it up and make it a bit raw".

These screens were fed content from the four cameras; one handheld behind the drums, two in the pit and one on a long lens at FOH, via a Barco FLM projector each side that rear-projected on to the screen.

There were also two Barco FLMs per side feeding camera shots and pre-recorded content from the Catalyst on to the sails on stage.

Said Eggerton: "There's also a locked off camera at the back which is cast on to the central mirror so that it looks like the mirror is seeing out into the crowd." Video world back stage was manned by XL senior engineer Wolfgang Schram, whilst Fergus Gordon was in charge of projection and Bruce Selkirk was on cameras.

ANALOGUE SOUND

I found FOH engineer Jonathan Lucas and Skan crew chief Lloyd Williams at a very spacious and decorative mix position, which featured one of the last-ever produced Midas XL4 consoles in all its analogue glory.

Although Lucas embraces digital on occasion, he prefers to use the Midas XL4 as he explained: "When there aren't too many changes



Above: FOH sound engineer Jonathan Lucas & crew chief Lloyd Williams at the XL8 console; Lucas' effects racks; monitor engineer Dan Speed with the Midas Pro6.

that need programming so you can do it on the fly without having the converters that are always a compromise, it's a great place to be. It doesn't feel like you're flying a spaceship, it feels like you're mixing a gig," he said.

"Sonically analogue and digital boards are getting closer and closer. The XL8 and the Pro6 are getting very close to the analogue sound, but there are still too many lights and screens!" Lucas ran the Midas XL4 with a Heritage stretch running five triggers and effects returns.

The entire audio system was provided by Skan, which included its flagship d&b J-Series line array. "We have over a stadium's worth of it now; thanks to Muse we had to up our stock," said Williams.

"Even though this is an arena tour, we did two gigs which weren't arenas. At Hull Ice Rink there was no height or weight in the roof so I flew eight boxes, then Plymouth Pavilion was like a theatre gig. So in regards to where you can put the J-Series, it's massively versatile.

At Manchester Central, there were 12 J8s per side on the main hang, along with four J12s on the bottom of the hang to achieve the coverage needed down at the front. The side hangs consisted of six J8s and two J12s on the bottom for width around the side.

"In this venue in particular everyone says don't do side hangs," explained Williams, "but it's much cleaner to get them up and point them down and have really lovely coverage over the front."

Skan supplied a full sub package including six J-Subs a side in stacks of three and four B2s either side of the thrust in stacks of two, with a couple of Q7s fills to cover the inside of the thrust and a few at the end of the B stage for added coverage.

CLAMPED MICS

The stage looked surprisingly free from mic stands and Lucas explained that this was because the team from Skan had custom made mic clamps to attach on to the drum kit, whilst the vocal mic stands were made out of cymbal hardware to be really sturdy. "The clamps fit on to the drum hardware instead of positioning a mic stand around it, so everything moves together and it looks very cool," said Lucas.

Although Biffy own most of their mics, Skan provided the extras needed. The band mostly use Sennheiser evolution 900 series mics. "Sennheiser have looked after us really well, their gear is very good and sturdy, and they gave them to us at the right price," commented Lucas. There was also a Beyer M88 for off-stage bass and an Audix OM7 for Ben Johnstone's vocal.

He continued: "We've overcome more and more. When all the guitars were on stage it was a nightmare as Si's [Simon Neil — guitar, lead vocals] rig is very loud and he likes the sound that comes from everything being on the verge of breaking or catching fire!

"We've now got the amps off-stage and the boys are on the Ultimate Ears UE11 IEM moulds for the first time, so the stage is quieter and

there's a cleaner signal meaning I can get away with more compression."

Lucas was running minimal scenes on the desk, preferring to mix on the fly. There was a scene for the support act, a scene for the Biffy gig and one scene for a section of the track 'Boom Blast And Ruin'.

He explained: "It has a filtered distorted bit at the beginning and the middle. I try and re-create the track so I've programmed a scene that has everything active knocked out of the mix and sent to a distortion unit. It comes back in a group so you can punch for the distorted bit then hit it and the normal mix comes back. I'm using a Yamaha SPX990 distortion setting for this — the grainier, the better as that's the effect required."

Lucas had an array of effects units that included an Eventide H3000 harmoniser, Manley ELOP, Manley Variable MU and XTA graphic EQ.

"Across the mix we've got the Avalon 747 which is just doing a bit of EQ and protection on the way in, which is Lloyd's department too; that's the beauty of this gig, I can just do the mix and Lloyd wonders about making sure the rest of the room is doing what it should," he said.

MIXING MONITORS

Although the band were now on in ear monitoring, Skan provided d&b M2s and C7 Subs to boost the low end energy on stage.

Stood next to his Midas Pro6, monitor engineer Dan Speed said: "We've done a whole run of festivals with this desk and it's been a great success so far. The sound quality is great and it's easy to use; you can set it up in such a way that you're not going to confuse yourself and it sounds like a Midas.

"We've ended up with a scene for every song. Originally I was going to mix it on the fly but when we got into rehearsals and we started using bits of track and click track it got to the point where there were too many cues for me to operate. It was the first time I'd used the automation and so far so good." Speed was assisted by tech Chris Martin.

Popcorn provided catering, whilst Phoenix supplied the buses. Keely Myers reflected on the production: "All of the suppliers have done an absolutely sterling job. Dave Ridgway, Des Fallon, Chris Fitch, Paul Hattin, Wendy Deans, Will Johns and Brilliant Stages have pulled loads out of the bag for the tour and come together to make it work. They have fully supported TPO and the band to achieve this.

"I'm very proud of what we've managed to produce here, it's a fantastic looking show. It's just a shame that the tour is so short as we're



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Keely Myers

into our stride and then it will finish, but we look forward to the next one!"

It's not the end of the road for Biffy Clyro, who will be supporting Muse in Australian venues this year.

With a Teen Award for 'Bubbles' (Best Song) now under their belt and a recently-announced headline slot for *Sonisphere 2011* at Knebworth — not to mention *X Factor* winner Matt Cardle taking 'When We Collide' (a cover of Biffy's 'Many Of Horror') to the Christmas No.1 spot — the band's commercial appeal continues to grow. Only time will tell whether they have the impetus to sell out a bigger arena tour.

TPI

*Photography by
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