



ROYAL BLOOD

As Royal Blood embarked on the arena run of their latest campaign, TPI rejoined the tour to discover what's changed and how the band is setting audience's hearts racing with their biggest shows to date...





For Brighton duo Royal Blood - bassist/frontman Mike Kerr and drummer Ben Thatcher - this year has been a supersonic ride. From their initial run of modest underplay gigs to full-scale arena shows (via a summer of hugely successful festival appearances) the band - and their production crew - have consistently stepped up to the mark, delivering bigger, bolder performances with each new iteration of the show.

When TPI first met up with the tour in May, the team were just a few weeks in to the campaign's initial underplay run, looking ahead with relish to the challenges of ramping up the show's 'encapsulation' aesthetic to a more festival-friendly scale, before evolving it further to fill the cavernous spaces of the arena run. Flash-forward to the end of November and the view from FOH has expanded significantly. It was here, fine-tuning the show for the second date of the band's UK arena run, that TPI rejoined Lighting Designer Sam O'Riordan to find out how this evolution had progressed.

The initial lighting concept for the underplay run was born out of a collaboration with Tim Routledge, with whom O'Riordan had been lucky enough to work on a handful of past

projects. "I like working with Tim because I feel like we don't really disagree much, if ever!" said O'Riordan. "In fact, I don't think we've disagreed once on any element of this design; it's nice when you meet a creative that you actually gel with."

Beyond that, Routledge's wealth of experience proved a massive boon to the process. "Tim's been there, done that, got the t-shirt, so he's anticipating things I may not, which has been really great."

As their starting point, the pair looked for a way of connecting the presence of a simple two-piece on stage with the intense wall of sound they are able to create each night. Through an evolution of ideas, the designers landed on the concept of encapsulating the performers in a constantly shifting vitrine of light, creating a volume of space more appropriate to the scale of the music produced and at the same time intensifying focus on the singer and drummer within. On the underplay gigs, a back wall of Martin by Harman Scepton pillars and a more permeable front wall of floor-mounted lasers were used to create the desired effect, but it was clear something much more powerful would be required for the step up to festival stages and arena spaces.

"It's nice when you meet a creative that you actually gel with..."
LD Sam O'Riordan on Tim Routledge

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FOH Engineer Phil Jones on his Midas PRO X.

The first challenge was to translate the Scepteron back wall into something that could compete with the daylight conditions of the festival run, retaining a thematic link, but beefing it up for an outdoor crowd. Their solution was to replace the clinical Scepteron lines with thick vertical banks of 48 Portman P2 Hexaline. "We heard Portman were releasing the P2 pretty early on, so we got in touch with them and straight away they were excited about being involved in the project," recalled O'Riordan. The tour's lighting supplier Neg Earth was equally enthused and immediately purchased the banks of Hexaline required to bring the concept to life. "Neg Earth have been absolutely fantastic; they've really looked after us," said O'Riordan. "They really believe in the project and they've been really involved throughout. Their support has been brilliant."

In addition to providing the required punch, the Portmans are built into a rig that concertinas into a neat package, making load-in and transport relatively swift and painless. Consequently the crew were able to create maximum onstage impact with the minimum of turn-around time, an advantage carried through to the tour's arena dates.

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LD Sam O'Riordan

NEXT-LEVEL LASERS

Rehearsals at LH2 Studios provided a useful test space in which to fine tune the next iteration of the tour, as the arrival of the arena run opened up new opportunities for the lighting designers to step things up a level - not least in the reintroduction of an up-scaled laser system. On the earlier gigs ER Productions Laserblades had been used. "That worked really well and everyone loved it," said O'Riordan. "It gave us the green light to go full steam ahead and plan for the arena run along those lines."

For this latest iteration, 120 ER Productions Kinekt's are flown in a new pre-rig truss above the band - a square comprising 30 Kinekt's on 12m x 2.88m pre-rig truss sections. Together they create a similar effect to the Laserblades with the added advantage of providing 10 times the power while remaining extremely versatile and small. Thanks to the Kinekt's' high speed x/y scanning and the use of the recently launched Beyond server, O'Riordan has a much wider pallet of options available to him, as ER Productions Co-founder Ryan Hagan explained. "Each Kinekt has a gyro that was originally created as a safety feature for large installations," he said. "Our crew can rig 200-300

lasers and return the next day, easily identifying if a fixture has moved by a fraction. We're then able to bring the unit back in line without even turning it on. We can intercept the x/y position signal, so the gyro controls the movement. The default position is set to vertical and will stay in that fixed position even if the Kinesys truss is tilted and regardless of the effects we are running."

Thanks to this new laser set-up, the laser box is able to morph in a whole new range of interesting ways, at times bristling to the throb of the music or rippling in waves around the Royal Blood boys below. "What's nice about his gig is it feels like ER have really stepped up to help us," said O'Riordan. "It's not like we've just got a couple of lasers scattered across a stage; there's a very specific look we're trying to achieve and ER have really pushed through to make it work for us. It's exciting to be able to work with a company that's up for trying new things."

For Hagan, seeing the results of their hard work has been equally rewarding. "Royal Blood's team are great to work with," he said. "Sam and Tim are always creating innovative designs that really push boundaries of production technologies like lasers."

VIDEO VÉRITÉ

The arena stage allowed Routledge and O'Riordan to further develop their 'encapsulation' concept with the addition of a square video ceiling flown on a separate kinesys rig within the laser truss. Video Design supplied the screen - 40sqm of 6mm LED - as well as disguise (formerly d3 Technologies) gx 2 servers and a full HD



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camera package based around Carbonite Black Plus switcher. "Video Design are a really smart outfit: all their rigging, their systems, their racks - they're just a really tidy firm. And all the operators and video crew they've supplied have been top of their game," noted O'Riordan.

Prepared video content has been deliberately avoided in favour of a pure, live feed from a mix of fixed and handheld cameras. "For me, content feels better suited to pop music, with its backing tracks and the like," said O'Riordan. "What I like about this is that it's a completely live experience. You've got the boys on the stage, and everything they do is live. Every sound you hear is Mike hitting a string or a pedal, or Ben bashing a drum, and everything you see is triggered live as well."

While IMAG and video ceiling both share the same feed, Notch is used to add an extra layer of texture - a visual buzz - to the content above the stage. "Notch and disguise has married up with this gig so well," enthused O'Riordan. "We're not using the servers to anywhere near their full extent - a lot of it is timeline programming - but they host Notch really well and it's stable. Notch has been perfect for this gig, because it feeds into that whole live experience."

DRIVING SPOTS & MOVING HEADS

With the conceptual light cage suitably scaled up, the rest of the lighting design is served by a simple but effective package of strobes and moving heads. "We haven't gone mad with

different fixture types," explained O'Riordan. "I don't like to throw a load of different products at it; I prefer to keep things relatively straightforward, keep it quite uniform."

Each bank of Portmans is edged top and bottom with SGM Q-7 strobes while a set of TMB Solaris Flares edge the main laser truss. This central truss also supports several Robe Spiider LED washes. "They've been fantastic - they're a great wash light and, with that 'flower effect' centre, they're a great effects light too," O'Riordan commented.

Robe BMFLs are placed along the side of the stage and behind the Portmans, with 2 BMFLs on the main rig acting as followspots for the band on stage. These are each operated by a remote POV video camera feed to a tripod mounted Robe RoboSpot controller, positioned backstage. "I'm such a big fan of it," said O'Riordan. "I hate being on comms during a show, so having a system like this - where I can control all of the parameters of the head from the console, but then give a followspot operator pan and tilt - is fantastic. And it works really well, because whenever I pull up that fader on Mike or Ben, I know for a fact that they're going to have a light on them." Indeed, so intuitive is the arcade-like RoboSpot kit, that some of the Fly By Nite truck drivers have been mucking in and taking on control duties. "They like it because it's a fun new gadget to learn, and I love it because it avoids all those complications you get with manual followspots, like blackout cues

"Mike, the lead singer, is a big fan of Midas stuff..."
Phil Jones, FOH Engineer



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not being bang on and even people falling asleep mid-show.”

At various points in the show, the performers might stroll down a short catwalk that juts into the crowd. To avoid having to put up an extra bit of truss, the BMFL followspots take on the role of backlights and a series of Robert Juliat’s new Dalis foot kickers around the catwalk’s edge are used as key light, (“They’re absolutely fantastic,” said O’Riordan).

All lighting is controlled from a MA lighting grandMA2 (with a second for backup), with three MA NPU handling the processing required for the intimidating parameter count taken up by all those lasers.

HEART POUNDING AUDIO

Like O’Riordan, FOH Engineer Phil Jones has been working with the band since the very start of their career. “I’ve been friends with the boys for years, so this is only the second tour ever that I haven’t been production manager or tour manager,” he explained. “We started out in pubs and now we’re in arenas, which is kind of crazy, but it’s great.”

With the band’s stock skyrocketing thanks to both commercial and critical success - not to mention a host of stellar endorsements from the likes of Jimmy Page and Dave Grohl - Jones has had the freedom to really push the boat

out for the arena run. “Ramping it up to arenas is really about making sure those two boys on stage sound as big as possible,” he said. “With two people, there’s nowhere for anything to hide, so it’s got to be in your face and it’s got to be good. I’ve been lucky enough that we have the budget to spec some posh toys and make it sound really great.” He continued: “One of the main challenges is getting it loud. And it is loud - it’s balls-out rock ‘n’ roll for an hour and a half - but getting it loud so that it’s comfortable as well, that’s the tricky part.”

Helping to hit that loud and clear sweet spot is Britannia Row, which provided all audio kit, including a PA comprised of L-Acoustics K-Series. For the larger shows, 14 K1’s with 6 K2 downs are used per side for the main hangs, behind each of which are hung eight K1SBs. 16 K2 per side are used as side hangs, with up to 24 KS28’s on the floor. The whole system is powered by 12 LA 12Xs in a very posh new Brit Row amp dolly (“it looks good and it goes in quick,” said Jones). For some of the smaller stops on the European leg of the tour, the K1’s were omitted, with the K2 and K1SBs used as the main hang instead.

“I’ve been a fan of Brit Row for years, so I try and use them for everything I do,” said Jones. “The backup’s there, the kit’s good, it all works.

“We started out in pubs and now we’re in arenas, which is kind of crazy, but it’s great...”
Phil Jones, FOH Engineer

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Lighting Designer Sam O'Riordan on his MA Lighting grand MA2.

They're great, we really get looked after." Particular praise goes to System Tech Johnny Kierle, PA and Monitor Tech, Shaun Ayles, and third man James Collie. "Shaun has really been the star of the show as far as the Brit Row crew goes - he started with us in April and knows the gig inside out - and Johnny Keirle has come in as a new systems guy recently and really saved the day, he's been brilliant."

Up at FOH, Jones uses a Midas PRO X and an extensive array of outboard. This includes Midas XL 42 dual channel pre-amp and BSS DPR 901 Dynamic EQ for both vocal channels; a Neve 33609 on left-right; an old dbx 162; a newer dbx 160SL on some of the guitars; and an Avalon 747 for the backing vocalists who join the band on stage for a handful of songs. Effects come courtesy of a TC Electronics D2 and two Reverb 4000's, a Bricasti M7 reverb and an Eventide H3000. "I don't go in for Waves or UAD plugins; I don't really want computers involved," explained Jones. "I own quite a lot of this stuff and I think it sounds better - and its tactile, which for me is really important. At this size of venue, I have the real estate for a double 24U rack, so it all goes in really quickly."

A second Midas PRO 2 is used by

"From Phil Jones through to Paddy Hocken over the summer and now Ian Calder and Steve Chapman, it's been great working with them all..."
Matt Jackson, Fly By Nite

Monitor Engineer, Dave Bennett. According to Jones, the console is a firm favourite: "I love it, and the band loves it - in particular Mike, the lead singer, is a big fan of Midas stuff. He doesn't want to hear anything else." Jones continued, "We're big advocates of Midas here. I have no problems and we get excellent back up. In fact, I had an issue the other day, sent them an email and I got a call from support in less than five minutes. They're good people."

An additional 2 L-Acoustics KS28's and 3 ARCS IIs are used for fill at stage right for singer Mike Kerr, and drummer Ben Thatcher uses a Porter and Davies buttkicker. Shure PSM1000's and Cosmic Ears CE6P moulds are used for in-ears and, despite the band being boxed in by video and light, RF has proved problem free. "The PSM1000's are the Rolls Royce of in-ears, I guess," noted Jones. "We were using the 900's, then we stepped it up and everyone's really happy with it."

A diverse pool of mic brands includes Shure SM58's for main vocals, Audio-Technica AT4050 and AT4047 on drum overheads and guitar backline, plus a selection of kit from DPA, Neumann and Beyerdynamic.

FILLING UP & MOVING ON

While many tours may boast a tight-knit family feel, for the Royal Blood team this line rings especially

true. With a core of firm friends at its heart (many of whom have had front row seats for the band's meteoric rise), a cohesive can-do spirit seems to be spread thick throughout the crew, helped along by satisfied stomachs and deft driving.

Transport, provided by Phoenix Bussing, comprised a crew and a band bus for the European leg, with an extra crew bus added for the UK run. "We've been out with Royal Blood for the last couple of years, so we have a pretty good relationship with them," explained Phoenix's Paul Hattin. Having worked with tour manager Steve Chapman since his Arctic Monkeys days, and with production manager Ian 'Chip' Calder since the early '80s, Hattin was quietly confident that this outing would be plain sailing. "There are never any problems working with Steve and Chip; everything goes very smoothly, everything gets sorted very quickly. It's one of those tours where you sort out everything beforehand, the busses leave and you don't hear anything until the busses come back, so it's really nice to work with them."

Fly By Nite's Matt Jackson is himself a fan of the band. He first got in touch with Phil Jones and the team back when Royal Blood were just starting out. From their first single-truck tour together, the Fly By Nite contingent has steadily grown with the band's success. Most recently, the three trucks that went out on the European leg of this current tour have been augmented by a further four back in the UK (including half a truck of merchandise), with an eighth sent over to pre-rig the Dublin show to accommodate an overnight from Nottingham.

"They're a great team," commented Jackson. "From Phil Jones through to Paddy Hocken over the summer and now Ian Calder and Steve Chapman,

it's been great working with them all." In particular, Jackson has been impressed by how well the entire crew look out for each other - such as when caterers Popcorn made a cake to celebrate Lead Driver Simon Lea's birthday. "It's nice when they do little touches like that," he said. "It goes a long way to making people feel valued as part of the team."

Above all there seems to be a solid sense of pride in being part of the Royal Blood success story - and in particular this latest chapter of arena dates and the next-level status they symbolise. Judging by the lost-for-words grins on stage, the significance is clearly not lost on the band, or indeed on the backstage crew that make it happen each night. As O'Riordan neatly summed it up: "I've worked with these guys since some of their first shows in some tiny clubs in Brighton, so to watch them 4 years later playing the biggest arenas in the country is just phenomenal."

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