

LIGHT & SOUND INTERNATIONAL • FEBRUARY 2022
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GARY BARLOW




I've told this tale once before, when I first reviewed a Gary Barlow solo show for this magazine (see *LSi* February 2013), but it's well worth re-telling. Back in the mid 1990s, my wife and I were re-acquainting ourselves with London, having returned from a stint living and working in the US. Standing in line to enter The Tower of London, I spotted Clem Burke, Blondie's peerless drummer, already inside. Having worked for Burke on the *Parallel Lines* tour of Europe and as his drum roadie, we were well-acquainted. Once we were inside, I sought him out; after all, what was he doing in London? "I'm working for Gary Barlow," he told me. I was visibly surprised; I knew nothing of Gary Barlow's talents bar the two Take That shows I'd previously reviewed for *LSi*. I liked boybands - it was like revisiting the heights of Motown from my own teenage years - wonderful vocals and great dance routines to fantastic three-minute pop

classics written by the powerhouse that was Holland, Dozier, Holland. In my naivety, I had assumed the same combination applied to Take That . . .

"No, no," said Burke. "He's a great songwriter. I'm really enjoying the work; melody, lyric, hook. He really understands what makes for a great pop song." Burke's opinion has been vindicated a thousand-fold, but it didn't fall into Barlow's lap. That's what I find so illustrative about Barlow's success - he has always worked bloody hard for it, something he continues to this day. In speaking to his production team for this tour, it's clear that drive percolated all the way down.

PRODUCTION

For this Gary Barlow tour, the production manager's hat goes to Paddy Hocken, with Chris Vaughan of CV



Steve Moles reports on Gary Barlow's flamboyant
All the Hits tour as it delivers an electric mix of
big-band sound and pure pop might for audiences ...

Productions being preoccupied in Las Vegas with Adele's residency. I first spoke with Hocken back in early October, just before full production rehearsals at Fly By Nite's facility. It was apparent even then, prior the emergence of omicron, that all elements of production had been examined with a weather-eye on maintaining that all-important isolation bubble. How right Hocken was to be so cautious. "That said, this is a big arena production and we will aim to make it feel as normal as possible," he said. "Full-scale and polished; a Gary Barlow tour is nothing if not a quality show. He always wants it to be that way - why should now be any different?"

Considering what transpired across the nation during the run of the tour, it is to the credit of Hocken and the team he assembled that the tour was so successful, and so tumultuously received.

LIGHTING

The show opens emphatically in red and doesn't rest from that area of the spectrum for five numbers. The original concept was quite different, as outlined by lighting designer Tim Routledge below, but the great disruptor impacted this tour as much as it has affected all of our lives. That opening is a bold, defiant gesture; Barlow sets out his stall with aplomb, "you're all going to have a good time". That decision alone throws down the gauntlet, challenging the audience to run with the show's powerful surges.

Where did the powerful opening come from? Routledge offers some perspective: "In a way, this is a postponed tour to introduce the album *Music Played By Humans* [released in 2020] but of course, it has had to evolve over the last two years. Now, it's more an 'all the hits' show; even more

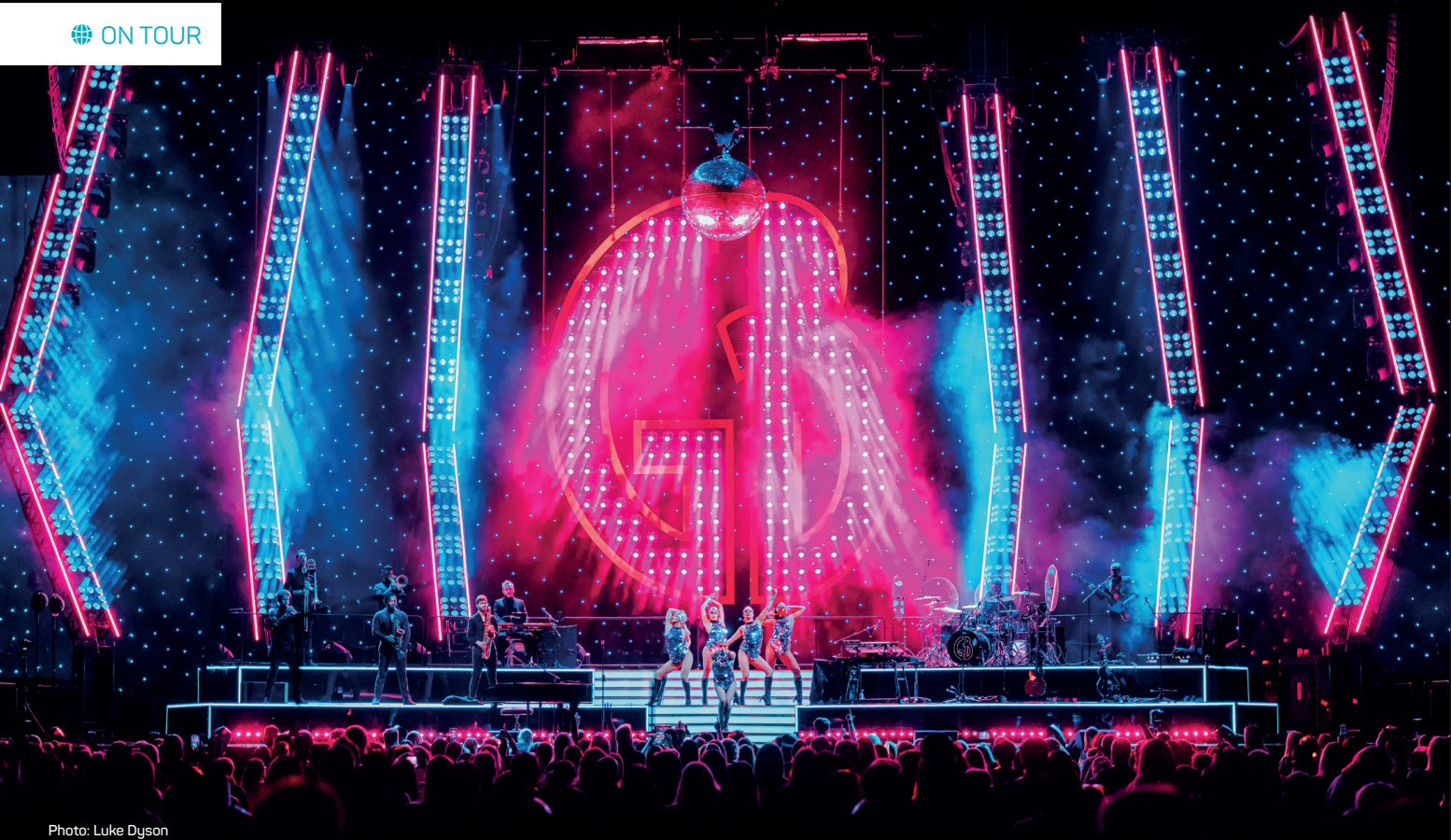


Photo: Luke Dyson

"What makes it worthwhile is that magic moment when the houselights go down. A cliché maybe, but one that always brings up the hairs on the back of my neck . . .

- Tim Routledge

than that in fact, as he has another new album out now [*The Dream of Christmas*, released late 2021]. Misty Buckley [set design] and I have worked together on this new iteration of the tour since June 2021 when the tour changed direction with the arrival of a second pandemic-timed album release, and the show has since become very heavy lighting-wise. Lights are so heavily integrated into the set that it has to be that way of working."

He adds: "I love working with Misty - her detail on set pieces is always second to none; that just makes things look more considered and cohesive. The kick-off point to the show is 'a big band for the modern era', a concept that comes from Gary's imagination. The origins to most of what the show is feeds directly from him." How so? "The show falls into four sections - Vegas, Christmas, a compact B-stage in-the-round segment, and the finale. The first references a classic Las Vegas-style big-band show. Red is the theme, to the extent that Gary wears a red suit and red shoes. It's mainly new songs from the *Humans* album. The band is his normal five-piece, augmented by a six-piece brass section."

Routledge continues: "It's a cold start - there's no big entrance, he walks out in blackout, the spotlight hits him out of the darkness, and he starts to sing a *cappella*. As each line of the first song builds, he introduces the band one by one. That works great for a soft opening. I think that example underlines how Gary has command of what takes place on stage and how we make it look for him. Development is a very direct process; he

speaks to Misty and I, not via his management or an assistant, and he does so regularly."

Can you give us an example? "In terms of Gary communicating the direction of travel for the show, that is an absolute. For example, he had been working with his stylist Stevie Stewart and had determined the all-red costume right down to the shoes. He brought that original idea to us - that wish to have a red flavour to the first five songs - he wanted bold Vegas."

And the reds are brassy and bright, with the big brass section and dancers in feather headdresses, it oozes Las Vegas at its best. It's not all-red all the time, of course - Routledge relieves the eye with open white to provide the highlights and accents the stage needs.

"That's an intervention from him that gives a strong direction for how to approach a whole section of the show," continues Routledge. "A more detailed example could be one that deals with the specifics of a sequence: the addition of a scenic fireplace on stage and the falling of snow during the Christmas section were directions from him. Misty and I might have selected or suggested all manner of ways to contextualise that section, but he already had the vision, it only remained for us to realise it for him. At the musical level, he keeps us up-to-date about how he is developing the setlist way before and during band rehearsals prior to us going into production. So we know what's coming, the ebb and flow, the light and shade of



Front Elevation



Photos: Luke Dyson

"What's important to me is the absence of rear projection from the system; nothing comes off the back..."

- Gary Bradshaw

He continues: "The whole show is run on a grandMA2 that Tom Young programmes for me on MA3 hardware; he just prefers it as he has moved his muscle-memory to the new hardware. There are several reasons for sticking with the MA2 for running the show, besides it still being the desk of choice in most live concert situations. Rob Gawler, who runs the show for me, is an MA2 devotee, plus Tom couldn't be present all the time at rehearsals, which meant I had to maximise his time. He is unbelievably fast - arguably the fastest programmer out there. I also love James Scott, he programmes a lot for me as well across a number of shows. But Tom and I have worked together for at least seven years on Gary Barlow and Take That shows, so his face fits the show perfectly. That brings a significant impact to the work of building a show, the slang and shorthand we use is refined to a point of hyper-efficiency. Tom also brings great musicality; he has covered Gary for me over the years and knows many if not all the songs. With that skillset he offers up stuff to me in realtime; he's exciting to work with."

And where's the pay-off for Routledge? "Satisfaction for me comes from working with an artist the stature of Gary Barlow. From a more general level, what makes it worthwhile is that magic moment when the houselights go down. A cliché maybe, but one that always brings up the hairs on the back of my neck."

Wrapping up, he says: "For this tour, we left rehearsals already in a good place, but even so, I was surprised by how mad the audience went. You can't beat that feeling. And Gary is in great voice; he's singing better now than when I first toured with him 10 years ago. He's a superb performer at the top of his game; he knows how to deliver. A great songwriter, great singer, writes terrific scores for musicals: he's pure talent, and the reviews have underlined that fact."



SET DESIGN

Although Misty Buckley was unavailable for interview due to the immense workload she is currently under, Paddy Hocken had much to say on her behalf. "She has done an absolutely fantastic job, well-supported by her art director Matt Rees and prop designer, Richard Olivier. Ben Brooks and Jordan Whittemore at TAIT UK really pulled it out the bag for us on the build. They supplied the main stage, apron, lighting shelf, tech bunkers, band risers and camera platforms. The B-stage, a 16ft wide decagon, is fitted with an electric scissor lift for Gary's piano, all finished with Hi-Shine flooring. A combination of rental stock and customised pieces, at a ratio of 80%-20% respectively, made this ecologically-sensible."

Hocken continues: "On the fully bespoke front, TAIT fabricated the 7.5m tall 'GB' sign Tim liked so much; the central steps with opal polycarbonate fascias and gold powder-coated step tread angle detail; magnetic Dibond riser fascias with integrated diffused LED in gold powder-coated channels. The Christmas props include 20-odd giant gift-wrapped presents and a tourable 16ft high dressed Christmas tree. These details, especially on the steps and risers, really enhance the Vegas flavour of the show opening and sustain a polished look throughout."

What about the fireplace? "We wanted it to have a fire with real flames - not the easiest thing to achieve safely," says Hocken. "Marc Webber at ER Productions really impressed us with his solution - being able to have our special effects supplier deliver the whole gag was great. By the time Stephan Saliba from TAIT UK Scenic had added all the finishing touches to it, the piece looked very authentic."

SOUND

Anecdotally, those of an older generation who find rap, hip-hop, grime and drum'n'bass an impenetrable musical form, will be pleased to discover complete relief in the music of Gary Barlow. His ability to access, harness and exploit melody, modulation, harmony and the development of tempo in the structure of his musical output can illustrate many of humanity's strongest emotions. In short, he writes a great pop song.

For this tour, he has assembled his familiar backing musicians who have so ably served both Take That and more recently, Jeff Lynne's ELO; they're a tight unit. Then there's that six piece brass section - he's used brass before, but this is an emphatic swing to the big-band oeuvre that Barlow, aided by the inimitable Mike Stevens MD, pulls off with considerable aplomb. Thus, as with

all other departments, FOH engineer Gary Bradshaw and Steve Lutley on monitors have much to contend with there, on top of dealing with a prolonged absence from the levers of live mixing. Not just business as usual, then?

"Though much is familiar, it has felt different," Bradshaw opens. "Skan PA Hire once again provided its usual fantastic equipment and backup delivered with its familiar crew. I've worked with them a lot. In simple terms, they make my life easy and I think they are the best. Their preparation and attention to detail is faultless; add in the excellence of their crew and they pip everyone. There are several really good companies out there and they all deliver, but there's an almost indefinable edge that comes from when those three core factors work together seamlessly time after time. I must admit the 18 months of absence from work did leave me with a sense of brain freeze, I couldn't tell you if this is a d&b GSL-Series, or KSL at first. What's important to me and to Steve is the absence of rear projection from the system; nothing comes off the back." Just to confirm, it's KSL-Series mains and sides. "Mostly we had mains left and right with side hangs. For the O2 and Manchester, the typically bigger and wider arenas, we had a third rear hang of

V-Series acutely off-stage to complete the coverage. The system sounds great."

What about control, has the DiGiCo SD7 been frozen in time? "Certainly," says Bradshaw. "From lockdown till now, I'd done nothing bar the launch of a new cruise liner in Southampton with Gary on an SD7, and a couple of commercial presentations without him, though the two latter were with the smaller SD10. After such a long break, I was a bit nervous to return to the board. But we had a prep-day at Skan, and after 30 minutes, it all fell to hand just like riding a bike, as the cliché goes."

Was it really that simple? "Key to that was that me and Steve decided to approach this tour with a clean sheet. Previously, we would have gone to what files we had from previous tours, but we drew up a new input list. With those older files, things like the Toms had changed, and stuff was all over the place. Yes, re-doing it all took longer, but proved well worth the effort. I drew up a basic map in Excel: left-hand bank, right-hand bank, etc. Then we used the offline editor to put it in and check it out. On the prep-day, I put the whole thing into the desk manually, just to reinforce the mind-map I held in my head, so it all felt immediately familiar in operation."

What about the new addition to the input chart, the brass section? "Steve and I had worked a big brass section for Kylie some time ago and had great success using the trusted [beyerdynamic] M88 microphone for brass. For this show we needed a slightly different approach because sometimes the brass would play behind music stands in the classic big-band posture, and sometimes be free roaming. The M88 was fine for static but a clip mic was required when running around. We chose the DPA clip mic for brass, I forget the model number, and compared them. Initially I was a little hesitant, as often clip mics can't take the pressure at the bell, but I have to say the DPAs are stunning. So good, in fact, that we quickly decided to drop the M88 and just use the DPAs. No overloading problems and with them running virtually flat, very manageable. Those guys at DPA just get better and better at what they develop."

Bradshaw adds: "For the rest of the band, the only really notable musician technically-speaking is Milton McDonald who uses a Kemper guitar processor and puts everything through it, even his acoustic. So in that sense, it all came together rather quickly once we'd set up the desks."

However, that inclusion of brass calls for a difference in colouration in terms of

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stylistic presentation compared to what we're accustomed to hearing in a Take That concert. Does that all emanate from the band? "Those first five songs all come from the new album, so we had to learn them. They're unfamiliar to the audience as well, certainly in a live context. That's significant; excitement has to be built from a standing start." Quite a brave move by Barlow then?

"Well, they're all big brass numbers yet the clarity of the mics and the addition of a touch of reverb means that Vegas-style big-band sound is there immediately. On top of that, you have to consider the strength of Gary's performance. His audience trusts him to deliver, they expect a good song and know they won't be disappointed. By the time we get to *Pray*, the first of the big hits, Gary has the audience in the zone for a good time and it just keeps getting better."

How has it been working in the bubble? "For us working FOH, we are to some degree already separated from the main body of what is a large and vocal crowd. That's true in the set-up too; it's easy to work within a quite small bubble if you think about what it is you need to do. We are all well-accustomed to the frequent hand-washing and the mask-wearing. Even so, we still lost two brass players for a couple of shows, and a dancer. Rearranging the choreography for that loss sometimes meant resting one of the remaining five dancers for symmetry in some routines, and the brass arrangement also required attention. But it was as simple as muting two channels, sources didn't change even if the content did. Gary and the band were never less than fantastic; it's what the audience deserves and they get it."

Bradshaw clearly holds Barlow's performance in high esteem, which is high praise given the sound engineer has worked with many great frontmen, not least George Michael. Whilst it's a fatuous exercise to compare two stars of their stature, George Michael seemed to have been at the peak of his powers when we sadly lost him. Barlow too, appears to have grown in stature enormously in recent years, and respect for his music and performance is at a high point.

"More than that," Bradshaw says. "From where I sit, he is the easiest guy to work with. He will come out front during rehearsals and listen, and will ask for things directly. On show days, he will come out in the afternoon for a chat, though funnily enough, often he wants to talk about football [both Bradshaw and Barlow are Liverpool FC fans]. The point is, he's

direct, and how an artist gets a point across is important. George was like that. I would say that for Gary it all comes from his love of working, he loves doing it. It's true for any profession, and mine is no different: you produce your best work when you're enjoying the work. In this regard, he's similar to George, and it is lovely to watch."

VIDEO

One of the most notable things about this production is the absence of a large LED wall across the back of stage. Instead, we are treated to a 120ft-wide starcloth - a rather pleasing return to a stalwart stage dressing from a former era. That leaves IMAG and as we'll discover, underlines its contribution to the satisfaction of a large-scale audience. Thus the video package is small but of surprising impact.

"On paper, it did seem a bit weird at first," explains video director, Mark Davies. "To go out on an arena tour with this scale of production and not have LED and content somewhere on stage seemed a touch absent, but actually made it much easier to handle. Normally, you'd pick shots to avoid the screen, especially when you are frequently using close-ups of your frontman, you don't want his or her image on the screen directly behind or you get that awful howl round. OK as an effect, but not to be overdone. Instead, there was this beautiful starcloth giving infinite depth and the stage set was nicely tiered, so many of the shooting angles gave me shots with either the brass, the main band, the dancers, or a combination of them in the background. There's a nice depth to the physical stage as well, so it all worked in my favour."

The equipment is provided by Video Design, a Take That stalwart like Neg Earth and Skan. Davies has a PPU with two manned cameras and three BR Remote CamBall-3s remote control PTZ cameras, all five of them HD, plus Barco projectors for the IMAG. "The screens are the usual fast-fold jobs but we have ladder truss surrounds for them, with drapes added to dress and frame them so the look is distinctly theatrical, much nicer than just two stark rectangles floating in mid-air. With the width of the starcloth, it all looked of a part. I like that sort of attention to detail. The same is true of the equipment - it all stood out for its quality and was really well-packaged. That's a distinct advantage that flows from Video Design; it seems they always provide great packaging, carefully-tailored to whatever production you're working on. Crew-wise, they are quality: we are working in weird times and their crew

made it all feel very normal for me. 'Normal' - who'd have thought that's such an important feeling to have?"

What about the working restrictions? "Working within the bubble didn't really affect us day to day," says Davies. It was a worry when the two brass players got sick; at that moment, it really comes home to you just how fragile the situation is, but we made it bar the very last date. The only direct effect of the bubble regime was days-off when, instead of all going out in a large group for dinner together, we'd just go out in threes or fours and even then, we'd choose a quiet little place down a side street and go and sit in a corner. So it was a bit subdued and we had to push each other to keep things positive and to feel normal. Thankfully, the shows were so great that morale started high and just got higher."

How do you measure the success of a show like this from a video perspective? "Stand-out moments for me were when the audience sang along, and there were quite a few of those. As a general rule, I like to mix close-ups with wide shots, even though it's for IMAG. Yes, the audience you're really addressing, the ones at the back, can see a wide view of the full stage for themselves, but, one: it just looked so lovely and putting

that image to the screens enhances the pleasure, and two: if you stay really tight all the time, the more distant audience will lose touch with the geography of the stage."

That's a point well-made. What else can you do to enhance the experience of those sat at the back or in the nose-bleeds? "For the sing-along moments, I had a Bradley positioned to the side slightly upstage, so when I looked across to Gary, I got a sort of three-quarter reverse shot. That meant he and the first rows of the audience were together in shot. That's very inclusive for the far audience, who can see how much Gary is enjoying himself." They could also see when Gary was interacting with the band or the dancers, an exchange often seen just fleetingly by those sat right at the front. Again, there was that visible sense of enjoyment. As Tim Routledge and Gary Bradshaw commented earlier, it is a very joyous show."

And that's the abiding sense of this tour - great joy in spite of the strictures placed upon it and its audiences. Thanks to Gary Barlow for the good times. 🎵

- www.negearth.co.uk
- www.skanpa.co.uk
- www.taittowers.com
- www.video-design.co.uk

"We had to push each other to keep things positive and to feel normal. Thankfully, the shows were so great that morale started high and just got higher..."

- Mark Davies



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