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Amy Winehouse

at the Manchester Academy

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Amy Winehouse

at the Manchester Academy

words and pictures
by Steve Moles

Tales of the unexpected: By about the fifth song there was something bothering me. Off in the tumult of Manchester Academy I could hear a group of girls chanting, "Amy, Amy, Amy". It just sounded wrong - these were young girls chanting for their idol, it could have been Robbie, or Justin, but it was Amy. Somehow this didn't sit right; this was a show about Cool, capital C well deserved, not the normal scene for such wanton idolatry.

To the teenage chanters, Winehouse is rebellious role model personified; to the 20- and 30-somethings that make up most of her audience, she is sexy alpha female - a shallow take really. Winehouse is none of these things, not in essence. She produces classic jazz-tinged smoky R&B - think Nina Simone, think Ray Charles arrangements, but don't think this is just some British Christina with attitude. She's been portrayed by the press as a wolf (admittedly in her own wolf's clothing), but what she's really about is reminding us all of a neglected era - when young men wore tight silvery suits, girls wore beehives, and gangsters thought drugs were a bad influence on the youth and preferred protection and intimidation as a means to make a living . . .

Sound

For me, everything about this show was perfect. The Academy is relatively small, and thus very atmospheric in the dark and dingy sense. Contact distance between artist and audience was close, sound (and lights) had only to honestly communicate what already existed, but therein lays a conundrum. This is amplified lounge music, and as such, when you put it into a concert setting, no matter how small, something more is needed to transmit the essential 60s R&B idiom.

Production manager and FOH sound man Dave Swallow has been with Amy and her band since September '06, not long by any measure, yet already he's had significant influence. "Most of the crew is new. I mixed for Goldie Looking Chain (GLC) in the past, which is where I met tour manager Tom Stone, who brought me on board for this. That in turn led to me bringing in Chris Bushell [also GLC] for lighting design, and Will Hitchings for monitors."

In fact, Swallow has something of a contemporary female artist speciality, having recently mixed for Corinne Bailey Rae, "which was when I had to get Will to mix FOH for GLC, though in fact I started with GLC as their monitor man myself."

This was getting confusing, but one thing was clear, here was a man who's seen life from both ends of the multicore. "I think it's good to explore both sides, eight, nine years ago I was mixing small rock bands - Death From Above, Alex Empire - doing both."

Swallow is in a pretty exposed position on this tour: despite a preference for V-Dosc, Britannia Row (in the shape of Roly Oliver) argued persuasively that this would be too big for such a circuit and asked him try their new Outline Butterfly. "I managed to pop in briefly for one of the BBC Electric Proms shows at the Roundhouse before Christmas - I heard enough to make the decision that I could work with it."

He also has a brand new Digidesign Profile to mix from: was this another act of persuasion by Mr Oliver? "This is my second time out with a digital desk, I used a Yamaha DM2000 for the last GLC tour, I was going to ask for a Midas H3000 on this, but then I did a one-off show at the London Forum for the Sugarbabes with a [Digidesign] D Show. I'd seen the D Show previously on Corinne: I'd moved onto tour management and got Gerard Albo to mix house on the recommendation of one of her band members. He was a big Pro Tools adherent and he spent a lot of time showing me round the desk. I was comfortable going into the Sugarbabes show, even though it was my first real operation, and the next morning I woke up and thought - I should stop being scared of these things."

"That was back in December, I've only done five shows so far but I'm very happy, although I am still getting my head around it."

What do you like thus far? "You can get cues so steep, you can knock almost single frequencies, rather than a whole bunch when you EQ on an analogue desk. That's one of the great things, it means you can get hold of something and polish it. The EQ is very sharp, which means for an artist like Amy who needs it, you can make the live mix sound a lot more produced."

The Profile is a much smaller (and lighter, just 45kg) control surface obviously intended for just this circuit. Despite working the same engine, does Swallow find the reduced work surface makes for any compromises? "There were 33 inputs for this show, though I've now reduced that to 29; there's a lot of open mics on stage, two brass players, sax plays alto, baritone and flute; the drummer has two kicks and two snares, a 22" he plays with a 13" snare, and an 18" with a very deep 12" snare which is typically a Latin/60s Black music combination. The desk has two banks of eight channels, then the



Crew from top:

Lighting designer Chris Bushell.

Dave Swallow, production manager.

Gerry Fradley (left) and Jock Bain, systems techs (Britannia Row).

Will Hitchings, monitors.

master section, then another section of eight, so there's immediately 24 channels available - by doing things like putting left and right overheads onto one channel I've got it down to 24. The only thing is it's still in the D domain - just select the gate and off you go - but you can't easily do extensive double gates, though there are ways and means."

Swallow is obviously still at the exploratory stage with the desk, but has already got all the essentials safely on board. But what of this new PA? "We're still playing around with it, but Jock [Bain] my system tech from Britannia Row, has done the Outline course and knows exactly how to put it in. Every gig we change it slightly." Experimenting and exploring? "Exactly - and it's easy. Yesterday at Liverpool Academy we put eight a side, mainly for vertical coverage up to the little balcony there. Here is a similar-sized room capacity-wise, with no balcony, but we've only put in six a side, because we want to drive the system a little harder. What I need for her show is a system that's compact and very clean. I must confess I find it a little hard to bring out the voice; because of the way she sings, it sits exactly where the guitar is, a similar frequency range. But today, with the smaller, harder driven rig I'm finding we get less of that mid-range 800Hz 'honk', and that helps."

Bain also reported that agreement had been made to fly the system at the Glasgow Academy the next day - 12 boxes a side off a half-tonne point. They couldn't have done that with a bigger system, so the compact factor for touring this circuit is beneficial. "Jock and Gerry [Fradley, looking after stage and monitors] are that bit more professional, that's one of the reasons I work with Brit Row a lot, though on this occasion the decision was down to Metropolis." Metropolis provides both artist management and promotion.

With horns and BVs making a substantial contribution to the Winehouse sound, how does Swallow approach the mix? "The band is all quite new, except the bass player. They, like her, are easy to work with; she's nothing like the person portrayed in the press. Mic-wise, the significant things for me are an Audio-

Technica 4050 for the guitar - he's using a Fender Hotrod Deville, played at low level, distortion free means I can fill the rhythm section a lot more. Then, for her voice, I've been using a Sennheiser E935, but today I'm trying an Audix OM7. We'll see how it goes." Why the trial? "Her voice can be harsh in the low range, even 1kHz to 3.5kHz is sometimes a little too harsh. So I want to find something to give more warmth in the low end. I have had good results with the 935, and I've been through the whole Shure range with her, but I'm still experimenting. She's got quite a big range and there's a lot of energy in there - I want to bring that out a bit more."

The stage is set for conventional monitors, and it's quite tight for space up there, does that present any issues? "Not really, I have had a few words with her about mic technique, but that's more about between songs; sometimes she's too relaxed when talking to her audience and forgets about the mic so she drifts off. Otherwise she's very good, never shouts; when she's singing she's right on the ball."

Monitors

Will Hitchings is using a Yamaha M7CL: "Like Dave and the Profile, I've used this desk for the odd gig, but this is my first proper tour with it. They're good desks, the layout is clean and simple - I like that."

Hitchings is older than Swallow, having been mixing sound for over 25 years. When he then told me that he'd mixed Van Der Graf Generators (VDGG) reformation tour in 2005 we went off into an old fart's reverie - my first roadie pay cheque came from VDGG's label Charisma Records in '72 - but we managed to pull ourselves back . . .

"For the last few years I've been house engineer at the Carling Academy Bristol, as well as my outings with GLC. For this tour if I'd gone analogue then the [Midas] H3000 would be my preference; I don't think the Profile would be suitable for monitors. The M7CL is big enough for this, otherwise I'd think about a PM1D."



Hitchings has Turbo' 440 wedges: why no ear system? "She doesn't like them, she's very much a jazz singer and she needs to hear the stage sound. She's intuitive, rarely sound-checks, doesn't practise, and doesn't warm up, so when she hits the stage she needs that intimate local information. So I just set things up beforehand as loud as they will go and sometimes after one or two songs she might ask for a little more of her voice, or a touch of bass or keys, that's what she works from. On stage it's a very acoustic environment, that's how the band work. The TMS 440s are a nice wedge for this kind of work, quite musical. I'd choose either them or the L-Acoustics wedges."

You're also using Flashlight side-fills? "Yes, but not at rock band levels, they're mainly for Amy's voice, and to the other musicians - brass stage right, BV's stage left - rather than clutter the stage with wedges."

What did he think of Swallow's decision to switch mics? "The Audix has good feedback rejection, but has a bit more of a boxy tone. The 935 has been fairly well controlled. Quality-wise, it's slightly nicer than the OM7, but worse rejection."

And the rest of the band? "That's the only thing I don't like about the desk: the drummer has a sub behind him, and I send a mix to his headphone amp, which also takes a click feed. In total I've got six lots of wedges and the sub. I'd like to put 31-band EQ on everything, but the M7CL doesn't have the capacity, so the side-fills are on 15-band. That said, I've never had a scary moment - it's a steady show that doesn't go too fast. How you EQ and balance is what defines the difference between engineers, and I still quite like normal EQ. That's not a comfort thing, the EQ in the desk is fine: it's about accessibility and ease of use, you do have to hunt and peck in the desk."

Hitchings also revealed he'd run monitors on the Glastonbury Jazz Stage for several

years: "In those circumstances you learn something every day. With nine bands a day, you have to organise yourself, keep a clear head, don't do anything in a panic." Which, you'll gather, is a maxim he carries with him to this day.

Lighting

Another first here, though not on the desk front: "It's the first time I've toured with a system from Siyan," said LD Chris Bushell, "though I've done lots of shows with them over the years and had a particularly good time with them at Reading Festival." Despite working with The All American Rejects, Corinne Bailey Rae, and the ubiquitous (for this tour crew at least) GLC, Bushell cites the Winehouse tour as "my first big thing."

He's been with her since September '06. The venues thus far have all been small, so this is not a show design as such, more straight-up concert lighting. That hasn't prevented him from adding stylistic motifs. "As soon as I heard her music I knew it needed a Burlesque look, so I've used as much red drape as we could afford, and red carpet. The carpet is our good fortune really, her record company bought it for the BRIT Awards, and seeing as it was destined for the skip afterwards, we rescued it, crammed it in the truck and escaped into the night." Then he adds: "And the sound guys love it."

Bushell's signature mark is his use of domestic fittings, "living room standard lamps, big red shades with a tasselled fringe. Management were happy to spend the money on soft goods, the lamps took a little more persuasion. After six weeks of hunting, I came up with two models - one cheap, one quite expensive. They let me have the expensive ones."

Bushell uses 100W incandescent bulbs with mirrored caps to prevent light escaping the top. These are a nice effect: there's enough of them on this intimate stage to never appear lost in the wider setting of moving lights and smoke.

Vintners Tales

- How does Swallow find managing production and FOH duties for Winehouse? "I've done production before, and I must admit I really like putting things together, but once we're out on the road I find it less appealing, and by contrast mixing is sweet. If it comes to choice, I like doing sound too much."

- Bushell's first proper tour with Siyan: how has it been? "The support has been excellent, and instrument-wise I got the lamps I wanted, not alternatives, that's why I chose them. There's just my tech' Jake Sullivan and me to put it up every day, and he's been great."

- The Palco Mobile LED flood on a moving yoke was a new lamp for me: was there any advice Bushell would offer on these lamps? "They are quite different from anything else I've used. You can't rush them, the pan and tilt movements are slow; you just have to be patient."

- Swallow does have an off-board dynamics rack out front, sporting the usual suspects: valve pre-amp compressors etc. "The Avalon is my 'get out of jail' card: I did use it for the BRIT Awards, but I've stopped now. Running the show on the Profile, being digital there's no noise at all, so when you put in something with a valve in it you really notice the hiss - or I do. When everything else is so clean it just sounds wrong. So I'm just using the 901 for a bit of compression on her vocals, I haven't got a plug-in for a multi-band compressor on the desk. The Avalon is mine, it might be time for an overhaul."

- The beat is led by the bass guitar rather than the kick drum? "Yes, he uses flat-wound strings which makes for a much more percussive sound, but I do have to pull the kick back a bit to make that work." Percussive it maybe, but there were times when it sounded positively liquid; if there's one adjective that describes what Swallow achieves with his mix it's 'smooth'.

- The catering for this perfect show was provided by Eat to the Beat . . .

“For me, everything about this show was perfect”

“It’s a classic look I strive for, I just went out and bought a big bolt of cloth, I even swag it across the front of the risers, not that most of the audience see this.” But the attention to detail is well made; the extensive swags hung from the back truss - like plunging necklines on velvet ballgowns - really set the tone. Bushell does have two lighting trusses up above, but even these are partially concealed with borders in plush folds of red.

“The other thing was not to make it look too technical: I’ve hidden as much as possible. My main instruments are [SGM] Giotto CMY400s - I’ve 11 of them - and eight [SGM] Palco Mobiles, the pan and tilt LED flood. The Palcos do wonders on the back drape and they’re not too hot.” He also has four eight-light blinders on the floor for some hard back silhouette, and eight ETC Source Four profiles on the front truss to put a pool of light on every performer. “The S4s are just open white, making for a nice contrast with a CTO from the movers.” Using a monochrome look for a 60s motif is a tempting device; Bushell uses it sparingly, allowing these three sources of white light greater impact by interjecting them between songs coloured with dark, saturated hues.

“I’ve also got six MAC 600s on the front: I picked them for their thick, solid light. They’re not as bright as the Giotto’s, but the Giotto Wash is just not as big, fat and wide. The angles are the tricky things, especially tonight with such a low ceiling,” and true enough, he was obliged to change many a base focus from one lamp straight down, to an alternative lamp at a more oblique angle, just to allow enough distance for beam width to expand and cover adequately. I thought this quite effective - didn’t 60s clubs often suffer low ceilings? - perhaps he should always trim low.

“I’m given a free hand with colours, lots of deep reds, pinks and amber, I do tend to keep away from the cold stuff.” Which didn’t prevent him from unearthing some fetching blue/magenta combos that worked especially well against the backcloth. “I’ve managed to find a pop structure to each song, though I have to say her older material is difficult in that it’s - I suppose - a lot more purist.”

“She also twists the set around a lot,” which leads us nicely into desks. “I prefer Avolites to any other desks. The Diamond 4 Elite for this show is ideal; relatively small, it still has all the funky stuff - fixture overlay, that sort of thing. This is the first time on tour with this model, but I’m not busking the show at all. For this tour I’ve decided to keep faithful to my theme, so that if she really breaks big - which we all expect - then I can escalate it.”

Escalation maybe Ms Winehouse’s destiny, but it won’t all be plain sailing. Exiting the back of the building to navigate back to FOH rather than fight my way through the audience, I encountered a group of people leaving, just 30 minutes into the show. One spotted my pass and collared me: “Rubbish” he said. Pardon? “You’re with them,” I was flattered. “I came here expecting more, I’ve heard ‘Rehab’ - a great song, but this was rubbish.”

Therein lies the dilemma: Winehouse has attracted much attention in recent months, culminating in a well-deserved BRIT; but it has come at a cost. The Press has built her up as some kind of rogue female, with her sailors’ tattoos and louche appearance. The irreverent lyrics of her hits do little to dispel this image - though that’s a matter of personal interpretation. With bigger stages beckoning, she’ll need to find ways to carry the disappointed and the teenage chanters.

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Outline's Butterfly System

As this was the first time I'd encountered an Outline Butterfly system, it's worth noting a few listening experiences. During the set by first band of the night, Cherry Ghost (a sort of Western Country Rock band), I was able to easily walk the auditorium and make some measurements. Manchester Academy is a low-ceilinged (approx 7m) box, with hard flat walls, and no soft furnishings of any sort. Half-full at the time (I'd estimate 1,500-1,700 capacity) the temperature and humidity was what you might term normal - unlike an hour later when it had become a hot, sweaty hole.

With a line array stacked on stage there's really little point in assessing at close proximity, a pair of Outline cabs (DVS 12 I believe) set as fills, sat on stage to cover the front rows, so I crossed the room with a dB meter at approximately 10m back from stage, and again at 20m. Source material was easily consistent enough to see even levels left to right, 105dBa slow at 10m, 102dBa at 20m, but over such relatively short distances (for a line array) these observations are pretty meaningless, it's tonality and bandwidth consistency across the horizontal directivity that matter.

Cherry Ghost was not a good example; the band was cut back to a three-piece for a so-called acoustic set. (I say so-called because the rhythm guitarist, for reasons best known to himself, played a heavily distorted Gibson SG through a back-line cabinet that appeared deliberately pointed at centre stage; this in turn forced the sound engineer to struggle with the vocals, but that's enough about that.)

Amy Winehouse's band was altogether a more reasoned musical source, even if negotiating my way through the audience proved

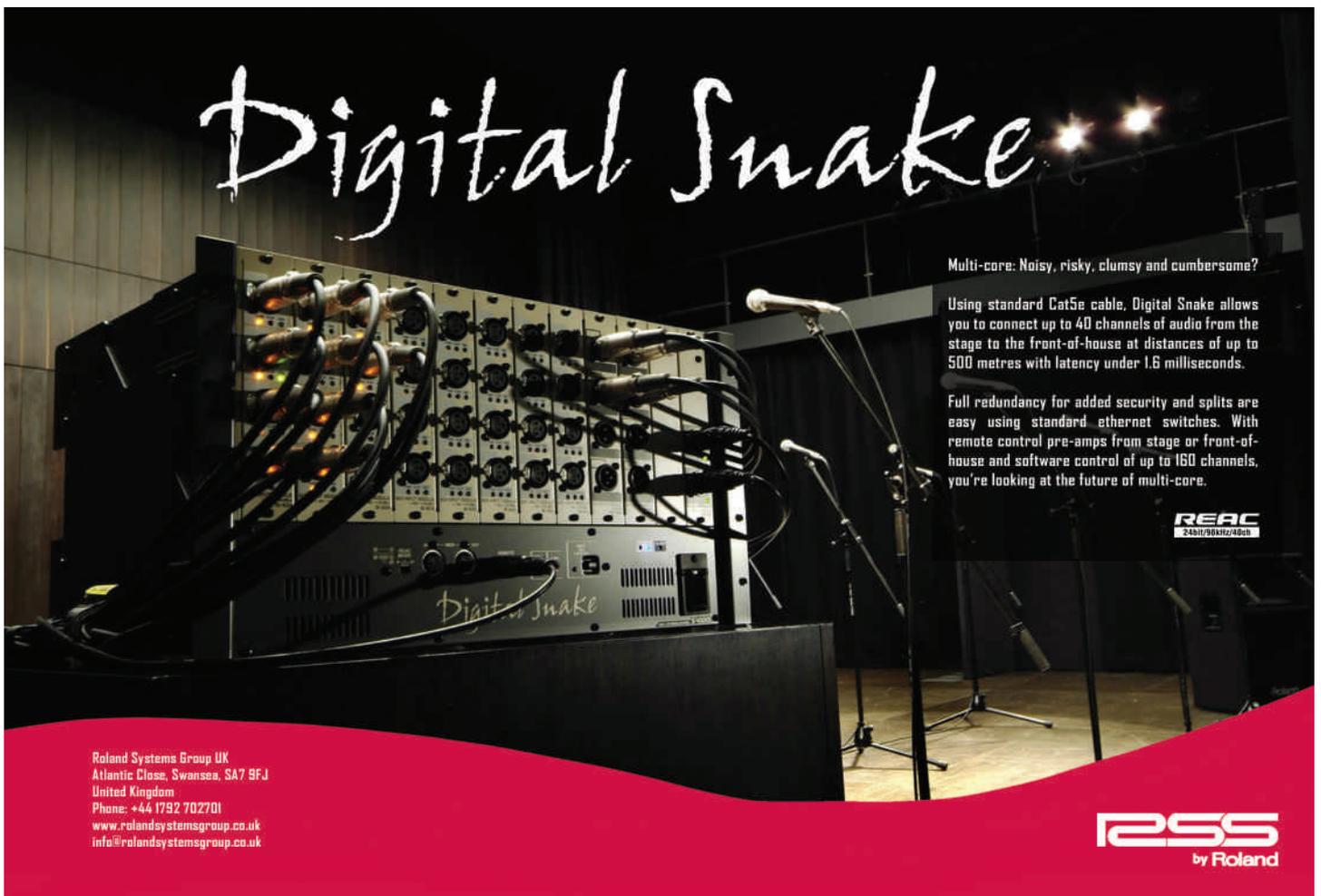
much more challenging. For a bad acoustical environment, now very hot and humid, there didn't appear to be any problems with deflected energy bouncing off the top of the audience's heads (figuratively speaking) upwards to reflect off the back wall; that's an environmental benefit, not some magical ability of the PA system to cut through a temperature inversion point of the room.

Pattern control was such in the horizontal that with a well set-up PA, as this was, reflections off the wall were never going to happen. That just left our ears in the direct field, and Dave Swallow's mixing abilities. Vocally, the PA is strong - even Amy's lower resonant rumblings (say 500Hz) sat distinct from keys and guitars; BVs likewise appeared discrete in their own wrapper. Musically, I liked it very much.

Swallow kept his mix 2-3dB below what we'd experienced earlier in the night, and it was all the sweeter for that. Two kick drums and two snares for quite different musical characters was not an indulgence but a worthwhile attribute to a broad musical spectrum. In essence LF and HF elements contributed enough to make this overall mix distinct and musical without compromise to the voice.

So, on balance, a good performance in a smallish room for a stage-stacked line array system. Butterfly is also small and lightweight - 35kg per cab - stacked atop an on-end 218 Sub. Jock Bain and Gerry Fradley won't mind me saying that they're crew of an age that shouldn't be lifting heavy boxes; in fact it was Bain's 48th birthday this very day. It will be interesting to run across it flown in bigger rooms, especially arenas.

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