

Lighting & Sound international

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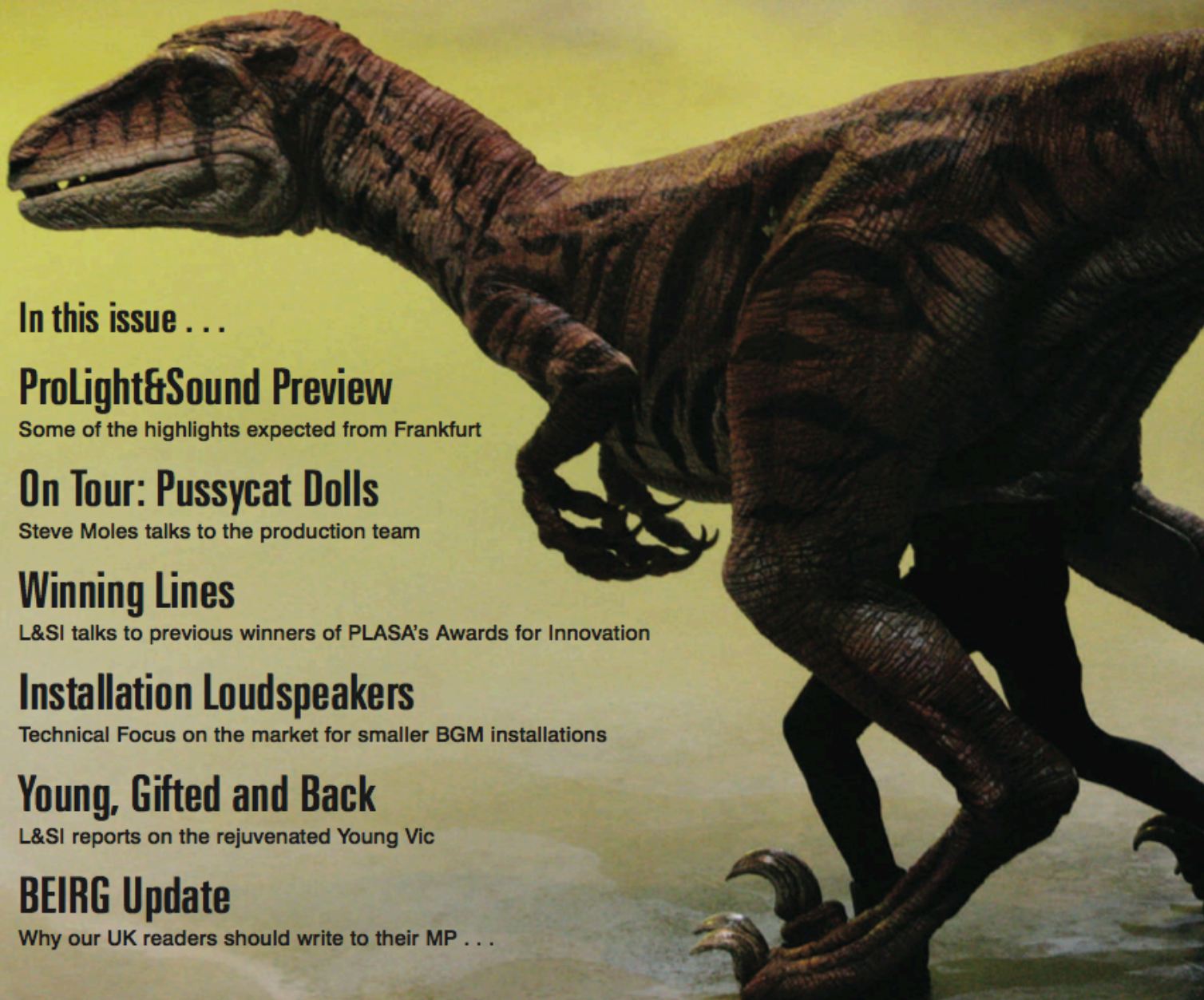
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Pussycat Dolls

at the Manchester Evening News Arena

words and pictures
by Steve Moles

The Pussycat Dolls (hereafter referred to as PCD) are at a significant stage in their evolution: neither sub-teen idols nor post-pop dowagers, they fall in the cleft stick of a mixed audience. Tonight's sell-out was a classic example: crowds of barely-pubescent girls rubbed shoulders with their more mature sisters, and maybe a 20% contingent of the over-20s, again mainly female.

That mix is, of course, part of their success; apart from the (thankfully) successful conclusion of the Minogue'athon, PCD were the only other arena act out at this time of year, a fact made all the more astounding by the knowledge that they'd just played this self-same circuit eight weeks earlier, to similar sell-out audiences.

There's something of the 'girls just want to have fun' element to this audience, as I told their manager Jeff Haddad when he opened a conversation on the relative difference between UK and US audiences: "They're just more into it here," he said, "it's not such a phenomenon in the US." Haddad had deeper concerns on his mind - where the girls go next? "We're supporting Christina Aguilera on a 40-date tour of the US, then I've got to get Nicole's solo album out."

Nicole, if you've watched any of the PCD videos, is the black-haired one that the camera mainly focuses upon. There's good reason for this: this re-invented Vaudeville troupe of dancers as Girl Band is a little long in the tooth, and though they can move well and sing proficiently, it's Nicole that provides the signature presence: she has looks, a voice, and she doesn't need the heavy application of slap to make her look good on stage.

Production & Sound

In some ways this is a tour looking to attract a more mature audience. The show is very raunchy - frankly, I was surprised there weren't more dads finding an excuse to bring their daughters as an opportunity to ogle the bump and grind. Indeed, PCD had been lambasted for overt sexuality in the national press the previous day.

But the man with four hats, tour manager Bryan 'Froggy' Cross, is more concerned with just making it work. "I can manage the four hats because essentially this is just a 'track act'," he says. Cross is also production manager, front-of-house engineer, and mixes monitors to boot. "Frankly, with a show like this, I could mix both from the loading dock if I had to."

Let's be fair - Cross is not the first to integrate the responsibilities of sound and production; Steve Levitt has done it a few times, as has Lars Brogard, but never so comprehensively as Cross, so I take my hat off to him for a slick act. Even today, when a 10-camera DVD shoot team descended upon him (at two days' notice!) he was sanguine and relaxed.

"I use the K100 binaural head mics from Neumann for front-of-house reference, and I'm mixing on a Digidesign Profile - one of the first on the road I believe - so this is entirely manageable." Cross elects to mix from the side of stage where he can see the girls, "but of course, I do have my Clair Brothers techs check the room for me as well. I used the [Digidesign] D Show Venue on the last tour, and bought the Profile myself for this leg. The show is all Pro Tools-based, the HD is the heart of the system; no musicians at all, just the girls' voices live. The advantage of the Profile is I don't need a sidecar to go with it - it's a cute little console and I only need one guy to help me get it from the box and set it up. These are my Venue racks from the last tour, in banks of 24 I've got 48 ins and 24 outs, it's just a different, smaller control surface."

But Cross did give himself a fright when he took delivery of the Profile. "I plugged it into the racks and they didn't recognise the desk," he was already in the UK, about to do his first show. "It was scary, I couldn't even use the mouse, but as with all these things it was just a software thing, I needed to upgrade to the V2.5 - boy, I learned that one fast."

The concept of using the binaural mics is OK in theory, but how does that work in practice; can you really hear the house properly? "I started off using Smaart Live for visual reference, but then switched to a plug-in RTA, the True Trace, that just made it more manageable, as well as letting me see what was going on. When I send the system techs out into the house I'm more concerned they deal with level, or taking sound off empty blocks of seats. As far as the system EQ is concerned that's all from my end."

As was mentioned earlier, Cross has a Clair Brothers system. "They are by far my favourite company," he says. He has a fully flown I4 system, with I4Bs alongside. "I've tried them all at some time or another - Vertec, V-Dosc - but this does it for me, the I4 is just more forceful, there's no comparison between the 15s you get in this PA and the 10s and 12s you get in other systems. That's what gives me the low-mid meat and that punch in the chest."

Cross also has three floor stacks of six subs - L, C, R - picking up the sub-80Hz work; between the two sources there's a rich dance house low end which he balances extremely carefully against the girls' voices. But it's big, a fact that forced me to shoot the whole show hand-held as my tripod bounced rhythmically on the camera platform out front.

"Since I'm doing monitors and FOH I have a WiFi router to my laptop, so if the house is beating up on me I can pick that up and wander out into the room and still be running the show. That's what I mean about being happy to run this show from the loading dock if needs be."



From top: the multi-tasking Bryan 'Froggy' Cross.

Euwan Cameron, Steve 'Stoner' Rusling and Dennis Brown, members of the lighting crew.

Lighting designer Scott Warner (and is that Louise Stickland behind?)

The style of show being what it is, Cross applies a fair amount of compression to the girls. "I'm using all plug-ins - Purple Audio, Joe Meek, LA 2a." And how do they compare to the real thing? "Actually, I own a rack full of the same stuff and when I started down this path I took it to Schubert Systems Audio and made a direct comparison. I used a range of vocal mics, the Neumann KMS105 which is my favourite, and the Sennheiser 865 which I'm using for the girls here. I also ran program material from my iPod - ran a whole session through them in fact - and I couldn't hear any difference at all. And the great thing is with the plug-ins in the desk, not only do you save space, you're not throwing a \$30,000 rack in and out of the truck every day, and there's no Carnet fee to bring it all the way over here."

So why not your favourite 105 mic for the girls? "Quite simply, too much handling noise. There's a lot of choreography in the show and it was just too sensitive. Sennheiser recommended the 865 to me and it's just great." The Sennheiser website singles out the 865, a super cardioid condenser vocal mic, specifically for its "very good rejection of handling noise".

Cross continues: "The girls are Sennheiser endorsees, we use the G2 packs for their in-ears and radio mics. The scan frequencies automation for those systems is just great: when you're dealing with tour management, production management, FOH and monitor mixing it's nice not to have to worry about RF problems." You can't argue with that logic.

"That leads me to another feature of the desk I really like: the girls all have two sets of ear

buds - West Tone and Future Sonics; one prefers the West Tone, the others the Future Sonics, but they all tend to swap around depending on how they feel."

"With the console you can store preferences, so if one swaps back to West Tone I can apply any changes to all the pre-sets. In actual fact, the whole show is snap-shot'ed; if I run timecode from the console the show will run itself. That might sound a bit scary, and I'm the kind of guy who just jumps onto a new console and doesn't refer to the manual until something goes wrong, but Eddie Mapp, a friend who mixes Evanescence, showed me that. The thing is, this desk is so easy to get around, I tell stage hands 'if you can check your e-mail you can mix this show'. The biggest problem I run up against is the room, and most of these arenas sound pretty much the same, certainly compared to the smaller venue circuit, so this is pretty straightforward. It's experimenting with the desk that keeps my attention, otherwise it would get boring, and that's a dangerous mindset."

Cross does a good job, his chosen compressors performing heroically (think screaming implorations to "make some noise Manchester!" during the frequent and interminable between-song chats) and the I4s delivered the meat, as Cross would have it.

Lighting

Lighting designer Scott Warner has, on first impressions, a small rig for an arena show. A 40ft back truss, 24ft mid, with 16ft ends cranked downstage, and four fingers of truss angled down behind, "but it's all pretty full of lights, though given the chance I'd certainly add more," says Warner.

Dolly mixtures...

- There's a running gag between Cross and Haddad: Cross does such a good job of bringing the show in on budget that Haddad joshes him frequently about the "poor quality gear he puts out on the show". Fortunately, I was privy to this when Cross entered the office as I was conversing with Haddad. "Steve here thinks you've cut too many corners," began Haddad. "He expected something better for a show of this stature." For a long uncomfortable few seconds Cross looked me up and down before Haddad cracked and began to laugh.

- Bryan Cross got the name Froggy early on in his career working with the Tower of Power: "Bass player Rocco Prestia just came up to me one day and said 'you look like a frog'. It stuck. That's why I have a Tower of Power tattoo: they marked me."

- "Some people think the show is too sexy: I don't believe it myself," said Warner. "But we do sometimes get mums come up to the mix position after the show and complain. But as I point out, the girls don't use any profanities, not like other acts." Quite right.

- Bryan Wilson is rigger for the tour. Wilson has been through some difficult commercial turmoil over the past couple of years, it is good to see him out again doing what he knows best.

- "Sometimes I just pretend I've got a lot of PAR cans up there," said Warner. "I only bally-ho when absolutely necessary, and keep movement of lights when on to a minimum."

- "Stoner [Steve Rusling] is a great crew chief, the British crew has really looked after me," said Warner. "We've done some weird shows too; a gig at the Pyramids for a private audience, all local lighting, was, shall we say, a taxing experience."

- Rihanna was opening for the PCDs. She had a remarkably big set for an opening act - it's remarkable that she had a set at all really. Expect bigger things from her soon. The show also featured the new I-Pix 'Satellite' fixture from Chris Ewington.



The set consists of pieces rented from Litestructures' extensive stocks: indeed, the girls used the Litestructures Studio facility in Wakefield for their pre-tour rehearsals.

The lighting is from Bandit UK. Most of the lamps are Martin MAC 2000 Profiles - 50 including the units on the floor, "but I also have eight of the MAC 700 Washes on a downstage truss." Why the less powerful lamp? "I've been a Martin user since way back, since the 804. The 700s are there precisely because they are less powerful. If I put 2ks there, they'd be running at less than 60%. That said, I also tried the 700 Profiles and found they didn't have enough power [for this application], but the Washes are just perfect, and nice and small."

I apologised to Warner for turning up on the day of a DVD shoot: the ubiquitous and congenial Eugene O'Connor was at that very moment next to Warner checking his vision monitors and comms system exactly so he could interface with Warner's operation. "It's not a problem," said Warner generously. "In fact, Bryan [Cross] and I were talking about this earlier: I'm a former sound guy, and he's done lights - we were discussing swapping places for your visit."

With the show set the way it is, reliant upon tracks from the Pro Tools HD system, and with Warner's show also locked into his Hog II, the premise is not so fanciful, but we better not tell manager Haddad that or he'll have Bryan Cross wearing five hats and Warner will be out of a job.

"Bryan brought me in for this show. I didn't know at the time, but the set and lights had already been designed. The concept was done by a choreographer, Barry Lather, and they'd brought in Eric Wade to programme the show for him, but actually I was given a very free hand with the show within a couple of weeks of my arrival. Eric's a good programmer, and he'd made a good job of putting in what he'd been asked to, but I was getting a lot of comment that this particular bit

doesn't look good, or that particular bit. Pretty soon I was changing whole sections," which must be precisely why Cross brought him in.

"It's a different show: in some ways it reminds me of Gwar, a heavy metal band I used to work for, in that it needs to be bright and loud. It's a challenge in other ways. I also work for Steve Vai, a complete contrast to this show: he's a virtuoso guitarist and he'll make changes to his set or the way he presents a particular song every night. Not so with the girls, it's always the same, so I have to mix it up to keep myself on my toes. Sometimes I'll choose a metal look, sometimes disco."

And does he find the Hog II a good desk to run a show that he's obviously also improvising upon? "The desk is fine and I've been using them for years, but they've stopped supporting new fixtures. I've just added PixelPars to this leg of the tour and we had to downgrade the software to an old PixelLine version to run them, because Hog don't support that new personality." So a switch to the Hog III is imminent? "No actually, I've just bought myself a GrandMA - it will be waiting for me when we get back to the US. I tried all the other desks around at the moment; the GrandMA just seems a lot more powerful and very stable."

Despite touring Europe frequently this is Warner's first tour with Bandit: "I'm with TMS (Theatrical Media Services) in Omaha, Nebraska... they have good equipment and provide a good service, so I'll probably stay with them in the US. But Bandit have been great here."

Besides a preponderance of MACs, Warner's rig also spots a large quantity of PixelLine: "I'm a big fan of the fixture, that's why I added the PixelPars and I'd liked to have added PixelLine moles [James Thomas Engineering's PixelEight audience blinder model] but you just can't get them at the moment. I find them really useful, the only place they fall down is the no colour, and it

always ends up looking a bit lavender unless you're looking straight onto the fixture, but otherwise they're great."

Warner has a lot of PixelLine (I didn't count them) along every truss and a few along the set, matched with similar quantities of Atomic Strobes in the same locations. These two elements he uses well, and sparingly, to give real visual dimension to his show, the interplay between flown rig and stage really making what is quite a small system jump out into big arena scale.

What is Warner's lighting concept for the show? "The person whose work I most admire is LeRoy Bennett and although I've never seen him run a show, I draw a lot of ideas about colours, especially making one or two colours work together, which is what influenced my choice of lights. I use a lot of different blues, reds and greens, but not all at once, I like those things where he over lays, say, a particular green upon a deep Congo blue. That's certainly a change from what I can do for Steve Vai, or Jimmy Eat World, another regular act of mine."

It's significant that Warner stated he'd never seen Bennett operate a show, and indeed had seen a Bennett design operated by someone else only once. Although Warner captured some of the essence and spirit (think colour combinations), he was missing the transitions, and it's how Bennett's shows move the vision along that makes his particular magic. But Warner's young, and if he's serious about Bennett then he could do worse than take a month off touring and go and see a few of his shows: he has the makings and he doesn't lack eagerness.

"I've got five Troupers out front in the house which I hate because there's a lot of aluminium [Warner's American, but he says 'aluminium' not 'aluminum' - I think the Bandit crew have been

getting to him] in the stage set and the reflections spoil a lot of the wash looks." On that I wouldn't gainsay him: a further downstage truss with followspots would have been much nicer.

Warner's roots in metal and - where do you put Jimmy Eat World? - inspired some grungier metal looks that worked exceedingly well. Inappropriate for this idiom? I don't think so: the contrast they provided to his brighter pop-tastic treatments really helped bring some light and shade to an otherwise monotone performance.

Video

Beneath Warner's rig sits a landscape orientation Barco D10 LED screen from XL video; two smaller portrait screens sit either side of the set. "XL have been kind to us," said Cross (in his PM's hat). "We had the 20mm pixel pitch screens in the run before Christmas, but they offered us the denser 10mm pitch for this leg because they were in the shop - they didn't have to do that. Dan Ormerod runs our show, it's basically Imag, but we have an XL PPU with three Doremis, so Dan gets to do some neat things with the images on stage, and on the two projection screens to the sides."

With the interface to the DVD team and his other day-to-day responsibilities, there was no chance to talk with Ormerod, but he applied the same discipline that you'll see on PCD's videos: the cameras are only allowed fleeting glimpses of the more 'mature' members of the group. Nicole, in contrast, receives lingering looks.

So, I think we can expect changes next year. Currently at their peak in the UK, will Nicole's departure portend their demise? On tonight's showing I'd say the PCDs have run their course: this time next year they'll only be able to fill these arenas one night as a legacy. So prevalent is the blather between songs that the 75 minutes would easily compress to 50. Perhaps we'll take a look next year?

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Spotlight On: VARI*LITE

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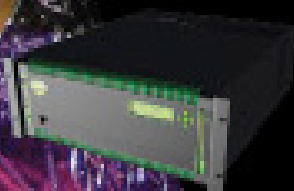
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Spotlight on: The Pussycat Dolls

HSL is supplying all lighting equipment and crew for the Pussycat Dolls European "Doll Domination" tour, a tour specified by LD Scott Warner.

To fulfil the spec, HSL has made a substantial investment in Robe's new Digital Series products for the tour - including 6 DigitalSpot 7000DTs and 36 REDWash 3.192s along with 16 REDBlinder 2.96's. The show also boasts 60 Robe ColorSpot and ColorWash 2500E AT moving lights, 40 Atomic strobes, a 12 way Kinesys automation system with Vector control plus over 60 motors and rigging. HSL designed and commissioned several custom truss pods that were fabricated by TFL for the tour which is project managed by Mike Oates.

It's a complex lighting system to build each day, requiring lots of precision and tight teamwork. Mike Oates comments, "The biggest challenge is getting it in and up in a reasonable time each day, for which we did serious pre-planning to maximize the efficiency of get ins and outs."

The slick, high-energy show is a colourful and fluid amalgam of classic pop lighting with plenty of attitude and dynamics. Warner makes an expediently sized rig - in terms of fixtures - go a long way with an inventive trussing design that includes four 2.5 metre 'Octopods', two of which move, a 4.5 metre circular moving truss and a semi-circle truss.

It's the first time that Scott Warner or Bryan Cross has worked with HSL, and they are both very happy. Oates further comments, "Scott and Froggy are a joy to work with, both have extensive experience at all levels of touring and production and have a very practical and intelligent approach to producing an excellent show. Ensuring a friendly and fun vibe on the road is also high on the agenda - we like that!"

