

Back to the future

WHAT WAS HOT,
WHAT WAS NOT,
AND WHAT WILL BE
IN LIVE SOUND:
ROB SPEIGHT
TAKES THE
LONG VIEW

(WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM JIM
EVANS, MIKE CLARK AND MARC MAES)

By all accounts, 2007 was a great year for the live sound industry: an ever increasing roster of live performances by artists and promoters looking for more lucrative and secure ways of making a living.

With the record industry still trying to work out what direction to go next, it seems performers are taking the lead and heading out to the fans, which is an excellent development for our industry. This, coupled with more and more bands running their own affairs and taking the record industry establishment out of the equation, things are changing rapidly – and it would seem for the better.

With ticket receipt increases seeming to have hit targets predicted by venture capitalists, The Edge Group, the 15-20% rise in sales in the UK alone (see the *PSNLive* Market Report 2007 – or download it from the *PSNE* website) will obviously have a knock-on effect on providers of not just PA, but manufacturers and all those who provide tour support.

So, what have been some of the key issues faced over the past year, and what does the industry feel the forthcoming 12 months will bring?

Probably, one of the biggest issues that has attracted the least amount of attention has to be the impending digital television switchover and Ofcom's desire to... well, the more cynical might say, make a quick buck. BEIRG have fought the pro-audio industry's corner tirelessly with at times little support from many of the people a sell-off of spectrum would affect. In October, Ofcom announced that the



Another muddy Glastonbury maybe, but this year's show caused far more controversy for pro-audio than any other

interim channels 63-68 would be temporarily available for PMSE users (Programme Making and Special Events; meaning, us) in regions where digital switchover will first take place.

However, the statement went on to say: "PMSE users were advised that their use of frequencies in this band might well be subject to change, that we might revoke or vary any licenses relating to this band so that the spectrum could be redeployed and that they should take careful account of this risk before making any decisions to invest in equipment for access to this band." Not very encouraging... so what are the alternatives?

Zaxcom and others have come up with hugely frequency agile radio microphones to try to avoid the issue, but Zaxcom have also introduced the TRX900 series, which uses digital modulation allowing for up to 30 units to be used in the same frequency block. This coupled with other revolutionary controls, such as the IFB100 RF remote controller, which allows control of gain, RF channel and high pass filter within a 100m radius, and cunningly enough uses the 2.4GHz licence free part of the spectrum, is an interesting development.

APT, the Belfast-based company, also launched a product that could certainly aid PSME's as the squeeze on spectrum looms. The apt-X Live,

which allows digital wireless microphones to operate in situations where spectrum is limited. APT, who premiered the product at 2006's AES state that the algorithm within the unit allows maximum channel density in the available frequency range while maintaining acoustic integrity, while keeping latency down to 1.9ms. The compression techniques employed by the unit have been independently assessed as excellent in listening tests where no perceivable difference was heard 24bit 96kHz PCM and an apt-X Live running at 96kbps.

In general, digital has made inroads across the live world and nowhere more significantly than at the mix position. In 2007 the proliferation of digital consoles has become glaringly apparent and many PA companies have not purchased an analogue console this year, nor do they intend to in the future. Lars Brogaard of Major Tom commented: "Analogue is dead and gone, thank God!" While others such as Chris Fitch of Skan PA said: "I haven't considered buying a large-frame analogue console for about 18 months."

With the influx of digital consoles to suit all budgets and truck packs from the heavyweight Midas XL 8 down to the compact Yamaha LS9 there are quality desks aplenty. These desks and similar appeared across

the year on shows as diverse as Ennio Morricone whose FOH engineer, Fabio Venturi, took a DiGiCo D5 from Entec Sound and Light for Morricone's two rare shows in London, while Britannia Row utilised Yamaha LS9s and M7CLs for the Brit Awards. Belgium's DEE Sound and Light expanded its stock of Digidesign VENUE systems and added an XL 8 to cope with demand.

Midas XL 8 sales took a while to gain momentum, but continue to emerge on more and more shows. DiGiCo and Digidesign would appear to be the favourites however, at least FOH.

Other manufactures have also decided to get in on the act with EAW launching its much-touted UMX.96, and Allen & Heath finally got their iLive console out into the light. Even smaller PA companies are now able to afford digital consoles of some form or another and so the likelihood of seeing one on a gig increases – this includes venues from the goliath of the Barbican through to the smaller clubs such as The Barfly, both of which acquired Yamaha MC7Ls in 2007. However, to some, the demise of analogue is nowhere near the end: "The use of digital is of course huge, and most of our shows go out with digital consoles, but we have customers who require analogue consoles for a whole host of reasons: they like the sound of analogue; they prefer

Jan Van Esbroeck, managing director, Lotto Arena



With plenty of sold-out concerts the new Lotto Arena venue has made clear that the need for a medium sized arena in Belgium was imminent. The 7,200 capacity venue opened in March 2007, and was rapidly embraced by both the Flemish and Dutch audiences and with local and international promoters.

"We have been receiving overall positive reactions," says Jan Van Esbroeck, managing director of the

Lotto Arena. "The initial target for the venue was 95 events per annum, and today, I'm convinced that, in March, we will have reached that figure already in the first year".

Soundwise speaking, visiting FOH engineers are enthusiastic about the mids and highs in the new hall. "We see a problem of absorbance with the lows, especially for smaller shows – next year, we will shift the stage towards the middle of the hall in such cases, to get better acoustic results."

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Ricky Lee Jones at Montreux

to use analogue; some shows and events are so 'unscripted' that using an analogue console is the best solution; and sometimes engineers just want a change," commented Britannia Row's Mike Lowe in on the sound house's use of Midas consoles. Giles Bristow of Alstubielt Audio concurs: "Yes, still every one asks for the Midas H3000 – not everyone gets what they want! Most still ask for digital – the transition period to digital is far from complete! I did buy an analogue console in 2007 and will again buy another two Midas H1000s in 2008. The reason being units are easy and more sought after than digital consoles in my market offering a quicker return for the investment. Most digital desks are still unfinished – engineers know it and still trust the good old

fail safe analogue consoles."

The expansion in the desire for digital console in front of them of course puts pressure on the PA companies to purchase the desks, which more often than not, run in to the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

With continuing growth in the marketplace, one would think that PA company coffers would be overflowing with shiny gold coins. The steady increase however has not seen an explosion of profits, with many companies reporting tours going out at less than they would have a few years ago. Everyone gets chipped on prices, yet some companies report significant drops in what promoters and management are prepared to pay.

Chris Fitch again: "When Abby Llewellyn and I bought Skan in 1996, we quickly established a 'market rate' for the services we offered. Incredibly, I am aware of tours going out for 30-40% lower than the rate we established over a decade ago. This is unsustainable and gives clients an unrealistic idea of what our services are worth. The cheap deals seem to consistently come from a handful of companies some of whom are very well established and really ought to know better. What does it say when a leading international touring company is prepared to compete for work at the prices of a garage operation?"

This has got to be one of the



The G! Festival in the Faroe Islands should be on everyone's 'must see' list for 2008

biggest problems facing rental companies across the world, but it would seem it is a significant issue in the UK and European markets.

Unfortunately, with inflation and oil prices steadily rising, profit margins are getting squeezed in all directions and in all areas of the economy, but also it would appear that audio in both the live and studio markets is becoming significantly undervalued and this trend looks to continue into next year: "It has been like that for 30 years, we get less and less each year and the costs go up, and with the dollar exchange rate the way it is right now, even more so. I think that sound rental companies are pretty good at beating themselves up on price and

rent out equipment just to do turnover," exclaimed Brogaard.

It is a strange conundrum that has continued to echo throughout 2007 and undoubtedly will continue into 2008 and beyond. Increases in touring and live events in general have indeed led to increased turnover and everyone that was spoken to for this article agreed. So, why the continuing downward trend in rental prices? "Reduction of profit being generated by CD sales means that bands now have to make a profit touring. So, now every record company has a marketing strategy whether it is using brands or one off venues for PR launches or full production tours. Their prof-

Bob Angus, promoter, Metropolis Music



"It's been pretty buoyant all round through 2007. The festival season was probably the busiest to date, and next year's events are shaping up nicely. There's been a lot of talk about recession and problems with the economy, but the live sound business, to date, does not appear to have been too adversely affected. This might be something to do with demographics. A lot of our target audiences are on the younger side

and don't have mortgage problems.

"Prospects for 2008 are healthy. While other areas of the music and entertainment industries have problems that are widely reported, live music looks set to continue to flourish."

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Andrea Corsellini, FOH engineer



Andrea Corsellini, a well-known figure on live TV shows and tours by big names such as pop veteran Gianni Morandi, who's packed venues since the '60s, hit the trade headlines in Italy when top Italian rocker Vasco Rossi called him in after the first four shows on his 2007 stadium tour.

Rossi's cross-country trek had a 200,000Watt Clair Bros i4 rig supplied by Audio Rent and venue capacity ranged from 40,000 to 75,000. It was necessary to make the most of the rig for Rossi's hard-hitting rock and although it was the sound engineer's first outing with Clair Bros systems, he said, "A good PA man is indispensable in any case – even more so under these circumstances – and Audio Rent's work was impeccable. Everybody was happy with the results."

Although accustomed to digital mixing systems, such as the D5 used with Morandi or the VENUE, with which he'll mix the New Year extravaganza aired live from Rimini on Italian state TV's flagship channel RAI 1, Corsellini says he'll be working on Vasco's 2008 tour and may well use the Midas XL4 he manned in 2007 with "a wall of outboard", as "Each modus operandi has its pros and cons and should be chosen according to the application."

▶ it numbers now have to add up and labels are reluctant to keep bands that don't make a profit touring," believes Bristow.

With ever expanding numbers of festivals throughout the year, it would seem that for many turnover will continue to grow and in 2007 and with over 500 being listed on the e-festivals website alone there is plenty to go around.

This year has also seen the return of some of the worldwide stadium extravaganzas, such as Live Earth and the Diana Memorial Concert at Wembley Stadium. Britannia Row provided a 136-box EV line array system as well as 70 Outline Butterfly Hi-packs and 20 Subtech subs, which stayed in place between the events culminating with Metallica's headline show after the two big televised events. Brit Row were supported by Sennheiser for these mammoth undertakings: "It is really a great help to work with a microphone manufacturer on these shows, especially a manufacturer that is very into radio as well as hand-helds and in-ear monitors. People like Dave Hawker and Andy Lilliewhite know all our radio techs and work really well with them,"

commented Brit Row's Mike Lowe.

Yet the big boys were not the only ones to get a slice of the pie this year with AudioPlus supplying purple clusters of power in the form of a Funktion One Resolution 5 system on the Glastonbury Pyramid stage.

The return of point source was watched eagerly by many in the industry, not least by line array proponents standing at the edge of the festival site with level meters! The system performed flawlessly and made the point that Funktion One and his royal purpleness, Tony Andrews, have been making all along – good sound starts in the box and with the drivers – not in a set of DSP running white hot to compensate for bad design. Unfortunately, as was well documented after the event, the elements were to work against The Killers at the festival with unusual atmospheric conditions, otherwise known as a temperature inversion where cold air sits on top of warm air, creating difficult acoustics in any one's audio book.

The sound consultants, Capita Symonds instructed the sound crew to drop levels in order to comply with the restrictions on the festival license, it was not, as Michael Eavis

Ingólfur Magnússon, department manager, Exton



Reykjavik to their touring itineraries and we can now offer world class venues of all sizes from small clubs to stadia. Act we were involved with in 2007 included Andrea Bocelli, Nora Jones, Incubus, Deep Purple, Chris Cornell, Josh Groban, Goran Bregovic, Uriah Heep, Air, Jethro Tull, Frans Ferdinand, Bloc Party, Björk, Megas and Kim Larsen.

"The diary for 2008 is filling up well and prospects are very good. It will be interesting to see what new developments there are on the technology front too."

"For Exton, 2007 was without doubt the busiest and most successful year in the company's history and I believe this is a reflection of the healthy state of the live music sector in general.

"We were involved with Iceland's biggest ever concert – a festival featuring Icelandic bands, while this October's Airwaves festival was generally held to be the best yet.

An ever increasing number of international artists continue to add

incorrectly stated at the time (and subsequently retracted) a technical fault. AudioPlus and Funktion One definitely had nothing to be ashamed about and the wolves were held at bay, even if it meant PR gurus around both camps had to spend days cleaning out the cages. Andrews and all at Funktion One

also had the opportunity to stick one to the masses when he was presented with the inaugural Gottelier Award at the PLASA Innovation Awards ceremony in September.



Duran Duran at the Diana Memorial Concert held at Wembley last summer

Many venues also saw a breath of audiological fresh air as high quality PA systems were installed. One of the most notable being the O2, formally The Dome in London. Having been stripped out of most of its millennium garb, The Dome was redesigned and re-badged and at the same time filled with Harman Audio networking and loudspeaker products. Utilising 50 BSS Soundweb London boxes, the venue was completely networked giving global control and flexibility across the installed loudspeaker systems. In the main arena, where the highest seat is 30m above the ground, consultant Ed Thomas utilised 36 JBL PD5322 three-way, full range boxes to cover the top of the cavernous space, 14 JBL AM6200s to cover the very top of the rake and two hangs of JBL VerTec line array provide the main sound re-enforcement supported by 24 double 18-inch subs. The Soundweb system allows visiting artists to plug into the house PA and utilise whichever parts of it they want: "On the whole the main left and right is provided by the ▶

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Thomas Christensen, project manager, Nordic Rentals



"The summer of 2007 proved to be one of the busiest ever for Nordic Rentals. We have had a very good festival season. Alongside these events, we have done one off's with international acts such as Aerosmith and Metallica in Denmark and a DVD shoot with Runrig in Scotland. We've had European and Scandinavian tours out with Peter Gabriel, Status Quo and Chuck Berry.

"The indoor season kicked off with a number of large corporate events. The fall of 2007 has been very busy with touring. We have been out with Shakin Stevens and Gary Moore among others in Denmark. Currently we are on tour in Europe and the UK with Runrig and Status Quo.

"We must say that this year has exceeded our expectations. I think the live industry has been on the rise for some time now. Peoples' expectations are very high and the need for entertainment today is greater than ever.

"As for 2008 prospects look good, both for us and for the live sound industry as a whole."

touring company and we provide the re-enforcement," explained system designer Ed Thomas. Since it opened its doors to the public in July the O2 has played host to many artists: the Scissor Sisters, for which Adlib Audio complimented the JBL VerTec with... even more JBL VerTec; and of course Prince, who played an unprecedented 21 nights at the venue. Wembley also installed a music friendly system when it specified an EAW house system.

Ever increasing in size, complexity and zoning, loudspeaker systems also continued to become more unwieldy in certain situations and many companies turned to Dolby Lake processors with its intuitive and easily accessible control panel. The Dolby Lake Live Sound Group was also to strike up a deal with Lab.gruppen, for whom it will provide OEM technology for integration in Lab.gruppen amplifiers.

Globally, festivals and touring also increased – the 41st Montreux Jazz Festival was once again supported by Meyer Sound, Shure and Digidesign. This year, not only did Digidesign provide nine VENUE and seven D-Show systems at FOH and monitors they also supplied five Pro Tools HD systems and equipped

and Midas launched, or are about to launch, desk-specific products in the form of the Trio made by ADK Pro Audio in the USA and the forthcoming DN9696 respectively.

While it is possible to pretty much interface anything to anything these days, these systems are making live multi-track recording ever simpler and providing FOH engineers with an added bonus; that of virtual soundchecks. Using a pre-recorded show many engineers are now taking advantage of the multi-tracks to speed up the soundcheck process, which also has the added attraction of allowing the band to stay in bed even longer. This, coupled with the digital desks ability to recall settings makes engineers lives easier. Avril Lavigne and her engineer John Kerns are firm converts as is John Coopman, who looks after Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band: "We went to a whole Pro Tools system; it is a very reliable method to track the shows and allows me to do a virtual soundcheck," he said.

Companies specifically aimed at providing these services have also been seen springing up with out post sound offering a wealth of supporting services allowing recorded shows to be mixed, online and available for



Blood Red Shoes perform at the up-and-coming Latitude Festival near Southwold

two outside broadcast trucks for recording purposes. More unusual festivals such as G! in the Faroe Islands hit its sixth birthday, while Dutch band Bløf headlined the Concert At Sea festival and continued their run of climate neutral shows: "I think that Live Earth certainly helped to focus attention on the climate issues and the impact that we have as an industry. We were made very conscious of it leading up to the event and we didn't want to squander anything. We just tried to be efficient really," explained Bryan Grant of Britannia Row.

As with all things, but markedly with the continued resurgence of digital consoles, the live market and iTunes, live recordings of events also saw an increase in popularity and the big three desk manufacturers have taken full advantage of it. Digidesign, whose VENUE and D-Show consoles integrate directly with their existing Pro Tools products were seen widely, while DiGiCo

purchase the next day while other 'Instant CD' companies have made inroads into what, at one stage, seemed like a losing battle. Concert Live, who have seen other outfits offering the same services backed by major record labels have seen their

John Northcote, CEO, Academy Music Group



everyone we work with is equally positive. If we didn't feel this way, we would not be embarking on such a broad expansion programme.

"As for 2008, we will continue to look for further acquisitions and to expand the AMG portfolio. Our ultimate aim is to keep moving forward until we have established Academy venues in every major city in the UK."

Daniele Tramontani, sound designer



In 2007, Daniele Tramontani designed the system for concerts by Ennio Morricone in an indoor sports area in Seoul, where he also supervised set-up and assisted FOH engineer Fabio Venturi. He also designed the delay system for the Genesis concert at Rome's Circus Maximus, the rig for the international presentation of the new Fiat 400 on the banks of the River Po in Turin and the PA used for the 450,000 crowd at the

youth rally with the Pope in Loreto.

Tramontani has no doubts as to what 2008 has in store: "2008 will see the arrival of products favouring the ramp up to more widespread use of Ethernet networks on concert systems – brands such as Lab.gruppen, L-Acoustics and Powersoft are all working in this direction, with smaller, more powerful amps with on-board processors. This obviously means an increase in the importance of PA men's role, as they'll baby-sit the rig during the show and, instead of changing faulty units or cables, must be able to diagnose and solve problems on the run, via in-depth monitoring facilities on their laptops."

dominance of the market place increase and were recently awarded the Entrepreneurs of the Year award at the annual HSBC Start-Up Stars Awards.

So, where to now? What does 2008 hold? Is the 'rise of live' a song that will make everyone's cash boxes overflow? "I don't think we at Brit Row are going to take over the world. We are just a small company with a few desks. I am hoping for more of the same with more activity really. We are already in conversation with various people about several large tours and events, as I am sure is everyone really. What seems to be happening and what is reasonably exciting is that live activity seems to be increasing. Whether or not peoples spending capacity can sustain that I don't know. There certainly seems to be a cultural shift with people wanting to see bands again," philosophised Grant.

Others, sometimes stretched to meet demand, look at things slightly differently: "I do not expect to expand (or contract) significantly in 2008. It would be a real blessing if we could do the same quantity of work as this year but increase our profitability," said Fitch.

With all of the extra work, many companies have come to the realisation that in-house training schemes for staff and apprentices are well worth the effort to ensure consistent, well-experienced employees. Both Adlib Audio and Britannia Row run 'apprentiships', grooming crew and engineers to their own high standards and with the recent announcement that the UK alone

may be short of several thousand experienced crew by the time the 2012 Olympics hits London is this the way forward in 2008?

Juggling inventory to keep up with trends also seems to be a priority with PA companies assessing the longevity of analogue and some older or less trendy digital desks as well as assessing the seemingly unstoppable tide of loudspeaker manufactures creating powered versions of all their boxes and all of the advantages that these systems often offer.

So, it would seem that the live sound industry is almost out of its teenage years. It is growing up and maturing, building strong skill sets, maximising profits and developing its potential to meet the demands of the changing face of music and all that that entails. Ensuring high quality is one thing, making people pay for it is a different matter: "We are all stupid, aren't we? It is only us that are agreeing to it. If we agree to do things for less than cost we can't blame the people that ask us, we can only blame ourselves. We are stupid if we do that because there won't be an audio industry if we carry on like that! How do you pay for development, infrastructure and the services you provide? You have to charge for that.

"If you are doing everything for two bob then you can't increase your level of service. Intelligent customers understand this. Things have a cost and people have a living to make. Lets face it, no one I know got into this industry to make a fortune. We all got into it because we are passionate about what we do; it is a lifestyle choice. But, you have to make a living," concluded Grant.

"My single wish would be for the blinkers to be lifted from purchasers eyes so they can judge good value and not just the bottom line. We need to see a significant increase in fees for audio work to ensure the long-term sustainability of the industry in the UK," Fitch concurred.

"If I could have my wish for 2008 it would be the cable-less, noise-less, box-less system that just went out and I could stay at home. But it wouldn't be as much fun would it," smiled Grant.

Anyone with a big beard, hearty laugh and an impressive belly want to sort that one out? Engineers of Metallica need not apply! ■

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