





# Sir Elton

The legendary Elton John is back with members of his original band. Steve Moles caught up with the production team at the NEC Arena, Birmingham.

words and pictures  
by Steve Moles

It's a long time since I've seen Elton John with any of his original band. In fact, the last time I saw Nigel Olsson I was 17, visiting a flat in Onslow Gardens, South Kensington, which Nigel and many other musicians used to frequent to talk rock - but that's another story.

Drummer Olsson and guitarist Davey Johnstone are touchstones for me, and I'd warrant many of Elton's fans here tonight. Their origins in Elton's band reach back to what was, in my mind, Elton's most fertile period. Albums such as *Tumbleweed*, *Madman*, and *Yellow Brick Road* come from an era where Bernie Taupin was seduced by the dust, texture and folklore of the American South, while Elton embraced Delta blues, honky-tonk, and most significantly, Gospel. So it was with great delight that I saw many songs from that period on tonight's set list.

## Sound

Front-of-house engineer Clive Franks arrived very late with the band, and we were lucky indeed that he was able eventually to spare us so much time.

Alan Richardson, by contrast, was all calmness and light at the monitor console. 'But Pablo is also here?' I asked rhetorically, referring to McCartney's house engineer. "He's looking after monitors for The Storms, I think Barry Marshall asked him to do it as a favour," said Richardson. I mention this one to commend Paul 'Pablo'

Boothroyd for his generosity of spirit; and two, because support act The Storms are an interesting band - very much in the mould of The Eagles, they produce mellifluous vocal harmonies over guitar-based country-folk-rock. They sound Californian but hale from Wales - Swansea to be precise.

Richardson has been Elton's monitor man since '96, "before that I'd worked for Bon Jovi, Kenny Loggins," and in fact we discovered he and I had met some 20 years earlier doing a show for Sinatra at the Pala Trussardi in Milan.

"The job falls into two distinct parts," Richardson began. "The band is five-piece - drums, perc's, guitar, bass and keys; they are all on in-ears - Sennheiser system. Then there's Elton." Richardson has two pairs of wedges for Elton, Clair Brothers 12AMs tucked in beneath the keyboard of his grand piano, and 212AMs either side of him. "The smaller wedge is for his vocals, the twin 12s are for band mix; he likes a full mix and very loud. We use a Beta 58A for his voice, you can hammer nails in with it and it still works!" An endorsement that might have Shure quaking a little . . . but then again?

"The mic captures the punch we need, he has an unbelievable amount of power in his voice, he can still sing louder than I yell. If my yell is at +3dB, he'll sing at +6dB. That certainly helps with the gain structure."



Crew faces, above:

Clair Brothers tech, Matt Herr, pictured with front-of-house sound engineer Clive Franks;

Monitors engineer Alan Richardson;

Lighting designer Kevin Bye.

Why the twin 12" for the band mix? "He likes to have a lot of drums, especially kick, in his mix. If we put the mix on a scale of ten, then piano sits at ten, kick and snare almost ten, the rest of the band tick over at seven or eight. The only thing not in his mix is some of the more fiddly percussion stuff."

That all sounds like a lot of attention on Elton - the band coming second - and that band mix from the 212s must blast someone, even with in-ears? "The band are the nicest guys I've ever worked with. They know soundcheck rehearsal time is for them - then Elton turns up. Yes, Bob Birch [Bass] does suffer from Elton's band mix, but he moves out the way. To be honest, very little changes day-to-day for the band, but for Elton there can be some ugly EQ just to overcome the room effect and keep feedback under control. Sometimes I look at his EQ and ask myself, can that be right? But essentially the job is him, and with regard to what comes from the room, we just over-power it."

Richardson is using a Yamaha PM1D. "I've had it about four years now; before that it was a PM4000." Your old desk was not the commonest of choices for monitors? "No, didn't sound like a Midas, but we're not looking for a 'nice' sounding board. The Yamaha provides all I want; I don't use any scenes and operate pretty much as an analogue desk. I do love it for its facility; I use all the on-board effects, limiters and gates etc. For what I'm doing it's perfect; because we go round the world a lot I know I can just take my card and always get one - it's everywhere."

In view of the late arrival of Franks out front, I took a quick inventory of his domain: Yamaha PM5000 desk, AMS reverb, TC M5000, TC 2290, Eventide

Eclipse, and a whole bunch of old DBX160. The system is Clair Brothers I4 line array, with all their system processing out front.

I asked him about the desk - probably the last large-format analogue desk to come out of Yamaha. "Yeah, they wanted me to go digital, Alan uses one, as you know, and I did try it two years ago, for some Billy Joel/Elton shows. I did about six shows and was just not comfortable with it. I didn't like the sound, and because of the way I mix it was too slow for me, only being able to grab one channel of EQ at a time, too restrictive. The PM5000 - I love it, it does everything I want and is much clearer sounding."

"It's the same for the I4 system, a much truer sound than the old S4. Easier to mix, the separation is more distinct; with the S4 you really had to work for that. I do miss the S4 for that certain low end, and in fact we are using a few S4 for just that reason. It gives the bass a certain character, and the first few rows lacked that warmth from the flown I4 Subs. Overall, the I4 has a better throw of course, and puts more energy everywhere in general."

We also had a brief discourse about controlling that S4 low-end character here at the NEC where some particularly flatulent low end can sneak up on you. Franks admitted that, "on balance the I4 delivery was more preferable."

With regard to the band, Franks was very forthright: "The fact that Nigel [Olsson] is back in the band gives the true Elton sound." Franks has now mixed Elton for over 30 years, so he should know. "He's a solid drummer and has a distinct sound. Chris Subcek, his tech, tunes the kit well."

## Elton Notes

- Elton's regular production/tour manager Keith Bradley was away for the day, attending his daughter's graduation; how civilised. DC Parmet, part of the wider production team, managed this role on Bradley's behalf for the day. DC (for he is known to all by this tag) and I had worked together in the past for Tina Turner back in the eighties - he had an engaging little story for us: "You should check out the opening band The Storys," he began. "They're from Swansea, a good little band, very West Coast 70s sound. Elton does like to champion new acts - Macy Gray, John Meyer, The Scissor Sisters - they've all opened for us. James Blunt opened for us in 2004 when no-one had ever heard of him. Elton gets all the new releases sent to him each week - he heard The Storys and called the band's lead singer personally." Needless to say, he didn't believe who it was. "But here they are. They do great harmonies, really good voices."

- In keeping with the 'low-key' nature of the Soft LED, there was no stage set to speak of, just slight risers for the drums and percussion, yet the stage appeared undiminished - proving that appropriate lighting and a big enough ego on stage is enough to fill the biggest auditoria.

- During Rocket Man, Elton took his piano on a musical excursion, venturing into some interesting Jazz improvisations, "well I've never heard that before," said Franks at the mixing desk. It very nearly didn't work as the audience's attention span waned, and the band slipped a little adrift, but he pulled it back together and received some of the loudest applause of the evening when it ended.

And how about that longevity? 30 years is some record: "Well I must be doing something right, I've been here since '72, though Elton has never once heard me mix." Has he kept you busy throughout? "I've been lucky enough to work for artists as talented as [Peter] Gabriel and [Robert] Plant, but Elton never really stops, in fact I'm hoping that maybe he will next year - and then come back with a fresh show. He'd really benefit from a break." Franks should know better than most, but as I said earlier, I found the current set refreshing for its re-visiting of so much of Elton's earlier canon.

So how does Franks deal with his mix, especially the super-sonic wave from Elton's wedges? "Well, nothing really, there's just the old DBX160 on his voice. I've tried newer versions but I keep coming back to that - it just suits his voice." Sometimes only brutal compression will do. "He definitely has the loudest monitors, louder than The Who - so yes, I do have to ride his vocal channel a lot. The spill can cause a scratchy, ambient effect - I've tried gating his mic but it doesn't really work. Alan [Richardson] really has those things cranked, but you never hear on-stage feedback. In fact, Elton's biggest thrill is blowing up a wedge. Alan has measured 118dBA peaks at Elton's head position." Amazing he can still hear at all.

The I4 system is tech'd by Matt Herr from Clair Brothers in the US, with the rest of the crew supplied by Audio Rent. "The only thing of concern here is the low end," said Herr. "You can dig out 160Hz with a shovel, anything between 125-200Hz is pretty bad, as Clive said. But we're putting out plenty of energy below that, and there it's a much tighter bottom end from the I4 Subs." Certainly enough to make it sound big and loud. Franks achieved a considered balance for what is a piano-focussed show where you can always hear the guitar but it never removes your head, and Elton's vocals burned



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through whatever was playing. If criticism can be made, then it was piano sound, Elton plays very hard and percussively a lot of the time, and that's how it sounded, harsh and percussive. Not that you can lay blame at Franks' door, this had everything to do with what happens on stage.

Richardson gave the clue on Elton's voice, power over quality, but then there's plenty of so-called talent on the road that can barely sing at all. So much of what we, the public like to hear is based on idiosyncrasy, the distinct character of a certain person's voice. Put 10 violinists on stage and ask them one by one to play the same piece and you'd be pushed to differentiate between them - but place Elton amongst 10 of his contemporaries and there'd be no mistake; and that's what we heard tonight.

### Lighting

Although there exists a strong video element in this presentation, this was emphatically a light show, with LD Kevin Bye keeping firm control on both elements. Bye is relatively new to the LD role for Elton: "I've been designing for him since 2003," he says, "but I'd met him several times before as board operator when Steve Cohen was Elton's designer of choice. Steve gave me the show with his blessing," which considering Elton's durability and output, shows a certain generosity on Cohen's part.

"The design here is done in collaboration with Benny Kirkham. I've been working together with him for the last couple of years. He's a good friend and an excellent LD, does the Dixie Chicks and Aerosmith. We put this show together back on '05. Essentially I'm given a clean sheet by Elton, in all the years I've worked for him it's been 98 per cent the LD, and one or two percent specifics from him."

Bye's rig (from PRG, out of their Greenford shop), is one of those easily adaptable rigs; six finger trusses fan out into the audience,

with short verticals off their upstage ends. Depending on the venue this can be spread or compressed. "It's low here because of the venue, usually I trim the downstage end at 43ft."

Bye mentioned his slight embarrassment at discovering, "it looks very similar to Andy Watson's rig for Radiohead." He needn't be embarrassed, there's no patent on finger trusses, and Watson's application was a far darker recipe than would have suited Elton.

"I also originally chose the fingers so when possible we can rig the apex point above the piano, which sits stage right of centre, but often we play arenas to 360° or 270°, and that vanishing point above Elton's head just wouldn't work for much of the audience. But this is still fun, you can steeply rake it to make it look really big in the larger halls - the significant point is this design has to be able to play well in stadiums."

The rig looks to be filled with nothing but moving lights? "There's a bit of conventional, I have lots of Molefays with colour changers, there are Source Fours on all the band members for a bit of skin tone, but mostly it's movers. VL3000 spots and Mac 2000 washes are my main lamps, the side towers have VL2000 washes, and there are VL6s on the floor. I'm really an old VL guy and frankly you can't beat the VL3000. That said, the Mac 2K is one of the best wash instruments - I chose it for its very different texture."

Bye is controlling his system not from a Virtuoso - which you might imagine from his statement about being 'an old VL guy' - but from the increasingly popular grandMA from MA Lighting. He has his reasons: "I did want to try something different, but it's the LED lights really. They require a lot of channels and the effects engine on this desk is good for the kind of heavy lifting I need." Sorry, heavy lifting? "I've got Pixeline running along the top of all the finger trusses, 66 in total (we used Colour Blazers in the US, basically the same) and they need 12 channels each. Then there's the fibre optic

star curtain and the Soft LED curtain behind it."

The Soft LED is a new item to me, so I spoke with Jonathan Woods, who's looking after it. "Soft LED comes in 24ft by 16ft panels, four of them span the 64ft of Elton's stage, with two further panels, 32ft by 8ft deep attached horizontally beneath to make a 64ft by 32ft screen." explained Woods. "The screen is really low energy, just 25A per phase for the whole thing, though there's a lot of processing in there which takes added power. Touring-wise it's great, the pixels, on four-inch centres, are mounted to the cloth and attached electrically through a harness of what is virtually bell-wire. Replacing a pixel cluster is a bit tricky - the easiest way is to mount a Y-frame ladder up between the two pieces of drape that sandwich the electronics; someone has to direct you by poking a pole or something against the offending pixel, but once located it's just a snap-fit, a clip piercing the wires into the back. But they don't fail often."

And what of rigging? "Very easy, you just need to take a bit of time and care - lay out some Visqueen and unload the curtain onto it before attaching to the truss. A single 24ft by 16ft lowers into its own case for de-rig. Including the box it weighs 350lbs, so a bit

hefty pushing up the ramp - but a whole lot better than a rigid screen."

But back to Bye's choice of the grandMA desk, "It was a bit of a steep learning curve," said Bye of the desk, "but Demfis Fyssicopulos programmed a lot of the LED stuff for me. He's a Venezuelan Greek and



was recommended to me by ACT Lighting who supplied the desk, and he's very good."

And what were your sources for the streaming video you run through the Soft LED? "Benny did most of the content. We

use standard Catalyst material - and I do run some camera footage, and the POV [point of view] camera on the piano." There's a four-camera IMAG system, in this instance onto the two house side-screens, but the IMAG proved a secondary consideration, the show on stage being easily big enough and engaging enough to satisfy most seats in the house.

"We also purchased a large library of stock footage." And in application? "The images are all over the place, once we discovered what is possible with the Soft LED and how it looked we went for close-in sections of footage, giving a very cartoony, or whimsical look."

Bye's lighting is essentially big and strong, deriving the obvious cues from the music - how could it be otherwise? - and keeping attention firmly fixed upon the piano. Whimsical and cartoony are good adjectives to describe the look of the stage. The Taupin/John interpretation of deep southern country comfort is painted in simple colours with occasional fantastical overtones. Thankfully, it never strayed into the over-egged world of a Boy Band extravaganza, in part due to the more easily assimilated output from the Soft LED.

Steve Moles

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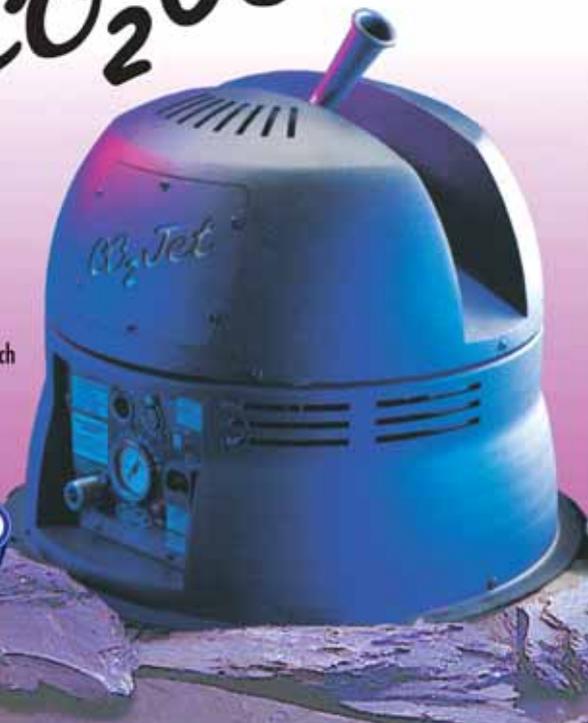
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