

GRAND REUNION

LED ZEPPELIN LIVE

December 10, 2007, saw three-quarters of the legendary Led Zeppelin line-up proving they still had what it takes to rock an arena in their first full concert since 1980 at the O2, London. JONATHAN MILLER goes behind the consoles with well-known FOH engineer 'Big' Mick Hughes and Fleetwood recordist Tim Summerhayes.

'Can you get Robert a desk?'

'I'll get them to do that for you; what do you want it for?'

'You know that Led Zeppelin thing?'

'Yeah; are you doing it, like?'

'Yeah, but it looks like I'm going to have to have Robert's vocal on one desk with all its effects, and then send the output of that desk to another guy who's mixing the band, and he'll put that in his desk, because he won't let me on his desk!'

'Alright, then... if that's the plan. Well, I'm around. If you want me to do it, then I'll do it with you.'

So begins the tale of how Metallica's renowned FOH engineer, 'Big' Mick Hughes, found himself standing behind a Midas XL8 live performance system in London's O2 Arena on December 10, 2007, mixing three-quarters of legendary rock icons Led Zeppelin – namely, guitarist Jimmy Page and bassist/occasional keyboardist John Paul Jones, with Foreigner drummer Jason Bonham standing in for his deceased father, John Bonham – while fellow engineer Roy Williams handled vocalist Robert Plant on the same console amid a media-frenzy surrounding one of the most eagerly-awaited reunion concerts of all time.

A Ticket To Heaven

As announced during a September 12 press conference by premier promoter Harvey Goldsmith, Led Zeppelin was set to headline the O2 Arena-hosted tribute concert for the late

Ahmet Ertegun – Atlantic Records founder, and much-missed mentor to some of popular music's greatest names, including, of course, Led Zeppelin – with all profits going to the Ahmet Ertegun Education Fund. The fund provides students with annual scholarships to universities in the UK, USA, and Ertegun's country of birth, Turkey, as well as a music scholarship open to all being established at London's Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication. Commendable stuff. And with 20,000 tickets priced at £125 apiece for this 'one-off' O2 Arena show, profits aplenty were pretty much guaranteed – all the more so when it was also announced that due to an anticipated overwhelming demand, tickets would be made available by ballot only, with interested parties being invited to register their names via a dedicated website for random selection. Again, due to an anticipated overwhelming demand, tickets would be limited to two successful applicants per household.

Predictably, perhaps, the website exceeded its bandwidth allowance and crashed almost immediately following the announcement; as it was, overwhelming demand proved to be something of an understatement here as it received an amazing one billion page impressions with – depending on whose estimate is to be believed

– somewhere between 20 million and 200 million people attempting to avail themselves of those tickets. According to Meyer Sound, which later played an audible part in the proceedings, "...a 25-year-old Scottish man was rumoured to have paid \$170,000 for a pair at a charity auction."

Make no mistake. Those Led Zep boys sure are popular, as one might expect from a group whose worldwide album sales currently swan around the 300 million mark (and rising).

That's all well and good, but the burning question remained: could they still cut it onstage? Expectations for the O2 performance no doubt rose another notch nearer to fever pitch with the long-awaited November 20 launch of the official Led Zeppelin website. Visitors clicking on its unassuming 'Reunion, London 12.10.07' link were met with a wailing of an air raid warning siren as an arty aerial

view of the O2 Arena itself fades into a nostalgia-inducing sepia-tinted colouration, before the shadow of a overhead zeppelin looms into shot, finally casting itself over the O2's distinctive dome like a scene from an *Independence Day*.

The concert was subsequently postponed until Monday, December 10 due to 63-year-old Zeppelin guitarist Page fracturing his left hand's little finger having reportedly taken a tumble in ▶



Hughes gets down to Earth(works).



Led Zeppelin's 16-song set list – 'scrabbling' unscripted!

▶ his garden.

Come the night before showtime, even the usually far from flummoxed 'Big' Mick Hughes was still feeling pressure to perform. "It's very difficult to just go in for a one-off," he reasons, "I've never done a show as stressful as that, and I've done some pretty big shows – a million people in Moscow [with Metallica] wasn't as stressful as doing this thing! It was just, like, 'Wow!', and I'd be lying if I said any different; even just standing outside my hotel the night before chatting to some guy... I think he said his ticket was either five or 10 grand! I've been talking to lots of people who've paid this kind of money... it was more than just a show. It was a spectacle."

When Mick Met Roy

The road to staging the spectacle was a fairly long and winding one. Hughes explains how he landed the great gig on the ground thus: "...I met and had a word with Qprime – the management company I work with for Metallica, who also manage Jimmy Page. Jimmy had been to see Metallica at Wembley Stadium (on July 8, 2007), and thought it sounded good, so that gave me the 'in' there."

Interestingly, Metallica's Sick Of The Studio '07 tour just happened to be the first time that Midas 'evangelist' Hughes had taken the new XL8 live performance system on the road, so it's little wonder that the same console ended up being used with Page & Co once Hughes' well-tuned ears had been brought to bear on resurrecting that legendary Led Zeppelin sound onstage – not least that its inherent flexibility allowed him to work alongside Williams without needing a second FOH console. "It was perfect," Hughes notes, before revealing: "In all fairness, I did an analogue spec at first – XL4, obviously... gates and various compressors for different jobs was the initial plot; effects were a bit of an unknown quantity at that stage – obviously, there'd be the statutory reverb machines, but I didn't know if we'd need anything special. It turned out that we needed flangers and phasers, plus a plethora of different reverbs and stuff, so it's a good job we didn't go that way, because it pretty much all changed. I ended up with probably nigh on 70

input channels – admittedly, probably only 34 or 36 of those was the band, and the rest was effects returns, but it just swelled sideways; so, fortunately, with the flexibility of the XL8, it wasn't suddenly a case of, 'Oh, shit; we need to get another desk!' The XL8 came into its own when everything was changed around on different things, so we could literally just re-program the effects rack.

"Of course, being able to recall a pop group into the B area on the console meant that we could set the end bay of the console to be Robert's vocal and his effects returns, so Roy could have his own pop group at the end while I used the rest of the console with the VCAs to do the band."

This ostensibly unusual way of working begs a rather obvious question that Hughes himself brings up when addressing that potentially divisive two-man operational issue: "I've known Roy for probably 20-25 years, and people keep asking the question, 'What's it like to have dual engineers, so-to-speak?' But because I've known Roy for so long – he's 60 years old and I'm 50, nearly – I know what he's done, and he knows what I've done, so there was none of that chicken strutting 'round shit scenario. I had nothing to prove to Roy, and he had nothing to prove to me. We were there to do a job, and we both just got on with it together. We never once argued about it – fantastic, really. I do wonder how it would have worked if it was two people who didn't know each other."

Grace Under Pressure

While Williams and Hughes were clearly committed to making their console-based marriage work for the benefit of all – not least Led Zeppelin, ironically it was actually that elusive Led Zeppelin sound that was to prove problematic for Hughes: "That, there, is the one question that created a big dilemma, because were we talking about the 1970s or about 2007? At the start, I really didn't know which way it should go. I listened to loads of bootlegs; I listened to the albums. They had a unique sound, but I think some of that unique sound was thrust upon them by the period in which it was recorded – the limitations as to what equipment could do, so it begged the question: does it want to be now?"

VIEWS FROM THE OUTSIDE • TIM SUMMERHAYES ON RECORDING LED ZEPPELIN LIVE

"Two or three months ago I got a call from the office saying that someone's enquiring about the Led Zeppelin show, so I thought, 'Christ! It would be really good to do that, thinking we wouldn't stand much of a chance. I made a couple of phone calls myself, and it became apparent that they wanted us to do it, which I was quite pleased about, really."

So says Fleetwood Director Tim Summerhayes, who, come December 10, 2007, was parked up outside the O2 Arena, sat inside Fleetwood One, his live concert recording and audio post-production for broadcast company's flagship mobile truck – equipped with a digitally-controlled 96-input Euphonix CS2000 console, charged with capturing and committing 48 tracks of uninterrupted Led Zeppelin performance at 24-bit/48kHz to iZ Technology's RADAR (master) and Merging Technologies' Pyramix (safety) formats. No pressure there, then.

"Technically, it's a very straightforward operation," claims Summerhayes. "Mick proposed his channel list, we looked at it, and it was absolutely fine. We made just one alteration during the soundcheck; Mick decided to use a couple of extra overheads on the drum kit – higher than regular overhead mics by a couple of feet, so we just opened them up slightly to make it a wider stereo image, but it was no big deal."

But recording Led Zeppelin's first full-length show since 1980 was a big deal indeed – so much so that Summerhayes' recording media was signed off soon after the venue's house lights came back on: "We were told specifically that we were recording it for archive purposes, and they were taking the masters away at the end of the show and just putting them in storage. To my knowledge, there are no positive plans for it to ever see the light of day, but let's hope it happens."

To that end, Summerhayes adds, "We had to capture the audience; we knew it would be quite riotous, and we knew it was going to be full, so we had 24 cables in the roof, and we used most of those, as well as our normal array along the stage, and we sub-mixed those to eight tracks, which was basically the available tracks that we had left at the end of the split. We thought that regular 5.1 might not be sufficient in a few years' time, so they've got eight tracks to play with."

And with producer/director Dick Carruthers simultaneously shooting the show in high-definition, perhaps Summerhayes' recordings may yet be called upon one day, after all. "We produced a workable listening track for them, but that was never intended to be used for anything other than a guide mix," notes Summerhayes, before changing tact slightly: "It's being put in a vault somewhere, to be looked at again at some stage, but whether I get a sniff at it, I don't know. I'd love to, but it will probably go to the Jimmy Page camp. I stand to be corrected, but I think it's Jimmy's band; he's the one who keeps the whole thing going."



Well hung... Meyer's mighty M1LOs ensured Zeppelin was heard as well as seen

What to do? Well, Hughes did what he could, striking up a direct dialogue with the band itself: "We talked about it, but when you're so close to the wood, can you see the trees? I don't know if they really had a vision on how they should play out. We played around with lots of different sounds and stuff in rehearsals, trying out different techniques – alien to me, some of them. I come from a world where it's all close mic'd, and everything's gated and tidy; it works, and that's how we keep the big arena and stadium sounds clean. Then, all of a sudden, you're into another world with Led Zeppelin, because you're into a more ambient sound."

Little wonder, then, that Hughes admits to feeling some pressure! "I was in a lose-lose situation, because literally everybody has an opinion on how Led Zeppelin should sound," he rationally reasons. "It's very difficult to mix something when you haven't firmly got the picture inside your head as to what it should sound like because you keep getting pulled in different directions by everybody's attitude to it. In the end, we decided that this had to be Led Zeppelin with technology; had Led Zeppelin continued to play for the last 27-odd years, then this is really what they would have come to."

That being said, in-ear monitoring was duly denounced. "They're not interested in any of that kind of stuff," states Hughes, humorously adding: "That part of the plot was still pretty 1970s." In the event, monitor engineer Dee Miller mixed on a Midas Heritage 3000, having specified a Britannia Row-supplied Turbosound system comprising 11 TFM-350 high-powered, full-range wedges (incorporating twin 15-inch drivers and a two-inch compression driver in a 42° angled enclosure) for general stage coverage; a pair of TFM-450 high-performance, bi-amped wedge monitors (featuring a custom 15-inch neodymium LF driver and a three-inch diaphragm neodymium HF compression driver on a 40° x 60° horn) for Page; another pair of TFM-350s for Bonham; plus six Flashlight mid-highs per side for sidefills.

The Song Remains The Same?

Little was being left to chance, so it was that back in July Hughes first found himself getting up close and personal with Led Zeppelin on a rehearsal stage within West London's Black Island Studios, the band having already had "a little knock" in June to find out if they could still play together before they actually got everybody's hopes up.

Initially listening back via two crystal clear Genelec 1037 active three-way monitors at Black Island, and armed with his trusty Midas XL8 and an accompanying Klark Teknik DN9696 AE550 Multitrack Recorder well in advance of its official release, Hughes set about mastering those Led Zeppelin sounds, paying particular attention to recreating John Bonham's distinctive drums, one of the band's unmistakable trademarks. Bonham Snr's pounding drum part recorded in a three-story stairwell that opens 'When The Levee Breaks' (1971's *Led Zeppelin IV* album) remains one of the most sampled drum breaks of all time. "I tried gates on the toms at the start, and completely failed," freely confesses Hughes. "I tried using external triggers taped to each shell to fire the gates; that kind of worked, but it sort of failed, because at some point you would hear a gate. It became pretty apparent that I would have to do it with no gates, so the gates all went. Then it was just a case of working with the overspill of all the different drum mics and stuff; again, that's where the XL8 came into its own, because we had the new 9696 recorder – the SADiE one that they've conjured up for virtual sound-checking."

Here Hughes' equipment of choice was very much screaming 2007. "That was viciously beaten on," he semi-seriously jests, before virtually launching into a crash course on the physics of sound. "It was taken way out of context to what it was designed for. Fortunately, it behaves very like a [Digidesign] Pro Tools system inasmuch as you can zoom visually on the waveforms, so it gave us the opportunity to whack the snare and look at the screen to see how long it actually took before the snare arrived back at the overheads and different tom mics, and because the XL8 has

a delay on every channel I could actually delay the drum channels; I had four milliseconds on the snare drum, so that the close mics were delayed four milliseconds, having taken the distant mics as being the zero reference, and delayed everything back to that so that four milliseconds of pushing the direct snare mics back made it all happen at once when you hit the ambients."

The result of which was? "It made it so much fatter; you didn't get all the phase cancellation," reports Hughes. "We then did the same thing with the tom-toms; they obviously had varying degrees of delay as well, but we're only talking milliseconds here – not taking a snare and putting it in the next song!"

The result of which was that John Bonham himself could almost have been sitting on that drum stool – combined credit where credit's due to 41-year-old Jason Bonham's impeccable drumming skills and the tenacious Hughes' finely-tuned ears, not forgetting the cutting-edge equipment being deployed to such devastating effect. Speaking of which, here's Hughes' low-down on the mics used thereon: "Predominantly, the drum kit was mic'd with Earthworks: the X-Y was two SR25s; the two overheads we used were SR25s; the hi-hat was an SR30; snare bottom was an SR25; snare top was a '57; I had an SR25 on the kick drum, which the KickPad had been plugged into to tailor the microphone to a kick drum sound; I also used another KickPad on the Beta 52 that we had in the hole of the kick drum, so they were both treated with the Earthworks plug-in 'Pad; the ride cymbal was a PC30, which is like a little gooseneck affair, which we could sneak under the bell; the timpani was another SR30; and then the tom-toms were Audio-Technica 350s, which are little goosenecks."

There you have it: instant Led Zeppelin drums. No need for samples. No sir: "I could have gated everything down; we could have even brought in some sampled drum sounds – fired some off the albums, even, but that would have been going for perfection, and I don't think it's about that. Led Zeppelin is an attitude more than a sound. The dynamics within the songs are fantastic, which is why you could never use gates... for the simple reason that they'll take it down to next to nothing and then they'll build it back up again from that within each song. It had to be all open and have this airiness about it – kind of a mixing pot."

It'll Be Alright On The Night

Following a week's worth of "trial and error" at Black Island Studios without any PA gear (and, amazingly, without Robert Plant, who was otherwise engaged in America with Roy Williams) production stepped up a gear when Plant (and Williams) regrouped with Bonham Jnr, Jones, and Page (and Hughes) at a larger sound stage within Shepperton Studios with a 'cut-down' PA comprising seven Meyer Sound M1LO High-Power Curvilinear Array Loudspeakers per side, four flown subs, plus a couple of ground-stacked subs for a few run-throughs of the 16-song set before

moving on to the final destination.

Shepperton, too, was far from being an easy ride for Hughes. "All of a sudden, you've come off Genelecs and gone through a PA system, so there's a transitional thing there, because you're listening to PA boxes, as opposed to something that's designed to be a studio monitor. We made a few tweaks there, but it was still a slimmed-down system; we couldn't commit completely to stuff, because it was going to change again.

"Then we got into the O2 with the full-blown rig," continues Hughes – full blown being an amazingly powerful all-Meyer sound system supplied by UK-based sound rental company Major Tom, upping the ante somewhat with 72 of those high-flying M10s, plus a centre hang of six MICA Compact High-Power Curvilinear Array Loudspeakers, with ten flown 700-HP UltraHigh-Power Subwoofers per side; nine more ground-stacked 700-HPs per side; four more MICAs per side for outfill; and another MICA per side alongside eight UPA-1P Compact Wide Coverage Loudspeakers strung across the stage for front fills. Three Galileo Loudspeaker Management Systems handled 36 outputs and Meyer Sound's Director of European Technical Support, Luke Jenks, used a SIM 3 Audio Analyzer System to tune the system to work with the O2 Arena.

On the face of it, this surely should sound stunning? Over to O2 first-timer Hughes for its final analysis: "Was I pleased with it? It's not as easy as I thought it was going to be. I'd kind of believed people that the room was going to be just stunning, and it wasn't quite like that. It kind of sneaked up on me a little bit, which was why I had to do a bit of scrambling and juggling for the first three songs to make it fit."

And as for that aforementioned dual-mixing scenario, was it alright on the night? "Even though we knew Jimmy would be doing guitar solos and stuff, the plan was to keep the vocal pretty prevalent," Hughes reveals. "The vocal effects were really down to what Roy wanted to do, so it was his bag. There were quite a lot of effects on the voice – if Roy was doing a long delay, Robert tends to go and stand by the drum kit, so I did have a couple of repeats coming through when the drums caught the echo or something."

So, job done, how does Hughes feel about it all after the momentous event? "Mmm," he muses, and then pauses. "The reason I go 'Mmm' to that question, is because people always ask me, 'What did it sound like?' Well, you can't really ask me that, because it's in the ear of the beholder. Everybody has his or her own idea, but I think it sounded great! As well as being a great rock band, they were always a really ambient band with some real twists, and I wanted to try and capture that."

Can't say fairer than that, now, can you? With post-O2 rumours of a possible Led Zeppelin tour spreading like wildfire, would Hughes consider taking up the mixing mantle again? "As much as Led Zeppelin is probably the coolest gig to do right now, Metallica are my guys. If it comes to it, and they came and asked me, then I'd consider it; but, from what I've heard all along, this was a one-off." 



Midas XL8 on FOH duty – "16 was perfect" (Hughes).

