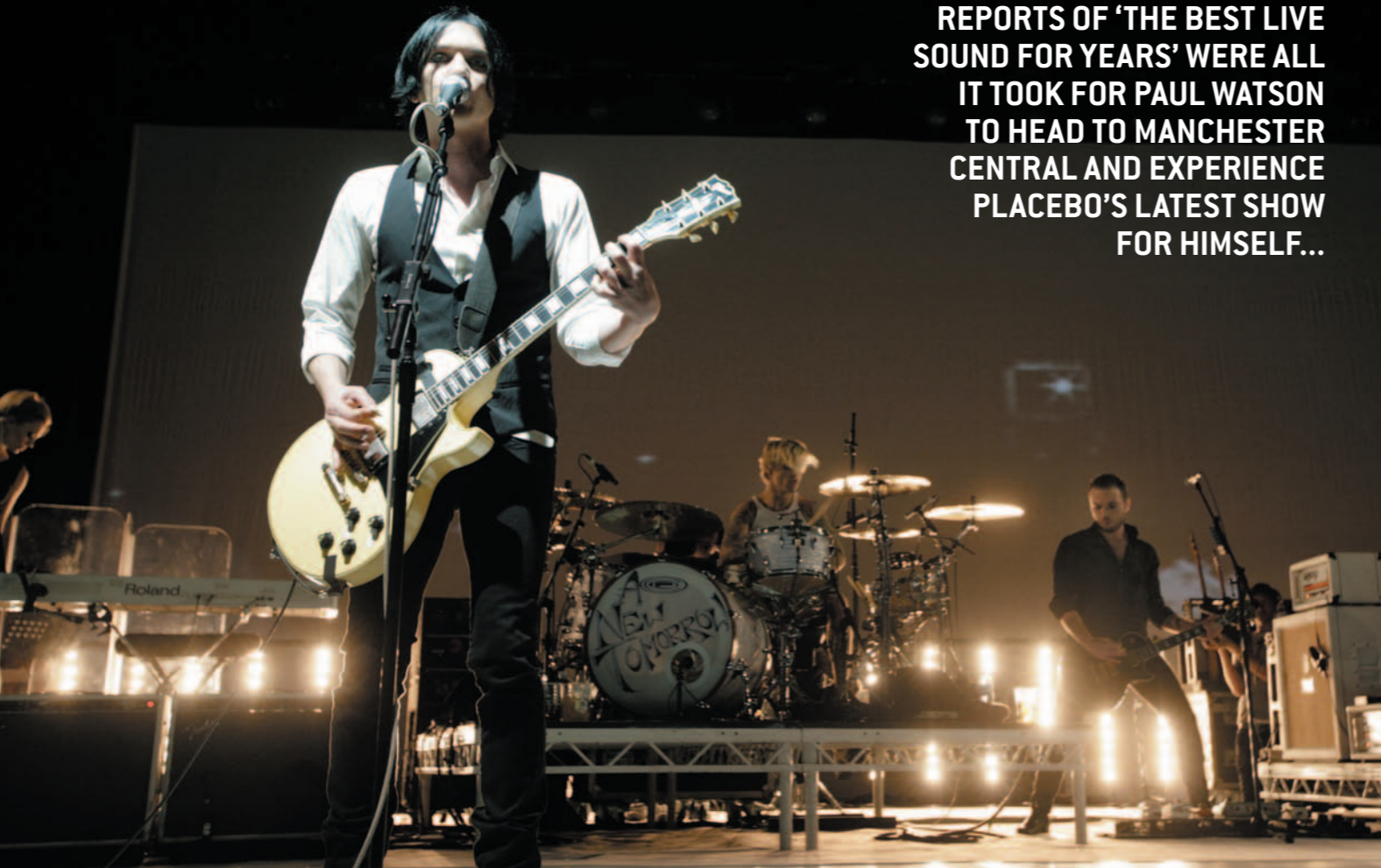


REPORTS OF 'THE BEST LIVE SOUND FOR YEARS' WERE ALL IT TOOK FOR PAUL WATSON TO HEAD TO MANCHESTER CENTRAL AND EXPERIENCE PLACEBO'S LATEST SHOW FOR HIMSELF...



L-R: George Breacker (PA tech); Canegreen/SSE Audio Group's Yan Stile; Luther Edmonds (SSE London manager); Dan Seal (system tech); PA techs Adam Field & Paul McCauley; Brandon Reese (front — sound crew chief); FOH engineer Ian Nelson. Below: Production manager Chris Taplin and the Meyer Sound PA.



A DATE WITH PLACEBO

Since Brian Molko and Stefan Olsdal formed the band in London back in 1994, Placebo have come a mighty long way with 10 million albums sold worldwide — one million in the UK alone. Currently promoting their sixth studio album, *Battle For The Sun*, their first to feature drummer Steve Forrest, Placebo's latest venture in the touring world began last May with a series of Academy-sized UK shows before embarking on summer festival stints in Europe, Asia and Mexico.

They arrived back in Europe in the autumn and I caught up with them at Manchester Central (previously the G-MEX) on December 12 to find out why this tour in particular has created such critical acclaim across the globe.

The first thing that became evident upon walking into the arena was the abundance of PA equipment. The much talked-about Meyer Sound PA system for this tour was provided by Canegreen/SSE Audio Group.

Production manager Chris Taplin of Shooting Star Productions, who is on his first tour with Placebo, explained how the choice of this rig has all proved worthwhile: "I'm very impressed by the system; it's very powerful and very flexible if you can carry enough, which we can," he said.

"We have various different sized boxes for different sized halls. The great thing about having powered cabinets is that it's useful not having the footprint on stage and there's no cable weight; cable management is so much easier, which is very cool.



"Obviously it's a fairly heavy system to fly so we ask the rigger to fly up to six tonnes a side of PA which, for a tour of this scale, is a hell of a lot — probably getting on for twice as much as I have ever had before. But, that said, it's worth doing because the end results are fantastic."

Yan Stile, co-founder of Canegreen and a big fan of Meyer, added: "My career has been driven by a relentless quest for perfection in audio and a long partnership with Meyer Sound and their leading-edge technology has helped us to achieve that perfection. Coupled with this the commitment and experience of the touring team has, night after night and without compromise, delivered what I believe to be about as good as you can get in live sound."

After a long soundcheck, during which I'd been blown away by the clarity and thump of the enormous system (even at the back of the hall), I spoke to FOH engineer, Ian Nelson, to discover more about how this powerhouse of a rig was configured and how he rated its performance.

Said Nelson: "Out of all the gear I have ever used, I get the most consistent response out of this Meyer system. Dan Seal [system tech] and I both sort of 'cut our teeth' using the EAW gear that I really loved and was part of Yan's inventory for a while.

"But we did a series of festivals in 2006 where we were coming across this system about once or twice every few weeks, and Dan had been using it a lot because he had worked for Canegreen for quite a long time.

"He was constantly saying to me 'you really need to listen to Milo now' because when it first came out, I had struggled with it. However, at the

point we started re-using it, Galileo had been released, SIM had been updated, the 700-HPs had come out and we really were getting the whole package."

As soon as Nelson heard Milo performing with the Galileo loudspeaker management system, he recognised the change. "The clarity of it is unbelievable. Also, it's so nice to mix on because I like to mix very delicately and even with tiny little moves on a fader, you can hear it making a difference. The EQ is virtually the same every day, too; we spot the same frequencies and pull them out before each show and the system's just so consistent."

CONFIGURATION

The two main L/R hangs are comprised (per side) of 16 Milo 90s and two Milo 120s, with 12 Micas as delays. There was a huge amount of sub-bass — 42 700-HPs were used in total.

There were also eight M'elodies and four MSL4s, which Nelson described as 'great utility boxes'. They were positioned in places where he couldn't justify rigging a big side hang.

Contrary to many shows of this scale, a lot of the sub was hung, as Nelson explained: "We have an awful lot of headroom and we fly some sub behind the PA to stop people being killed by sub at the front. The long hang of sub gives us a certain amount of directional control over it; it

allow us to steer it a little bit.

"Straight behind each side of the Milo hang, there's a dozen 700-HPs. In the Milo, the 12s are at either side of the box; if you drew a line straight down the middle of the Milo, when you put the subs behind, the 18s are basically straight behind the 12s, so there's ultimately one line of phase right through the system. This means that anywhere you go in the venue, that phase is consistent.

"We've found this system so punchy because at the crossover point it's all very accurately phased. Luke Jenks from Meyer gave us a hand setting it up the first time we used it and when we turned it on, we pulled up the kick drum from Pro Tools and Dan and just looked at each other... 'wow!'. It was so unbelievably impressive."

On the floor, Nelson opted for a cardioid arrangement — a stack of four subs on the front and four at the back. He commented: "The two guitar techs are each directly behind a stack of sub and this configuration means their ability to tune acoustic guitars isn't compromised.

"The main problem from the fly is that the waveform doesn't hit the floor until you get about 10m back from the barrier, so we split the flies up into three zones. We've got two zones of two boxes on the bottom and we can put delay on those two zones, which actually



"Out of all the gear I have ever used, I get the most consistent response out of this Meyer system..." FOH engineer Ian Nelson

Below: Ian Nelson with the FOH D-Show console; lighting & video operator Sam McLaren and his ChamSys controllers.

pulls the low down a little bit and then we literally just use these ground subs to fill in the hole where the wavefront doesn't quite make it to the floor.

"The idea is that the sub is the same at the barrier as it is right at the back of the arena and Dan has been saying that the kick drum at the back of the room has still been really hitting your chest — and that's 80-90m away!"

Karoly Molnar, Meyer's director of technical support, was the brains behind hanging the subs. Nelson explained how just a brief post-gig chat led him to adopting this new creative idea: "We were talking about what we were planning to do and Karoly said we should put the subs behind instead of at the side, and that the more you can get in the air the better.

"So we started out with eight in the air and 12 on the floor and then as the gigs went on we just put more in the air. He was right and whenever we've played somewhere like Bridlington Spa where we can't fly the subs, the difference has been staggering."

Nelson further expressed his reluctance to ever return to a more conventional PA set-up and commented on how he felt that now Meyer Sound had set the precedent, others would soon be following suit.

"This system has massively improved what we've been able to do this year. Every time we have gone out we have pushed ourselves to try something new. The last time we went out with Placebo was the first time we'd used flown subs to any great degree and it worked very well. After putting the majority of the sub in the air, well, you couldn't go back really."

Nelson spoke with similar passion about Meyer Sound's SIM audio analyzer, which he's been running wherever possible on this tour. He explained: "Dan went out and did the SIM training course in Germany just before we went away and I just kind of picked it up over the course of the tour.

"It has made a huge, huge difference. We use SIM a lot because our time alignment is really critical. We have to take the Milo and move that back to the subs, then we've got



to delay the ground subs to the flown subs, the centre subs to the flown subs, then the M'elodies on the stage have got to get delayed back and then the side hangs have all got to get delayed back as well.

"What I am finding is that SIM is so unbelievably accurate. We're sitting having conversations about 0.05 of a millisecond! There are points where you just have to stop!"

Nelson added: "I have to underline just how impressive Meyer Sound's support structure is. They're always available with technical advice whenever it's been needed."

CONTROL

Nelson's relationship with Placebo stretches back to 1996 where he started off as their system tech before taking over the FOH mix in 2001. Clearly a fan of them as individuals as

well as their music, he described them as "lovely people" and "a pleasure to work with".

As well as the Meyer PA, his "dream set-up" also includes his Digidesign Venue D-Show console and a D-Show Mix Rack system onstage — natural choices due to his previous role as Digidesign's European product specialist.

"The D-Show really fits the way I work; it's a very non-digital sounding desk. It's also very flexible to work on. The usage of the plug-ins is really good because you get so much choice over the FX you want to use, not just one type of reverb, compressor or gate. I'm using mainly TC reverbs [SS3] which are all internal so the only outboard I need is a CD player.

"I also use a Sony Oxford EQ an awful lot and it's a fabulous EQ. I also recently bought the Tubetech CO1B compressor and it's very similar to the real steel boxed one.

"I found that some of the stranger plug-ins I've come across, like the Phoenix Cranestone — which adds an analogue tape saturation-type compression and distortion into the mix — are brilliant. I tried that out in rehearsals on Brian's vocal and it fattened the vocal up no end so we ended up just leaving it on."

Another Digidesign user is Icelandic monitor engineer Finnur Ragnarsson who mixes on a Profile. The band use in-ears, namely Sennheiser EW300 hardware and Shure SCL5 ear pieces (Molko and Forrest also recently started using Ultimate Ears Quad-Driver moulds). Other monitoring included a pair of 600-HPs as sidefills and some single 18" subs.

LIGHTING & VIDEO

The UK tour's lighting provider was Neg Earth with video supplied by XL Video. Sam McLaren, whose previous credits include Bloc Party and The Ting Tings, operated both the lighting and video from a ChamSys MagicQ ProX console.

Overall show designer Juan Morandi's lighting spec included 28 Vari*Lite VL3000 spots and six Martin MAC 2000 washes, 18 Clay Paky Alpha Beam 1500s, 16 Alpha Beam 300s, 30 Showtec Active Sunstrips and 28 Martin Atomic Strobes with scrollers.

The main video kit included 190ft² of Element Labs Stealth LED screen and eight Barco projectors. McLaren, whose company Out Of Control provided the ChamSys consoles, used two Catalyst media servers with one doubling as a spare.

"ChamSys uses Art-Net native protocol, as does the Catalyst, so we just control the Catalyst direct from the ChamSys exactly like a moving light," said McLaren, who has worked with Placebo since 2006.

"The reason we do it is because when we fly away to do a show, we can take a portable one or a laptop, we have the same control surface. We literally pop the laptop next to us and it's all programmed into the keys.

"It's all manually triggered. We trigger the lighting and the video via the ChamSys, but it's all macroed into one set of cues. We have a big video projection wall at the back of the stage that take feeds from four 20kW Barcos, and two 8' x 4.5' side screens for I-Mag via 12kW Barcos flown from FOH.

"We have a whole load of custom video clips; there's not a single library clip on the Catalysts. That's one of Jvan's specialities — he's got a team of guys who make the video clips for him."

With many of the early tour dates having been held in smaller, more banked arenas



with seats, I was interested to see if the larger Manchester Central provided any challenges in term of coverage when it came to generating the show's 'big look' theme with the lighting and the video.

McLaren replied: "The side screens are low and huge, so that takes the image out quite wide which suits a venue like this. The projector truss at FOH also has strobes rigged on to it, so that takes the lighting right out into the auditorium as well. Even in bigger venues like this, it doesn't look small. The Alpha Beam 1500s are incredibly powerful, so they cut right through to anywhere."

There was a five man video crew and three live cameras, three fixed cameras and four robocams. Despite having their own proprietary Sony controller, the robocams — cut and selected by video crew chief and camera

director Alistair McDermott — were also controlled from the ChamSys console.

Other suppliers on the UK leg included Stardes (five trucks), Beat The Street (four buses) and catering firm Popcorn.

In closing, PM Chris Taplin summed up the production vibe: "I was fortunate enough to walk into an established core crew. The suppliers had been in for a long time and there was already a good infrastructure in place. Basically, we're with the same guys we've had for the last four tours and it's been fantastic."

Ian Nelson added: "Placebo [whose live line-up also includes skilled multi-instrumentalists Bill Lloyd & Fiona Brice] have been pigeon-holed a few times as a bit 'art house' and a bit weird, but if you look online and see what people have written about this tour, they all say 'you've got to go and see these guys live'.

"It's a show with great impact and that's really what we try to deliver every night — a big rock show that sends people away smiling."

Tour managed by Sean Fitzpatrick of Kylie fame, Placebo's schedule re-starts in Jakarta on February 16 and will include numerous festival appearances such as *Sonisphere* at Knebworth, before ending in late summer.

TPI

*Photography by James Cumpsty
& Paul Watson*