

ULTRAVOX: The Reunion

MARK CUNNINGHAM & LOUISE STICKLAND REPORT FROM LONDON'S ROUNDHOUSE ON THE CLASSIC QUARTET'S EAGERLY-AWAITED RETURN TO EDEN TOUR...

It's been a long time coming, but for the first time since 1985's *Live Aid*, the classic Ultravox line-up of Midge Ure, Billy Currie, Chris Cross and Warren Cann has been playing to live audiences around the UK on its *Return To Eden* tour, promoted by the omnipresent Live Nation.

Encouraged by EMI's recent remastering of the post-John Foxx catalogue, the reunion celebrates the 30th anniversary of Ure joining the band as well as the writing of Ultravox's greatest hit, 'Vienna', which would have been a No.1 if not for that pesky chap Joe Dolce's novelty ditty 'Shaddup You Face' — a travesty

best forgotten.

The chiselled looks of the early '80s may have become a little fuller, but the sounds of yesteryear remain intact and surprisingly faithful. Where banks of synths and contrived rhythm workstations once surrounded the four members, the 21st century Ultravox now relies on a slimmed-down arsenal of MacBooks and mother keyboards.

Their performance at London's Roundhouse was a reminder of the power and musicality of Midge Ure's voice and guitar playing, and the genius of Billy Currie, whose twisted synth lines and evocative violin cameos always gave



the band a distinctive edge over their New Romantic-period contemporaries.

Naturally, 'Vienna' was a highlight of the show, but their majestic 1982 hit 'Hymn' notably dripped with emotion as the crowd sang in unison with Ure. Even the curious younger element of the audience were taken aback by the sheer authoritative energy of the old guard.

PRODUCTION

Assisted by Geraldine Roul, the Ultravox production office is headed by two people in dual roles who have worked with Midge Ure



since 1993 — tour manager and FOH engineer Berenice Hardman, and production manager/monitor engineer Dave Claxton.

Back then, the pair operated a PA company in Wales, using a system designed by Tony Rossell at Southend-based ASS. Much of their work came from supporting other rental firms when they became overstretched.

One of those firms was Liverpool's Adlib Audio and their friendship with founder Andy Dockerty is as strong today as it ever was. It was inevitable that Adlib would land the *Return To Eden* tour.

Said Claxton: "We built our way up from a Transit van in 1986 to a couple of 7.5 tonners by around 1992. The following year we were asked to cover one of Midge's solo acoustic/storytelling gigs in Manchester. He'd had a terrible experience with the sound quality at the previous gig in Bristol and was delighted with what we were able to give him.

"We got on really well and as a result, he asked to do the next show, then the next, and then a full tour. Within two years we were also tour managing for him and our relationship has gradually developed to where we now run his website and handle other aspects of his career — it's been very successful."

In a year when Spandau Ballet and The Specials have amazed '80s fans with their unexpected curtain calls, was the Ultravox reunion a surprise to Claxton? "Not really. I think it was likely to happen at some point but it was Chris O'Donnell, one of the band's former managers and now part of Live Nation, who helped push it forward."

Ultravox shut themselves away in London's Terminal Studios for five weeks of rehearsals which benefitted from Adlib's courteous loan of a monitor desk for Claxton during the final week.

"On a day off, Berenice and I shot up to Adlib in Liverpool to have a look at some of their digital desks. I'd previously used a Digidesign Venue D-Show so I wanted to check out the smaller Profile for this tour because of the ability to apply that level of quality in some of the tight spaces we'd encounter.

"Andy Doc very kindly let me take the Profile back to London, free of charge, for the last days of rehearsals. I'm certainly under-using its potential because I'm very hands-on, much as I would be with an analogue desk."

The band's stage monitoring is totally in-ear, with Sennheiser G2 systems as the choice, paired with Ultimate Ears moulds for

Ure and Claxton, and ACS T2-Pro twin driver, soft silicone options for the remaining band members, provided by Hand Held Audio.

"As they stopped touring together in 1985, they'd never used in-ear systems before, with the exception of Midge, and the line of persuasion came from a series of explanatory e-mails. Warren's drum fill back then consisted of some powered Yamaha speakers with 16 x 10" drivers, so to go from that to in-ears has been quite a shift!

"For the first half of the rehearsal period at Terminal we had wedges on the floor and then brought in the in-ears for the band to slowly get used to performing with them with Midge's encouragement. They've now settled down and it seems to work very well."

SUBSTANTIAL SOUND

Adlib's Hassane Essiahi system-engineered and 'babysat' FOH sound on the tour, with Kenny Perrin assisting Dave Claxton, together with third Adlibber, Michael Flaherty.

Berenice Hardman wanted a big, powerful and substantial-looking PA and decided on a JBL VerTec system.

Claxton explained: "We chose VerTec because in reintroducing a band that hasn't

"I think [the reunion] was likely to happen at some point but it was Chris O'Donnell, one of the band's former managers and now part of Live Nation, who helped push it forward..."
Dave Claxton, production manager & monitor engineer

Below L_R: Stuart Archibald, Mark Jones-Roberts, Chris Curran & Tim Eastham; Curran at his Hog iPC console; Adlibbers Kenny Perrin, Hassane Essiahi & Michael Flaherty; keyboard tech Wim Daans.



actively played live for 25 years, we were aware that their memory of PA systems would be of piles of huge black boxes. A 'skinny latte' line array may not have been what they were expecting while VerTec is a little more chunky and the physical nature would be more familiar."

The standard touring set up was left and right hangs of 10 VerTec 4889 elements, complete with ground stacked 4880A VerTec subs, plus lots of infill. All combined, it produced a serious amount of sound in all the directions that people wanted it!

As in-ears are used, there was a need to fill the void created by the silent stage and so Adlib FD mid-high, short throw boxes were chosen to support the arrays. They also in-filled with a row of the smaller Adlib AA82s along the front lip of the stage. Further enhancing the onstage sound was a Nexo Alpha M3 per side.

Everything was driven by Camco Vortex 6 amps apart from the subs, which were twinned with Crown I-Tech 8000s. System processing was handled by Adlib's standard Dolby Lake set-up, complete with remote tablet.

For FOH mixing, Berenice Hardman chose a Soundcraft Vi6, utilising a total of 56 channels including internal FX. She wanted to use outboard for several specific effects and to recreate some of the more vintage '80s flavours, and so plumped for a Yamaha SPX2000 and 990, and a TC D2 Delay.

It's the first time she has used a Vi6, a console picked for its ease of use, solid sound and convenient functionality, such as being able to work across all the channels in layers.

Essiahi's daily task was to balance the system and hand over a smooth and rich-sounding PA that could deal with all frequencies to Hardman, so she could fine tune. His biggest challenge was keeping it as consistent as possible.

"Ultravox's music is very dynamic and can change dramatically in a flash, so the system had to be able to deal with this and a wide range of old and new sounds and feels," commented Essiahi.

He added a quiet stage also makes a room sound very different, so another challenge to make people think that sound was actually

coming from that direction.

"They are amazing performers and great people," Essiahi continued, adding that all the audiences have been very enthusiastic. "It's real music and a real live show with all the energy and drama you'd expect."

LIGHTING

Chris Curran is another of Ure's long-serving crew. Having been his lighting designer for the past 10 years and translating his ideas for solo tours, he was the automatic choice for the reunion.

"A lot of the visual ideas for this production have definitely come from Midge," explained Curran. "Whilst I've designed the show's lighting and the physical nature of the video screen, Midge and Chris Cross to some extent had a big involvement in the video content.

"There are six key looks in the set and they wanted it to be very art-driven, as Ultravox always were. It's certainly not a bag full of moving lights."

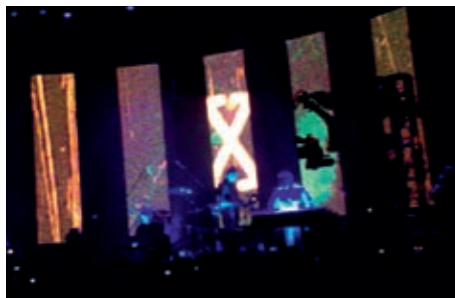
After 'getting it together' at Terminal, the team ventured westward to conduct final production rehearsals at the Venue Cymru Arena in Llandudno, Wales — a location sourced by Claxton and Hardman who live nearby.

"Not only is it a good room, it's also relatively inexpensive," said Curran. "The ceiling's a little lower than you'd ideally want but we could still fly everything.

"We were there for four days and Midge was hands-on throughout, sitting next to me at the desk, passing comment and helping to tighten up any loose ends, visually-speaking."

Prism Lighting has been Curran's preferred supplier for around 20 of the company's 31





years and, once again, the partnership paid off in spades. "I've worked for the company in the past. They understand the way I operate, they're local to me and are very sensible with their pricing," explained Curran.

"As far as I'm concerned, every time I focus a light on Midge, it'll come from Prism. This time they're providing full tour support and have been absolutely superb."

It's a two-truss tour and for the Roundhouse show, Prism specially curved the back truss to complement the contours of the venue and, said Curran, the supplier's rigging was faultless. "We came in early this morning and it went in as sweet as a nut!"

"As far as I'm concerned, every time I focus a light on Midge, it'll come from Prism. This time they're providing full tour support and have been superb..."
Chris Curran, lighting designer

Prism crew chief Mark Jones-Roberts added: "From day one, the production load-ins have been very smooth. Backline [Chris Oliver, John Lever, Peter Dudley and Wim Daans] come in around 11am, they know what they're doing and are up and running in no time. It's a prima donna-free tour.

"Fortunately, the Roundhouse has become a bit more lenient with its curfew since it reopened, although the shows themselves still have to finish early. Tonight, the band will be off stage by 10.15pm and our last flight case will be on the truck within an hour."

Ultravox chose the Roundhouse gig to shoot their tour DVD. Would this impact on Curran's work? "Not in the slightest. They want to use some house lighting on the audience and to highlight parts of the building, but otherwise as far as I'm concerned they're simply filming what we do," said the LD.

"They're taking their light levels from me and hopefully they'll be able to pick up the various dynamics of the show — from the shadowy moments to the full-on brightness of the encore.

"I've had some horrible experiences in the past with DVD shoots because the director wanted so much extra light thrown at the stage that it's completely ruined the look of the show for me and especially the live audience."

Curran is using a Hog iPC, sourced through A.C. Entertainment Technologies, to control his rig. "Ian Tobin at Prism persuaded me to choose the iPC after I originally planned to run the show on an Avo Pearl, which in hindsight might have been a touch ambitious because I'm also controlling the video feeds from a Catalyst media server."

Jones-Roberts, who was joined on the tour by moving light technician and dimmer man Tim Eastham, explained further: "Chris came along to one of the Kaiser Chiefs' shows [another Prism client] and Richard Larkum was telling him that the iPC was the way to go because it works so well with Catalyst, so that sold it.

"I plotted the rig into our WYSIWYG suite where Chris was able to spend a complimentary week familiarising himself with the desk. This gave him a head start on programming at the production rehearsals."

Martin Professional fixtures dominate Curran's lighting spec. "A lot of people have moved over to Robe but I still rate Martin lights very highly, and fortunately Prism can supply them easily.

"I'm using 16 MAC 700s and eight 2000s, all Profiles loaded with standard gobos, plus four 700 Washes on the floor. I've only got Profiles up in the truss because I wanted narrow beams and it's no good putting a 2000 Wash in the air as it'd just be too bright. There are also 12 MAC 250 Entours on custom drop bars for wide, theatre-style close-up beams, and some DB4s for uplighting.

"There's also a nod to the past. I watched



the band's *Monument* live DVD [from 1983] and I've tried to recreate some of those classic looks by including some PARs, powered by an Avolites Art 2000."

Minimal front lighting comes from Strand SL Zoom profiles on 3m trusses, standing on TFL custom bases.

"It's probably the cheapest video ever made because we bought a bulb from B&Q, Chris went up a ladder and started swinging it, and I filmed it on my pocket Sony video camera..." Midge Ure

Ure's showmanship is evident in the way in which he steps in and out of pools of light. "He's become very skilled at working the beams. That's why we don't have any follow spots because he's effectively in control," said Curran.

"If at any moment he doesn't want to be in the light, he'll step out of it. You notice in the show that he'll start putting his guitar headstock into a beam... little tricks like that."

VIDEO

Stuart Archibald has worked with Chris Curran for many years. When this tour came together and they decided to take on video, Curran suggested that he looked after that part of the visual equation.

Touring with Ultravox has also been a very interesting journey for Archibald from many aspects. He works as a project manager for installations at Northern Light in Edinburgh, and they released him for a month to do the tour.

"We've all got on exceedingly well across the departments, worked together very harmoniously and had a great time," he reflected.

He and Curran specified the kit between them and this was supplied as a dry hire from XL Video, where they dealt with project manager Paul Wood. XL sent a technician to help set up during production rehearsals as it was their first time using a Catalyst media server.

"We had a couple of days' training and it seems very straightforward and easy to programme and operate," said Archibald.

Onstage, there were five 4m high by 1m wide columns of Martin LC2140 LED screen — a format encouraged by Midge Ure who was keen

to avoid the 'TV set' look.

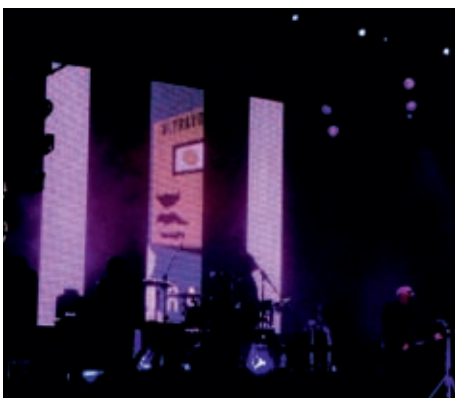
"Midge and I had seen the Martin screens used on the *Night Of The Proms* shows in Belgium and Holland where he performed as part of the house band and as a solo artist, and we knew they'd be ideal," said Dave Claxton.

It was also Curran and Archibald's first experience of using the LC screen, the latter commenting: "It's been incredibly reliable and tough and tours well."

Although not a particularly video-heavy show — quite often, the screens appeared as blocks of colour — the content that is there has high, often dramatic, impact. Some of it is stock Catalyst imagery, whilst other elements were created exclusively for the tour by keyboard tech and Mac wizard, Wim Daans.

There's also the fabled red light bulb sequence, as Midge Ure, the man himself, explained: "I wanted to create this idea from a past tour where we had a red light bulb swinging around, but film it and put it up on the video screens.

"It's probably the cheapest video ever made because we bought a bulb from B&Q, Chris [Cross] went up a ladder and started swinging it, and I filmed it on my little pocket Sony video camera. I then imported the video into my





Mac, slowed it right down and the footage now resides on the media server for cueing on the screens. It's a very simple idea but a very effective part of the show."

At Berenice Hardman's suggestion, Curran and Archibald also sourced two domestic video cameras for what amounts to the only instances of I-Mag. One was pointed at drummer Warren Cann for his speech moment during 'Mr X', which saw his image faded over the top of the screen with his head appearing on the centre column.

The second camera was focused on Billy Currie for his keyboard solos — enhancing these for the apparent wealth of Ultravox aficionados.

LET THEM EAT CAKE...

A special word of thanks goes to Eat To The Beat chefs Rachel Collins and Alison Matthew, who made TPI feel at home at the Roundhouse with their award-winning culinary expertise... and especially the warm lemon polenta cake, which has done no favours at all to the waistline!

As Berenice Hardman explained: "An army marches on its stomach and it's my priority to keep them happy and healthy. We have worked with Eat To The Beat before, they always deliver

and are head and shoulders above the rest."

Working for a band that includes recent Celebrity Masterchef guest Midge Ure must surely pile on the pressure, but the frontman could not have been more impressed.

"Rachel and Ali have been superb, both in the standard of the food and in the pleasant way they serve it," he told us. "Their vital corner of touring production is definitely worthy of a TV documentary — the work they do is absolutely fascinating to me."

Ensuring the band, crew and kit arrived safely at each date were Silver Gray and Tiger Tours (buses), with Stardes providing trucking — "all fairly obvious choices for me," said Dave Claxton in closing, "especially David Steinberg at Stardes who has some really great drivers."

The current Ultravox itinerary looks set to end in the UK on June 13 at the *Isle Of Wight Festival*, with one further date slotted in at the *Lokerse Feesten* in Belgium on August 8.

Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but TPI feels there will be more to come from this extremely fulfilling reunion.

TPI

Photography by Louise Stickland, Mark Cunningham & Graham Brown



MIDGE URE:

Ultravox Past & Present

THE TPI INTERVIEW BY MARK CUNNINGHAM



TPI: There's been quite a gap since your last gig at Live Aid, 24 years ago...

MU: Understatement! For the last two or three years, the fan site at Ultravox.org.uk had been collating everything we ever did together for the ultimate CD package for EMI. A dialogue between the band started and when it was pointed out that it was coming up for 30 years since we wrote 'Vienna', we thought it'd be a celebratory moment. If anything was going to happen again, musically, then it would be this year.

I was then asked to do some acoustic tunes on Absolute Radio and I phoned Billy, asking him if he'd like to do 'Vienna', which we'd never done acoustically. The moment we did it, the websites went into meltdown!

TPI: What was the mood like during the production rehearsals?

MU: It was great, although a huge learning curve for all of us, not just to go back and re-learn all the songs, but to also come back on form as a player. Plus, on top of all that, catching up with all the new technology.

You've got a couple of choices for full stage rehearsals in London but the amount of money they ask is crazy, but that's the Scot in me. Berenice [Hardman] and Dave [Claxton] found this great venue in Wales for a fraction of the cost, and as it was halfway to Edinburgh, the first date on the tour, it made a lot of sense. By sneaking off to Llandudno, we were totally left alone which was perfect, bearing in mind that not only have some members not toured for a long time, but have also not even played an instrument.

TPI: When Ultravox first toured, MIDI didn't exist and your keyboards were synchronised by means of an electronic spike...

MU: The first drum machine that you could program a pattern into was the Roland CR-78 but all it had was a mono audio output and because it was pre-MIDI there was no way to lock it up to a Mini Moog. Everything had to be altered and adapted, so we took a spike out of the back of

the drum machine into the Mini Moog to try and keep the Moog pulses in time with the drum machine. Roland were probably quaking in their boots! It was always a logistical nightmare.

TPI: So you were going on stage every night not knowing if you were going to get through it...

MU: We were going on stage a lot of nights not getting through it! The drum machine would decide to play in quadruple time. [Warren Cann, interjecting: You know that expression, working without a net?] We didn't have to poles to hold the net up! It really was incredibly basic although at the time it was cutting-edge technology. The problem was that we were trying to get this gear to do on stage what we did with it in the studio. That gear was never designed for the road.

TPI: With that background, you can hardly complain on this tour!

MU: Oh no, it's all very high-tech. There are four Apple MacBooks out there, all soft synths. We were able to recreate a lot of those original sounds, particularly Billy Currie's ARP Odyssey solos which were such a distinctive part of Ultravox's sound. Billy really plays it and models the sound completely manually by throwing the oscillators around, pitch-bending, twisting the notes so that the sound is constantly morphing and changing. He's managed to do it with a Novation keyboard and the soft synths, although it took him months of programming.

Instead of taking out 20 keyboards like we used to, we now go on stage with five. For the keyboard splits we use Logic's Main Stage program that accesses all the soft synths. Each song has a 'page'; up pops the patches, everything changes and you just get on with the next song.

So, no, we can't complain although laptops still aren't designed for touring. The designers don't consider that vibrations might cause a Firewire cable to fall out the back of one of Billy's break-out boxes, as one did the other night. The beauty, however, is that we can now do a soundcheck in 20 minutes instead of four or five hours!

TPI: Is this a toe-in-the-water exercise or is there a plan ahead?

MU: There's no plan. This was meant to be a pat on the back, celebratory, 'didn't we do a nice body of work' tour. The reviews we've had have been phenomenal and it sounds, weirdly, like Ultravox. I honestly don't know how that happens. You get four people who haven't worked together for 20-odd years, put them in a room and that sound is just there again.

TPI: It must be in the DNA.

MU: Yeah, it must be the DNA or in the ambience that humans create. I've played those songs many times in many formats with other musicians and they never sounded like this.

TPI

Photography by Annie Clay,
Emily Power/Absolute Radio & Ultravox.org.uk



Above: Ultravox in 1980; Billy Currie and George Martin recording the Quartet album at AIR Montserrat (1982); performing at Live Aid (1985); together again in 2009.

Hear the full version of this interview now
[at www.tpimagazine.com](http://www.tpimagazine.com)