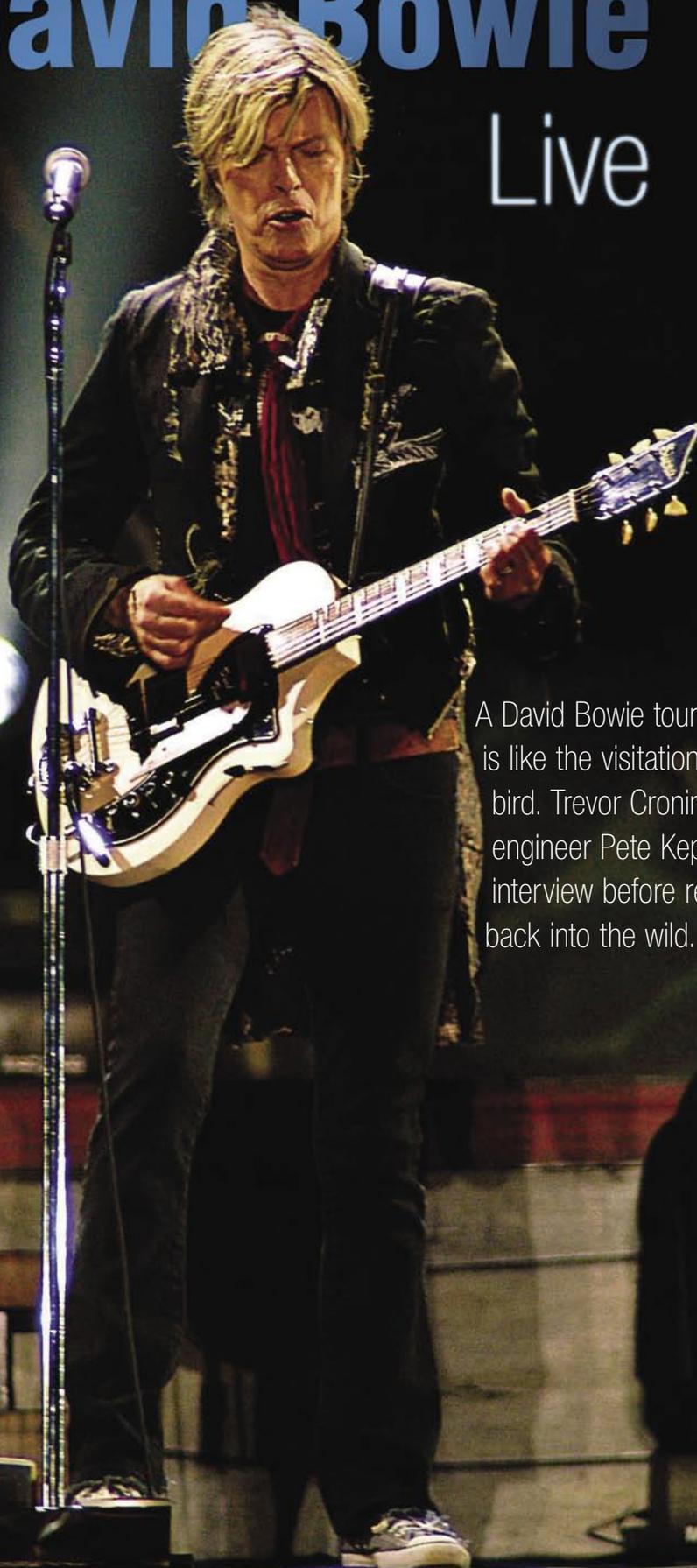


# David Bowie

Live



A David Bowie tour to our parts is like the visitation of a rare bird. Trevor Cronin tags FOH engineer Pete Keppler for an interview before releasing him back into the wild.

David Bowie's *A Reality* world tour represents the pop chameleon's most extensive embarkation in many a year. In fact, the recent run of shows is the first time David Bowie has performed in Australia since the 1987 *Glass Spider* world tour – although there was a brief fly-in for the Tin Machine tour of 1989.

AT headed to Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena to speak at length with the person entrusted with Mr. Bowie's front of house sound, Pete Keppler, who hails from New York City.

**Trevor Cronin:** *How long have you been working front of house for David Bowie?*

**Pete Keppler:** Two years, starting in April of 2002.

**TC:** *How would you describe him as a boss?*

**PK:** David's really good to work for. He has a wonderful capacity to bring people into the fold who don't necessarily have a 'name' yet. For example, Gerry Leonard is now his musical director and guitar player – great guitarist, really great guy, really great musical sensibilities – but like myself he's done a lot of work with smaller acts, but neither of us are what you'd call big names in the industry (yet!). You'd expect David to be cherry-picking people from an incredible, elite palette of musicians, but he hears something he likes and he goes for it.

**TC:** *After so many years of touring and recording I guess he can identify what he wants.*

**PK:** Yeah. You know, he could have the pick of anybody he wanted, but because he likes to have something a little out of the ordinary he picks and chooses the people he works with very carefully. He's also the first to say that this is the best band he's ever had.

**TC:** *What would you say are the major technical challenges of this tour?*

**PK:** Some of the arenas we've worked in have just been awful, sonically. Meanwhile, a place like this [Rod Laver Arena] is great.

**TC:** *I see that you've put plenty of acoustic-deadening drapes up on the walls?*

**PK:** Yeah, I'm glad the drapes are up. In just about any arena, the one area that seems to cause the most problems is the roof – untreated ceiling surfaces can just wreak havoc. We've played in rooms where the roof has been one large dome in the middle with nothing covering it. I mean, nobody was thinking about acoustics when they built a place like that. The Rod Laver Arena is great. It's obviously acoustically treated – I don't know what's up there, but there's virtually nothing bouncing back off the roof. In the sheds – the pavilion venues we play in the summertime – a few venues have actually spent some money and put acoustic treatment in the roof, and it makes a huge difference. As far as the technical stuff, there's really very little that I have to deal with. Between Bob, from JPS, who's been looking after me for the past week, and Tony Szabo, who's my regular front of house assistant, I'm well looked after in the technical department. I like to have a say in how the PA is flown if there are par-

ticular issues with a certain room but usually I prefer to leave that stuff to my system tech. I'll usually walk the room a little bit to check for coverage, and make any minor adjustments if necessary.

**TC:** *Could you run me through the selection of equipment you use?*

**PK:** There are 53 inputs coming from the stage. As far as mics go, Mike Prowda [the monitor engineer] and I chose a very carefully hand-picked selection of mics. We had a lot of time in production rehearsals to sort through the mics, and we were able to hear what worked best for each application. Primarily we use Shure and Sennheiser, as well as a few Audio-Technicas. We use a combination of the Shure SM91 and a Sennheiser 602 on the kick drum, and Beta 56s, Sennheiser 604s, and Shure KSM32s on the rest of the kit. Guitars use Shure KSM32s and AT 4050s.

David uses a Shure Beta 58 on his vocal, which we decided on after listening to a bunch of different mics – Neumanns, Sennheisers, Audix, etc. We really went through a whole bunch of stuff, and settled on the Beta 58 because it had the best rejection. And while it's not the most hi-fi vocal mic around, with David, it's pretty hard to make the guy sound bad. The thing is, he spends a lot of time off the mic, and sometimes will sing rather quietly even though the band may be full-on behind him. While some of the condenser mics sounded great, the bleed from the rest of the stage was a bit unmanageable.



**FOH Engineer, Pete Keppler, relies heavily on his Yamaha PM1D's internal processing and effects.**

From there his vocal goes through a Focusrite Red mic pre to line level before it gets to the monitor desk and down 300 feet of multicore to the front of house console. From there I do some processing with the BSS DPR-901 [dynamic equaliser] and Summit DCL-200 [dual compressor/limiter]. I also use a TC M3000s as his vocal reverb (and another M3000 for a small amount of reverb work on the piano and the acoustic guitars). Everything else is done within the console – all the compression, EQing and gating is handled

by the on-board channel processing on the Yamaha PM1D. Additionally, the PM1D has got eight on-board effects engines, so all the drum reverbs, most of the doubling and delaying and treatment for vocals, is done on the desk, with the exception of some vocal effects that David generates on stage with a selection of pedals. There's an effect that David had on a couple of records back in the '70s, where they were using an Eventide 910 Harmonizer on the snare drum to



*David Bowie's vocal runs through a BSS DPR-901 EQ (third from top) into a Summit DCL-200 compressor (centre), while a TC M3000 effects unit (two units below the Summit) provide the vocal reverb.*

produce a weird effect. I can generate that in the console and that works out quite well. Having eight on-board engines is great. I don't know exactly what to compare them to as far as their stand-alone equivalents, but it sounds every bit as good as an SPX-990.

**TC: So the PM1D impresses you then?**

**PK:** That console has really proved to be a pretty amazing piece of technology. It's been (knock on wood!) bullet-proof... it hasn't failed or done anything untoward on any of the shows. It's been out for a number of years now, so it's been road-tested a

lot. I really like the desk. The fact that it's got all the on-board effects and dynamics control is great. It's laid out with a lot of knobs and controls, which appeals to

me because I'm still definitely a real 'seat-of-the-pants' engineer who grew up on Midas XL3s and 4s. I don't like messing around with touch-screens and paging through layers.

Also, the fact that the desk has 12 DCAs (digitally controlled amplifiers) is really, really handy. I can work from the centre of the desk most of the time without having to worry about a lot of other stuff. Just being able to solo the DCAs and have everything in place is awesome. I rarely use headphones; I always work on the nearfield speakers, even during the show, for soloing. I don't like headphones much; it just isn't a preferable way for me to work.

**TC: Headphones take you away from what's going on in the room for a second or two.**

**PK:** Yeah. I mean, the isolation's nice, but I get what I need out of the nearfields, and somehow, God knows how, I haven't blown them up yet!

**TC: What monitors are you using?**

**PK:** They're the small Genelec 1029s. They're like baby 1031s, and they're really great. They're a lot cheaper than 1031s too!

**TC: What sort of level do you push the show at?**

**PK:** It sits between 106 and 108dB on the loudest stuff and only very occasionally peaks over that. There are certain numbers in David's show that get quite loud. There's a song called *I'm Afraid of Americans* which is quite large... it's got a lot of bottom end in it and some real heavy guitar work. Then there are other times during the show when I just push the volume up... *Heroes*, *Ziggy Stardust*, etc.

**TC: So the Genelecs rise above that? That's pretty impressive.**

**PK:** Yeah they do. The board also includes time alignment on the monitor outputs. So, it's easy to just dial in your distance from the PA and I can effectively make the Genelecs sit in front of the front of house sound and really hear them over the mix if I need to.

## Zoned PA

**TC:** *I've noticed you've got a healthy range of control for the speaker system.*

**PK:** That's right. I've got the front arrays split into three vertical zones. Quite often I find the EQ needs to be a little different in different areas of the auditorium – especially for what's being pushed all the way to the back and the top seats. It's just not the same back there, you usually have to dial in a bit more top end to ensure those seats aren't missing out on any of the high-end content. When we're not in the USA I bring my own system control with me. I've got a wireless tablet EQ that acts as the remote control for all the XTA processors. I can walk around with it and tune the PA from wherever I choose. I can walk around the side of the stage and go to work on the side-hang zone, which saves a lot of setup time calling my system tech on the radio and going 'remove 10dB of 315Hz over here'. It's very cool, being able to do that, and much more exact. We've also got zones for the little centre-fill cabinets, which hang off the lighting truss down-stage centre. That compensates for the lack of high frequency content in the areas that the line-array can't reach. There's also floor-fill cabs down in front, as well as some extra subs. Meanwhile, the main subs are flown with the rest of the PA.

**TC:** *That's great attention to detail for the big fans that are in the front row.*

**PK:** For the people who pay the most! I feel it's important to try and reach everybody. If you're really working and tuning things up correctly there's no reason why everybody shouldn't be getting close to the same sound. I've seen other people do line array setups where they really don't have that much front-fill pointed at the folks down in front, and maybe they don't mind, but personally I would want to hear every nuance of the music down there.

**TC:** *I noticed a lack of wedges or side-fill. I assume you're relying on in-ear monitoring fairly heavily?*

**PK:** That's right. Everyone except the drummer (who has a sub and a little wedge behind him) is on in-ears – which is a front of house guy's dream! Side-fills are especially problematic. They might be 20 to 25 feet away from the vocal mic, and you really get some audible delay going on. I mean, it's kind of cool in a way cos it's live-sounding, but it's nice to have the control without them, too.

**TC:** *Getting a controlled and sweet-sounding on-stage sound is obviously critical.*

**PK:** Sure. And the most important thing for the band is the monitor engineer. Whether you're using in-ears or live on-stage monitoring, the monitor mix is one of the most crucial factors for me and everyone else to having a good show. I can't fix what's being played improperly because a performer can't hear themselves properly. So, Mike Prowda is absolutely awesome. He's probably the best monitor engineer I've ever worked with. He's got the band really dialled in. He's got seven mixes to listen to constantly, and he does an impeccable job. Secondly, all the musician's techs are top-notch, too. The gear is always in top condition and sounding great.

## All the Right Moves

**TC:** *During the show do you have some major moves on the console?*

**PK:** Well, every song's got its own preset. Obviously not all 53 inputs are running all the time, so I'll keep stuff backed off – vocal mics and instruments that aren't getting used on a given song will be either shut off or turned way down. There are a fair number of cues to do and there's a lot of information coming off the stage on certain songs, but some of the stuff is a little bit more stripped down. It's really different night to night. Like I said, I kind of like to go on-the-fly, and so having a preset doesn't mean I just punch it in and the song's mixed. Anybody who's done any real amount of live engineering knows that you can be in the same place on two different nights and it's going to be two different shows – depending on the band's performance and so forth, there's always something to do.

**TC:** *Thanks for your insight Pete, and have a great time in Melbourne!*

**PK:** Thanks! Hope you enjoyed the show.

**TC:** *Sure did, it was one of the best sounding and most enjoyable shows I've been to in many years. As you mentioned I'm Afraid of Americans really kicked ass! Those guys love their work!*