

# Missy Higgins Live



Missy has pessimistically titled her 2007 tour 'For One Night Only'. But packed houses seem to suggest the name rings about as true as (yet another) 'Farewell' tour from Farnham. AT investigates further.

**Text:** Christopher Holder

► You get the feeling that anyone dubbed 'Missy' probably knows her own mind – there's no evidence of the toeing of any line in her career thus far. And I really wish I could have been a fly on the wall when she informed the record company bean counters of the makeup of her current touring band. I can only imagine the raised eyebrows and sideways glances... "an electric cello, an acoustic cello, *three* different basses... a trumpet?" On paper it reads more like the lineup for some beret-wearing, beatnik's free improvisation love-in – I suspect if Yoko caught wind of this, she'd be on a plane over here faster than you could say 'groovy happening'.

Of course, the reality isn't anywhere near as anarchic, but the results are interesting – this is still sunny, jangly pop but with a few surprises. And, it seems to have caught the imagination of the concert-going public – as we go to press, Missy and the gang have a series of arena dates booked for later in the year.

I caught up with Missy's front of house engineer, Brent Gray, and monitors engineer Simon Keet at The Palais in St Kilda. Both gents had a few new toys to play with: Brent was enjoying his time with a new slimline console from Digidesign – the D-Show Profile; meanwhile Simon had newly switched everyone to Sennheiser 'ears', and the unusual collection of instruments was giving him a new perspective on pickups and esoteric DIs.

## PARK LIFE

**Christopher Holder:** How would you describe the show Brent?

**Brent Gray:** There's a lot going on. The last theatre run we did was only 19 channels. These days she's got an extra keyboard player, an acoustic cello, and electric cello, three different types of bass – electric bass, electric upright bass and acoustic upright – trumpet, and two guitars. People are changing instruments all the time... it's an interesting show.

**CH:** And well suited to snapshot automation by the sounds of it.



The electric bass guitar setup: The fact the Ampeg cab is miked with a Beyerdynamic M88 isn't quite as interesting as the bracket to keep it in place. Brent has bought a number of Z Bars (from a company called Z-Right Stuff). They're particularly handy when space is at a premium.

Terepai Richmond's kit: Two Shure KSM32s as overheads, Shure SM57s for snares (there are two snares and each have a 57 top and bottom), an AKG 451 on the hi-hats, Sennheiser 904 on toms (the update to a 604) and a Beyer M88 for the kick drum.

**BG:** Sure. The new Profile has come into its own. People come on and off the stage, Missy switches from piano to guitar, and it's good to save snapshots, even just for the muting of channels.

**CH:** The D-Show Profile looks like a very neat and organised console.

**BG:** Yes, it's obviously smaller than the original D-Show and not quite as comprehensive but it's very easy to run and isn't missing any features I need.

**CH:** Are you recording these shows with ProTools?

**BG:** I am. I've got my G5 tower and, the way this board's set up, you've got internal routing straight to a ProTools rack – in my case 40 tracks straight to disk. I've already used one of the recordings to mix a live version of *Steer* – I picked the best version and mixed it one day on this console in my cans. That was it. Done.

**CH:** How much of an attraction is that ability of the board to talk seamlessly with 'Tools?

**BG:** It's a great feature, and not just to record but also to play back ProTools files – a 'virtual soundcheck' as it's better known. So if the band's not soundchecking you can load up the last gig, play it through and you've essentially got the band playing at full tilt. You don't need them to be on stage really. I've used it a few times with these guys...

**CH:** And as far as you're concerned it's about as good as a real soundcheck?

**BG:** For most venues, yeah. This band is on in-ears, so there's not a lot of noise coming off stage. So virtual soundchecking is almost identical to a real soundcheck. The only difference is in smaller, more intimate venues, where you can more easily hear the guitar cabs [which were turned backwards the night I visited] and the trumpet, which is pretty loud acoustically. It's a really good function.

**CH:** Although, it's worth pointing out that virtual soundcheck's hardly unique to Digidesign.

**BG:** No, but I like the fact that it's using ProTools, which is an industry standard: record, virtual soundcheck, live albums, B-sides... hand it to a studio and you know they can deal with it.

**CH:** Any cool Venue plug-ins you want to tell us about?

**BG:** I'm using a few things. I've got a Purple Audio 1176 copy for bass and the console's de-esser on Missy's vocals.

**CH:** But you've got some outboard as well?

**BG:** I run two Avalon 737s as inserts on her two vocal mics [Missy uses a Sennheiser wireless with a 935 capsule]. Her vocals are quite dynamic so I compress them quite heavily. I'm using the unit's EQ as well. But that's the only outboard, everything else is onboard. Even the standard D-Show compression is very nice on this console. It's designed to emulate a dbx 160x soft knee and you can't hear it – you can squash things quite heavily and it remains musical. The gates I'm not so sure about. Gates on digital desks can be a bit too accurate – use an analogue gate and you can mask the opening and closing a bit more. I'm not gating particularly heavily.

#### MONITORS – DI HARD WITH A VENGEANCE

This tour saw the band adopting in-ear monitoring for the first time. Which suited the Astroturf stage aesthetic no end – no wedges to litter the stage and more room for park benches.

**CH:** There's hardly a wedge to be seen Simon.

**Simon Keet:** That's right. We have seven band members on 'ears', my cue and a spare – nine packs in all. I've forgotten what feedback is!

**CH:** And they're all Sennheiser?

**SK:** Yes, we're using Sennheiser ew300 G2 transmitters with Shure e5 earpieces – Missy is the only one with her own moulds. Undoubtedly moulds are the way to go, but it didn't work out for everyone to have their own for this tour.

**CH:** Any major hiccups getting people to accept in-ears?

**"We have seven band members on 'ears', my cue and a spare – nine packs in all. I've forgotten what feedback is! – SK"**

(Top) FOH Engineer, Brent Gray with the new D-Show Profile. (Below) Monitor Engineer, Simon Keet, warms the bench.



**“It’s better when the performers remember to turn off their mobile phones! That’s always really helpful. – SK”**



Simon Keet has enlisted the services of five different types of DI for the show. The Avalon U5 has done wonders for Missy’s acoustic guitar sound. A cluster of BSS AR-133s lurk in the background.



The band has recently switched to in-ear monitors – Sennheiser G2 transmitters (pictured) with Shure e5 earpieces. The Yamaha PM5D, is Simon Keet’s weapon of choice.



### DIGIDESIGN D-SHOW PROFILE... PROFILE

Digidesign’s Profile is the compact version of the D-Show. It’s being pitched at small- to mid-sized applications like theatres, clubs, remote broadcasts and churches. The engineers AT have spoken to have greeted the Profile with open arms, citing ‘better ergonomics’ and the fact there are 24 faders (without the need of a sidecar) as big advantages. As you’d expect, it’s fully compatible with its bigger brother (you can interchange your setup information, and use existing Venue stage and FOH racks); while, the downsides or omissions of the smaller-format Profile seem almost too small to mention. You can’t add a sidecar, but you do still have access to the other expansion options, the Personal Q (artist-controlled monitor mixing) options and, of course, all the ProTools integration. The Profile ‘retails’ for around \$77k which is a good 20 grand cheaper than the D-Show.

**SK:** We spent quite a few days in rehearsal where I individually made sure the band was happy and that the earpieces were staying in. But it’s been worth the investment, as this band lends itself to a quiet stage. It’s not a grungy, dirty sound that they’re after. Brent creates a very crystal clear, hi-fi sound – nice rich bottom end and sparkly tops. I like wedges, and noise/dirty is cool, but for this band in-ears work really well.

**CH:** Along with the radio mics you’ve got quite a lot of RF to look after. Any issues there?

**SK:** We have 13 channels of RF and, yes, there has been the odd problem, but I’ve got a scanner. So I walk into the gig, and before anything’s set up I run the scanner, noting down the frequencies I think might cause me some issues. Mostly it’s digital television that’s the problem – I always hear data noise when I scan. But I know which frequencies I have on my packs, so I’ll shift them around so they stay out of trouble. Then I’ll do another scan once the backline and the stage is in, because Gerard’s keyboards actually create a bit of RF. He’s got a Korg Triton with a tube on the top and I’ve found that if you wave a pack over the tube you get a nice big pop! So, there’s a bit of fiddling around, but nothing major. It’s better when the performers remember to turn off their mobile phones! That’s always really helpful.

**CH:** I’ve noticed you’ve got a good selection of interesting DIs – can you give me a tour?

**SK:** It’s been an interesting learning experience with these DIs... I’m not sold on a few of them. The Avalon U5 is really good. But for touring and live work, AC-powered DIs probably aren’t the most appropriate thing. Especially when you’re picking up your DI and hearing something rattling around inside – one of your transformers isn’t mounted on the board anymore, and you’ve got to screw it back on – that’s not good. Don’t get me wrong, the U5 sounds great... but for touring, I don’t feel entirely comfortable. I don’t know

enough about repairing those kinds of things to feel confident that if one goes down. I can fix it.

**CH:** What do you use the Avalon on?

**SK:** Missy’s guitar. And, as I say, it sounds really good. She’s playing new Taylor guitars and combined with the U5 her guitars sound great.

**CH:** What are you using on the other guitar?

**SK:** [Guitarist] Simon’s Maton goes into a BSS AR-133 active DI. My opinion is that it’s not of the same quality as Missy’s guitar sound – the attack of the sound is a bit rough and I need to work on his EQ quite hard while Missy’s EQ is flat. Saying that, the pickups play their part as well – we’ve messed about with a whole bunch of acoustics and the variation in the in-built pickups is huge. So I can’t exactly put my finger on any one particular part of the signal path – there are a whole number of factors – but Missy’s sound is really nice.

**CH:** And what about the bass channels... what DIs are you using there?

**SK:** I have the Manley Tube DIs. I have one on the acoustic cello, and a dual valve DI as well. Then I’ve got a couple of Australian-made tube DIs from DEX [the VTLS200 Valve DI ‘Tube Boy’]. One tip: don’t put two of them next to each other, because there’s a lot of inductance. We learnt that very quickly – during the first rehearsal we were wondering why we had such an obscenely noisy bass sound.

### HIT & MISSY

Unfortunately, thanks to a streaming cold and a thumping headache I had to leave Simon, Brent and the rest of the Johnston Audio guys after soundcheck. But, not long after, I was very happy to be attending Live Earth as a punter and heard Missy’s performance and Brent’s work through about a thousand Vertec speakers. It’s a good engaging sound that they pull; and, as Simon mentioned, there’s lots of clarity, depth and sparkle. ■