

If the 2007 tour is anything to go by, after 30 years, The Cure's prognosis is good.

Text: Christopher Holder

► The Cure's iconic frontman, Robert Smith, is one of the instantly recognisable faces in pop. Actually, to be more specific, Robert Smith has one of the most instantly recognisable *hair-dos* in pop. Some 30-plus years in the biz, changing fashions, and an alarming hole in the ozone layer, haven't made a dint on Robert's love affair with Cedel hairspray.

But whatever preconceptions you might have had about Robert Smith – you could be forgiven for thinking he was more worried about his mascara than his vocal tone – would probably be confounded after a chat with The Cure's FOH and monitor engineers, Michael Brennan and Rob Elliot.

Rob Elliot (Monitors): "Robert's got an amazing ear and he's very hands on. The other day I touched something in the vocal channel, and straight away he's like – 'what did you do? Put it back, it doesn't sound as good now'. And we're talking about maybe 1dB at 500Hz!"

Michael Brennan (FOH): "And he'll call frequencies all the time: 'Less 300. Widen the Q a little bit... that's it. Yeah. I'm getting too much 3.5k'."

And then there was the time Rob and Michael gave Robert Smith a Sennheiser 935 vocal mic to audition, possibly to replace the Shure SM58 he'd used for decades.

Michael Brennan: "It was a lovely sound, and he acknowledged that, but he's so used to the sound of the 58, and he likes the growl he gets off the 58. You can't argue with Robert Smith, he's been doing it a long time."

Rob Elliot: "Right. And the other factor was that the flat basket of the 935 rubbed his lipstick off too quickly... unlike the round ball of the 58!"

Perfect. That just about sums up Robert Smith – the creative force of The Cure. A musical perfectionist? Yep. Vain? Well... maybe just a bit!

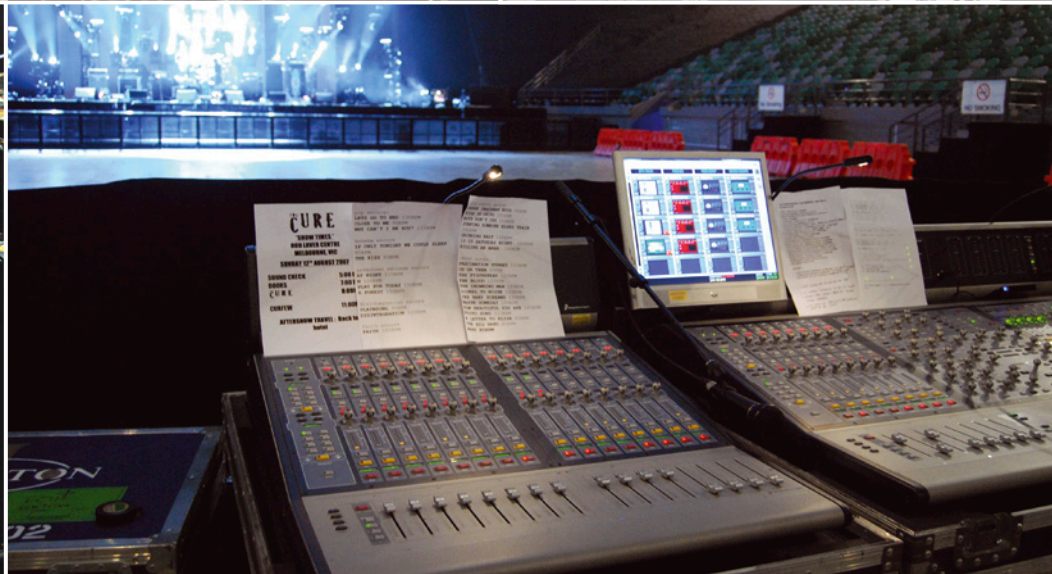
77 SONGS – TWO WEEKS REHEARSAL

Just prior to the current world tour, Robert Smith spotted FOH Engineer, Michael Brennan, mixing Mogwai in the UK. Apparently he liked what he heard and offered him the tour. Two weeks of production rehearsals followed.

Christopher Holder: Can you tell us about those initial preparations, Michael?

Michael Brennan: We set the band up in an enormous sound stage on a film studio lot. The band was in one room and I was in a smaller room with my [Digidesign] Venue console, three L-Acoustics ARCS cabs and two 218 subs.

Initially it was simply a case of getting a sound up on the board. I'd record the rough mix in



ProTools, Robert would listen and then we'd discuss it and tweak it. We'd repeat that process until Robert was like, 'fundamentally that's what I want'. And then it's been a case of putting the icing on that sound – fine-tuning it.

CH: How many songs did you prepare?

MB: Seventy-seven. He would call a new set-list each day!

CH: Woah. It sounds like Robert knows what he wants. Does that extend to keeping an eye on how the sound progresses during the tour?

MB: We record a mix of the show every night, and he'll listen to my mix and we discuss it the next day: 'In the Middle 8 of *Forest*, do you think the guitars are eating up my vocal a little bit?' Stuff like that. He's also very concerned about the stereo image. We've got a lot of stereo things happening up there and the width of the songs is very important to him.

CH: What sort of elements?

MB: Porl [Thompson] has two guitar cabs going with two mics on each – he's panned about '10 & 2'. Robert's acoustic guitar has three lines, which are set wide left and right and a centre, which fills out the sound. He got me to pull the left and right lines in to a '9 & 3' position because he figured that's where they should sit... and sure enough, he was right – it sounds better.

CONTROL FREAK

CH: Would you describe yourself as a relaxed operator or do you need to know precisely what's going on all the time?

MB: I'm a control freak, no question. I'm listening and constantly tweaking – not crazy stuff, just massaging levels. And I just can't stop thinking about everything all the time... Where everything's routed, system EQ... I'm the only person that knows how it should be sounding, really. I wish I had a USB connection in my skull to download it!

CH: Which brings us neatly to the console. Sounds like a digital console like the Digidesign D-Show suits your style?

MB: Well, there's no question that each night I'm making changes and refining the sound – making improvements then saving them as snapshot updates. What I'm doing is still within Robert's production rehearsal parameters, but I can hear and improve the sound every night. This is only our eighth or ninth show and I know we're miles ahead, sonically, from where we were last week in Perth. Even the difference between the first and second shows in Sydney was, for me, massive. The second night was smoother – I EQ'd the system a bit more, produced it a little bit more.

(Main picture) No, that's not the full setlist, it's just the encore options! (Clockwise from top right) The Cure at the Rod Laver Arena – d&b M2 wedges abound. Porl Thompson's guitar parking lot. Michael Brennan's Digidesign D-Show at FOH. Porl's guitar amps – a Cornford rig with two Shure SM57s per cab. The mic brackets are homespun, using a mic clip connected to a spatula... true!

"This is only our eighth or ninth show and I know we're miles ahead, sonically, from where we were last week"

Michael Brennan (left) fine-tunes his D-Show prior to the Melbourne date. (Right) Monitor Engineer, Rob Elliot, behind the Yamaha PM5D. Johnston Audio supplied the PA.



“you’re the f***ing Ramones, why do you even care!?”



Bass foundation

Michael Brennan: The sound of Simon Gallup’s bass guitar is absolutely fundamental to The Cure sound. The amount of melodies, riffs and hooks that come off the bass... it drives nearly all the songs. I would never normally mix with the bass so prominent, but for them it’s fundamental.

I struggled with the bass sound in rehearsals, but I’ve finally nailed it.

I’ve got four bass channels: pre pedals DI, post pedals DI, a Shure SM57 and now a Neumann U87 on the other cab. The 57 works

fantastically, because there’s no real bottom end on it and no need to filter it or anything, while the 87 provides all the tone you could ever want on top of the DI sound – there’s tons of aggression and mid. The overall sound is a combination of all four signals.

I compress all four signals using four instances of an on-board Joe Meek compressor. They’re absolutely slamming, but they sound so smooth, you just don’t hear them. I know they’re working, but you can’t hear them sucking the sound or tone out.

CH: And I notice there’s not much in your rack, so you’ve obviously explored the on-board plug-ins?

MB: I have. The console came supplied with something called an Access Pack, which meant the dongle was loaded with hundreds of plug-ins. And at one point it seemed like I had every one of them loaded up. But then I decided, ‘hang on, I don’t need this’, and I stripped things back again. But, for example, on vocals I’ve got a Line6 Echo Farm, Focusrite d2 mono EQ and a Fairchild 660 compressor. The Fairchild compressor is something I just stumbled on while exploring the plug-ins and it’s fabulous on Robert’s voice.

CH: No misty-eyed nostalgia about running racks of outboard compressors and preamps then?

MD: I’ve tried a lot of external compressors and preamps on this tour. I’ve tried Ameks, Klark Tekniks, Avalons, and they all do nice things, but there’s no point; I’m getting everything I need from the board. That’s the beauty of the D-Show: I can go wherever I need to go, hire a board locally, put my mix in, and I’ve got everything I need... I don’t need any external processing. And you’re up and running, ready to roll. And because each time you’re using the same console, configured in the exact same way, your mix is constantly improving.

SUBS OFF AN AUX SEND?

While Michael was showing me around the D-Show’s matrix section he made an almost throwaway comment that struck me as interesting (“I’ve got the subs on an auxiliary – the system sounds better like that”). A bit later I had to haul him up. And sure enough, the subs don’t get a matrix send, they get a ‘mix’, which allows Michael to pick and choose what he sends.

MB: The first few gigs I wasn’t doing it that way and the subs were restricting me, they were deciding where I could go with the mix. Now I’ve got all of my main mix coming out the V-DOSC, and the subs are on a separate dial via an aux on every channel. So we’re not restricted with where we can go with the V-DOSC. It has made a massive difference. It gives me a lot of headroom.

CH: I think you’re going to have to elaborate Michael.

MB: Okay. Previously, when the subs were part

of the main mix, the V-DOSC went down to about 60Hz. Now I’ve taken the V-DOSC right down to 30Hz and I’ve kinda butchered the EQ on the low end of the V-DOSC so it sounds really tight and sweet. And I’ve butchered the subs as well, so they sound fat – providing proper subsonics. It’s really tightened the sound of them. To be honest, if I turn the subs off, there’s still enough bottom end there. But the subs give it the extra warmth. You feel it more than hear it.

CH: But why couldn’t you do that with the subs being fed from a matrix send as per usual?

MB: If it’s on a matrix send you’ve got every channel going to the subs all the time. And because of that you find yourself filtering loads of channels to stop certain channels’ low end going to the subs and unnecessarily using up the subs’ headroom. But now, I don’t need to filter the channels, I can leave them as flat as I want – keeping all that warmth and body and tone. Once you start filtering it exposes other stuff. And you have to start EQ’ing top end as well, because you’ve taken out the entire bottom, which covers up that harshness. Before you know it, you’ve lost all your tone and you start to push faders to +6... and then you’re really chasing your tail. This way, I can adjust the subs constantly from song to song – using the subs creatively.

ENCORE ENCORE

A Cure concert takes the audience through the full gamut of emotions – sadness, depression, fear, angst, hopelessness... Just kidding. It was a top-quality exhibition of four musicians right on top of their game and a full Rod Laver Arena showed their appreciation. Having some 77 songs prepared really is quite extraordinary, and evidently Robert Smith and the band take their craft very seriously. Which, as I mentioned earlier, may have confounded some expectations. But looks are often deceiving, as Michael Brennan clearly illustrated with this final anecdote:

Michael Brennan: I was on a tour with The Ramones – the very last tour of The Ramones in America – and I had a meeting with the band every night after the show. And every night I was thinking – ‘you’re the f***ing Ramones, why do you even care!?’ But sure enough, they went through every song with me – dissecting the sound. But, I’m not complaining, it’s good that a band cares. ■



Photo: Bob King

STEELY DAN LIVE

They're probably the most feted sonic perfectionists in the world today – revered by system engineers the world over! So how do you mix the holy grail? AT finds out.

Text: Mark Davie

► Steely Dan has probably played through more PAs than any other band. Well, maybe that should read *been played*. Walter Becker and Donald Fagen's back catalogue can be heard echoing in empty concert halls and arenas across the globe – Steely Dan has for some time been the discerning engineer's recording artists of choice for tuning PAs. Given a Steely Dan gig is a rare occasion – even rarer in Australia – it's sometimes difficult to imagine Steely Dan *the band* coming out of the PA, and not just Steely Dan the CD. Sure enough, Walter and Donald have entrusted their live sound to one man and he's known simply as JR.

Shuffling through the back door of Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne, relying on a two-letter name as a golden pass, and hoping to goodness the production manager isn't as particular as a Steely Dan audience, I eventually find JR (actually christened John Robbins) taking a kip on the couch. My intrusion on his much-deserved afternoon respite goes overlooked as he trundles me off towards front of house for a glimpse inside the inner workings of Steely Dan's live show.

I guess it shouldn't have come as too much of a shock – given Steely Dan's reputation – but JR champions the sound of analogue mixing consoles and is known for his superbly detailed mixes. He's a giant of the game and the go-to engineer for the likes of Prince, Yes, John Mellencamp and of course, Steely Dan. Despite such an impressive resumé, it's apparent JR is no prima donna – after quickly sizing up if you're

actually interested or not, he's happy to reveal his trade secrets, which can be quickly summarised thus: analogue, mono and no effects.

NO FX. NONE. NOT A SKERRICK

Mark Davie: It's hard to think of another band that would be more particular about its sound. What early conversations did you have prior to the tour?

JR: I asked them about effects and they told me that they didn't want to use too many – it would come across as being pretentious. Steely Dan's sound is more about layering than pulling off impossible things live. But we seemed to be on the same wavelength and they liked what was going on, so they left me to my own devices. They've come out front maybe four or five times in two years.

It seems it's my lucky day; towards the end of soundcheck Walter and Donald take a stroll out through the stalls. A genuine thumbs up from Walter sees at least one part of 'Dan' on board with JR's mix.

MD: Obviously they must care though? They're some of the world's most famous perfectionists.

JR: Oh yeah, they care. But they let me go for it. Take for example, one day I didn't have any effects, and I liked it, so I didn't use them again.

MD: No effects whatsoever?

JR: Zero.

MD: Snare drum? Vocals?

JR: There's plenty of natural reverb. Big room go boom.

Midway through the set that night, JR turns to me, asking "do you know that song, 'Black Friday', that they just did? There used to be big echoes in there. When they told me they didn't want that, I thought, 'this isn't going to be an effects band'."

LAYER UPON LAYER

JR talks a lot about giving the audience exactly what they demand. They know the recordings inside out; and it's not just the famous hooks or the big chorus, it's all the intricacies, the subtle harmonies and layering. It's here that JR really does excel – he reveals all the detail as and when it's required.

MD: How does this show keep you busy?

JR: I've kept things very simple: I don't have any effects, there's no panning – everything is mono – and I rely on compressors to rein in any unexpected level peaks. This band, because of how dynamic the musicians are, will almost mix itself. But I'm always hands-on – I finesse the layers, every moment of every song.

MD: Can you describe to me what a layer might be and what you're finessing?

JR: For me the way I interpret it when I listen to the albums: everything has its own place. But if you can't hear something where it should be in the mix, even though it might hardly be there, you'll miss it. So when I say 'finessing' I'm ensuring all the elements that sit in the same frequency spectrum – whether that's guitars, horns, keys, vocals – aren't stepping on each other's toes by attenuating the thing that's in the way. So I pull back more than I push anything up and I attempt to maintain a smooth overall level.

MD: So no +6dB fader creep?

JR: No – no creeping fader syndrome here. Fader creep is often about searching for more power as the night wears on – pushing the kick drum. But this band is not about the kick drum; it's a bit part rather than the foundation. For us it's more bass guitar and hat.

MD: So what have you got grouped on the VCAs?

JR: Drums, guitars, keys, Donald's keys, backing vocals, vocal and horns. Simple.

MD: That's seven faders. What's that on the eighth VCA?

JR: That's my 'Band' fader. I've got my entire band (everything except the vocals) on the one fader. If the show starts and they're not singing loud enough, or singing much louder, then I can get the mix to gel real quick with one little-bitty scootch – I'm not grabbing a whole bunch of faders to make it work. It was actually an idea given to me by Big Mick [FOH engineer for Metallica et al]. He calls it the 'Get Out of Jail' fader.

True to his word, for the entire show JR gently finesses the layers of sound that are controlled by the VCAs. If you're searching for some secret move, then a peek over his shoulder reveals very little;

just incessant, yet gentle and minute, fader moves that belie a deep understanding of the material and what is required to manage the level of one part without sacrificing another. This constant manipulation keeps everything where it should be: the level readout on the audio analyser, which sits out of sight of the mixer, barely deviates from the 100dB speed limit for the show's duration.

SHAPING WITHIN LIMITS

MD: Are you someone who gets their mic choice and mic placement absolutely perfect and run all the channels flat; or do you hack away with EQ?

JR: I get the mics right, but I'm not afraid of the EQ. I pick out the dominating, identifying frequency of each instruments and highlight it, and lose everything else with high and low pass filters: everything gets a lot of high- and low-pass filter treatment... big time.

MD: Even though you're obviously altering the overall natural tone of the instrument by doing that?

JR: Absolutely. If you solo one of my VCAs it won't sound natural at all. But in the mix – blended with the other instruments – it sounds natural. That's why I filter so heavily – highlight what identifies the instrument, because everything else is just noise.

MD: In effect, you're using EQ to interpret the recordings – what people are expecting to hear from the CD.

JR: Yes, because that hi-fi studio sound doesn't translate the same in this big uncontrolled, hostile acoustic environment. This is not a control room; and I've got to work with the environment I'm in. When I push up our band's baritone saxophone, I hear low mids, and I accentuate that. You're going to hear the baritone saxophone sitting perfectly in the mix because I've picked out its identifying characteristics and worked with them.

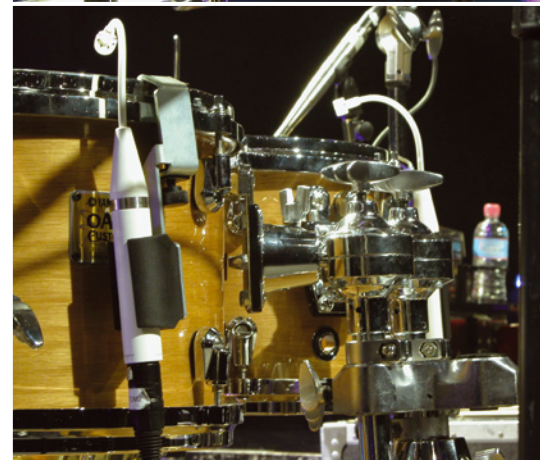
MD: So, it's not just a matter of filtering what it isn't, but it's a matter of accentuating what it is?

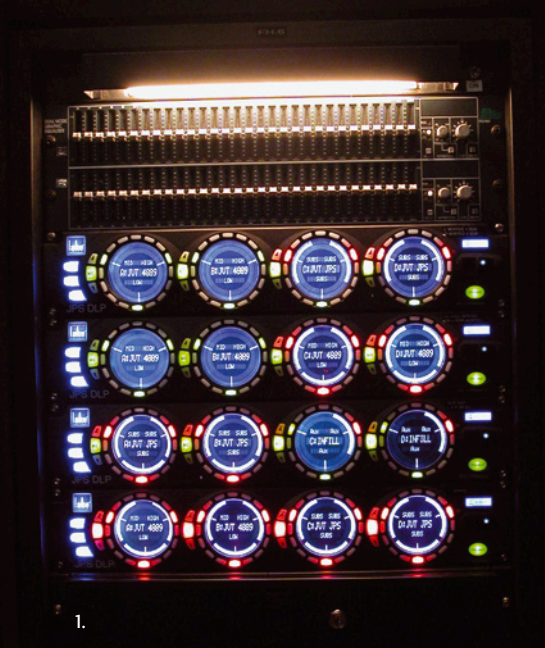
JR: A little of both but mostly it's a case of getting rid of everything around it. There's not a lot of top on the guitars, there's not any bottom on them – all of the bottom's carried by the bass guitar, and a little by the kick drum. It's about getting everything out of the other thing's way, and when it all comes together – that's a good feeling.

LINING THEM UP

Jands Production Services supplied the system. JPS's Vertec rig has been teamed up with the Dolby Lake Processor, and it's been like a dose of salts. JPS System Engineer, Nick Giameos, had the PA singing, but humbly pointed to JR's finetuning as being the icing on the cake.

Steely Mics: Earthworks mics had the drumkit well and truly covered. Including these yet to be released clip-on tom mics. Currently they look like a cross between a dentist's drill and an arthroscopic probe but they sound great. (The release version won't be white.) JR liked what he was hearing with these Audio-Technica AE 5400 handheld condensers on backing vocals, especially the level of rejection. (Bottom) The Leslie cab – two Shure SM57s on the top and a Beyér M88 at the bottom.





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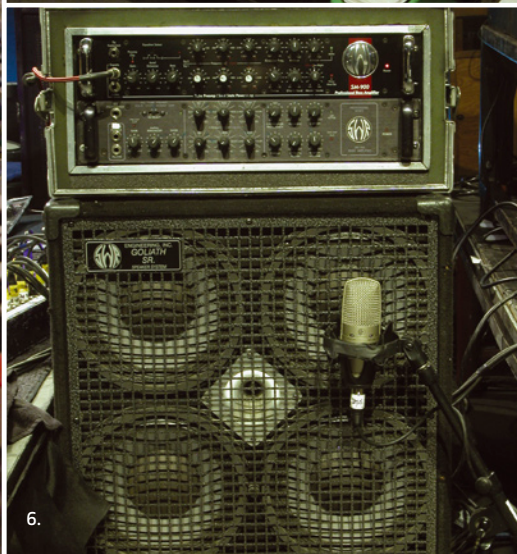
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“Craziest thing I’ve ever heard... ‘What size wire do you use on your 18s?’ What? Why?!”

Dan-atics: (1.) Jands Production Services teamed their JBL Vertec rig with a phalanx of Dolby Lake Processors – and it sounds better than ever. (2.) Walter’s guitar tone is also sans effects. New sound? New amp. (3.) Steely Dan FOH Engineer, JR. (4.) System Engineer, Nick Giameos. (5.) Sustain keeps every lead guitarist regular. (6.) ‘Giants of the Industry’ require appropriately titled equipment – this Goliath bass rig stands tall. (7.) JR’s Midas XL4. You’ll notice not a single auxiliary has ‘troubled the scorers’ – no effects.

JR: I love the Lake processors. Always have, I’ve used them with Clair Bros ever since they’ve had them in the States. The Vertec is one of my favourite line arrays.

MD: I would have picked this band as perhaps being more a V-DOSC band. I would have thought Vertec was a bit more ‘balls out’.

JR: Well, we used the i4 [Clair Bros. proprietary line array] all last year, and that was great for Steely Dan. JPS’s i4 was out of town this time round, otherwise I would have used it. However, the Vertec is prettifying up very nicely. That’s a problem with a lot of line arrays – they’re not pretty – they put sound where it needs to go, but they’re a little abrasive sometimes. But this has done well. Maybe it’s the Lake Processors, I don’t know, maybe the system guy knows what he’s doing – probably a bit of both!

XL PHILE

Pressure is being brought to bear on JR to find a digital console he likes. And he won’t say that he *doesn’t* like them, he just likes the sound of an analogue console better. And until it stops working he’s going to keep putting fear into the hearts of hire company technicians who’d rather put the Midas XL4 out to pasture than out on the road. For the minute, the analogue desk works impeccably, probably because JR only has one snapshot to trouble the system with. And no complaints from what one would expect to be the most finicky audience in the world.

JR: It’s actually much worse with Yes. They [the audience] line up to talk with you after the show. They’ll ask you cosmic, tweaky things – less audiophile and more gearhead. Craziest thing I’ve ever heard... “What size wire do you use on your 18s?” What? Why?! ■