

Ladies First In Sound

One tour, three artists, diverse production

By E. Victor Brown

When a trio of reigning queens of R & B, hip hop and soul recently held court – coast to coast – on the Verizon *Ladies First* Tour, they delivered high style backed by a “soundscape de force.”

Headlined by Beyonce, Alicia Keys, Missy Elliot (and special guest Tamia), the tour kicked off in Florida, hitting mostly sold-out arenas throughout its drive to California. While package concert events are nothing new, each Ladies First show offered three diverse artists in a three-

plus hour show – and largely three individual productions.

A Showco Prism main loudspeaker rig, supplied by Clair Bros, anchored the house sound system at each stop, backed by a veteran Clair/Showco crew. The Prism system is the latest iteration of a venerable technology, enhanced by the maiden voyage of the new Prism Two subwoofers. Clair Bros i/O digital signal processing and a Crown-Prism power amplification package fueled them, with Clair-Carver power applied to the subwoofers.

Just a couple of years ago, the console package might have raised eyebrows, but the rapid proliferation of digital mixing exemplifies how quickly things can change in the big-time concert segment of the market. Two DiGiCo D5 Live consoles held down the front-of-house fort, two more handled monitor duties for Beyonce, while a Yamaha PM1D was the choice for Alicia Keys. Missy Elliot’s monitor crew proved happy to use both.

Much of the rest of the sound elements were individual to each artist, with the tour requiring a rather astounding 16 semi-trucks and an acre of busses filled with support personnel.

The first trucks usually arrived for a 9 am call, but the PA didn’t hit the floor until after noon. Clair/Showco Crew Chief Wade “Wookiee” Crawford, during a stop in Chicago, notes, “the show is full of hydraulics, staging and video, in addition to massive trussing and lighting, so our two trucks of PA come somewhere near the end of that



The new Clair/Showco rig making its debut on "Ladies First" - nice to see a horizontal array approach! It's supporting headliners Alicia Keys and Beyonce (left and right) as well as Missy Elliott.

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list. We say it takes 90 minutes to load in and fly the system, but the other day, we actually had it flown and trimmed in 45 minutes.”

The house loudspeaker system was configured to supply 270-degrees of coverage – each horizontally oriented Prism array was arranged three boxes high by 10 boxes wide, with curves mirroring the stage corners below. The array structure required two flying grids per side (a six-box row and a four-box row), each grid outfitted with a single two-ton motor.

While Clair Bros is low-key about the specifics of the Prism upgrade, Crawford offered some behind-the-scenes reasoning about the development new Prism Two subs, which were stacked 12 per side on the typical floor locations, left and right. “Some of the hip hop, rap and hard rock artists seemed to be trying to achieve an extreme punchiness from the current Clair/Showco subs, which are intended to compliment a broad range of musical styles,” he explains. “So the company responded by creating this new model with as much punch as possible in the extreme low end. You can feel your hair and shirt move a hundred feet from the stage with a kick drum.”

SCANT TWO DAYS

Multi-Grammy winning artist Beyonce



A closer look at the new Prism Two subwoofers.

is at the top of her game, with her set on *Ladies First* featuring a large band and a gaggle of background singers and dancers. Her FOH mix rested in the capable hands of Horace Ward, a veteran of live acts such as Prince, Usher, Puff Daddy, Mary J Blige, LL Cool J and many others. This experience came in handy with only a scant two days of rehearsals prior to tour kickoff.

“Although Beyonce has a glamorous stage show, it’s heavy hitting, with three keyboard players, guitarist,

bass player, drummer, deejay and three background singers plus percussive loops,” Ward notes. “Melding everything with sequencers is a challenge, but I grew up doing that, starting with Teddy Riley in the first era of looping and sequencing during the heyday of the New Jack Swing era. Most of the acts I’ve done have had sequencing, looping and full bands.”

With no full soundcheck time available on this tour, Ward worked to make the artists feel secure. His system tuning has a straightforward approach – preliminary equalization by ear, and then tweaking the output of Beyonce’s Sennheiser SKM 5000N wireless microphone (with Neumann KK105-S capsule), then back to CD for more fine-tuning, back to Beyonce’s mic, and call it a day.

While he normally uses an out-board microphone preamp on lead vocal mics, Ward found the DiGiCo mic pre to meet his requirements. From there he inserted (in order) an Avalon AD2044 compressor and then an Apogee CRQ-12 parametric EQ.

“Beyonce is a dynamic singer, and rather than clamp her down too much, I delay the attack so I can still get that crispness on the edge and hold the body of the notes with the Avalon compression, which is very transparent,” he details. “A t.c. electronic 2290 and an Eventide H3500 handle delay and reverb effects,



Two mix positions in one location, side by side, headed by digital consoles.



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which Beyonce has coming back into her ears in order to vocally ‘play off the delay.’

For the band, Ward deploys a mic collection that is predominantly his own, including a new Audio-Technica AE2500 dual-dynamic condenser placed in the center of the kick drum hole with the cap just inside the head.

“I’m an old reggae man, so I build my mix with drums and bass, real big vocal and then sweeten it with everything else, for a nice warm sound. It’s loud, with the hot parts ranging between 103 dB and 108 dB,” he details. “Beyonce reviews a video recording with my audio mix for most shows, and we use that to help us build. She lets me know if there’s anything more needed with her mix, but this has only come up once. If I’m mixing the way I’m supposed to, it’s a matter of making subtle changes toward building a stronger mix.”

STEREO IEM MIXES

Ramon Morales handled Beyonce’s FOH sound during her Destiny’s Child days, and this time out he worked the dual D5 Live digital boards for her monitoring system. Simply, the second console is for back-up purposes. Morales ran five stereo mixes for in-ear monitoring systems, with 14 more mixes for individual wedges scattered about the stage.

The star and her supporting cast all



The veteran Horace Ward chillin’ prior to tuning.

use Future Sonics Ear Monitors fed by Sennheiser 3000 Series bodypack wireless receivers. By the way, most stage mics were also wireless.

Morales chose the D5 compression and gating, with an Avalon VT-737SPs tube mic preamp added to Beyonce’s signal path. Outboard processing included reverb courtesy of a t.c. electronic M3000, with virtually everything else, effects-wise, handled by a single t.c. M5000 digital audio mainframe.

“It’s worked out great, with lots of volume separation between the band where it’s fairly loud, and Beyonce, who is farther downstage,

using a combination of wedges and in-ear, with a pretty full mix of everything,” Morales notes.

Long-time Clair Bros engineer Dave Skaff, behind the house board for Alicia Keys this tour as well as the previous one, also offers an impressive resume that includes mixing for top-shelf artists like U2 since 1985 (the only monitor gig he still does) along with Shania Twain, Paul Simon, and Barbra Streisand.

With about 15 minutes supplied to him for tuning on this tour, Skaff’s process begins with familiar CD tracks, and then moves along to instruments and “ringing out” Keys’ Sennheiser E935 handheld cardioid microphone (on Sennheiser E500 wireless bodypack).

Generally, he keeps house levels hovering between 98 dB and 103 dB,



A change of pace with a PM1D for Keys’ monitors, along with the Manley VoxBox applied to bring out her vocal and a multi-tasking t.c. M5000 processor.





It's happy-time with dual digital consoles for Beyonce's main monitor man Ramon Morales.

with peaks of about 107 dB on up-tempo numbers. The backing 10-piece band and three singers, along with assorted effects and loops, up the D5 input count to 81. His primary challenge, however, is not the number of inputs but getting separation in the low-mid range of the mix with a Fender Rhodes piano, Hammond B3 and thick bass guitar all in the same range.

"I just ride Alicia over these big arrangements, background vocalists

and splashy horn parts, finding a place for all of it to sit," he adds. "It's like trying to corral a gang of really talented young musicians and arrangements that ebb and flow, while trying to keep it about the song, never overpowering the vocals or, on the other hand, having them too far out front." Helping in this strategy is a Manley VoxBox vocal processor on the lead.

Two wedges were on hand for

instrument monitoring, joined by side-fills also dedicated to Beyonce's set. All other monitoring was distributed via more Sennheiser E300 Series wireless in-ear systems, with Future Sonics Ear Monitors on a Sennheiser Evolution E2 wireless beltpack for Keys.

UPPING THE ANTE

Hip hop artist supreme Missy Elliott was the charge of noted mixer Dennis Thompson, best known for his work with Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Dennis Brown, and most of reggae's legends along with numerous hip hop and R&B artists along the way. He points out that he recommended a wireless Shure mic system with SM58 capsule, which he believes is well suited to handle the high output of an artist like Elliott. Add a little Lexicon 224 delay, and he's good to go.

Big artists on a large tour present enough challenges, but when all of the engineers are using an unfamiliar console (D5 Live) as well as an upgraded house loudspeaker system and never-before-heard subs, it tends to ratchet up the ante.

"Even with so much gear and personnel, the audio guys have been wonderful at working with what we've got," concludes Crew Chief Crawford. "We've always made the show happen, regardless of anything else going on with the rest of the production." ■



One of a series of huge tours for Dave Skaff, mixing Alicia Keys.

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