



On The Audio Edge

The term "stand-up comedian" doesn't quite cut it when describing the work of Eddie Izzard. Sure, the U.K.-based performer happens to be one of the funniest individuals on the planet, but both style and substance transcend the standard "set up-punch line-rim shot" approach that's been the stock in trade for decades.

Izzard in the live realm is a tour de force (pardon the pun), taking the audience on a journey via an insightful running monologue constantly peppered with ad-lib riffs and free-form association, and going in new directions from night to night. Dressed in drag, a look he terms "executive transvestite," there's immediately the sense that something is different, exciting and challenging - an edge that further pushes the humor envelope.

Late on a winter night a few years ago, I was idly flipping through the usual depressing fare of cable TV programming and passed a fleeting image of a strange-looking individual (man? woman??) on a stark stage backed by an unmistakably track of real - and hearty - laughter. Whoa - back up and check this out. And I wasn't disappointed.

It was an Izzard "Dress To Kill" tour date, taped for HBO, and for the next 90 minutes, he proceeded to deliver a salient history of the world in the midst of tangents about cross-dressing, animals, street theatre, crime, God and... Well, you had to see it.

And apparently, audiences in ever-increasing numbers agree, with Izzard's latest tour, "Sexie," selling out 2,500-plus-seat theaters across North America before moving along to 21 arena dates in the U.K. and Ireland. (And just two percent of total seats available for the tour went unsold.)

Reinforcing Eddie Izzard's one-man comic assault

By Keith Clark

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PLEASE ANY ACT

"I steal everything from rock 'n roll," Izzard has noted in numerous interviews. And with this latest incarnation appearing in ever-larger venues, sound reinforcement for Izzard is decidedly rock 'n roll as well, as I found when I caught up with the tour prior to a show at Cleveland's beautifully restored Allen Theatre in the heart of the city's theatre district.

Sound Designer George Glossop worked with Los Angeles-area-based Delicate Productions in assembling a system that would please any concert music act in terms of its output, fidelity and flexibility. It's fronted by the latest iteration of Martin Audio W8LC compact line array loudspeakers, driven by Crest power amplification and headed by a Yamaha DM2000 digital console.

But it all starts with the source. For the past several tours, Izzard preferred a lightweight head-worn microphone with a miniscule Danish Pro Audio capsule. "Eddie likes to have the freedom to use his hands, and he didn't want a huge 'ball' of a microphone in front of his face," explains Mick Perrin, tour manager and promoter for Izzard

the past eight years. "But the need to go with a larger system in light of the bigger audiences/venues meant a physically larger transducer to capture his voice."

Front-of-house mixer Scott Scherban, a veteran of concert acts such as Tracy Chapman, the Pretenders and Natalie Merchant, notes that a Sennheiser 865 capsule has proven a worthy choice, attached to a Sennheiser Evolution 300 wireless system. "It's been solid and reliable, and the big thing is that Eddie's happy with it."

In fact, Izzard has found ways to incorporate the new mic into his act; as he's gotten used to employing a decent technique, he's also had fun creating effects and using them to hilarious ends. During one stretch of the tour, a full 15 minutes of the show consisted of demonstrating all of the clever sounds he could do with the microphone.

It's a situation that keeps Scherban hopping behind his digital console.



Brothers in touring arms: Scherban and Perrin prior to showtime.

"Eddie's been doing a bit where the mic acts as a sword, and I work to lower the EQ a bit so that it really does a fair impression of what a sword sounds like," he says, adding that keeping up with Izzard's varying speech patterns (he frequently drops to a mumble or whisper while improvising), the constantly changing mic distance, different pacing and inflection and up to 30 minutes of fresh material each night has him busier at the console than any rock concert.

"I mix and EQ that one microphone as much as I would do a full band," he adds. "He'll do the first half of the show, and everything will sound great, and then when we come back, everything has changed because the doors of the room were opened and people have been moving around, so the mix has to be optimized again. My finger doesn't ever leave his fader during a show. And the crowd expects to hear the murmuring as he creates; it's part of the magic of understanding his thought process. You can't let this be buried."

Inputs are limited. The main wireless system is backed up by two spare systems, in turn backed up by a hard-wired "last resort". The only other inputs come via dual CD players largely used to supply tracks that set the tone in a raucous audio, video and lighting extravaganza that culminates after three minutes with the star's appearance.

Even without the fuel of the dynamic opening, an Izzard crowd is raucous, with constant buzz, shouting and laughter placing the noise floor at



As the installed left-center-right house system looks on helplessly, the full-scale concert system for Izzard goes into place.

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about 100 dB, and the single voice - every word - needing to cut above it. After all, the ability to hear that dialogue is the entire point. It's also a late-arriving crowd, with the room not filling up until right before curtain. Night to night, it's tough to get a sense of exactly how a given room's going to react.

BUILDING TO FRENZY

The decidedly vibrant opening musical sequence points to another reason for the larger-scale nature of the system. It's got to be appropriately in your face. "The scene builds to a full-range frenzy between the system and the crowd, and then his foot hits the stage and it's time to totally shift gears, where the sole priority and emphasis is on that one voice," Perrin says.

A great deal of research went into the system, with Glossop traveling to Los Angeles to evaluate the Martin Audio W8LC line array system courtesy of a dedicated demo at a local venue arranged by Delicate Productions. "There were a lot of options, but when George heard this one, he immediately liked it," Scherban explains. "The



Just a bit of compact loudspeaker placement to attain presence in the first few seating rows.

precision was the difference, along with the very natural signature.

The line array approach is also vital to what we're trying to do, which is project a single voice in huge rooms," he adds. "These are great tools for a situation like this. We've been able to attain coverage from the first rows to the corner nosebleed seats. It's just there, consistent and where you want it."

At the same time, he keeps a couple of outputs at the ready. In some of the older theatres, random seats are positioned to fall almost impossibly outside of the coverage range. When it happens, an output is dedicated to driving (via hundreds of feet of cabling) small loudspeakers on yokes that can be placed in these off-the-beaten-path regions, with appropriate delay in relation to the house set in seconds on the digital board.

The initial coverage plot for each venue is first roughed in using Martin Viewpoint optimization software. Upon arriving in the morning, laser measurements determine crucial distances in the room, with this data then input and a resulting array structure and coverage approach provided.

At the same time, Sch-

erban uses his own experience to make the final call in this regard. "The software is a great tool to help the process, but there shouldn't be total reliance upon it," he says. "It still comes down to what you know and can see as a sound person. The software also can't account for the ambience of the room, and what's going to happen when it fills up with crowd that changes the temperature, humidity, air pressure, let along reflective surfaces."

For the North American theater leg of the tour, the approach was generally arrays of 10 W8LC three-way line array modules flown per side, tapering at the bottom into a gentle "J" configuration. Scherban and a single crew member can assemble and fly both arrays within 30 minutes. "Another side benefit of the line array is that it looks great, which doesn't hurt," Perrin adds. "It really fits the style of this particular production, fitting the set while also keeping sightlines completely clean."

Below on the deck, dual stacked Martin W8 "Hybrid" horn-loaded subwoofers handle the low-end, with two Martin WS2 two-way compact trapezoidal loudspeakers tight-packed together to supply front fill. Additional fill in the center portion of the very front audience zone was delivered with low-profile Martin WTUB two-way enclosures offering a very wide horizontal dispersion pattern.



Wireless antennas stand-mounted at the mix position.

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The arrays (as well as delay taps) are controlled by a combination of XTA DP-224 and DP-226 digital processors, with power supplied by a complement of Crest amplification. Scherban carries out remote management of the processing via XTA's proprietary AudioCore software loaded on his laptop.

CONTROL AT FINGERTIPS

Scherban's FOH position is marvelously uncomplicated and uncluttered, with just the compact DM2000 digital console and its companion computer, the wireless antennas and receivers, and small rack of source devices. All system control and effects are handled on the DM2000, with Scherban quickly going back and forth between the laptop and console surface.

"The big key with this console isn't that it's necessarily "digital," but rather, it's small footprint. We don't want to have to take up a dozen seats that could otherwise be sold, particularly



Subwoofers, monitors and fill speakers flank each side of the stage.



Crest amps, racked and ready to go, located backstage.

given the demand for tickets on this tour," he says. "That said, the digital aspect is really great because it puts all control at my fingertips. There's an intuitive functionality to this board, and the recallable scenes really are a lifesaver when you're keying on where Eddie might be going next."

Stage monitoring is handled from FOH as well, with feeds to single Martin E12JB low-profile wedges positioned far stage left and right. In essence, they're configured more like sidefill, with a bit of house/audience supplied to them in "dry" rooms, and also, they serve as a handy way for Izzard to keep his mic technique on track.

Every loudspeaker in the system is delayed in relation to Izzard's mic. Because he moves about the stage a lot, Scherban chooses a "roughly center" position as the basis of the delay. The idea is that when his lips move, they're in sync with the sound produced by the system. "When people talk, we're usually looking at each other, and we focus on the other individual's mouth as part of this," he says. "We don't think we are, but it's true. So if the words aren't matching the motion of his mouth, it's disconcerting and you might lose some of the subtle things being said."

Every show is recorded via another direct feed from the DM2000 to a mini disk

player, and this stored material can be burned to a CD-R at a minute's notice. Izzard occasionally requests this as a resource to review certain bits. And it's worked so well that there's consideration being given to compiling these tracks on a commercially available CD in the near future.

"What we've got here is a tight, efficient system that meets every need we have, and could meet the needs of a full band," Scherban says. "With fewer components needed, there's fewer things that can go wrong, fewer pieces that can break, fewer complications. This rig is also financially beneficial - with less to carry, it cuts costs and saves money on manpower and time."

So mixing this one guy is really tougher than any full band you've done? It's my final question for Scherban as we wrap up the discussion. His response is emphatic.

"I know it might sound easier on paper, but it's one of those cases where the opposite is true," he says. "It's a mind-set where you have to adapt and prepare. When you mix a band, you might miss a cue for a guitar player or whatever, but that's usually not a disaster because there's already this huge soundstage, a group of many parts. There's also, and inevitably, a loss of subtlety, and that's only natural."

"But here, there is one thing that everyone in the house is fully tuned in to, and that's the running dialogue of this single performer. You miss even a little of that, and you miss a lot."

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