

## Best Job In The World

David Morgan on mixing Simon & Garfunkel

By Linda Seid Frembes

**W**hen I recently caught up with David Morgan, he'd just arrived home after seven months on the road, fresh from front-of-house mixing duties with the Simon & Garfunkel *Old Friends* tour.

But prior to that were mixing gigs with Boz Scaggs in Japan as well as a series of Steely Dan dates in the U.S., and with Simon & Garfunkel slated to resume touring this summer, Morgan's been a very busy sound guy lately. Although you won't hear him complaining.

"I have one of the best jobs in the world – I get paid to listen to great music every night," he notes. "And I owe most of my career to the success I've had with Paul Simon."

Morgan has been mixing Simon

since 1986, after Simon's management saw (and heard) him manning the house console for a Whitney Houston show at London's Wembley Arena. A week later, he received a call to join Simon. "Whitney made me look really good. She can sing better than anyone I've ever heard," he explains.

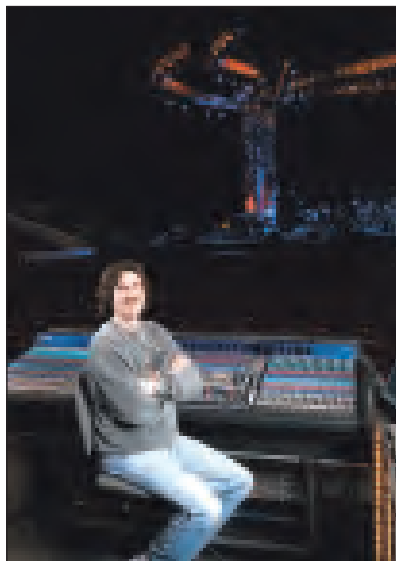
Clair Bros is supplying the sound and support for *Old Friends*, and the rig out this summer will remain largely unchanged from the earlier tour leg. Fourteen Clair i4 line array loudspeakers flown adjacent to 12 i4B low-frequency enclosures, flanked by smaller columns of eight 10-degree i4s and six i4B cabinets to cover the far sides.

Rear fill is handled by four clusters of Clair P4 loudspeakers, with eight P2s lining the stage for front fill. The subwoofer contingent is two groups of four Clair S4 subs, left and right on the floor.

### MIX CENTRAL

Also on hand at FOH will be the recently released Yamaha PM5000 large-format analog console. (The tour's previous date marked the console's first "real-world" outing.) It quickly has become Morgan's favorite board, chosen over a digital desk largely because Simon & Garfunkel in concert don't require a heavy rotation of memory and scene recall. Further, there's no digital information routing from the stage.

"I like a solid analog console that works every day. I've been a loyal user from the PM1000 to today, and the results speak for themselves," Morgan adds. "With Paul Simon, we've been all over the world – reliability is an absolute necessity when you're in Botswana."



*David Morgan's seen a lot of boards over the years and still likes good "old" analog – he and the new PM5000 shown prior to a Simon & Garfunkel arena date.*



Two master vocalists in mid-concert form. (Photo by Kevin Mazur, Wireimage.com.)

Morgan had been talking with Larry Italia of Yamaha about the PM5000 for a year leading up to its availability. "Getting it for this tour was all about timing," he says. "The uniquely engineered equalization and microphone preamp join a design of impressive heritage, and I've found the board to sound extremely smooth and transparent where it needs to be. Visually and tactilely, it's also the easiest surface I've worked on."

No major changes in production are expected for the current tour leg, with rehearsals slated to commence about a week prior to kick-off. The itinerary calls for appearances in major markets that were bypassed last time out.

Morgan's optimal mix position is centered approximately 100 feet to 105 feet from the stage. Center, of course, delivers balanced stereo image, while the distance is chosen to be close enough to accurately direct output while far enough to be able to evaluate the reverberant field. He's striving to experience what the average listener is hearing.

Logically, he adds, the Simon & Garfunkel live mix starts with the voices of the two stars. "You have to understand all the words, and the vocal harmonies need to be natural. Roy Halee, a studio engineer who was one of the real pioneers of the recording industry, taught me a lot in our years together during the *Graceland* and *Rhythm of*

*the Saints* tours. He was our musical ombudsman. The history of Simon & Garfunkel is interlaced with Roy – all those great reverb sounds like the far away trumpet solo on 'The Boxer' and the manufactured percussion sounds on 'Cecelia' are all from him."

### SOUNDS TO DIGEST

Reproducing the depth and scope of studio sounds are nearly impossible from FOH; however, Morgan tries to

make what is usually a very reverberant arena environment sound enough like the effects on the record so the audience feels like they are getting a full performance. With the ubiquitous skyboxes – complete with plenty of glass doors and windows – a fact of life in modern venues, intelligibility can be in peril.

Morgan seeks to strike a compromise between what is on the album and what the building will let him do.

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# On Tour

And at each stop, the production team requests that all glass doors, windows and panels be opened as much as possible. Every little thing can help...

"I do everything by ear because that's how I came up in this business," he says. "It was the 'learning by listening' era. As annoying as it is to the guys on the crew, I'm in there at every rigging call through the rest of the day. I come in early, while the PA is going up, to listen to the venue, to hear things like the sound that cases make when rolling across the stage, chains being dragged, people walking on the stage. I'm looking for how splashy the high end will be, and gauging the reverb time for the low end. I'll also observe if the riggers need to yell at each other to be heard and notice the decay time when a piece of plywood is dropped.

"So before I turn on the PA, all of these sounds have been digested, with some decisions formed about what kind of energy I want to put in the room. I've already EQ'd the PA in my mind," he adds. "There are times when concessions to architecture and physical reality have to be made. Some venues just don't give you the opportunity to present the mix in its most perfect form."

After the sonic "roughing in" process, further fine-tuning is handled with a Lake Technology Contour/Clair iO digital processing system. A wireless Dell tablet allows Morgan to wander the listening area, making adjustments as he goes – including the nosebleed sections. Depending on the setup, specific coverage zones are handled with anywhere from two to four loudspeakers.

"The Contour/iO is a marvelous tool that has given us an immediacy of adjustment that we never had before. Now things happen in seconds. Certainly we never had the time or tools to precisely EQ a PA to this degree back in the 70s and 80s," he states.

## THE DIPLOMAT

Perhaps the toughest job on a Simon & Garfunkel tour is held by Tim Holder, who carries the unofficial title of "diplomat" to go with his monitor engineer moniker. The pair of performers is often at a crossroads between what Simon would like to hear as a guitar player and what Garfunkel would like to hear as a



*Does a console get lonely when the engineer isn't around?*

solo vocalist.

Holder, who joined the fold during Simon's 2002 European tour, works with Morgan to create the right blend of monitors and house PA for both audiences and the dynamic duo.

"It is a unique situation. They're standing shoulder to shoulder, 18 inches apart, and it's difficult keeping both guys happy since they have opposite requests," Holder says. "Mr. Garfunkel likes to work off the house and doesn't like direct monitors – no wedges and no in-ears. His reference is mainly on the blend of a side-fill mix and the house, with a supplement of a visually 'hidden' mix that adds

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vocal presence, and his reverb return comes from another 'hidden' mix that varies depending on the natural reverb in each room.

"Mr. Simon is just the opposite; he likes the Clair 12AM wedges in front of him," Holder continues. "His mix is his vocals and guitars, as well as a side-fill mix that is similar to FOH."

Holder's mix is also impacted by the different arena environments. Keeping stage levels low, both he and Morgan depend on EQ for shading. Holder's mix position is stage left, a position he describes as traditional rather than optimal.

For the coming tour leg, he's considering getting a PM5000 of his own or going with a Yamaha PM1D digital

desk. "Since we've already established the show, this might be the perfect time to go digital. We had considered the PM1D on the first tour but were concerned with the programming needs of a digital desk, especially on a new tour."

Simon & Garfunkel serve as testament to both voices and songs that remain timeless. As Morgan concludes, "The vocal blend is unchanged. The voices may have changed, the arrange-

ments may have changed, but the resonance of those harmonies is eternal. The experience of the song remains much the same.

"I'm thankful that this is one of the few businesses that you can be in simply because you enjoy it. The life that we're given with this work is a wonderful gift." ■

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## David Morgan: The Vitals

Born and raised in the Northeast, this American history major from Boston University has had a storied career as a FOH engineer. Morgan made his way into the music business via playing a guitar but then realized he made a better sound engineer than guitarist. After college, he built his own demo studio in Woodstock, New York, later moving it to Los Angeles.

In 1976, he mixed his first live show at an outdoor concert for the band El Chicano for an audience of 8,000. Since then, he's mostly been mixing arena acts. Lately, his favorite venues are the Excel Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Greek Theater in Los Angeles and the Universal Amphitheatre in Universal City, California.

Currently residing in Thousand Oaks, California, Morgan marvels at how he's been able to sustain a life in the music business for 40 years. But perhaps a more remarkable accomplishment is that that he and his wife have been married for 21 of those years – he credits his extensive time on the road as a key to the happy union. "Absence makes the heart..."

- Linda Seid Frembes



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