

THE ART OF ADAPTATION: MIXING BIFFY CLYRO LIVE

By Jon Burton

stage
sound & tech

For the last few months, I have split my time between preparing for a new year's teaching, my academic studies and my main passion, engineering. I have been very lucky in recent years to work with some great bands, and some over a very long period, building up strong relationships. I have recently been working for Scottish rock band, **Biffy Clyro**. I started mixing their shows in 2019 and have worked with them on and off for the last six years. I think it is worth stressing that I have always primarily been a freelance engineer. Although I have built up associations with many production companies over the years, I have maintained my independence, primarily working directly for bands. This has led to me working with a wide variety of artists over the years, but Biffy are one of my few out-and-out rock groups, and they are great to mix!

The recent run of shows has all been European Festivals, from the famous *Glastonbury*, *Rock am Ring* and *Rock im Park* festivals, with main stage audiences in excess of 70,000, to smaller, more intimate festivals of under 10,000 people. The shows have given me a chance to see lots of other bands and hear other engineers mix. This inevitably leads to some introspective self-analysis. How am I approaching a mix? Could it be better? What can I learn from others?

I am always wary of criticising any mix. You never know how hard a band are to mix until you are standing behind the console! Having said that, it is possible to make generalised comments; I can have an opinion about balance, about dynamics and about sound pressure levels. My opinions are, of course, my own, but they do come from the

standpoint of a long career.

So, what do I focus on in my own mix? What am I aiming to achieve? I can confidently say that this has evolved and matured over the years. I am now less concerned with pleasing myself; my main focus is the audience experience. That might sound quite glib, but as I've grown older, I've become more aware of the 'big picture'. I am more conscious of the role I play in the 'show', not just the sound, but the entire audience experience. This has been a healthier and more productive outlook to develop. I now spend more time considering how I can contribute rather than obsessing over the importance of my role. Perhaps this is just an acceptance that sound has never seemed as important as the lights, and now both are subordinate to video!

When I started with Biffy Clyro, I inherited a channel list, microphone choices, and workflow. Inevitably, these did not all align with my ways of working; however, I have learnt from experience not to dive in and make a change for the sake of it. I lived with the existing setup for several shows. If something annoyed me for two consecutive shows, only then did I consider what I could adapt or change. After about ten shows, I had a list of amendments to make, but again, these were to be implemented in a way that would cause minimal disruption to the artist.

I have to admit that I switched the FOH console to one I was more familiar with, so I started my show file from

scratch. However, show files, if possible, are best built by your own hand to suit your needs. As I write this, I am on my way to cover a few shows. I have the existing engineers' file, which I will review, but I will probably start anew. I've had bad experiences with hidden settings, plug-ins, and surprises that have compromised my show.

After working with Biffy for some time, I believed I had built enough confidence and a strong enough relationship with the band to implement significant changes. This was done before the start of a tour to give the band a chance to rehearse with the adjustments I made. Many of these changes involved 'pruning'; reducing some of the 'complications' that had crept into the setup. It is easy for things to be added, initially useful, but their purpose can become forgotten or redundant. This was particularly true of the channel list.

I have always adopted a minimalist approach to channels. With Biffy, this meant questioning why I needed so many microphones for cymbals when I have a singing drummer! Did I require the triggered drum sounds? Could I create a similar effect with the acoustic kit that is better suited to their current aesthetic?

However, the most significant and impactful change was with the guitarist-singer. It is always tempting for us sound engineers to try and control the stage sound, but I have always believed that we are 'balance engineers'; we balance the sound

from the stage and then distribute that mix to the audience. We are not a separate entity; we are an extension.

The guitar amps had previously been positioned offstage, with the cabinets in isolation boxes sealed from the outside world. Microphones fed the sound back to the guitarist via in-ear monitors and some additional wedge monitors. This meant several extra gain stages, and removing the guitarist from the more visceral experience of standing next to, hearing and feeling his Fender and Marshall amps. He wasn't enjoying the sound, but nor was I. The net result was that the speaker cabinets moved back on stage, behind the artist, no longer routed through multiple interfaces.

So, having made the changes, what had I achieved? A louder stage, more spill, and the need to constantly ride the guitar and vocal channels. But fewer overall channels, a better source sound for the guitar, and most importantly, a happier artist. Happy artist, better shows. Better shows, happier audience. I work harder than I did, but this is what I'm paid to do, and it's still been great fun!

As another festival season comes to a close, I find myself still striving to define the role of an engineer. Mixing sound is never just about the audio — it's about

adapting, supporting the artist's vision, and enhancing the audience's experience. Every show offers an opportunity to learn something new, whether from a fresh technical challenge, a fellow engineer's approach, or simply listening more attentively to what the crowd or artist responds to. Ultimately, that's what keeps this job exciting: each show is a chance to refine the art of balancing the mix.

