



HUMAN RESOURCES

ON THE RECENT DÉBUT TOUR BY TOYAH WILLCOX'S NEW OUTFIT, THE HUMANS, THE FOH AND MONITOR MIXES — AND THE LIVE RECORDING — WERE ALL ENGINEERED BY PAUL NICHOLSON WHO EXPLAINED ALL TO MARK CUNNINGHAM AT LONDON'S SCALA...

In February, *The Humans* — the new outfit featuring singer Toyah Willcox, Bill Rieflin of R.E.M. and Chris Wong, with honorary member Robert Fripp (of King Crimson fame) on spaced-out guitar — played their first UK live shows in the wake of their debut album, *We Are The Humans*.

After intimate warm-up shows in West Country churches, the four-piece astonished audiences at The Assembly in Leamington Spa, Cambridge's The Junction and The Scala in London's Kings Cross, where TPI saw them in all their experimental glory.

Inspired covers of Nancy Sinatra's 'These Boots Are Made For Walking' and Hendrix's psych-rock classic 'Purple Haze' were the only vague nods to Toyah's 1980s pop past. With Mr. Fripp onboard — her husband of 24 years and a globally-worshipped God of Prog — there was never going to be anything mainstream about these gigs.

Their intriguing sound has been variously

described as 'art rock', 'twisted funk' and 'complex'. Arguably, all three labels stand up and though not comfortable listening, the audience — with exception of one individual who clearly bought his ticket to hear the singer reprise her 1981 hit 'It's A Mystery' — appreciated this brave new direction.

When I wasn't being manhandled by over-zealous *The Humans* personnel freaking at the sight of my camera, I spent most of my early evening with Paul Nicholson (above), the founder of Red Square Audio and — in this case — the band's live sound engineer.

"I started working with Toyah around 1992 when I was the in-house engineer at Salisbury Arts Centre, which is near to where she and Robert live," explained Nicholson, about the start of his relationship with the former punk princess.

"There was a Battle Of The Bands-type competition held there and the winners got to perform a song with Toyah. She liked this young outfit so much that she



asked if they'd be her new band, and also asked me to be their touring engineer.

"That lasted for about four or five years until Toyah started working more as an actress and TV presenter. Recently though, she's been rediscovering herself as a songwriter and performer both with her rock covers band and this very exciting new project as *The Humans*. I get on very well with Toyah and it's a great privilege to be mixing the live sound for both.

"*The Humans* is almost the polar opposite of her usual band — it's not your average rock gig. Apart from samples on one number that were put together by Bill Rieflin, there are no drums... but there are two bass players!

"When I heard that Bill was in the band, I assumed that being R.E.M.'s drummer, he'd be playing drums. But no, he's playing bass and keyboards, as well as triggering all the samples."

How did Robert Fripp get involved? "When they were recording the album, they wanted some interesting, laid-back guitar for a particular song, and naturally thought of Robert. They then invited him to be a guest on this tour and, who knows, he may well do more later on."

Whilst *The Humans* have been relying on in-house PA and lighting systems for the tour — and they've varied wildly from venue to venue — Nicholson made sure that the monitoring has remained consistent by bringing a selection of 500W 12" powered Tannoy cabinets.

"There are two each for Toyah, Bill and Chris, and Robert has two small 8" versions that he's really happy with. We've cut the levels down on-stage which is very sensible for them and me because I'm not getting any bleed at FOH."

Mrs. Fripp adds an extra layer to the sound herself with a Boss effects pedal enables her to create loops of her live vocals. This was precisely the kind of experiment that evolved in rehearsal, said Nicholson.

"We rehearsed for three full days before the tour which gave me the opportunity of seeing

how the band gelled and how the different sonic layers worked.

"Their sound is deliberately loose which allows them to take songs in any direction they feel, from gig to gig. And I like that freedom because it means I can get creative myself and it all works as a partnership."

"Musicians and producers would all like the facility to take something away from a tour that has future potential, and Eclipse is the only system that offers a direct solution, making it an easy proposition..."

HUMAN RECORDING

The experience has been "wonderfully challenging" for Nicholson as it has stretched him beyond the role of a conventional FOH engineer.

Not only is he adding monitor mixing to his job description, but he's also using his InnovaSon Eclipse console to capture and preserve every *Humans* performance, by way of the product's fully-integrated Multi-track Audio Recording System, otherwise known by its acronym, M.A.R.S.

"I say it's a new desk but it's been around for about 18 months. The thing is, I couldn't justify putting it on the market until InnovaSon completed their development of the desk's recording facility, which is what makes it such a unique product," said Nicholson.

"There's a second internal PC that runs a 64-track digital recorder, storing all of the data on a regular SATA hard drive. You can do all of your recording on that in B-WAV [48KHz/24-bit], remove the drive after a gig, rig it up to a Pro Tools system and mix the performance.

"That is basically what will happen at the end of this mini-tour. Robert and Bill are planning to take all of the files back to a studio and identify the best recordings from each date and perhaps mix them with a view to a possible future release or use on websites. It's how the business is now.

"Musicians and producers would all like the facility to take something away from a tour that has some kind of future potential, and the Eclipse is the only system that offers a direct solution, making it such an easy proposition."

Nicholson took me through the process. "In the Project Manager menu, you'll name your

project [e.g. 'The Humans@Scala'], arm your tracks by highlighting the appropriate channels across the console, then simply press the red record button and you're away.

"Another feature that's totally unique to the Eclipse is the immediate recall of any recorded material as a virtual sound check (VSC). I've used these multitracks to line up the system and monitors before the band arrived for their soundcheck.

"Also, by pushing a button called Broadway you can make any input channel on the stagebox live by pressing its cue button — the singer or any other musician can rehearse with a virtual band."

MARKETING

Paul Nicholson's Salisbury-based company, Red Square Audio was founded in October 2008 to endorse and distribute high end audio brands, including Tannoy, Apex, Lab.gruppen and InnovaSon.

Donning his Red Square marketing hat, Nicholson argued a compelling case for Eclipse. "It's very much a walk-up and mix board that's very compact and sounds extremely good. Any fader can be configured for any function. There's no steep learning curve in terms of getting used to lots of layers and menus, which I think puts off a lot of engineers.



Below: Paul Nicholson at the InnovaSon Eclipse; tools for the job — Tannoy monitors at Bill Rieflin's and Robert Fripp's stage positions.



"We did some festivals late last summer and put some Eclipses at FOH and on monitor duties. A few of the engineers were complaining that they weren't familiar with these desks and started demanding alternatives. But after I persuaded them to at least try them, and showed them the input, VCA, aux and FX on each channel, each of them was happy within minutes, and commented on how easy it was.

"Now that it's genuinely ready as a product and with The Humans' tour serving as a perfect showcase for its potential, I'm looking forward to taking it out into the mainstream market and convincing engineers and rental companies that it's the console to use for live production, theatre and broadcast — very much in the same way as I've done with Tannoy's VQ Live loudspeaker system."

REINVENTION

The degeneration of the record industry has been responsible for the closure of so many previously buoyant recording studios over recent years,

that there is now a veritable army of engineers and producers that have had to reinvent themselves. Perhaps the next logical step would be for them to embrace the kind of 'mobile studio' facility that Eclipse offers.

"I think the studios that do remain in business must hate us for promoting Eclipse!" laughed Nicholson. "Of course, you can't beat a professional studio for the quality environment it provides but we live in a world of harsh commercial realities.

"A lot of very creatively-minded people simply can't afford those kinds of rates, which is where Eclipse comes in because it doesn't just serve live gigs. You can use it anywhere to record anything, very affordably... and in today's world, that's a very powerful concept."

The Humans closed their brief tour with a performance at a benefit gig in aid of the Haiti earthquake at London's Roundhouse, alongside KT Tunstall, Paul Weller and other special guests.

TPI

Photography by Mark Cunningham

THE ART OF PRE-SHOW MUSIC

Paul Nicholson: "Probably because of the quality of the recordings I loved in my youth, I've grown to hate the whole idea of the MP3 audio format.

Despite my prejudices, when we were preparing for The Humans' tour, I was going to assemble some appropriate ambient music by the likes of Brian Eno to use as background music before the band went on.

"Robert, however, thought it would be much more interesting if he did something himself. So after the soundcheck at each gig, he's been using his trademark Frippertronics techniques to create these incredible, floating soundscapes by playing his guitar, making different loops and merging them together.

"Because he's doing it live at each venue, they always sound different according to his mood on the day. He'll then disappear backstage and when the doors open, the audience walk in on this gently cascading sound. I just think it's a beautiful touch... and, of course, I'm recording it all."

