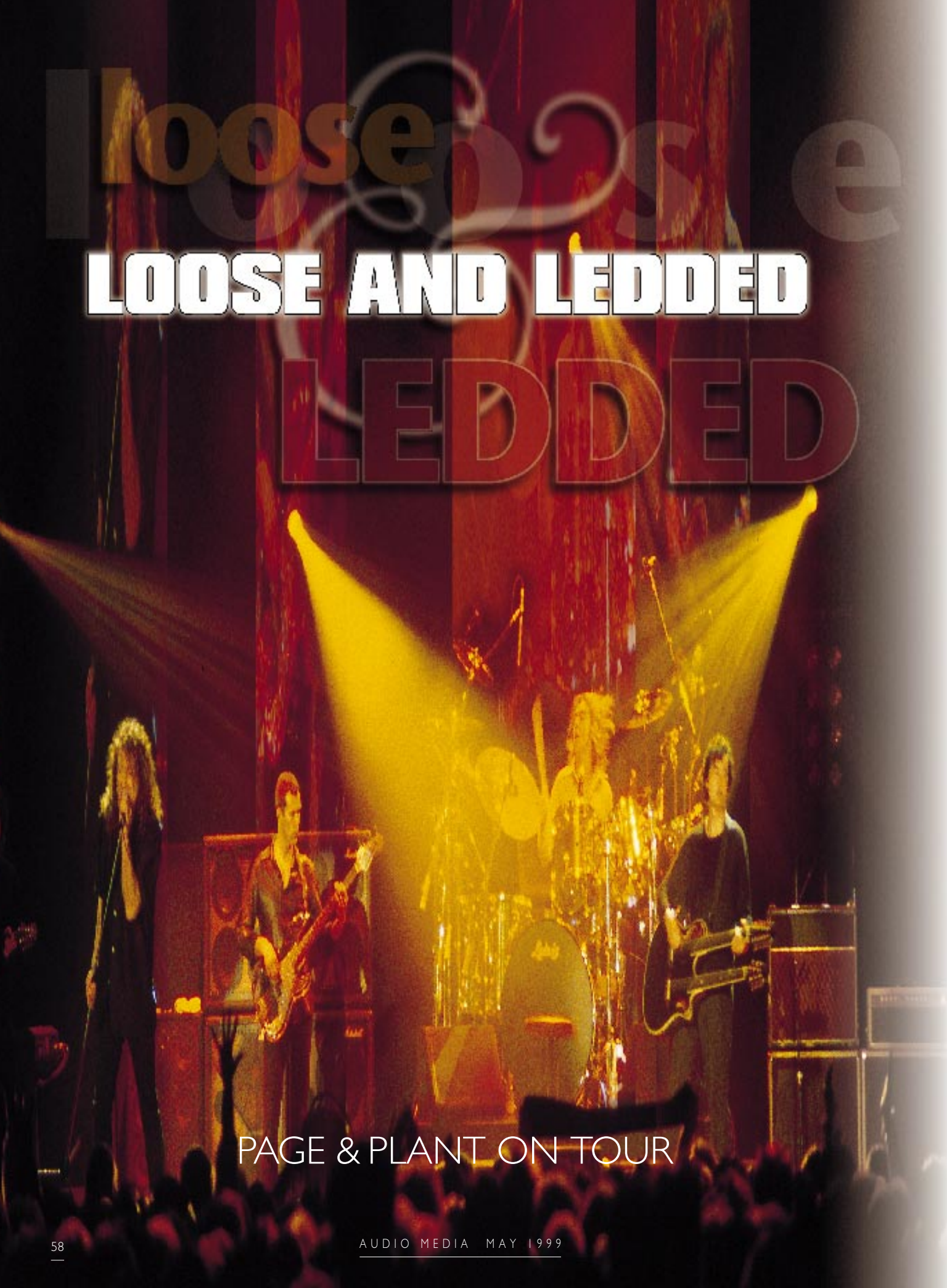


loose

**LOOSE AND LEDDED**

**LEDDDED**



PAGE & PLANT ON TOUR

**W**hen, in the Summer of 1995, Page & Plant first ventured forth as a re-formed rock combo — and let's not be coy about this, it was Led Zeppelin restored — they felt they were lacking the gravitas of their former glory days. As such they took with them a 25-piece orchestra, an eight-piece Egyptian ensemble complete with nose flautists, and a hurdy gurdy player. It was an unnecessary indulgence on their part, apparent to all of those who saw them. Not only had they no need of the musical crutch, their performing abilities were, if anything, improved from the latter days of Zeppelin. Both self-evidently in robust good health, their performance was tight, fluent, and was anything but a mere note-perfect rendition of their repertoire. It was live, vital, and immediate. Now, three years later, they have re-emerged, a warmly received new album under their belt, with a stripped-down show that reveals them in all their glory.

Dave Kobb, an engineer with 26 years of touring experience behind him, has just the right age and experience to produce Page & Plant in exactly the style they should be. The basic demand is for a raw dated sound, but with none of the incumbent interference dated technology can bring. He's quite clear on what it is he wants from his system, and the way he sets about achieving it: "I don't especially like systems that rely on a separate sub low box down on the floor.

surprisingly little up in the air. Just three, two wide bumpers per side, the center pair hung five cabinets deep and slightly tilted in to cover the main arena floor, four deep to the side bleachers, and two deep, plus a half-size R4 on top for the extreme near stage side seating. The center front rows have the added punch of a cluster of CBA Pistons pointing down from the front of the lighting rig. The thing is, this is a big room with vertiginous seating. The top rows are easily 20 meters above the floor, and it's a good 50 meters to the most distant position, but Kobb's coverage was excellent. It's one of the shortcomings of the S4 that, in smaller venues, chunks of the audience inevitably sit trapped in the beaming output of the high end, and that's an effect detectable even in an arena for which the system has been designed. Whatever the specific box type hanging configuration, Kobb seemed to have his coupling and dispersion just right. This was a loud show, and with just a four-piece band, not necessarily obvious exactly how to make the mix big and full. "What I'm doing is exaggerating the dynamic they do on stage, and then only if it's needed. Apart from that there are a few great cheesy effects. Huge pans, tasteless echo and phasing, all that neo '60s over-the-top stuff. I've even got an original Eventide Instant Phaser from 1972 down here. It's probably one of the first pieces of electronics Eventide made for this business. This one came from

**STEVE MOLES**  
witnesses a  
stripped-down  
Page and Plant  
show that still  
delivers a high  
octane sound.



The smaller trapezoidal systems don't do it for me. With the low end down there somewhere on the floor, it may or may not be in phase with the main system. OK that's not such a big thing to check, and it does mean you need a lot more low-end capacity if you're going to fly it all, but this is straight-ahead rock and roll. It's about capturing the energy of the band and not doing too much tinkering around."

### **Coupling And Dispersion**

Kobb has a trusty Clair Brothers S4 system deployed from the Manchester Arena's lofty portals (Manchester, UK). For a well-sold show, barely 2000 below capacity, and the biggest selling rock show there this year, he has

Robert [Plant]'s studio; CBA fixed it up for me after I went through two or three of them on the last tour and it seems to be holding out real well. But a word of warning: don't use the return on them — it makes the PA sound like you're frying eggs."

### **Plant Life**

Apart from the CBA system drive rack, Kobb has just two racks out front; one for effects, the other dynamics and, within them, it's not all dusty old clockwork devices. "You have to be choosy. I tried all the old stuff — Roland tape loops that kind of thing — but they were just so noisy. So I went back to the TC2290 for long loops on Robert's vocals." That's one of the more taxing elements

► of the show. Although many of the vocal phrases that require extending are well flagged if you know the albums, it's obvious from the way Kobb hovers over the faders that Plant sometimes spontaneously decides he wants a note held. In 90 minutes I didn't hear Kobb miss one. "The TC is just cleaner and more reliable, plus it's instantly adjustable so, if they're playing a bit slower or faster on the night, I just tap it in.

"I've got the usual H3000 for the standard harmonizing on Robert, an SPX990 for all that weird distortion stuff, and a Lexicon 480L for reverb. I like to run my drum kit dry, you're already sitting in the middle of reverb in these rooms; keeping it dry leaves the drum sound much more punchy." An understatement to

say the least, the drummer being a tub thumper of alarming ferocity. "For Robert I like a bit of reverb when necessary, just to keep it big until the room takes over." On the other side stands what Kobb admits is a far greater investment: "I like expensive dynamics. I must have cost Clair a lot of money. I've got a Joemeek compressor, just for the cymbal overheads. A British engineer told me about them when we were doing pre-album press stuff using the Manor Mobile for top-rated UK television show *TFI Friday*. It's a first for me in 26 years. It really contains that splashy cymbal sound, squashes it down just like that old '60s sound. Funny thing is, it's 2U high, and unbelievably expensive but, if you open it up,

there's just this little circuit board in there." Despite which Kobb says now he always specs one. "I'm also a big Summit fan, I have a couple of DLC200s for Jim [Page]'s acoustic guitars, but one of the most amazing pieces of audio equipment I've seen is this," he said, pointing to a Crane Song Discrete Class-A Compressor. "It's designed by Dave Hill, who originally worked at Summit. I'd seen an advertisement for it, and I knew of Dave Hill, so I called them and they sent me one." The occasion pre-dates the P&P tour, Kobb was with The Who at the time and used it for Entwistle's bass: "The great thing is you can make it sound like any compressor in the world, so now it's my standard bass compressor."

## Nice & Loose

Kobb also has a Manley pre-amp and a de-esser (assigned to Plant), and a Langevin op/amp which he uses for the upright jazz bass. Beneath these are half a dozen Aphex gates all for the kit but, says Kobb: "I keep it nice and loose for the big sound." As for putting it all together, and perhaps starting to look a little long in the tooth, Kobb has a Yamaha PM4000: "They've done me well and you get 56 inputs and everything you need is on board. The thing with this band is you have to know when to leave it alone. Some guys like to mix as if it's for an album; they spend half the night with their ears inside headphones when the sound's going on out here. That's what everyone's listening to." A timely reminder of where live sound priorities lie.

## Stage Sound

On stage, Brian Hendry works under similar constraints; he's obliged to give Plant the effects that Kobb is putting out front, particularly the retro stuff, plus he has a pretty hot stage sound to deal with. "I took over this job from a Clair guy last year," he said. "The orchestra and Egyptians were still there then, and there were a couple of Harrisons backstage just for them, plus what he had out here for the band. It was overly complex and the first thing I did was to mix down that stuff straight into a couple of channels on my board." Hendry, it should be noted, has a long history of looking after the needs of bands of this stature. A Scot, he was one of the first guys to go over to California with Tasco when they seemingly ruled rock 'n' roll touring. "I'd worked with Robert before, and Whitesnake and Coverdale, so I know what they want. Robert called me but I was out with [Tom] Petty at the time, otherwise I'd have been there earlier." Despite his credentials, and undoubted ability (he'd have gone long ago had he not lived up to expectations), Hendry admitted: "It was quite something to step into mid-tour, what with 30 or so other musicians besides the band." Now, of course, things are in the familiar configuration that his clients will have known for most of their performing careers. "Robert still uses an old SM58 on a cable. We've got lots of Audio-Technica mics on the back line, but the 58 is what he's used to. ►

- He likes to swing it around, it's all taped up, the only way to test anything different is to do it in the real live environment, and why risk that?"

## **Stealth Wedges**

Hendry's set-up for the stage is interesting: up high to each side he has a pair of R4s and the same beneath them at stage level. Page has a pair of Clair 12AM wedges, and Plant has four half-circled around his mic stand with two more behind on the front of the drum riser. There's another pair stage right front, and down in the pit just below stage level are four of Clair's relatively new 2 x 12 Stealth wedges. "What I've done is created three zones for Robert [stage left, right and center], all in stereo. The flown side-fills have just Roberts' vocal mix so I can bring it up and not worry about feedback. The floor side-fills are primarily band with a little of Robert in there. With the front fills in the pit I can fill in the stereo when Robert (or Jimmy on occasions) moves to one side or the other, pulling back say on the stage left floor side-fill and warming up the Stealth immediately to his left depending on where he is."

It's a system that requires a certain vigilance from Hendry, nonetheless the comfort factor is visible. Plant frequently makes an off-mic gesture that puts the mic in perilous proximity to a wedge. More

importantly, with a loud guitar sound on stage (and the aforementioned hammer drummer), Plant is able to pitch perfectly out of nowhere, and all this in an open environment, not an In Ear monitor in sight. Hendry has one word of warning about the Stealths, not that he finds it a problem here: "They've got a round horn rather than a radial between the two 12s. They're

***"There are a few great cheesy effects. Huge pans, tasteless echo and phasing, all that neo '60s over-the-top stuff."***

***— Dave Kobb***

obviously designed so that, when in pairs, they're angled in towards one another. That's not how I want them here, where they're providing a fill. Because of the horn they don't couple well when flat in-line as I have them. That means there's no smoothness around 2k to 3.15kHz when you walk across them." As he said, not a problem for him, but worth drawing

attention to. Hendry mixes from an XL3 with similar justification to Kobb's choice of console: "It's an old friend. I know the sound of the board, it's familiar and when I'm busy my hand goes straight to the right place without looking." He uses little EQ on the desk, instead a rack of 13 old Klark Teknik DN360 stands to one side. "Don't get me wrong, I like the TC1128s, but this is Zeppelin." He said, in reference to that retro prerogative. "I take the sound I'm given, and leave it mainly flat. You'll see there's just a little bump [dip, in reality] around the low mid where it's a little hot. You just get those times when everything couples, when something around 2kHz lifts off, and you can just reach over and hit it."

Effects-wise, Hendry has much the same obligations as Kobb; long and short delays on Plant's vocals and a bit of reverb: "I also use an SPX900 for a bit of chorus on the acoustic guitar, just to give it a hint of false bottom on stage." Otherwise it's all down to the band themselves. What makes the show satisfying is that both Page and Plant still produce the goods like they did 20 years ago. It's not that they haven't progressed, but they haven't slipped into maturation like, say, Clapton has. There are still rough edges, it can still sound dangerous, it almost makes you feel 18 years old again without revisiting the sins of adolescence. □