

Classic Rockers The Who Honored by VH1 with DigiCo

Los Angeles – VH1 and a host of artists and actors paid tribute to the iconic rockers, The Who, and the “VH1 Rock Honors” at UCLA’s Pauley Pavilion on July 12. Days later, the band were the surprise guest performers at the MTV/Harmonix launch party and the Orpheum Theatre for their “Rock Band” entrée into the video game arena. At both Los Angeles events, the band proved they are still influential as much today as they were four decades ago. Not only with their live performances, but also they embrace new digital technologies on tour.

With production partner Eighth Day Sound (and Jordan Zur handling logistics), The Who sound team comprised Paul Ramsay at FOH, and Simon Higgs and longtime Who engineer Bob Pridden on monitors. For the first time, the band migrated away from its steadfast audio solutions—dual D5s at FOH and an analog console at monitor world—in favor of digital consoles with a smaller footprint, namely the new SD7 and D5, respectively. In addition, a second SD7 handled FOH for the majority of the other ‘Honors’ performances, manned by ATK’s Mike Stewart (his first use of a DigiCo console of any variety).

Both of the Los Angeles VH1/MTV shows were preceded by two Roger Daltry shows in Banff, Canada, and a few days of rehearsals in L.A. Both Ramsay and Higgs’ previous experience mixing on DigiCo D5’s—Ramsay with The Who, Annie Lennox, Air and Eric Clapton and Higgs with Sparks and Duran Duran—gave them the confidence to strike out in virgin territory in their particular areas on the Who mini-tour.

Ramsay employed as single SD7 at FOH, upgraded from a pair of D5s (the second running in mirror mode as a backup console) to handle just over 80 inputs. With only one sound check prior to the first show and no production rehearsals, he was impressed at how effortless the console was to plug into the mix and configure. Not to mention the sound.

“I’ve been mixing on DigiCo consoles since the start of 2003, and was an analogue guy up to that point. But, since first using a D5, I’ve never looked back. It’s the best sounding console I’ve ever mixed on. I’ve noticed since using them, that the separation you can hear all of the instruments in the mix is incredible, but still the whole mix sounds solid as one. Plus, with its ease of use, with everything in front of you, no layers and the touch-sensitive screens, it still has the hands-on approach and feel of an analog console. The SD7 in particular has an even easier work surface to use and that made it an easy console to jump on. From its color-coded knobs, to indents on the graphic EQ’s, to very clear accurate metering, to easy socket file set up, to bigger and clearer screens with so much information in front of you... there are too many extras to list! Most importantly, even running at 48K, it sounds to me better than a D5, with a clearer high end and tighter lows. The gate and compressor are also clearer and easier to use and sound better. I love it! Need I go on?”

Space constraints were definitely a factor in the decision to retool the overall audio footprint with the number of inputs and outputs required for the shows. At FOH, since they’d already been working digitally, it was virtually a no-brainer. At monitors, the band has traditionally used analog consoles going back many years.

“They’ve always used Midas consoles so I think everyone was a bit unsure about switching to digital,” recalled Higgs. “The initial reason for swapping was we literally didn’t have the room for the analog console and all the racks of outboard gear needed for the shows. That was really the thing that pushed me over in favor of using the D5. In the end, I know Bob trusted me enough to go with the DigiCo and after that, they were fine. It worked out well as I have all the outputs used—34 busses and 12 directs, 20 of which are going to Pete’s rack mount mixing desk with a mini DigiCo 20-channel console so he can mix all of his own sound on stage.”

Ramsay records every show onto Nuendo via MAD1 multi-track, which he uses for fine-tuning the mix each day, and serves as an archive of the show. “The added bonus of doing this means that

I can do virtual sound checks on the console,” he imparts. “As input list is changing at present it’s easy to add or remove channels and extra dynamics as required without moving from the console surface. On normal tours, we’ll do a 5.1 mix off the DigiCo console onto a Digidesign 002 Pro Tools system, which are put on The Who satellite station the next day and available for sale within a few weeks on the web.”