



Acoustic energy

Dave Swallow's passion for audio quality and intellectual approach to mixing has made him a highly sought-after FOH engineer. **Andrew Low** talks to Swallow about working with La Roux, Seasick Steve and Amy Winehouse...



Dave Swallow has had his share of unusual live mixing jobs. From the midi-controlled electronic sounds of La Roux to the minimalist set-up of Seasick Steve or the vintage sound of Amy Winehouse, Swallow brings his own ideas to live shows to let the artists sound like themselves "plus ten times the energy".

During his career, which started in Chinnerys in Southend-on-Sea, UK, Swallow has found that sometimes less is more. This was particularly evident when working with Seasick Steve. He explains: "These days people forget what they are mixing. Most albums are over-produced and laden with compression, so if you tried to recreate that live with someone like Seasick Steve it would mean a totally different thing to him. It is a case of thinking about what you are mixing and what comes across."

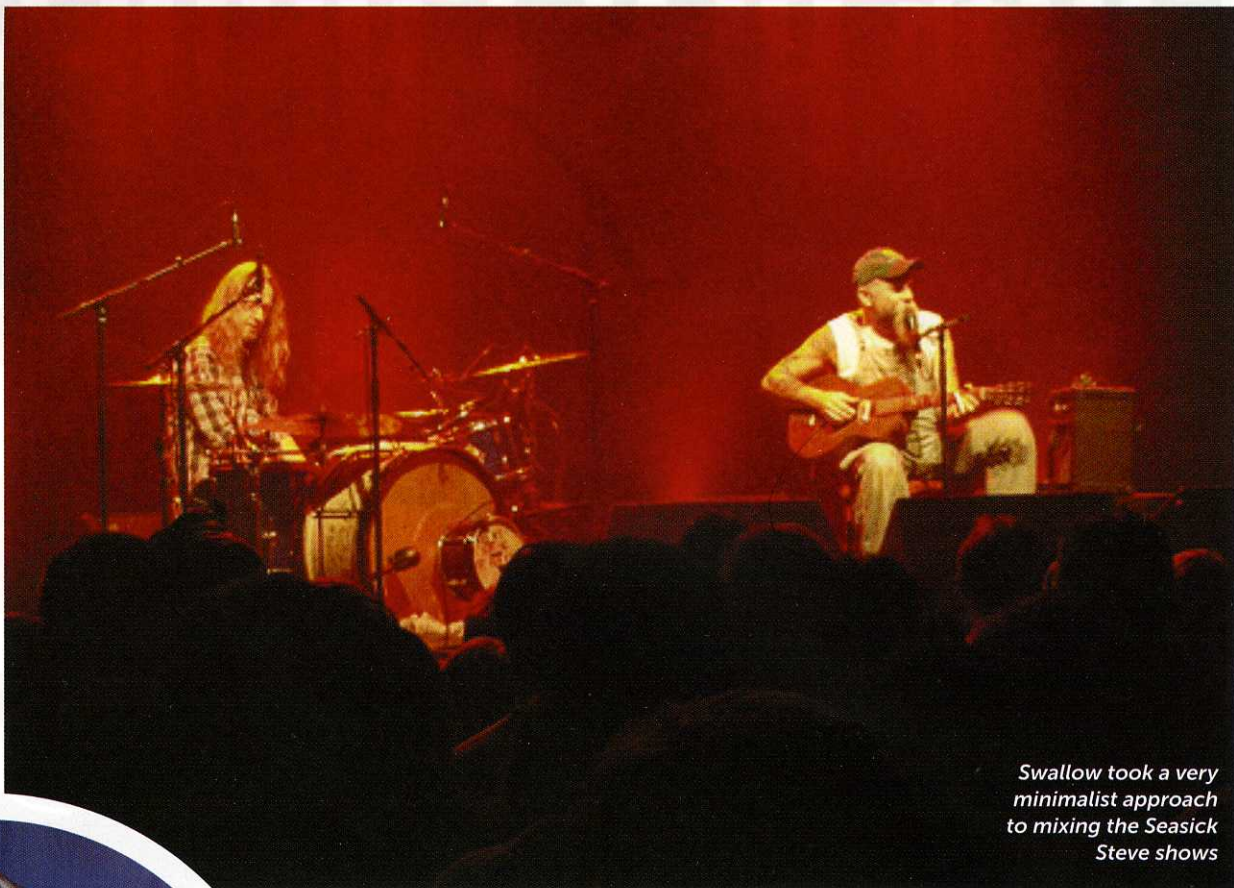
"I took a completely different stance when mixing Steve, so rather than going in and sorting the PA out so it was perfect, I just left it the way it was observed how the band reacted with the audience, and it worked very well. Because there were

only two of them on the stage, they interacted a lot with each other and also with the audience."

"It was similar to mixing a jazz band, because I let the musicians eq their amps, tune their instruments and I let them have their space and separated the mix until it was all driving in the right areas."

"For his tour I only used one mic on Steve's Roland Cube 30X amp and minimal drum miking. If you heard it separately, every single bit on its own sounded rubbish. The amount of times I had guys in the OB trucks saying, 'Do you want to leave it like that?' I had to insist to leave it be and promise that when the whole mix was heard together it sounded great."

"The kick drum was an old marching drum with old pigskin on it and it cost £400 to re-skin. It sounded like slapping a wet fish against a cow's stomach, but put in context with the rest of the drum kit and what Steve was doing, it all made sense. I didn't gate anything. The only two things I compressed were his vocal and his guitar. I ran his vocal through the Avalon 737 preamp and put a Distressor on his



Swallow took a very minimalist approach to mixing the Seasick Steve shows



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guitar and really cranked that up so it was hitting the input peak and that guitar came to life."

Mixing electro 80s' throwback singer La Roux is a very different scenario to the dirty blues of Seasick Steve, as midi controllers loaded with samples from the studio album are used as instruments. Swallow found that trying to recreate the album was just not possible. He also found that, although the music was totally electronic, he could still add an organic feel to the mix. "We had to make the decision of whether we were going to try and hide behind that fact that it is electronic and run

backing tracks and try and make it sound live, or embrace the fact that we can make it sound real," he explains.

Budgets for La Roux's European tour did not permit Swallow to bring a desk or PA on the road, so he carries a tool chest containing a TC Electronic D-Two multitap rhythm delay, which is all programmed up for various songs, a TC M2000 effects processor, and a computer running Logic, also programmed for specific songs, and an Alesis HD24 on stage. "Everything is bounced on to HD24 on stage because we are very cautious of computers running any form of major processing live. I have never had an HD24 crash on me yet. We run ten channels from that, which is kick drum, snare and hat line, an extra bass, channel, a melody line and two percussion lines. And then we have two rhythm key lines and then just an extra backing vocals," he states.

Swallow found that Amy Winehouse's tour was similar in terms of restrictive budgets, meaning that he could only bring Avalon 737 preamps and a BSS Audio DPR-901 eq for vocals along with him. But when he does have his choice of gear, he has his favourites. Although while touring with La Roux in Europe he has been finding his way around the newest gear every night, he's realised that these have remained the same – Funktion-one and Midas consoles, with a caveat that DiGiCo's integration of multiband compression is "the

future". This means that La Roux will be heard through a Midas Pro 6 and Funktion-One for her UK dates.

"I think Funktion-One is the best PA in the world. The first time I used it was during Winehouse's main stage set at Glastonbury. For the first time in I put everything through that PA system and immediately thought 'bloody hell, this sounds great'. I could hear everything, but I wasn't fighting for space. Her set required 29 channels of live mics on the stage. Everything on stage was nicely separated and we had a Digidesign Venue at FOH, so I loaded up my session, pushed the faders up and the vocal was immediately in my head; it wasn't at the stage, it was in my face. If something was a bit too loud I only needed just pulled the fader back and it sunk back into the mix, but it didn't disappear.

"Tony Andrews goes on about transients and how important they are in any form of mixing PA system. He stuck to his guns with this and made a PA system that responds and reacts to everything that you are doing. So whether you are pulling out frequencies, adding them or pulling faders up or down, you can still hear everything. Some other PAs seem to have their own sound and you might need to add gain on a particular channel to hear it properly because there is so much processing going on in the background. For me, it has become very apparent that PA system manufacturers may make a great sounding speaker, but because of the way it is hung it or how the boxes are phasing with each, other they have had to use corrective measures to combat those problems, which has led them on to something else that they need to fix and additional processing is needed. I am thinking specifically of the Nexo Geo. I find that system to be completely over-engineered and over-processed, whereas the F-1 stuff sounds completely organic and open, and the stereo imaging is amazing. It is not like line array where you are panning things hard left or right to make an actual difference.

"Processing for La Roux's UK tour will be run on the Pro 6. I will have my external effects because they are already preset, but I probably won't run Logic because, since the sound goes into the computer and then back out again, there is a slight issue with latency. It's not noticeable in a noisy room, but you hear the slight delay on the effects in a dead room. So I just program into the Pro 6 all the things I'm doing in Logic. It's the best way, because you just don't know what you are turning up to at each gig."