

# Echoes of Pompeii

A highlight of PLASA Show 2022 was a recreation of the iconic PA system used for Pink Floyd's 1971 *Live at Pompeii* performance. Simon Duff investigates . . .

**[UK]** Chris Hewitt holds a unique position within UK pro audio that spans decades. His career began in the 1970s mixing live sound for the band Tractor, signed to John Peel's Dandelion Records; working for Ian Dury's Kilburn and The High Roads; managing a rental house and setting up Suite 16 studios, Manchester in 1985 with Peter Hook.

Furthermore, he opened a museum and wrote and published books, including two on the breakthrough record producer Martin Hannett and two on the history of rock music PA systems. The Chris Hewitt Museum of Rock is his privately funded museum. A vintage audio collection in Cheshire, close to Manchester, it opened in 2016 to the public and industry professionals.

It is an idiosyncratic display. Hewitt claims to have the largest collection of 1960s and 1970s WEM PA and sound equipment in the UK, in addition to vintage equipment from HH, Vox, Marshall, Shure, Selmer, Carlsbro and Martin Audio. The museum also contains a large collection of vintage guitar amps from Vox, Fender, Marshall, Music Man, Selmer and Peavey. There's also a large selection of vintage mixing desks, from 4-channel to 40-plus channels, microphones, tape machines, vintage radios and studio and live rack effects units. Recent additions to the collection include various Abbey Road microphones and a 1950s valve monitor amp that drove the Altec 605A cabs that Hewitt owns which are ex-Studio Two and through which many Beatles songs were mixed.

This year, PLASA Show visitors got a taste of the collection thanks to a unique show-feature that saw a selection of Hewitt's classic gear presented at the heart of the show.

## CLASSIC GEAR

*Pink Floyd Live at Pompeii* was released in 1972 as a concert documentary film. Directed by Adrian Maben, it featured the



band performing, over four days, at the ancient Roman amphitheatre in Pompeii, southern Italy. No audience was present apart from band and film crews. The core footage in and around the amphitheatre was filmed using Floyd's regular touring equipment, including a mobile 8-track recorder. Hewitt explains why he felt the need to recreate the set up: "Ever since seeing the back of *Ummagumma* - Pink Floyd's fourth album cover with all the gear on it - and then going to the cinema as a teenager to watch *Live in Pompeii*, I wanted to recreate that Pompeii system, so as bits of it became available I bought it."

He continues, explaining developments in PA in the early 1970s: "Ideas for large PA rock systems in the early '70s from America involved using cinema loudspeakers such as the JBL 4560 and the Voice of the Theatre loudspeakers started to be used. In the UK, Charlie Watkins of Watkins Electric Music, better known as WEM, became a pioneer in rock music PA systems. The setup for Pink Floyd was premiered at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970 and was then used in Pompeii in 1971. So, it's a crucial part of



rock music history and I felt the need to keep that alive."

Describing the PLASA Show set-up, Hewitt says: "The building blocks work around 10 WEM SL100, 100W power amps slaved together, the WEM PA and two WEM Audiomaster five mono-channel mixers. The console has five mono input channels, each with Presence, Treble and Bass controls and one echo send. Mono output is on jacks sent to the first SL100 and then screened jacks link between every slave. Six WEM 4 x 12" PA columns, two WEM 2 x 12" PA columns and two WEM 2 x 15" PA cabinets are deployed. There's also one WEM festival stack consisting of two 15" bass units, four 12" lower-mids, six 10" upper-mids and twin six-cell Vitavox Gold Horns. Then additional horns, one 4-way Celestion MH1000 tweeter, one

↑ Top: Chris Hewitt and son Tom with the PLASA Show recreation of Pink Floyd's 1971 WEM stack used in Pompeii

↑ Above: Slaved WEM SL100 (100W) power amps and a WEM Audiomaster 5-channel mixer

Vitavox Giant 15" sector horn, one extra twin Gold Vitavox six-cell and a 3-way vertical Celestion horn box.

"The speakers and slave amps are the exact configuration of one side of the PA at Pompeii in October 1971. Included in the microphone department are Sennheiser MD 409s, used for vocals and other instruments. In addition, the PA line up includes an original 1970s WEM parabolic speaker dish, a focused audio beam source. Also one of the three WEM Audiomasters that mixed Jimi Hendrix at the Isle of Wight.

"To top off the display, we have a beautifully-restored Avis Mk 1 Ford Transit van - the model used by Floyd when they drove from London to Pompeii over 50 years ago. Over the three days at PLASA, playback sources were from CD and included the original Pink Floyd audio from Pompeii 1971, The Steve McElroy and Friends (the Aussie Pink Floyd) 50th Anniversary recordings of the

Pompeii re-creation from September 2021 and tracks from *A Foot in the Door*, a Pink Floyd compilation. Main tracks played over the three days to demo the system were *Echoes*, *One of these Days*, *Careful with That Axe Eugene*, and then post-Pompeii tracks like *Shine on You Crazy Diamond* and *Wish You Were Here*."

#### ROCK ROYALTY

Also presented at PLASA was a choice selection of original equipment used by Martin Hannett. This included a Marshall Time Modulator Model 5002 unit, used extensively by Joy Division and early New Order. Hewitt explains: "It helped create the panned phased delay LFO [low-frequency oscillator] chorus sound that Martin used extensively at the time."

Also on display was an AMS DMX 15-80 S delay, one of the early digital delay units used regularly by Hannett. "Martin owned at least three 15-80s and

he was closely involved with Stuart Nevison from AMS on their product designs in the early '80s. Originally designed to meet specifications laid down by the BBC for equipment supplied to them, the 15-80s offered two completely independently-controlled delayed channels with precisely controlled delay times. Times were adjustable without any sacrifice to the 18kHz bandwidth, which was constant irrespective of the amount of delay selected. A total delay of 32 seconds was possible with the unit, split over two channels. The 15-80 was a real game-changer and I believe its sound remains unique."

CH Vintage Audio's work includes supplying authentic period equipment to the film industry in order to recreate concert and rehearsal setups. Recent high-profile projects include Danny Boyle's Sex Pistols biopic *Pistol*, for which CH Vintage Audio supplied a full recreation of David Bowie's

Ziggy Stardust gig in Hammersmith Odeon in 1973. 11 Sex Pistols UK gigs and two US gigs also recreated for *Pistol* required a different PA for each, and a Simms Watts PA was deployed to recreate Chrissie Hynde's Pretenders rehearsal room recording used by the Pistols.

For the Morrissey film *England is Mine*, the PA system for the infamous summer 1976 gig by the Sex Pistols at Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall was re-created in addition to one at Rafter's nightclub, plus backline and small PA amps for Morrissey's bedroom.

Hewitt's future plans include further film and TV sound system recreations and Volume 3 of his *Development of Large Rock Sound Systems* book. The vintage display was certainly a hit with PLASA Show visitors and those inspired to visit Hewitt's museum are welcome to do so by pre-booked appointment. ☺

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