

The line-up for George Michael's 2008 Tour featured the cream of British musical talent



GRAHAM KEARNS guitar

MIKE BROWN guitar

STEVE WALTERS bass

INTERVIEW

Boys From The Backline

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George Michael's Tour 2008 featured a sizzling all-British 16-piece band. Here, some of the band members talk to Will Simpson about stage sets, key changes and a happy return to form...

George Michael strolls out onto the stage at Earls Court. It's one of the last nights of his world tour and he's already opened up his homecoming show with a version of *I'm Your Man* that has had the whole 18,000-strong auditorium on its feet. Next he welcomes the audience, saying how good it is to be back in Britain and announcing, "This is our 103rd show so these guys are f***** hot tonight."

"These guys" are the 16-piece backing band that have spent the last two years playing with the ex-Wham star on his *25 Live* extravaganza. They're also unique, in that, apart from two American backing vocalists, they're all British, an unheard-of scenario in an era when A-list artists, like Premiership football clubs, prefer to select multi-national line-ups.

But according to musical director Chris Cameron, the band's monocultural complexion was merely a coincidence rather than a deliberate design on the singer's part. "I think it was just the way things turned out. Nearly everybody, myself included, has played on his records before. Guitarist Phil Palmer played on *Listen Without Prejudice*, sax player Andy Hamilton has been around since *I'm Your Man*. Shirley Lewis on



Sax player Andy Hamilton relishes the opportunity to tour with George and the band

backing vocals has been around since *Faith*. We've all been around a while."

Building The Band

Some, like guitarist Mike Brown and keyboard player Luke Smith, are comparatively recent recruits. "I had worked with George in the studio on the *Patience* album," says Smith. "When the tour came up, I think his usual keyboard player was on another tour that he couldn't get off. So my name came up in conversation. They asked me and obviously I said 'Yeah'."

The rest of the group came through an audition process and although George has the ultimate say in the band's line-

up, MD and long-term collaborator Cameron has a major input in recruitment, a role he likens to that of a football manager. "It's much the same way that Arsene Wenger or Alex Ferguson pick players. It's not just on the basis of what they can do on the pitch. We find out about their personalities. What are they like within a working environment? Are they a bit of a loner? Do you need to put your arm around this one? Are they a team player? All these kind of things."

Preparation for the tour started a full six months before the first date in September 2006. This is when keys were selected and decisions made about who plays what in each song. "Most of the

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMALL AND LARGE VENUES

The band discuss the pros and cons of intimacy versus space

"I always find the smaller venues more nerve racking because it's a lot closer," says Luke Smith. "You can see people and it's more intimate. I think the bigger the gig, that first time the adrenaline hits you think 'Wow this is great' and then you start playing and you forget about people who are there. You don't really appreciate how big it is."

The problem of course is that the larger the venue the more difficult it is to connect with the audience: "Sometimes

the place is so big that your attention can actually wander," says Andy Hamilton. "There's so much to look at. Funny enough, we did a small show at the Roundhouse, which George did as a thank you to nurses who had looked after his mum when she was seriously ill. I could see the expression on the faces at the back of the room and it was fantastic. I think I enjoyed that as much as any gig on the tour. Personally, I like to feel that I'm a bit closer to the audience."

GEORGE MICHAEL lead vocals

CHRIS CAMERON Musical Director

CARLOS HERCULES drums

LINCOLN JEAN MARIE vocals

LUKE SMITH keyboards

guy's are quite flexible," says Cameron. "They have so many skills. For example, Mike Brown will do all the wah-wah parts 'cause he's just a funky little boy, but that doesn't mean that Graham Kearns can't do them. In fact, he does do them on some tunes. Phil Palmer will do a lot of the acoustic guitar tunes and Graham will do a lot of that too, because they are both really sensitive and good at those."

"Sometimes I can leave them alone to get on with it. They're seasoned campaigners. I don't need to be standing over them saying, 'You must do this'. I'll

Cameron. "The last thing he'll want to do is *Careless Whisper*. He'll do something from one of his recent albums and then we'll start working back."

But that's not to say that Michael is hands-off as regards his music. According to Cameron, new technology has meant that the singer can be preparing while the band are going through their paces.

"For example, because of Pro Tools we can give him *One More Try*, which was originally done in F. It's too high for him now so we can

"Our experience allows us to flit in between European and American music"

come in if things need to be voiced in a particular way. But usually because they're so good, once we've got a template going, I don't need to stand over them and crack the whip."

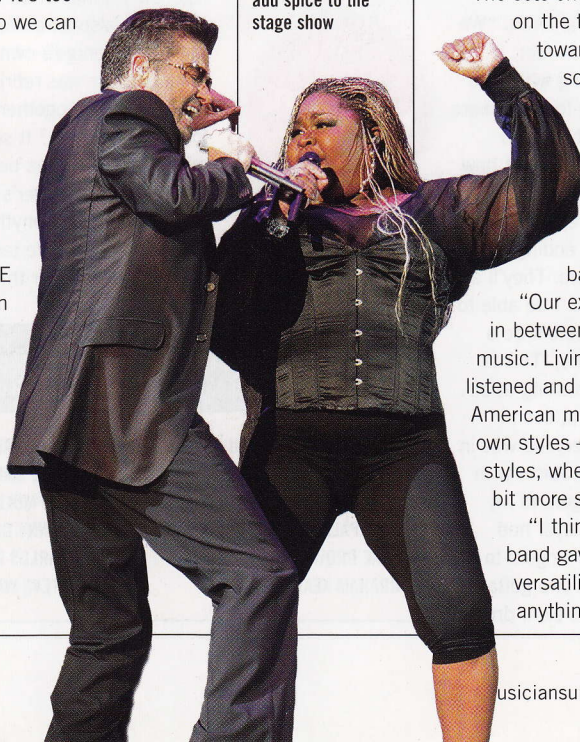
Song Selection

Rehearsals began in earnest a month before the tour started but only at the 11th hour did the star of the show add his vocal presence to proceedings. "He'll come in and usually he'll only want to sing the latest thing he's recorded," says

de-tune to do it in E flat 1. He can listen to that at home and say 'ah yes, E flat 1 is fine'. So we'll start rehearsing in E flat and then we'll realise that's still too high and take it down to D flat or D or whatever."



Duets with backing vocalist Lori Perry add spice to the stage show



The tour was a huge success, even in America, which in recent years hasn't been a particularly happy hunting ground for the singer due to obvious reasons. "I think he felt that they'd forgotten about him over there," says Andy Hamilton. "A lot of water has passed under the bridge. But it was wonderful to go back there, because he has got a loyal following and I think it was a reaffirmation that he can still cut it live. Though of course I could have told him that anyway."

The sets on the North American leg on the tour were usually weighted towards the jazzier, more soulful end of the singer's spectrum, while in Europe his dance-orientated tracks were aired more often. According to Smith, this was one area where an all-British band provided an edge.

"Our experience allows us to flit in between European and American music. Living in the UK we have listened and absorbed so much American music, but we also have our own styles – dance and more leftfield styles, whereas Americans are a little bit more self-contained."

"I think having a mostly British band gave George a lot more versatility. It meant he could do anything in his repertoire – from



Wham! to his soul days to his dance days or whatever. He could go in any direction and the band could handle it."

Both Hamilton and Smith are fulsome in their praise of the singer, the way the musicians were treated and the camaraderie there was among the band. However, one aspect of the tour didn't sit so well with many band members – the small matter of the huge video screens that obscured them each night, meaning that individual musicians were unable to see each other as they played.

Sound And Vision

"We hated it," says Chris Cameron. "We didn't like it from day one. In fact, I remember going to a meeting when the geniuses who put the thing together were patting themselves on the back and going, 'Oh wonderful'. I asked, 'But how are we going to see each other?'. 'Oh you'll have cameras,' they replied. 'But how am I going to conduct endings?' 'Oh it's fine, you'll have a camera. They'll all be able to see you.' 'But will I be able to see them?' 'No, because there'll be a curtain in the way.' I was like, 'This is terrible. This is not music-making at all'.

"But we all got used to it, even though we didn't like it. Everyone was in their little cubicle. I had a cubicle with myself and three of the singers to my right. The other keyboard player had himself and the other three singers to his right. Upstairs, you had the two guitarists and the percussionist on his own, drums

Above: George Michael gets in gear for his new hits, old faves and more...

and bass together, and then on the top tier you had Andy on sax and Phil on guitar. Not ideal, but we got through it."

Star People

Luke Smith is more circumspect. "I'm getting paid to do a job so it's not necessarily about what I want or how I think it should be. I'm just playing my role within a band. George is the artist. That's the reality. People have come to see George Michael, not Luke Smith."

The Earls Court gigs were billed as 'The Final Two', a nod to Wham!'s legendary 'Final' show at Wembley in 1986 but also an ambiguous hint regarding George's own future. Did it mean that he was retiring from live performance altogether? Or merely big tours like this one? It seems even his musical director has been kept in the dark about the singer's intentions.

"He's not said anything to us," says Chris Cameron. "We tend to read things in the press or hear things on the radio

first. But I think it's just that he's not going to be doing another tour like this with a huge stage and huge lights. Personally, I think that's a good idea."

Andy Hamilton: "My take on it is that there comes a point where he doesn't want to be seen doing the same thing. I think all the time he was that pop star George Michael, he found it an incredible strain living up to everybody's expectations. I wouldn't be surprised if, in a couple of years, he comes back to something different. He'll still be singing, because he's a great singer but it'll be who he wants to be, rather than what everybody else expects him to be."

And if in two years time, he changes his mind and decides he wants to do another world tour? "Oh I'd love to do it," Hamilton laughs. "I mean, you wouldn't exactly say, 'Sorry but I've got a couple of pub gigs next week' would you? Show me a saxophone player who would turn down the opportunity to go round the world with George Michael."



BAND LINE-UP...

An incredible throng of talent makes up the George Michael tour band

GEORGE MICHAEL lead vocals
CHRIS CAMERON Musical director/
 arranger
PHIL PALMER guitars
MIKE BROWN guitars
GRAHAM KEARNS guitars

ANDY HAMILTON saxophone, keyboards
LUKE SMITH keyboards
LEA MULLEN percussion
DANNY CUMMINGS percussion
CARLOS HERCULES drums
STEVE WALTERS bass

SHIRLEY LEWIS backing vocals
JAY HENRY backing vocals
LINCOLN JEAN-MARIE backing vocals
LORI PERRY backing vocals
SHARON PERRY backing vocals
LUCY JULES backing vocals