

IN THE OCTAGON



The Red Hot Chili Peppers' *I'm With You World Tour* features a universe of video

By: Sharon Stancavage



When it was time to design the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *I'm With You World Tour*, Scott Holthaus was handed the same creative brief that many concert acts give to their production designers: none. "They don't really give direction," he notes.

However, he adds, Flea, the group's bassist, having liked the look of a Massive Attack show, urged the participation of the UK-based firm United Visual Artists (UVA). Thus, UVA had a hand in two of the production's major elements: the eight venetian blinds that function as video and lighting as well as the video elements built inside the stage. "The screens are in an octagonal configuration; each one has the ability to be a 10'-by-10' screen, 10'-by-10' mole, or ACL light—or a combination," Holthaus says. "If we choose which side is to be shown, it can expand—going from a 10'-by-10' to a 10'-by-30' screen just by lowering it like venetian blinds."

The venetians were supplied by Tait Towers, of Lititz, Pennsylvania. The company "fabricated the eight telescoping, or expanding, panels of 9mm Saco V9 LEDs from PRG Nocturne [of DeKalb, Illinois] by a single-width panel, which is roughly 6" by 10'. One side creates a 10'-by-10' square when they are all compacted; on the other side is a total of 1,340 ACL bulbs," he says.

During the first few songs, Holthaus has the screens parked. "They start high and work their way in, getting used more as the show goes on," he says. They make an arrangement like a birdcage during a cover of Stevie Wonder's "Higher

Ground." In "Adventure of Rain Dance Maggie," they lower to a point just above the heads of the band, creating the form of a Chinese lantern.

Other video elements include a 44'-by-20' Saco V28 wall located upstage. "The content can replicate itself on the venetians or on the back wall," Holthaus says. "Typically, [both elements] tie together visually," creating looks with real depth to them.

Video elements are also embedded in the stage in the shape of an asterisk. "The video floor follows the same configuration as the screens,"

"Scott and I are very anti-generic content. I don't want to say, 'We don't have anything programmed for this song, so we'll use fire.' When we punt, we go to cameras. We don't do fire or waves or anything like that." — Dixon

Holthaus says. "It's the first time I've been able to travel with a Tait [Towers] rolling stage, and it's a luxury." The 40'-by-60' stage is comprised of seventy-two 15mm LED decks and is highlighted during several songs. "'Other Side' really ties everything together—wall, venetians, and floor," adds Leif Dixon, the tour's screen director.

The video content is a combination of treated IMAG and 2-D motion graphics, created by Holthaus' firm, Happy Machine; the Los Angeles-based animator Brainbow; and, to some extent, the UVA team. Holthaus explains, "We're trying to use hand-drawn animation as opposed to just amorphous stock stuff."

Handling the content on ten separate surfaces is Dixon, using

Catalyst v4 as his media server.

"They are all driven coming off one single Mac Pro," he says. "We do have a spare, but it all comes off one active machine, which is a pretty good testament to Catalyst, actually."

Dixon chooses from pre-produced content and feeds from seven cameras—four handhelds, two lipstick cameras on drums, and an overhead robocam—which are then fed into Catalyst. "We have six SDI inputs in the Catalyst and a clever

routing system put in play by the Nocturne guys," Holthaus explains.

Much of the IMAG is treated inside the Catalyst. "George [Elizondo, the video director], doesn't have a direct pipeline to the screens," Dixon says. "Everything—the individual cameras, ISOs, and George's program mix—comes to me, and I control the screens." Elizondo, who knows the details of each song, works somewhat independently of Dixon, cutting the cameras and getting shots as he sees fit. "George is doing his thing regardless of whether we send it to the screen or not," Dixon says. "He sends signal to me, and I decide what goes to screen."

IMAG is critical for those times when the band pulls a song out of nowhere and there are no lighting or



Hand-drawn animations, from Los Angeles-based animator Brainbow, speak to the production designer's desire to avoid stock content, even in an ever-changing set lineup.

“I don’t mix with any board lights. I mix in the dark, and I don’t label everything. I remember where everything is. My goal is to watch the band and interface the band with the audience. I don’t want to distract from that, so the equipment that I use is secondary.” — Rat

video cues associated with it. “Scott and I are very anti-generic content,” Dixon says. “I don’t want to say, ‘We don’t have anything programmed for this song, so we’ll use fire.’ When we punt, we go to cameras. We don’t do fire or waves or anything like that—I rely heavily on George.” Because of the band’s collective temperament, punting is a possibility each night. “We’re working for a rock band. It’s

not a pop act with SMPTE or dancers or video that’s time code-striped to hit perfect little marks on the music.”

Automation supervisor Rob DeCeglio controls the venetians. “Every night before the show, we look at the order of the set list and say, ‘We know these six songs have to hit these certain positions,’” Dixon says. “We never want to sit with one screen position for too long, so we give Rob

the flexibility to arrange the show around the dedicated songs.” DeCeglio adds, “Depending on the set list, we try to have a look for every song or two, although we might stay stationary for a song that we’re doing more of an audible on.”

Tait Towers provided the automation system, which has 58 axes of motion and is controlled by Fisher Technical Services’ Navigator. “The software is very flexible,” he says. “In the past, you had certain controllers and software that went with certain motors. This allows you to put all kinds of motors and gearing onto one system.”

DeCeglio’s role, which is to move thousands of pounds of automation above the heads of the band members,



The backs of the Venetian blind units are covered with 1,340 ACL bulbs.

is critical to the production. “Rob probably has the hardest job on the whole tour,” Dixon says. “He has a complex system to maneuver, and it would be fantastic for him if they did the same show every night, so he could program his stuff. But it doesn’t work that way. Considering the position he’s in, he’s remarkably resilient.”

There are also three automated trusses upstage, three automated concentric octagons above the stage, two side trusses, and six side torms. The 30’-high torms are modular units that can adapt to a venue’s maximum trim height. “Tait made the frames for them; each one contains 18 GLP impressions,” Holthaus notes. A Martin Professional Atomic 3000 strobe with color-changer is placed at the top and

bottom of each torm, with four Clay Paky Sharpys located just under the top-placed Atomic. “The Sharpys are the greatest thing since canned beer,” Holthaus says with a chuckle.

Sharpys are also placed inside the over-stage octagons and upstage straight trusses; nearly 100 of them are used in the rig, “Their beam doesn’t fade off like every other instrument in the rig, and they reach all the way to back of the wall,” Holthaus says.

The lighting rig, provided by Premier Global Productions, of Nashville, also includes Martin MAC 2000 XBs, Martin Mac IIIs, Strong Gladiator front-of-house spots, and Lycian Starklites located on the side trusses. “The truss spots do the majority of the work, because they’re

controlled by my hand, and they mold the face better than the front. The front-of-house spots are there because we have so much ambient light, thanks to the screens, and so much blasting with the light from the torms pummeling the kids,” Holthaus explains.

The lighting was programmed on an MA Lighting grandMA1 console by Zach Peletz; Holthaus is out with the show as the lighting director. “Once the tour is rolling, I kind of help Scott with lights on a daily basis,” Dixon says. “The main thing is already done, so we’re just dealing with the frosting once we’re on the road.” The show is, as one might expect, highly cued. “The cues are not next, next, next—there is a stack, and the accents are on the subsidiary channels,” Holthaus says.



The lighting rig includes GLP impressions, Clay Paky Sharpys, Martin MAC 2000 XBs, Mac IIIs, Strong Gladiator front-of-house spots, and Lycian Starklites.

Sound

When a band has an ever-changing set list, everyone on the crew needs to be on their toes. “Every once in a while they will throw in something that has a significant cue in it, and that will get me running around—but I’ve been doing it a long time, and I’m up for the challenge,” explains Dave Rat, the band’s longtime sound engineer, who is also president of the tour’s audio vendor, Rat Sound Systems, of Camarillo, California. “I was renting them sound equipment back in the mid-to-late-’80s as a PA vendor,” he says. “Then they asked me if I would be their live engineer.”

Rat worries about sonic consistency, so he relies on an L-Acoustics PA based around the K1 cabinet. “I can get huge L-Acoustics PAs nearly anywhere in the world,” he says. “L-Acoustics is extremely attentive to making sure that every system they produce can sound nearly identical, regardless of the vendor or country.”

The system consists of K1s for the main left/right PA as well KARAs and ARCs for the side hang, which takes the coverage out to 270°. “A typical main stage hang will cover up to about 180° or so, and the secondary hang brings that to about 240°,” Rat says. “With this show, they can sell all the way around to 270°, so we expand, depending on how far we’re going around in order to cover every seat.”

Rat uses a Midas H3000 Heritage console—an analog product—as does monitor engineer Tim Engwall. “There are a lot of advantages to using a digital console: smaller size, lower weight, reduced cost, a lot more features,” Rat remarks. “The primary reason I stay with an analog console is the ability to see exactly what is going on, always. Digital consoles tend to have screens and layers. They tend to have multiple pages, and they might have 16 or 24 faders. I don’t want to go through

menus. I like to see everything, always. I want to be able to stand in one spot and know all the information of every aspect of the sound system in half a second.

“I don’t mix with any board lights,” he continues. “I mix in the dark, and I don’t label everything. I remember where everything is. My goal is to watch the band and interface the band with the audience. I don’t want to distract from that, so the equipment that I use is secondary.”

Rat keeps it simple while mixing. “I only use two effects. One is the [Lexicon] PCM 60, and the other is an Eventide H3500. The PCM 60 does all of my reverb for vocals and drums, and the H3500 does everything else.” The effects are done on a song-by-song basis. “I program them as needed. I’ll do a flanger effect on the vocals; I’ll do auto pan on the guitar for another song; and I’ll use the delay for vocals on yet another song. I reassign them as needed.” He uses

Empirical Labs distressors for the vocals and eight channels of Klark Teknik's DN514 gates on the drums.

Rat has a variety of microphones, although he admits to having certain favorite brands. "Audix and Shure are the two companies I trend toward," he says. Two of his workhorses are the Shure Beta 91 (on the kick drum) and the Audix D6 (on the kick and a large percussion drum). Others include Audix OM7s for vocals and Beta 98 for the toms.

The mic package also contains a few surprises. "I really like the AKG C5600, which was acquired years ago," he says. "They're condenser mics, and I use them on the cymbals. It's an oddball mic that never really caught on." He has also some Royer 122s "on the cowbell and for one of the percussion using the figure-eight pattern; it helps me use less mics."

In terms of monitors, a variety of wedges and in-ears are used. "We just got the new Shure PSM 1000 in-ear system. We're very happy with the quality and clarity," Rat says, adding, "most all the band is on EAW MicroWedges."

The most dynamic monitor setup is for drummer Chad Smith. "The drum has two EAW MicroSub subwoofers under his grated drum riser, firing straight upwards; two MicroWedge 15s behind him in stereo; two Buttckickers as drum throne thumpers; and he's on in-ears," Rat says with a chuckle. In fact, the combination of the various monitors is more than just an auditory experience. "With the drum throne thumpers and the MicroWedges behind him, he's got all this power and energy, so it's a combination of hearing and feeling. And with the drum thumpers, it's like an earthquake below him, so it's really a sensory overload."

The Red Hot Chili Peppers' *I'm With You World Tour* wraps up in New Zealand in January. 📶



Drummer Chad Smith has EAW MicroSub subwoofers under his drum riser, MicroWedge 15s behind him, and Buttckickers as drum throne thumpers for a physical experience.

