the DMB PARADOX

Tour after tour, Dave Matthews Band offers the latest in visual and audio technology

By: David Barbour Photography: Todd Kaplan

In some ways, it's a mystery: Dave Matthews Band is well into its second decade of popularity. Its reputation is rooted in solid musicianship, creative songwriting, and a jazz-rock-fusion sensibility aimed at the adults in the audience. There's nothing glitzy or showy— least of Matthews himself, who is solidly in the running for the title of Least Flamboyant Rock Star of All Time.

How is it, then, that each of the band's tours constitutes a kind of state-of-the-industry report on concert design, with all the latest gear deployed to such stunning effect?

We've never gotten to the bottom of it, though we keep trying. In the meantime, there's this year's tour, which once again dazzles one's visual receptors while never sacrificing musical values. As usual, it's the product of a tightly knit design team and crew, all longtime members of the DMB touring family, who collaborate so closely that it's often hard to tell who did what.

"We all work together," says Fenton Williams, the tour's co-production designer, along with Bruce Rodgers. "There's Bruce [head of the scenic design firm Tribe, Inc.]; Mike Lane, the video director; Aaron [Stinebrink], the lighting programmer, Jeff Crane, video engineer/creative genius, and Bruce's tag team at Tribe, Mai Sakai and Sean Dougall. We sit in rehearsals together and we all pull it together. It really is very integrated. We all seem to have the same vision in mind."

The production design process for a Matthews tour is both collaborative and evolutionary. It begins with phone calls between Williams and Rodgers, discussing the history of DMB designs, and needs that became apparent during the previous tour. Williams' relationship with DMB gives him insight into production design possibilities and the band's ongoing musical path. The phone calls lead to napkin sketches by Williams, which are developed by Rodgers, with input from others, including Stinebrink. Each new design is the latest installment of a long-running effort to integrate lighting, staging, and video into a seamless package. "Working with Fenton and the DMB gang is like working in a modern atelier, where everyone gets involved," says Rodgers. "It's so much fun thinking, talking, sketching, and creating environments for such an amazing band." This year's show is arguably the most sophisticated to date.

Before the concert begins, a video screen, measuring 50' wide by 10' tall, is flown in just above the deck. At stages right and left are two narrow vertical video walls—each is 20' tall and 6' wide—in box-truss frames containing moving lights. Above the stage is a spiral-shaped truss with more moving lights. As the show begins, a burst of lighting blasts through the front video screen, which is transparent, revealing the band.

The screen rises and the music starts. Immediately after that, one sees a second video screen located upstage behind the band.

From there, it's a brilliantly cued flow of lighting and images, deployed in many configurations across the available surfaces. The imagery is a blend of content—shots of trees, water glistening in the light, urban traffic, flames, a woman screaming—mixed with carefully composed IMAG effects. (The upstage screen is often divided into three panels, allowing simultaneous close-ups of multiple band members.)

Talking to the designers, it seems clear that each new design expands on whatever was done the year before. "Last year, we did use side screens," says Williams. "We had three strips of them on each side of the stage—but, given their angles, we couldn't accomplish what we wanted to do; we had to hang them straight, which made them harder to see. This year, with the screens embedded in hard truss structures, we were able to angle them, making them easier to see. They're in place for the people sitting on the far sides of the audience—that way, they're not looking into a big black hole. This year, I told Bruce I wanted to do a downstage screen. He put in the upstage screen, which looks great. I added the lighting rig into the design, as we passed the drawings back and forth." The designers are so intimate with each others' thinking that there is no need for extensive discussions. "I don't think we ever talked about it," adds Williams. "When I saw the drawings, the side pods were already there."

The upstage Kabuki drop, which appears for a few numbers, was supplied by Sew What?

The upstage screen provides IMAG views of the musicians.

The front screen consists of 30 panels of Martin's LC2140 LED video wall. (The LC Series is Martin's line of semi-transparent, modular system of LED panels.) "They wanted the transparent look," says Stinebrink. "The original thought was that it would be cool to bring it down, in front of the band, during the show," says Williams. "But we didn't know if the band would be into the idea. It was during the last week of rehearsals that we realized the way to do it was to open the show with the screen already flown in. That way, the audience wonders what we're doing," followed by the big reveal, which gives the concert it's first "wow" moment at the top of the evening. Williams notes that the screen changes position during the concert, sometimes hovering far above the stage and sometimes coming in low to make a kind of header, framing the stage in a more intimate way.

The vertical screen pods at left and right are constructed of 12 panels of Martin LC1140 LED video wall. The upstage screen, which measures 60' wide by 12.5' tall, consists of 90 panels of R7 LED modules from Lighthouse Technologies. "It's their new 7mm high-res screen; it's worked great for us," says Williams; the screen provides a strong visual contrast with the Martin panels, which feature a 40mm pixel pitch. The upstage screen disappears for a series of songs near by the midway point in the concert; it is replaced by a Kabuki drop, designed by Rodgers, depicting a black-and-white hill-and-dale pattern, custom-made by Sew What? The screen returns for the final numbers. DMB's video services are produced and supplied by Filament Productions, a long-time partner.

These two views show different approaches to blending lighting and video.

Working with Filament, Creative Technologies provided the screen, which is among the highest resolution on tour right now.

The spiral truss is a real eye-catcher, especially when the truss toners execute a rapid-fire moving chase around the tightly wound curves. “The spiral is a custom-made piece from TMS,” says Williams, referring to Theatrical Media Services, the Omaha-based rental house, which has supplied DMB tours for years. “Honestly,” the designer adds, “I’ve had several people say it’s the first spiral truss they’ve seen; local stagehands have mentioned that they’ve not seen anything like it.”

In addition, a 12" box truss located downstage holds the front LC Panel screen and units that provide audience light. A low upstage truss contains a significant chunk of the lighting rig—“It does the brunt of our work,” says Williams)—with a set of moving units found upstage on the deck.

The lighting rig includes 38 Vari-Lite VL3000 Spots, 27 VL3500 Wash units, 11 High End Systems Studio Beams, eight High End Studio Command 1200s, six ETC Source Four 26° units, 10 Arri 5kW Fresnels, 28 linear four Mole lights, 21 PAR 64s, 38 PixelRange PixelPar 90Ls, 41 PixelRange PixelLine 100 light battens, 21 Wybron CXI scrollers, 10 Wybron Coloram large-format scrollers, 34 Martin Atomic strobes, and five Studio Due CS-4 and six CS-2s. Additional pieces include four MDG foggers and ETC Sensor dimmer racks. A Motion Labs motion control server handles the movement of the front screen.

Williams says he chose the famously bright Vari-Lite gear “for the intensity that you get out of them.” The Studio Command moving-head units, with dichroic color-mixing, he says, function both as truss toners and as a way of treating the Kabuki drop when it is in place. Most of the truss toning—including that spiral chase effect—is done by the PixelPars. Williams admits to struggling with these units’ dimming capabilities—like many LED units, they snap on rather than dim up—but the effect is startling, especially in the chase sequences. Stinebrink adds that the PixelLines “are great fixtures, well put together, and thought-out for touring applications.”

Perhaps the most novel aspect of the rig is the Studio Due units. The CS-2 is a moving yoke containing two PARs; the CS-4, as the name suggests, is the same thing, but with four PARs. “What I like about them is they’re ACLs, so they wash so much of the stage,” says Williams. “I like to do a lot of audience lighting. They give me a way not to just have the crowd immersed in light, but also to do accents on instruments like the saxophone and violin. With them, I can get a lot of movement without blinding everyone all the time.” He adds that the units’ movements are “so nice and smooth and defined.”

The lighting is controlled by two MA Lighting grandMA consoles, plus a grandMA lite; one console runs the two Catalyst Pro V4 media servers, which handles the video content. “There’s one grandMA for Fenton and one for me,” says Stinebrink. “The grandMA lite is our backup. Fenton runs the cue list and I handle the Catalyst.” He adds that the grandMA “made it possible for us to move along with the band more closely,” an allusion to the show’s ever-changing set list and morphing performance style.

Mike Lane says the video rig includes three Barco Encore processors, a Folsom 16 x 16 RGBHV router, and a Grass Valley video switcher. For IMAG, “we’re using six cameras—four manned, four robotic, and one POV. There’s just one hand-held camera onstage, to manage the drums. The rest are located at the front of house and in the pit—and, of course, the robo-camera is onstage.”

He adds, "The hardest part is figuring out how to mix the live feeds of IMAG with additional custom content we're running on the screens. The video can switch quickly from a stretchy look of Stefan Lessard's bass to a close-up of Dave's face hitting a high note. It causes the cameramen to understand what we are doing, from an engineering and look standpoint, so they can adjust their shots accordingly. On top of that, DMB mixes up the set list all the time; it forces our camera operators to be in synch with every move of the band."

The content, Lane says, has been collected over various tours. "The lion's share has been produced by Filament Productions," he adds. "We've never used any of the stock footage in the Catalyst." Filament also worked this year with Charlie Terrell and his company, Daddy Van Productions, to create additional content.

"Going into rehearsals, one of our main focuses was finding looks to complement the imagery," says Stinebrink. "We were lucky enough to have a hi-def camera during rehearsals. Mike and Jeff [Crane, the video engineer/Encore programmer] would shoot material that we needed, edit it down, and, the next day, they'd give it to us, to be put into the show. It was a lot of fun, because they'd try to scout around for the right stuff."

The production is designed for easy touring. "We start around 8am and everything is up around noon," says Stinebrink. "On a good day, we can be done by 11. It moves along quite quickly. I have to credit the lighting and video crews with that." They include Hank McHugh (production manager); Pete Franks (lighting crew chief); Steve Finley, Bob Chaize, Mike Rinehart, Dominic Fanelli (lighting crew); Chris Byrum (handheld camera operator); Arnold Simmons (camera operator); Luis Castillo (LED technician), Mo Dinsmore (LED technician/camera operator), Anthony Giordano (stage manager); Norman Gomes and Chad Koehler (riggers); and Drew Labriola (set carpenter).

With so much gear available, Williams says the show breaks down into various sections. "There's the beginning, when the front screen rises. Then the Kabuki drops down, and we emphasize the side screens. There's another section when the front screen lowers into its lower second position. But, of course, it changes every night." That latter fact may be the biggest challenge of all.

Designing a flexible sound system

Jeff Thomas, the front-of-house engineer, is another longtime member of the DMB team; his gear choices have accrued over time, as he has built a lineup of tried-and-true items.

The lighting rig's many positions allow for the creation of colorful, wide-ranging looks.

The upstage screen is often divided to create a triptych of closeups.

For example, his loudspeaker rig consists of 30 Meyer Sound MILO boxes, which he began using in 2006. "Before we used the Meyer line arrays, we had old Meyer technology," he says, referring to his use of a rig based on the company's MSL-3 units. "But," he says, "we had reached our capacity with them, and were waiting for the next technological development. We moved onto [JBL] VerTec for a while, then decided to up the ante one more time, using the Milos."

The rest of the all-Meyer loudspeaker rig includes MSL-4s for side and auxiliary fills, HP-700 subwoofers, CQ-2s for front fill, and UPJ-1Ps for center fill. The monitors are USM-1s and MFJ-212s. The one non-Meyer component is a set of Crest 7001 monitor amps. In addition, some of the musicians use Sensaphonics 2X-S in-ear devices.

With a broad range of instruments onstage, including brass and strings, Thomas uses "all different types" of mics, "to get at the unique character of the instrument. With vocals for Dave Matthews, the most consistent choice has been a Neumann 104 or 105. We've bounced back and forth between them, for different reasons." Both units, he says, "are designed for optimum transmission of the human voice," and one imagines that they're particularly useful for handling Matthews, whose casual, intimate style of singing—he couldn't possibly get closer to the mic—provides a still center in the universe of sound that surrounds him.

The show is mixed on a Digidesign VENUE. "This is our third year of mixing the show on a digital console," Thomas says. One reason for the transition to digital, he adds, is "we needed to step into the technology of being able to walk into a festival situation with a USB drive." Another big plus, he adds, is that the Venue renders outboard gear unnecessary. Also used is a Meyer Sound Galileo loudspeaker processor system.

Perhaps the biggest reason for choosing Venue, he says, is "our archiving is very intense. We record every show in duplicate—and sometimes in triplicate. The Venue has the ability to provide that triplicate format, which is a very nice feature." For the latter purpose, he has a set of Tascam recorders, as well as an Aphex 1788 remote-controlled mic preamp system, API L200 frames with 212L preamps, and a Digidesign HD-3 Protools system with 192 i/o units.

Monitors are mixed by Ian Kuhn, using Yamaha PM1-D and M7CL consoles; outboard gear used includes an Aphex 1788 mic preamp system, and a Grace Design 901 reference headphone amplifier. Sound gear is supplied by Pro Media/Ultrasound, of Hercules, California, another long-term DMB vendor.

Jamming the design

Whatever their design concepts or technical problems may be, everyone interviewed for this piece agrees on one thing—that the main challenge of working on the DMB tour is the band's ever-changing identity. It's not just that DMB is a jam band; the set list shifts constantly, familiar songs turn up performed in unfamiliar ways, and the group's overall approach to the music may be subject to unexpected sea changes. Working with the group is a bit like trying to grab mercury with your hands, and everyone involved must remain at the ready for each new development.

That includes changes during performances. "Typically, we'll get a set list around 7:30, for the 8pm show," says Stinebrink. "For the most part, the band will stick to that. But, in the middle, they will change up. You

Williams' spiral truss design, seen above, is a true original.

The front screen in its low position at the show's opening.

never really know what's going to happen." "We just take it on and move forward with it," says Williams. "They're pulling out covers and older songs they haven't played in a while."

"There's a lot of planning that goes into it," says Stinebrink. "We program 80 songs during rehearsal. You try to make each one different—but, at some point, you're reusing a position and you hope that the band doesn't play those songs back to back." That, he adds, is where the ability to improvise becomes important.

"We have a structure for each song," adds Stinebrink, "and we've built in the ability to move with the band. For example, 'Ants Marching,' is played four or five different ways, so we've set up the lighting and video to move with where they're going.

"We get five weeks of rehearsals, which is a nice gift the band gives us," he continues. "Of course, we have songs that we haven't programmed at all, because they haven't played them in five years. They'll pull one out and we'll punt our way through it."

Similarly, Thomas says, "The challenge applies to every instrument. The band is so dynamic, and sometimes they're so casual about it. It takes layers and layers of compression, all of which needs to be placed manually for it all to work." As noted, he records every performance, and therefore has a good sense of the band's many moods and approaches. Still, he says, "I've spent the last few years programming the Venue console for DMB, but they're constantly changing. We have a whole new band this year, and it's like starting all over again, with a different energy and attitude." The key, he adds, is treating each musician as a distinct voice. "It's the magic of the recipe," he notes. "Each individual is like a different spice. They retain their flavors. It's something you can't just mix together."

Thus Dave Matthews Band remains a paradoxical phenomenon—retaining a strong emphasis on musical authenticity while embracing the latest visual technologies, striving for a show that looks and sounds precisely cued even in the midst of improvisation.

One imagines Stinebrink speaks for his colleagues when he says, "The challenge is seeing so many different shows and keeping it fresh every time for each audience. This week we're doing both Charlotte and Raleigh, North Carolina, and I'd imagine that 15-25% of the audience will be at both shows." Fortunately, Matthews and the rest of his colleagues keep the show in a state of perpetual motion—and his design team is ready for any curveball thrown at them.