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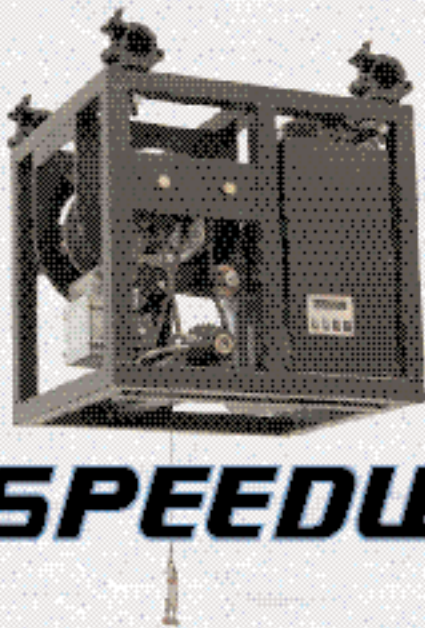
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INDUSTRY NEWS

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The Op-Art Effect:

Susanne Sasic on Lighting and Video for R.E.M.

By: Ben Joel Coolik

The indie rock group R.E.M. is currently on tour in support of its new album *Accelerate*. After playing 16 dates in just over four weeks across the U.S. and Canada, the band is in Europe for another 46 shows in three months covering 20 countries. This whirlwind schedule reflects the high-octane content of R.E.M.'s 14th studio album, which debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard charts in April. *Accelerate*'s 11 tracks clock in at a blistering 34 minutes and are clearly the dictating force behind the two-hour-plus, nearly 30-song sets the band is performing nightly. Responding to what *Rolling Stone* is calling "a classic blast of rock 'n' roll from a band at a new peak of its powers," Susanne Sasic, the production/lighting designer, has created a stunning visual parallel to R.E.M.'s sonic velocity. Without straining for over-the-top stylization or an outrageously stacked lighting and video package, she constructs a multi-layer backdrop of visually compelling imagery framed in bold swaths of color.

Sasic dresses the stage in layers of semi-transparency. What she calls "a city skyline," with five vertically hung high-resolution LED screens backlit with two horizontal low-resolution video panels, is a key visual metaphor. "I took [lead singer Michael Stipe's] idea of the 21st-century city," she says, "and designed the video screens to look like a city skyline, adding a layer of lower-res video behind it to create depth and have the video overlap and bleed into itself, then framing the stage with a sparse assortment of lighting fixtures, relying on the brightness and large beam size of [Zap Lighting] BigLites to be the primary counterbalance to the brightness of the screens."

Sasic's design incorporates both seamlessly integrated and juxtaposed video and lighting elements. She often employs a quality of exaggerated pixilation with, she says, "an emphasis on op-art patterns, and high-contrast black-and-white, duotone, and infrared effects." John Lancaster's definition, in the 1973 book *Introducing Op Art*, of this "method of painting concerning the interaction between illusion and picture plane, between understanding and seeing," precisely describes the effect of Sasic's blend of high- and low-resolution imagery colored with heavily saturated contrasting tones and stark black-and-white images, including live shots of the band, the pixilated "Hollowman" tour icon, blurred cityscapes, cut-and-paste letters mapping out song lyrics in time with the music, and other pixilated effects.

"I love the duotone effects on the live video—high-contrast black and red, or black and green," she says. "I am also very happy with the transparency of the [Barco] MiTRIX screens and the moiré pattern effect of the upstage [Mainlight Industries] Soft-LED screens showing through the Mitrix. Michael directed me to the album artwork: high-contrast black-and-white Xerox copies



PHOTO: TODD KAPLAN

created from photographs that he took of cities, made into a series of collages by the band's in-house graphic designer, Chris Bilheimer. The many highly contrasted black-and-white and duotone camera effects, as well as layers of patterns and noise laid over the camera image, is in keeping with Michael's interest in seeing imagery similar to multiple-generation Xerox copies, as well as a rough cut-and-paste fanzine style."

Along with Sasic's video content, many visual effects draw on video content created by Bilheimer. In collaboration with Stipe, he has co-designed all of R.E.M.'s artwork for the last 13 years. His video input included several different film loops running just a few seconds each. Referring to a collaborative process that was, he says, "probably two e-mails and a phone call," Bilheimer says, "Blue sent me an outline of ideas and said to pick and choose any I thought I could make."

Blue Leach, who calls himself the "fellow in charge of video screen action" (also known for his work with Depeche Mode, The Verve, and Manic Street Preachers) is instrumental in forming a cohesive stage picture through "a confluence of impact between film/pre-recorded and live action." He explains, "On my show console, I cut into and out of [promo] films with my live cameras. I then add digital color and physical energy,

through direction, that then dovetails with the theme of the films." On the *Accelerate Tour*, besides incorporating the new "Supernatural Superserious" and "Hollowman" films into the show production, Leach was most excited about "the debuting of edited footage from the as yet unaired and incomplete 'Man-Sized Wreath' film from the folks from CRUSH" (a Toronto-based ad agency) at the Madison Square Garden show. Leach relies on a variety of custom effects, and pushes live video editing technology to the extreme, notes Sasic.

Despite a noticeably modest lighting rig, Susanne Sasic adeptly paints striking stage pictures. Her mesmerizing lighting expertly underscores the video and music. "This is a smaller lighting package than the last R.E.M. tour, due to a larger video package and an overall shorter time frame for the tour," she notes. "Michael wanted video to be a centerpiece of this tour." When asked about a seeming infatuation with the asymmetrical, she replies, "I don't usually set out to create an asymmetrical design, but it does often seem to be the best solution to the problem of getting more out of using less." Driven by a full-size MA Lighting grandMA console, the lighting package, provided by Upstaging, features 23 Martin MAC 2000 Wash fixtures supporting nine Vari*Lite VL2500

>>> continued on p22

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>>> contined from p21

and seven VL3000 spots. The asymmetrical frame, constructed out of 15 Martin Atomic Color Strobes, also includes twenty-three 4-lite Mole DWEs, a few of them strategically located at eye level onstage. Six MR-16 strips, situated vertically, provide a sharp highlighted edge to the vertical MiTriX screens provided, along with the two horizontal Soft-LED panels, by XL Video. The video package relies on the Catalyst media server and includes one polecam, two D50s, four minicam/infrared cameras, and two remote DV cameras.

In balancing the lighting and video, Sasic comments, "The lighting frames the video and stage. Because we use so much high-contrast black-and-white camera imagery, as well as other non-naturalistic effects, the key light can be bright and high-contrast, and I am able to light for the eye and stage rather than keying down for video." The key light often blazes from the seven 4.5K BigLites, whose broad beams maneuver smoothly through the light haze. Sasic notes, "I have been very pleased with the BigLites. Their movement is surprisingly fluid given their size, and I love the square beam."

She also mentions her first experience with the Coemar Infinity Wash XL fixtures used as floor mounts and on the side truss positions: "The Coemar Infinities are a new fixture to me. I like their color

mixing and beam shaping and I have finally found a moving light fixture that gives me all the shades of green I'm always looking for." In August, with the tour inhabiting larger stadiums in the U.K., she says, "there will be additional offstage side video screens as well as some additional moving lights and [PixelRange] PixelLine LED fixtures," and she hopes "to enlarge the upstage layer of low-res video. I always keep venue sizes in mind when designing. I never stuff a giant show into a too-small venue; that looks like *This is Spinal Tap* to me. I'd rather leave some pieces in the truck."

Working with one of the world's most

well-known bands, how does Sasic balance pleasing the band, pleasing the crowd, and pleasing herself on an artistic level? "I am most interested in pleasing the band, but once a design has moved from paper to the stage, I stop thinking about it too much. Nearly everything in the show is pleasing to me on an artistic level. I'm lucky to often work for people who share my aesthetic sense so that although I am always looking at the show critically and making adjustments, I rarely have to second-guess myself." Given the phenomenal achievement of her approach to the tour, Sasic hardly needs to look back. ☺



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