

double / feature

Jeff Ravitz and Paul Dexter do the touring two-step with REO Speedwagon and Styx

By: Sharon Stancavage Photography: Todd Kaplan

When REO Speedwagon and Styx decided to hit the road together, they found themselves in an unusual situation:

Both bands had top lighting designers whom they liked quite well. So, instead of using a single designer, they decided on a different tactic: Each band kept its LD and they designed the system together. Jeff Ravitz has been working with Styx for the past 33 years, while Paul Dexter has been on board with REO for the past four. "Both acts have different parameters and different styles, and that was the biggest challenge we had in trying to come up with a system that was exciting and yet viable for both groups," says Ravitz.

The dual production had one critical goal. "We wanted the system to look different for each band," says Dexter. To achieve this, he adds, "Jeff went off and created what he perceived it to be, and I went off and created what I perceived it to be—we had to start somewhere."

When they came back, it was time to collaborate in earnest. "We stretched and pulled and pounded for about a month, and came up with something that we thought was going to work. But some of it wasn't really

practical, so we went back and re-molded and modified until we got something we felt was going to cover all the bases," says Ravitz.

For both bands, the central point of the set is a 65'-wide-by-14'-high Martin LC 2140 LED wall provided by Epic Production Technologies. "We concentrated on making show content that would be exciting and dramatic," says Dexter, who, as creative director for REO's show imagery, along with REO's lead singer Kevin Cronin, worked with Tocrok Productions, located in Dallas, to create custom clips. Much of it is actually historical, making use of archive stills and videos of the band. For example, the song "Can't Fight This Feeling" features CNN news footage of the band's airport arrival to appear at Live Aid in 1985.

Video is an integral part of the REO production from the first moments of the show. "For the opening song, 'Don't Let Him Go,' we developed an idea from one of our editors at Tocrok," says Dexter. "We built the REO logo in an industrial way on the video wall, with welders and sparks going off and a hammer slamming on an anvil, creating more sparks." As the logo is formed on screen, the stage is

in the dark, a drumbeat is heard, and Bryan Hitt, the drummer, appears in bright white light. "When he comes in and plays six bars, his history clip is put up on the screen," says Dexter. "It ends with his recent photo, and then the next band member starts playing." As the band members appear one by one, images from their past appear on the wall, each ending with their current photo, until the space is filled with memorabilia.

Styx also uses the video wall extensively throughout the show; the visuals include fireworks during "Grand Illusion" and graphic gears in "Blue Collar Man." Some of it is quite heavily conceptual, some is fun and abstract, but every second has something dedicated to it," reports Ravitz. The content, created by Concert Video Visuals in Chicago, was finalized after Ravitz had finished programming the show. "There wasn't an absolute lock between the color palette of the video and the color palette of the lighting," he admits. "Sometimes it's fun when we have heavy contrast, because it makes it easier to distinguish the foreground from the video." The video for both bands is delivered via a Catalyst V4 media server.



CONCERTS

When two designers are working together, everything that is common to both productions is up for debate, and here that included the truss configuration. "It's a lot different than what I might have done, but it covers a lot of territory," says Ravitz. Instead of a simplistic layout of straight trusses, Dexter had other ideas. "Paul was really good about keeping me honest. I might have done more of a conservative rig that would given us plenty of angles but probably wouldn't have been as visually interesting as a truss structure," admits Ravitz. Instead, the truss configuration is an array of cross-stage trusses, rectangles, and side positions that are illuminated by Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlasts working as truss toners.

In addition to being visually interesting, the truss changes for each bands. "We put hinges and articulated connection points on certain trusses, so I do a move at the beginning of the show that takes our truss from level and flat to some fun and interesting angles, while Paul does another configuration entirely," says Ravitz. The fully automated truss motor system, comprised of Skjonberg components, is, like the rest of the gear, courtesy of Epic. "It ended up being a big erector set up there," Ravitz adds; "that's the fun part of it."

Assembling the lighting rig

The fixtures used by the designers combines gear that reaches back to the roots of concert lighting, with some of the latest available products. The result is an eclectic list that suits both designers well. "The equipment came together through compromise, willingness to experiment with each other's fixture choices, practical need, and the desire to create a big-rock show look," says Dexter.

From an automated standpoint, the rig includes 27 Vari*Lite VL3000 Profiles, 12 VL2500 Profiles, and eight VL3500 Wash units. "There is a fair amount of scenic surface to light—platforms, edges, stairways—that make up the landscape of the stage for both acts, and I found these lights extremely useful for that," notes Ravitz.

Both designers make use of eight VL1000 Tungstens on the front truss, which replaced their standard use of ETC Source Fours as front-of-house specials. "This year, we did away with a lot of focusing in the truss, mainly out of consideration for daily time constraints for the production crew dealing with setting up two major acts in one day," Dexter says.

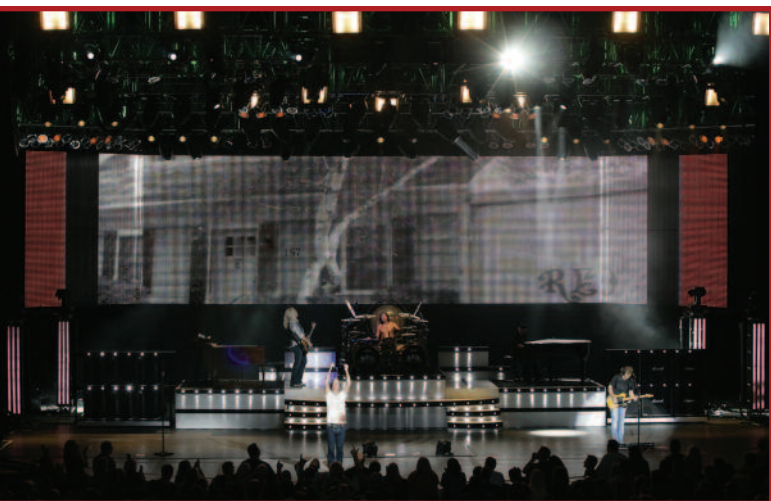
Ravitz originally specified the VL1000s. "I like the variety of color temperatures that can be achieved with the cold arc sources and the warmer tungsten sources mixed together; it gives you texture and

contrast and variety and a bit of human skin warmth," he explains. "I like sculpting people out of the darkness, and the VL1000s became really important for that. The other fixtures—like the VL3000s and the 3500s—became key for creating compositions moment by moment."

For REO Speedwagon, Dexter lined the set with LED nodes. "Good rock 'n' roll is filled with drum hits and guitar solos, which need to be accented in a very dramatic way," he says. "The best way I can think of doing that is with audience-exposed LEDs. We treated them like a video screen—through the media server—and the effects are far more interesting than using a console chase."

In addition to this new technology, Dexter brought along something from the past. "We're dealing with two bands that have come out of the era when we started," he says. "The moving light didn't exist; we didn't have computers or digital anything." Consequently, he specified a traditional concert staple: PAR 64s. "I like them," he says with a smile. "I think PAR cans can give a quality layer that you can't achieve with only moving lights."

Ravitz agrees. "Paul is absolutely correct in saying that the PARs add a level of intensity and punch and speed in reaction time you can't get from something else," notes Ravitz.



Paul Dexter designed the REO Speedwagon show.



Jeff Ravitz handled Styx, as he has done for 33 years.



Both bands get together for a rock-out finale.

Originally, 130 PAR 64s were specified; the number was trimmed down to 104, which Dexter, who is traveling with the tour, focuses every day. "I focus them on the ground," he says. "It only takes about ten minutes a day for a person to climb on the truss to make a few adjustments."

The shows also make use of 28 Clay Paky Alpha Wash Halos, as well as 14 Wybron Lightpods, complete with CXI Color Faders. "The Lightpod is a cool fixture that Paul knew that Epic had in their inventory—it's a nine-light with the three center lights taken out and a strobe inserted," explains Ravitz. It's used for audience lighting for both productions. Also to balance the new and the old, there are eight bars of four ACLs spread evenly on three trusses from upstage to downstage.

Both productions use a grandMA console. "It does so much, particularly with controlling media size and adding all the effects available. It's a very easy console to operate, but I still need practice programming it," comments Dexter.

Blending scenery and video

The REO Speedwagon set was converted from a 2007 Dexter design that was constructed by Accurate Staging in Los Angeles. The set

includes a 4' high drum riser and 4' x 8' risers on either side, with a semi-circular deck just downstage of the drums, connected with circular front steps. As mentioned earlier, the designer had the set outlined in LEDs. "It really does add to the overall look and dimension of the lighting," Dexter explains. Excitement Technologies in Dallas engineered his ideas into reality, using Nichia HP LEDs that outline the 55'-wide set, including cages on each side that surround the guitar cabinets.

For Styx, Ravitz went with a set design that's familiar to the band. "It's essentially a format that has worked for them in the past," he says. "This is just a slight variation on a theme, where the anchor position is the drum riser with an interesting metallic fascia that takes light very nicely and which we treat externally with lighting." The set also makes extensive use of M. C. Escher-style stairs. "There are four step units that actually go nowhere—they go up past the amp wall and then just end, but they create small playgrounds for the band to stand and pose on," the designer comments.

Ravitz, like Dexter, also has LEDs built into his amp stacks on stage left and right, but it is a completely different look than REO's exposed LED array. It's a design that was spearheaded by a band member who

saw them in a display window, along with Libby Gray, the show's lighting director. "She basically buried these [Philips Color Kinetics] iColor Flex strings inside the amps so they formed a matrix so she could create vague shapes, graphics, text, and colors," says Ravitz. "It's covered with a piece of milk Plexiglas; it works incredibly well to create a whole new visual element."

In the end, the success of the project depended not only on the designs from Dexter and Ravitz, but also on Tim Rozner, the production manager. "Tim has a lot of experience and a long history with both bands," says Dexter. "He looks at all the production's implications and the practicalities of the design, without sacrificing the art of the design. In addition, he packages equipment deals well with resources to get the tour more than we bargained for," confides Dexter.

Epic Production Technologies also made sure that the designers weren't restricted. "Epic wanted to make sure that we weren't limited in any way—we really got a fabulous deal which shows up on stage and the audience reaps the benefits," notes Ravitz.

REO Speedwagon and Styx will be out on the road in the U.S. until mid-November. 🎸