

# HAIL, HAIL

ROCK AND ROLL!



**And hail to the production team that made the  
Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 25th anniversary concerts possible**

By: Catherine McHugh



Bono, Fergie, and Mick Jagger perform. Note the murals depicting early inductees on the arches behind them.

For two nights at the end of October, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame brought together an unprecedented a lineup of musical icons, all coming together to celebrate the history of rock 'n' roll by making a joyful noise in New York City's Madison Square Garden.

Just a few of the highlights included Jerry Lee Lewis kicking off the proceedings with "Great Balls of Fire;" Stevie Wonder performing with Sting, B.B. King, Smokey Robinson, Jeff Beck, and also with John Legend, who accompanied him on an emotional rendition of Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel;" Annie Lennox bounding onstage and bowing down to Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin before joining her on "Chain of Fools;" U2 backing up Patti Smith and Bruce Springsteen on "Because the Night;" and, later,

assisted by will.i.am and Fergie, of the Black Eyed Peas, beginning a cover of the Rolling Stone's "Gimme Shelter" only to be joined onstage by surprise guest Mick Jagger.

The talent behind the scenes was an even match for the superstar headliners. Beginning in the spring, Joel Gallen, the show's executive producer and director, began enlisting the designers who have worked on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's induction ceremonies over the past few years, pulling together a Herculean production that was to be staged as both a live event and television special (for HBO), with a DVD release to follow.

Even with the hundreds of televised and live events on his resume, including Woodstock 1994 and 1999, Allen Branton, the event's lighting designer, says, "I can't recall

a show done before that was so ambitious. There was so much content to deal with in such a short amount of time and a relentless stream of world-class, A-list headliners. It was intense."

In addition, "the Madison Square Garden phenomenon" compressed the production setup into what seemed like a nearly impossible time frame at the outset. "There is nothing else quite like it in show business," says Branton. "That venue is so busy with sports and other events that you really can't find a big-enough window of availability in there to do a production this large. And yet, because it's Madison Square Garden, producers insist, and rightly so, that this is where this event has to be. So you end up creating design and installation models, to compensate for that lack of time, which are really





The screens at the top of the set were designed to accommodate the audience's 270° configuration.

peculiar to that situation.”

Upon learning that what would normally be at least a four-day load-in for a show of this size was being allotted two days—one of which was a 24-hour, overnight load-in—Anne Brahic, the production designer, insisted on was bringing in Kish Rigging. “Kish was really instrumental in making this happen because, shy of the deck, everything was supported from the air,” Brahic explains. “We had to have the best riggers out there do this, and they forethink everything to the nth degree. We knew that they were going to say in advance what would or would not work. They provided the reality check. And they went way above and beyond the call of duty.”

Brahic's design went through 70 renderings before it was all over. “Oh, it was a process!” she says. “A lot of criteria had to be met before we could even begin to wrap our heads

around what it was going to look like—the first point being that we had to have a turntable that was split in half, so the scenery couldn't come downstage of that midline.”

Since the turntable was a given, Brahic insisted on the largest available unit from All Access Staging and Productions, which was 56' in diameter. “That allowed us to have the bands really concentrated on there, without them having to push wedges and everything off of it every time they needed to move it,” she explains. “We also had to incorporate a very large movie screen. And they wanted to be able to seat people in 270°, so sightlines were also an issue. Designing this show was definitely as much about coordinating reality and logistics as it was anything else.”

Working from a directive from Jann Wenner (of *Rolling Stone* magazine and the Hall of Fame) to make the set look both traditional and modern,

Brahic was inspired by the textures and surfaces of an acoustic guitar. “That's where the wood and silver—like from the strings—and the glossy black and very light-colored wood in the set came from,” she says. “Obviously, it was done in a very abstracted way, but one side of the turntable wall was actually the fret—the fingerboard of a guitar—if you looked at it closely. The portals were originally going to be high-gloss black—a reflective, smoky Plexiglas—so Allen could blast light from behind them, or they could just be reflective black surfaces.”

Acadia Scenic, of Jersey City, constructed the arches, vertical scenery, wood, and divider wall for the turntable. Wenner loved the design but felt it lacked something that identified it with the Hall of Fame and made it specific to this event. He commissioned the artist Gary Kelley to create a mural depicting the original class of

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees: Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, James Brown, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and the Everly Brothers, which was incorporated into the portals under the set's arch. Brahic worked with Kelley on the color palette, making it light-friendly for TV and theatrical lighting purposes.

"He actually did the drawings on a small scale and then had high-resolution scans made; we printed everything on Textiline, which is a plastic mesh material," Brahic explains. "Stretching that fabric over such large-sized set pieces was difficult, because you know you're going to end up with puckers and wrinkles, and, of course, we weren't able to spend days stretching things out. But with some creative lighting, a few gobos, and by trying not to light it too steeply from the side, it worked."

As soon Brahic had a set rendering, she called Ed Kish, of Kish Rigging. "It all looked simple and non-threatening until I learned how much time there was to load it in," he says. "It was basically a four-day load-in that happened in one day. Everybody had to do their homework. It was a good team, so, in the end, it all worked. There was a lot of preproduction effort on everybody's part. It wasn't your typical TV-only show—there was a big emphasis on the live event, which gave it a little bit different spin on how it came about.

"I had a big role in this project from the onset, because I didn't want to find myself in a situation where we failed," Kish continues.

"Consequently, I ended up collaborating with Allen and Anne to define what it was that we were going to do, perform that analysis, and do some planning to make it possible to execute it. Our head rigger, Frank Dawson, ended up doing the work on site, to mold it and shape it."

Before the actual load-in, Kish's team did a prerig and a prebuild, utilizing the Garden's rotunda, an adjacent space underneath the seats in the arena, to store all the rigging, automation, lighting package, cables, and equipment from other departments. "That allowed us to essentially prebuild as much of the show as possible and put it on wheels, so that, when they finally gave us the building, we could do as much in as short of a period as possible," Kish explains. "It was our first time working with [line producer] Frank Garritano; he provided good leadership and was willing to support us—and then load-in was a week's worth of suffering in a day! The Local One crew should get a high-five. They're extremely professional and skilled. It would not have happened without Dennis White and his crew."

During this process, says Brahic, Kish recommended installing automation for the video screens; this was done by Las Vegas-based Show

Group. Pete's Big TVs supplied the video screens, which included a 15' x 55' rear-projection screen upstage, which also flew in and out for the various acts. Six Barco SLM projectors were stacked to project the still photos as one seamless image. The design also featured a 15' x 55' (actually 80', if laid flat) curved LED screen, which showed short films to introduce each act, or "pod," as dubbed by the production. The screen flew up to reveal the stage, and provided IMAG support. Manufactured by Glux in China, it was composed of 18.75mm mesh panels, which allowed for a light-weight, semi-transparent screen that could be formed into a curved shape.

Guy Benjamin, of Pete's, set up a demo for supervising films producer Rick Austin, art director Star Kahn, and head rigger Dawson. "They originally wanted a higher-resolution screen, but the 18mm offers good transparency—the 8mm, not so much," Benjamin says. "After we worked with Rick on choosing the screen, we worked with Kish Rigging on how to build it and how it was to fly, because they engineered that."

Indeed, Austin feels the video system was a success. "We built what we called a 180° ring screen that matched the dimensions of the turntable stage, which allowed one act to be set up behind while another act was performing," he explains. "It was a set piece that served many



Different lighting treatments helped to change the look of the murals on the set's arches.

functions: as a scrim to hide what was going on during the setups; as a video screen, so that everyone in Madison Square Garden could see; as a curtain that rose to reveal the next act; and, while it was in the rafters, as an IMAG screen, so the audience could see close-ups of the bands as they performed.

“The best part was that every single artist came just for their love of rock ‘n’ roll,” Austin continues. “They weren’t there to make money or sell a new album; they came to celebrate rock ‘n’ roll—they wanted to meet and play with their heroes and be part of this once-in-a-lifetime concert. It seemed to be a labor of love for everybody involved, and I don’t think it would have gotten done any other way. That said, the show itself was a gigantic undertaking and a real challenge for Anne, and for Allen and his crew, to have to create an environment that worked for every single artist who performed. They both did a great job in designing something that was so malleable and that looked completely different under the changing lighting.”

### Solving the lighting puzzle

The lighting team (Branton and long-time lighting directors Kevin Lawson and Felix Peralta) employed an innovative—and somewhat risky—

solution to paint the wooden-edge detail on Brahic’s set pieces, in order to make the mural of the original Hall of Fame inductees disappear at times. “Because we were going to be not only doing this event but also a DVD project and an HBO special, that art was so distinctive that you had to a.) find various different lighting treatments for it so it wouldn’t look the same the whole time, and b.) selectively let it go away to give people a rest from it, or the show would start to look too much the same,” Branton explains. “I thought that maybe we could just light the wood, but, with everything being a curve, the techniques we’ve used for this sort of thing in the past wouldn’t work.”

Executing a thorough study using Vectorworks, Lawson came up with the idea of using custom gobos in certain lighting units. “The arches were nestled one on top of another and from strange angles, so we basically had to create a couple of custom templates that would allow us to sheath the arches,” he says. “Using the [Vari\*Lite] VL3500 spots and various sweeping curves, we ended up with four different custom templates that were deployed in four different places in the rig and allowed us to tightly focus in and isolate that wood from the arch. There wasn’t any real way to test it out before we got

there, so I just figured it out as best I could on the computer. It was a bit of a leap of faith. Basically, they were short curves, and, between Felix and me, we figured out how to jigsaw-puzzle it all together. When it was all done, it was a very striking look; it really gave the scenery someplace else to go other than just being these panels full of murals.”

“I really think it was successful,” Branton concurs. “It wouldn’t have looked nearly as good without all of that. But it was really a throw of the dice. We hadn’t tried anything quite that quirky before—especially knowing that we’d have no time to reposition any lights or make any major adjustments to it if it didn’t work. Kevin tinkered with it on and off the whole time, and, by the time we got to that Thursday, it was in pretty good shape—and, on Friday, it was really singing. I really have to hand it to the two of them.”

In terms of choosing lighting units, the fact that the set was big and tightly layered on top of itself presented an unusual challenge. “In a lot of ways, it would have been easier to go into a more open environment,” Lawson says. “But they had this gorgeous, elegant piece of scenery up there, so it became a bigger challenge to produce this rock show in the midst of this kind of classic environment.”

The lighting rig included eight Vari\*Lite VL2500 Wash units, 27 Vari\*Lite VL3000 Spots, 56 Vari\*Lite VL3500 Spots, 72 Coemar Infinity Wash units, 10 Coemar ACLs, 10 PRG Bad Boys, nine Syncrolite SXB-7/3s, 28 Martin Atomic Strobes with color scrollers, 30 Philips Color Kinetics iW Blasts, nine Philips CK ColorBlaze 72s, and eight Strong Entertainment Lighting Super Trouper II and five Lycian Starklite 1271 followspots. Lawson and Peralta ran the show from four MA Lighting grandMA consoles.

“In general, Felix lights the things



Because of the severe time restraints, the lighting package was entirely automated.



and I light the people,” Lawson explains. “He lights the scenery and does most of the heavy effect lighting; I light the audience and extra key players, and operate the dedicated backlights to performers.”

Atomic Lighting, provided the lighting gear, with Brad Hafer, VP/director of account management’s involvement. “When we did the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction show in Cleveland this past spring, Atomic brought us a really good proposal for bringing the lighting equipment down to Cleveland from Lititz, Pennsylvania, [where Atomic is located]; I’ve known him a long time and trusted him, so we went for that,” Branton says. “And, at the end of that gig, the guys reported to me that, with his equipment package, we had zero failures. In all the years I’ve been doing this, I’ve never had that happen before. It’s utterly unheard of. That one performance in Cleveland moved him to the top of our list of who we wanted to try to use for this show—as long as he could make the budget work, staff it properly, and all that. They did a great job.”

Due to the severe time constraints, the lighting rig was completely automated. And although Branton is not typically a fan of designing lighting via computer software, the team did use the services of the previsualization studio Prelite for this event. “Prelite was useful in formatting the show, because it allowed us to deal with a lot of the housekeeping—creating the formats, the cue stacks, the preset focuses, and everything you need to build the cues—beforehand,” Branton says. “They made a lot of progress, but it still varied widely, regarding which of those things could be used on site because, when you get it on camera, it might not look quite right for whatever reason, due to the vagaries of photography. Plus, most of the artists were changing their minds about what they were going to play



“It was basically a four-day load-in that happened in one day,” notes Ed Kish.

right up until the end. It was really tricky. At times, it was borderline impossible to get settled and comfortable with any of it. We were feeling that everything was about to go off the rails at any minute throughout the whole thing.”

Like Kish, Branton also credits the Local One crew for holding everything together. “They did the load-in and then the show on Thursday and they never went to sleep,” he says. “But that night, it was pretty flawless on their part. That was one of the more courageous bands of guys I’ve ever worked with. They had to be fried by Friday night, but they did a fantastic job. I was pretty impressed; it was a real endurance contest.”

Other personnel included David Oakes (head gaffer); Ronnie Skopac and John Ellar (best boys); Justin Cheatham, Mike Grimes, Jason Livingston, McClain Moss, Dave Pretz, and Mike Smallman (lighting technicians); Casey Diers and Camden Peterson (lighting assistants); Liberty Bock (operations manager); and Gayle Depoli (tech manager). Lighting was also supplied by Syncrolite and TriCity Photon Research.

From a design point of view, the

range of performers also posed a major lighting challenge. “Simon & Garfunkel and Metallica—even Springsteen and U2—are different worlds,” Branton says. “The model for this was unusual in that the imperatives of television usually end up overwhelming the live events that we do. In this case, the live event had equal weight to the television aspect of it; it was produced by Live Nation, and Dan Parise was their man. I was really impressed with how well-balanced he kept the two domains in good balance all the way. And he was a virtuoso in terms of working the physical and political aspects of getting something in and out of Madison Square Garden. As hard as that was, we really didn’t have any hiccups or friction beyond the clock.

“Honestly, when you first looked at it this thing on paper, it was like you were being invited to participate in a disaster. But then all of these good people got in there, put their heads together, and figured out how to make it work,” Branton concludes. “I’m really proud and grateful for the job that everybody did. To a man, they were all fabulous.”

Hail, hail rock and roll, indeed. 🎸