

lighting. projection. sound. baby.

By Mike Falconer

Gwen Stefani's

Harajuku Lovers

Tour is a seamless

blend of the latest

technologies

As Gwen Stefani herself admitted halfway through her appearance at the Hollywood Bowl, it's been a wild ride since she decided one day to record a "stupid" dance record. The album has already spawned two hits, in "Hollaback Girls" and "Cool." And, with this tour, Stefani is proving her popularity as a solo act.

Looking more like Madonna than Madonna does these days, Stefani's catchy dance tunes provided a surprisingly entertaining soundtrack to her onstage performance. Surrounded by video screens on all sides and with just an album of songs to draw on, the lead singer of No Doubt, out on her own, looked every bit the MTV protégée. However, it would be a mistake to categorize Stefani's debut album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* or her *Harajuku Lovers* tour as the Britney Spears-ification of a respected rock act.

Projection and Lighting

One of these days I'll cover a concert and it won't be lit by JUSTIn Collie or Doug "Spike" Brant—otherwise known as the design partnership Artfag.

Seriously, the design company with the unforgettable name certainly seems to be the darling of the touring world at the moment—and it is easy to see why. "Performance environment design," as Artfag calls it—which means design of the lighting, video, and set—is all the rage among top (former) lighting designers. However, only Artfag considers it central to its artistic identity and has gone so far as to trademark the title words seen in quotes above.

Of all the Justin-designed shows I've seen, his work for Stefani is, perhaps, the one that best exemplifies the advantages of those trademarked words. Lighting is



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Stefani's *Harajuku Lovers Tour* was a highly theatrical presentation of dance/pop music. The show's relatively small light plot relied on a mix of Martin Professional and Vari-Lite units, plus a small number of conventional units. The blend of lighting, projections, and staging was an articulation of designer Justin Collie's concept of "performance environment design."

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a relatively minor part of the design, with projections dwarfing the 50 moving fixtures, the set, and even, at times, the artist. Nevertheless, even from an audience perspective, it strikes an appropriate balance between what used to be known as different disciplines.

A starting point for Justin's design was a written treatment from Ray Woodbury, the creative director for the tour. "It talked about multiple different scenes and different looks," says Justin. "Spike and I were trying to figure out how we were going to achieve these different scenes with the budget we had. Around the same time, I went to see a demo of Pandora's Box."

German manufacturer Coolux, maker of the Pandora's Box media server, had just appointed Theatrical Concepts, Inc. as its US distributor and Theatrical's Steve Gilbard had invited Justin to see the new media server. "Steve talked about the ability to project onto three-dimensional objects, and something he said triggered a response," says Justin. "Projecting onto different-shaped objects would give me a physical shape, which I could then easily change, and that's how it evolved."

Justin's design for the *Harajuku Lovers Tour* was bereft of lighting—literally. The lighting rig consisted of just 36 Martin MAC 2000 wash fixtures, 19 Vari*Lite VL3000 Spot fixtures, and 23 Martin Atomic 3000 strobes—with a smattering of conventional fixtures. The night I saw the show, at the Hollywood Bowl, there was room for only one of the projection screens. Justin admitted to me afterwards that he would have been in serious trouble, due to the lack of spectacle, had it not been for the permanently installed Color Kinetics LED fixtures lighting up the Bowl's shell.

The tour was centered on, and revolved around, projection. There were 40 Barco MiPIX 3'x 3' display panels that formed part of the set, but these were dwarfed by the 11 Christie Digital S12 12K DLP Roadie projectors and 10 Christie Digital X10 10K DLP Roadie projectors. Justin had a total of nine custom screens manufactured for the tour. A large 36' x 19'6" screen sat at center stage, while the eight other custom screens flanked it. In addition, two IMAG screens, on either side of the stage, brought the screen count to 13. All projection equipment and media servers were supplied by California-based Delicate Productions.

With the growth in brightness and popularity of LEDs and LED video displays in recent times, it was surprising to see such an abundant display of projection technology, which seems to have fallen out of favor with a lot of designers. "One of the factors when you're using projection is that the brightness of your lighting is restricted," notes Justin. "Your light levels are fighting with each other, so you kind of have to approach designing projections with that in mind. To achieve the multiple locations called for in the written treatment, and to stay within our budget, meant that projection was really the only way to go."

Two separate Gigabit Ethernet networks were used solely for transferring video content between onsite locations. Eight Pandora's Box media servers—configured to have eight layers,



PHOTO BY TODD KAPLAN

HD/soft-edge/SDI input—were used to deliver content, along with three FFV Omega hard-disk recorders/playback units. The content itself was created in conjunction with No Doubt's long-time video director, Sophie Muller. "We started to create content ourselves," remarks Justin, "but, when things started to shy away from the initial concept and include costuming, Sophie also started to create content."

Justin and Muller worked closely together to create a coherent vision onstage. Muller was used to the fixed dimensions and permanent nature of music videos, so Justin acted as her bridge to an unfamiliar world. "With the arrangement of the screens we created a canvas," said Justin. "Sophie was then able to come and put the pictures up on them."

A key challenge for Justin in working with Muller was the appreciation of the space and the rules of live performance versus music video. "In the rock-and-roll world, every day your spot angles are different, your truss positions are different, and you have to accommodate different seating arrangements," noted Justin. "The live show is not a perfectly recreated experience. Sophie is used to everything being controlled all the time. Live rock and roll is throwaway. At the end of the show, it's not on tape; you can re-examine it on a technical level—but not from an experience point of view."

The video and lighting for the Stefani show was controlled, unsurprisingly enough, from the lighting console—an MA Lighting grandMA. The console, along with the lighting rig and the three grandMA Network Signal Processors that were used to handle the media server channel count, were supplied by Ed & Ted's Excellent Lighting.

Although the use of video in any production these days is not extraordinary, the use of it to the exclusion of almost everything else was a testament to Justin's com-

Projection technology, rather than lighting, was the thing on the Harajuku Lovers Tour. Justin used a number of custom-designed screens to create his distinctive effects.

mitment to controlling the production environment. "You have to be involved with video," notes Justin. "As soon as you're not involved, you lose control of the environment, and that can defeat the purpose of trying to create mood and atmosphere."

Mixing all night long

One cannot ignore the fact that Michelle Sabolchick, the FOH engineer for Gwen Stefani, is not a French dude, but rather one of the very few female engineers in the business.

Although relatively new to Stefani, having only been working with her since May, Sabolchick is no stranger to the business—or to mixing female artists. Over the past ten years, her client list has included the likes of Joan Osborne, Luscious Jackson, Debelah Morgan, and the Indigo Girls. "Women tend to take things more personally," says Sabolchick when I asked her about the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman mixing a female artist. "If they have a bad show, they'll brood about it a lot longer than men, so I get where they are coming from. The disadvantage would be getting stuck as the 'chick that mixes chick artists,' when I love to get behind the console of a good, old-fashioned all-boy rock-and-roll band."

Of Czechoslovakian origin on her father's side, Sabolchick was born and grew up in the heart of the Pennsylvania coal region—in a small town called Ashland. Although the town provided a limited number of outlets for her interest in music, a high school project on the recording industry gave her a goal to aim for. After a brief stint at a radio station and, later, a recording studio, she started working for a small sound company outside Philadelphia. Even though the pay was

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PHOTO BY TODD KAPLAN

Barco MiPIX panels were built into the set, to create an extra set of effects (left), another example of projection technology usurping the role of lighting on the tour.

small, Sabolchick loved the work. After that, she started mixing for local bands. Her first major break came when she began working for The Spin Doctors on tour.

As to why more women don't get involved in the sound side of the live concert business, Sabolchick jokes, "They think lighting is more fun?" She does confess to enjoying touring: "I love the friendships it creates, the way you can start a tour with a bunch of strangers and, a month later, be closer to them than to people you have known for years. But when I do finally retire from live sound, I plan on doing something else completely unrelated to the music business—open a good, old-fashioned ice cream shop, perhaps."

For Stefani, Sabolchick used a Midas XL4 console out front, which, "has been my first choice of console for years," as she puts it. Her decision, however, to use a JBL VerTec line array system was grounded in the types of venues that Stefani was scheduled to play. "This tour has been booked mainly in NHL hockey arenas," notes Sabolchick. "The arenas were being sold in 270°, so we needed a PA that would provide a nice, even coverage over a wide area. Also, with it being dance music, I needed a system that had a lot of energy and could compete with thousands of screaming girls."

Sabolchick's rig consisted of 60 JBL VerTec 4889 units plus 24 VerTec 4880 subs with Lake Contour processing and Crown IT 8000 digital amps. Her consider-

able lineup of outboard gear included Summit dcl 200 compressors, Empirical Labs distressors, Drawmer gates, Eventide H300 Ultra-Harmonizers, and Lexicon Pcm 91 reverb units. Also filling out the gear list were a number of processors: dbx, Waves Maxx BCL, and t.c. electronics' M5000, M2000, and 2290 units. Audio-Technica provided the mics and the monitor consoles was Yamaha PM5000. Sennheiser in-ear monitors were also used.

The arrangements on *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* varied from something approaching a Broadway-musical style to bubble-gum pop dance music. The live sound is equally as complex, with a range of elements for Sabolchick to deal with on a nightly basis. "It's not a set-it-and-forget-it kind of mixing gig," she says. "I'm mixing all night long. There are tons of keyboards and samples that come and go. The bass player goes from a straightforward, clean sound to a heavily distorted sound and then a synth bass. Some songs are keyboard-oriented, while others feature mainly guitar—then you have Gwen running all over the stage and in front of the PA. She spends half of one song on top of the subs—directly in front of the front fill."

Stefani's rock background, and its associated pretensions, coupled with the pop/dance flavor of her solo debut made for a challenging performance to keep up with as an audience member, never mind the crew. The repertoire that Stefani ran through every night was entertaining enough, but the production, which at times looked like a modern incarnation of a Busby Berkeley musical, was undoubtedly be what many took away from the show. With her solo album, Gwen Stefani has shown there is life after, or even instead of, No Doubt, but it is her *Harajuku Lovers Tour* that has set her apart as an entertainer. 📶

Gwen Stefani Harajuku Lovers Tour

Lighting Equipment

- (36) Martin Professional Mac 2000 Wash
- (19) Vari*Lite VL3000
- (23) Martin Atomic 3000 strobe
- (10) James Thomas nine-light molefay
- (2) Lycian HMI 1200 followspot
- (1) Lycian ME II followspot
- (28) Wybron CXI color fader
- (4) Reel EFX DF-50 hazer
- (4) Sahara Pro fan
- (8) Le Maître bubble machine
- (1) ETC 12-way 2.4K dimmer
- (1) ETC 48-way 2.4K dimmer
- (2) ETC C.E.M. module
- (1) TMB ProPower 48-way 208V distro
- (5) TMB ProPower 17-way MCB 20A breaker module
- (3) TMB ProPower five-way soca module
- (1) TMB ProPower six-way Edison module
- (1) TMB ProPower camlock module
- (6) Doug Fleenor five-way opto splitter
- (2) Doug Fleenor 30A relay module
- (1) Furman power line conditioner
- (2) Clear-Com Intercom PSU CS-222
- (20) Clear-Com RS501 single-channel backpack
- (3) ClearCom double-muff headset
- 17 Beyer double-muff headset
- (2) MA Lighting grandMA console
- (3) MA Lighting Network Signal Processor

Projection Equipment

- (11) Christie Digital S12 12K DLP Roadie projector
- (10) Christie Digital X10 10K DLP Roadie projector
- (8) Coolux Pandora's Box media server
- (1) Ross Synergy 4 video switcher
- (1) Ross 12x64 router system
- (4) Sony DXC-D35WS camera
- (3) FFV Omega hard-disk recorders
- (1) 36' x19' 6" custom screen
- (8) Scenic screens in custom shapes
- (40) Barco MiPIX display panel

Sound Equipment

- (60) JBL VerTec 4889 loudspeaker
- (24) JBL VerTec 4880 sub with Lake Contour processing and Crown IT 800 digital amp
- (1) Midas XI-4 console
- (1) Yamaha PM5000 monitor console
- Summit dcl 200 compressors
- Empirical Labs distressors
- Drawmer gates
- Processing: dbx, Waves Maxx BCL, t.c. electronic M5000/M2000/2290
- Eventide H3000 Ultra Harmonizer
- Lexicon Pcm 91 digital reverb
- Audio-Technica microphones

Lighting gear supplied by Ed and Ted's Excellent Lighting

Projection gear supplied by Delicate Productions

Sound gear supplied by Sound Image