

Justin Timberlake's new tour aims to be
the biggest party in town—with the
technology to prove it

By: David Barbour

club justin

Justin Timberlake stamping a mirrorball to bits—that's the provocative image on the cover of his current album, *FutureSex/Love Sounds*. In a way, however, what the singer is really stamping out is his boy-band, teen-idol past. The new album, with its distinctive, almost indescribable blend of techno and hip-hop, has proven to be only the beginning of the emergence of a new Justin Timberlake. He's attained credibility as a film actor, a style icon, and a musical tastemaker, paving the way for what may very well turn out to be a sustained adult career. Very few pop artists manage to escape their bubble-gum pasts, but Timberlake is well on his way.

The latest stage in the rollout of the singer's adult image is his tour, *FutureSongs/LoveShow*, which spent the late winter/early spring months burning up the box office at arenas across the country before heading off on an extended tour of Europe. (He returns to the U.S. for additional dates in August and September—and one feels that there may be more bookings after that.) It's a big show, an in-the-round staging that is choreographed within an inch of his existence. Music, dance, kinetic lighting, and the latest projection technology combine with an expansive sound rig to create a club vibe on a spectacular scale.

The club stage

One look at the tour's set is enough to reveal the show's ambitions. It's an enormous structure, 100' by 100' with a circular center stage, additional raised playing areas for the musicians, and a pair of ramps extending toward the audience, culminating in B stages at 3 and 9 o'clock. At 12 and 6 o'clock are the bars—little establishments where drinks are served. These are the high-price seats on the tour, although, in truth, given the show's circular configuration and raised center, if you want a really good view of the star, you're much better off in the mid-priced seats located higher up in the arena. (Apparently, the idea was born out of the singer's experience touring clubs in the months before the



ALL PHOTOS: TODD KAPLAN

FutureShow/LoveSongs tour began.)

The set is based on a concept by Timberlake, with additional input from production manager Ian Donald and the staff of Tait Towers, the firm responsible for its construction. (The bars and bar stools were built by Show FX.) The set, with its many demands, wasn't an easy proposition. "We struggled to come up with a shape that worked on the floor, that dealt with the bar, got Justin out in the house, and also dealt with the fire exists," says Winky Fairorth, of Tait Towers.

Adam Davis, also of Tait Towers, describes the set's many moving parts. "There are two freight elevators," he says, "35 x 11' hydraulic, servo-controlled units, each with its own independent power unit linked over one Ethernet cable to run together." These units bring up the band rises on either side of the center stage area, completing the center ellipse shape of the main stage. At the center of this space is another, 8' diameter elevator with a revolve, where Timberlake appears, often with a piano; this is also a turntable. There are 6 x 8' elevators on the B stages. "It's a lot of automation for a rock 'n roll show," adds Davis.

The hydraulic elevator systems feature custom scissor lifts designed by Tait Towers. "We weren't happy with the

lifts that you could get commercially," says Davis. "They were all too big and heavy, not right for the road," adds Fairorth. The new, slimmer version they came up with consists of two 15" wide mechanisms that fit together to make a 30" wide lift. The structures are as elegant as they are efficient. "All the plates and components for each scissor arm was pre-cut, welded, and machined together," says Davis. "In any scissor arm, there are four points that matter; here, they're accurate to five-thousandths of an inch."

Underneath the stage is an entire underworld of rooms and gear. Davis adds that the staging structure is built with Tait's new double-decker pole technology. "It features conical poles that aren't dedicated, so any one of them fits into any hole. That way, it sets quickly." In addition, the set's lower level rests 5" off the ground on wheels. "It's engineered to roll on an uneven surface," he says. And, as Fairorth points out, "The lower deck gets assembled at one end of the arena, then is rolled into place." As a result, adds Davis, "We're pretty pleased with the load-in and load-out times; the show sets up very quickly, packages well. The first time, it went up in 45 minutes."

Completing the stage setup is a

series of four curtains, built by the California-based drapery specialist, Sew What? Two sets of curtains form a circle surrounding the circular stage. Branching out from this circle are two more half-circles of fabric. The curtains, made of gray 50% sharkstooth, are deployed in endless configurations throughout the show. They serve as projection surfaces for the IMAG and video content, and for the lighting, too. More than one number features Timberlake inside the center circle, revealed by light bleeding through the fabric. Los Angeles-based Showrig handled the rigging and automation of the curtains; the company's proprietary control system was developed in concert with Las Vegas-based Fisher Technical Services. Rob Decellio programmed the system and runs it nightly.

An expanse of lighting

Just as the set is filled with circles, so too the lighting rig is a sinuous construction, elegantly spinning out curves above the action. "The truss shape follows the stage shape exactly," says Bryan Leitch, who designed the lighting with Nick Whitehouse. "It was pretty simple to do, once you laid it out like that, really." There are lighting units along the

curves of the curtain trusses and in many other places as well. Interestingly, the followspots are built right into the overhead rig. "Justin did not want any followspots in the house," Leitch notes, adding that the location of the followspots allows the star, his dancers, and the musicians to be covered while simultaneously keeping light off the curtains. In the very center of the rig is a small circular truss, which can lower in; this is especially useful when Timberlake is alone at center stage, possibly surrounded by the curtains.

What with all that stage area to be covered, the lighting rig is, well, large. The numbers speak for themselves:

changing profiles. They're simply there to keep the color temperature right for the video."

And then there are the VL4s, units that, for all practical purposes, now come from the Pleistocene Era of concert lighting. Whitehouse calls it "a punchy little narrow beam." The units are placed on the stage and are used for big dramatic sweeps. "I did try other lights, including other Vari-Lites, but nothing that had quite the same quality," Leitch says. He expands on this: "Some lighting designers are in denial about the dynamics of moving lights. Anyone who says a moving head is a moving head—full stop—doesn't have the

Whitehouse: "It's not just a load of dancers and [Timberlake]. It's not lit all the time—which isn't what a lot of people expect."

76 Vari*Lite VL3000 Spots, 32 VL3000 Wash units, eight VL1000s, 32 VL4s (that's right, and more about them in a moment), along with 120 Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12s, 50 Martin Atomic strobes, 50 Moles, ten Lycian followspots, and twenty 3K Syncrolites. (Smoke effects are provided by four High End Systems F100 foggers and four Reel EFX DF-50 hazers. The bars, by the way are internally lit with American DJ SDEL-109L LED units.) In addition, there is a complement of lasers from Pyrotek.

Addressing the preponderance of Vari-Lite units, Leitch says, "The 3K Wash and Spot each has a great quality of light. The focus is fantastic. Also, most of them are placed above the stage, often placed very near diaphanous white screens, and we couldn't have them leaking light outside the sides and backs of the units. The VL3000 Series doesn't leak light. If you look at the available range of lights with that kind of output, I think you'll find that's not always the case." The VL1000s, Leitch says, "are our movable

first clue about how light works in air. Look at the VL4—and how, because of the old technology involved, the head moves and how it changes colors; also, look at the quality of light that comes out of that. It's truly unique." The VL4s, Whitehouse adds, are placed in custom black holders and recessed into the show deck; the Showrig automation system is designed so that, when the curtains are lowered, they stop just above the VL4s.

Of course, finding that number of working VL4s was easier said than done. "I spoke to Curry Grant [of PRG, the tour's lighting supplier]," says Leitch. "They pulled out the stops for us. They found some units that had hardly been used at all. Also, Brian Monahan is the best VL4 tech in the business. A lot of people questioned the dominance of the Vari-Lites in the rig, but Justin wanted the unit to be absolutely beautiful." He quickly adds, "I do use

The lighting, by Bryan Leitch and Nick Whitehouse, is very theatrical, creating strong light/dark contrasts.





other brands. SGM makes a fantastic light, but the Giotto 700 spots simply weren't available when we were in the planning stages."

In addition to the moving units, the ColorBlast 12s work beautifully as truss toners, illuminating the curved and circular pieces from within with ghostly displays of color. "You do need a lot of them in this situation, especially when they are curving around bends," Whitehouse says, adding that he is highly satisfied with their performance on the road.

Adding to the rig is the laser system supplied by Laser Design Production. According to Doug Adams, (the special effects designer for the tour), the show has two 15W red YAG lasers—"there are only three in the world, and we own them all," he notes—with four fiber-fed remote scanners (one in each bar), plus four 4W white light diode lasers (with an additional four fiber-fed remote color scanners with blanking for multi-color effects.) Interestingly, Adams says the

Left: A view of the circular lighting rig. Below and opposite, right: The laser system in action. Opposite left: One of the tour's curved projection effects.

YAGs are placed under the deck, and shoot their beams through glass lenses placed in the stage. The lasers, combined with 60 mirror positions on the set, create some startling, architectural arrangements of multi-colored beams, creating cat's-cradles of light through the auditorium. The lasers are linked to the show's time code (but have independent control cued by a Pangolin time line system.) Chris Blair is the tour's laser tech (with Gordie Hum and Steve McCoy). Supporting the laser effects are a set of Le Maitre G300 smoke machine, as well as the company's new Stage Foggers; a set of Hurricane fans keep the smoke moving.

Indeed, as Whitehouse points out, the number of units isn't all that large when you consider how much acreage the rig has to cover; this is especially true when the curtains are in, as they necessarily cut off significant portions of the rig. One key piece of gear in this product-intensive show is the PRG Series 400 cable, which combines 120V or multiphase 208V power with an Ethernet network in the same cable. As such, it reduces the need for

endless multiple strands of dedicated cable. "It's an amazing piece of kit, and it made it possible for us to do this rig," says Leitch. There are six racks of the Series 400 system as well as a set of ETC dimmers.

And indeed the lighting, run by Whitehouse, is percussive, full of cues, and tightly linked to the music. What with ten dancers, seven musicians, and four back-up singers, all of whom are in fairly constant motion, the staging is action-packed, and the lighting works in sleight-of-hand fashion, pulling your attention from one place to another, while underlining the driving beats of the choreographed numbers. Timberlake, says Whitehouse, "wanted to move away from a pop look to something more theatrical, more contrasts between light and darkness. It's not just a load of dancers and him. It's not lit all the time—which isn't what a lot of people expect."

The lighting can be fairly said to dance; Leitch and Whitehouse blend saturated washes with percussive pulses and chases and strong light/dark contrasts create a non-stop parade of effects in the dance numbers, with strong, simple, theatrical looks for the ballads. Some numbers

are so cue-intensive—having as many as 400 cues—that the lighting is linked to time code. The console is an Avolites Diamond 4, which Whitehouse has used frequently in the past. One plus factor of the console, he says, is its show saver backup. "You can use a PC with Windows to run the show, if the console were to fail," he points out.

The show had three weeks of rehearsal at Warner Bros. Studios in Los Angeles. "It took a long time to put together," Whitehouse notes. "Most tours settle in after about a week; this one took about a month." Still, he adds, the entire process has been smoothed to the point of efficiency. "At

with the show's choreography," says Leitch. "Once we got past that, there were no real problems. I'm not pretending it wasn't hard work—we put in a lot of hours. But Justin is a really good guy who knows what he's talking about. We clicked straightaway. He's just a decent man, and an absolute joy to work for."

Images in the round

For video director Steven Fatone, the key number in the Timberlake show might be "What Goes Around," because the circular curtains are also the projection surfaces for the show's unusual, innovative imagery, which

Leitch: "The biggest job that Nick and I had was choreographing everything to go with the show's choreography."

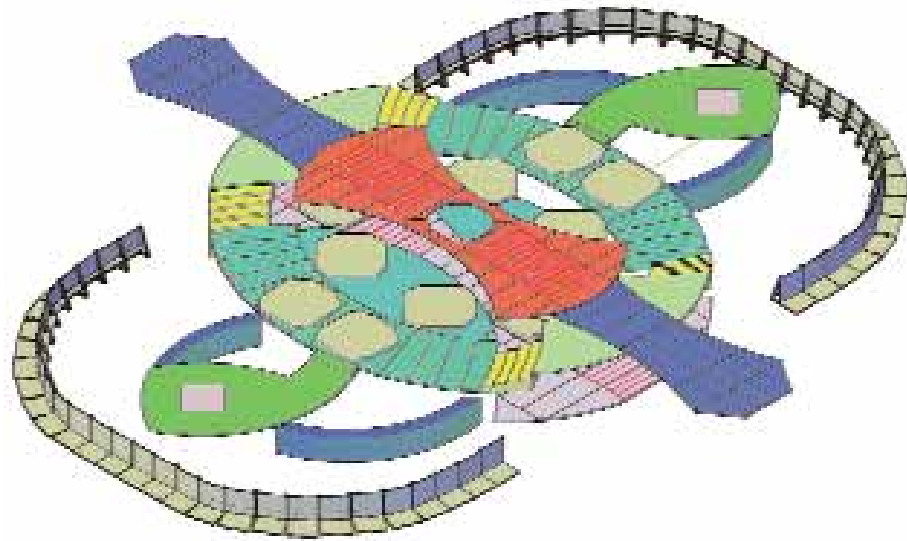
each new venue, the rigging goes in at 2am and everything is done by noon the next day. It's all pretty standard, except for the pre-rig; depending on the venue, there are about 100 rigging points."

"The biggest job that Nick and I had was choreographing everything to go

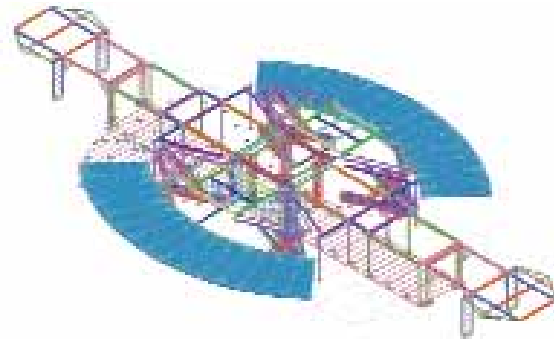
consists of live IMAG altered by added layers of original content, the latter created by Geodesic. The key issue here is the curtains, which are curved, as previously mentioned. However, Fatone is using the Photon system from the Montreal-based company, VYV. (Photon is currently being used, to



CONCERTS



These set drawings from Tait Towers give a sense of the size of the overall layout (left) and the complex substructure (below).



stunning effect, in Cirque du Soleil's touring arena show, *Delirium*, which features some of the largest projections you may ever see.). For the Timberlake show, Fatone notes, Photon projects curved images onto the curtains, working out all distortion and keystone issues in advance. "With it, you can warp the image to any surface," he says.

The large-scale, layered images, projected onto transparent curtains, have an eerie, spectral feeling. Enormous close-ups of Timberlake are altered by layers of color and animation, creating big, ghostly images; combined with the fast-paced cueing of many numbers, the video images add an hallucinatory quality to the show.

The production runs eight Photon boxes, delivering images to Christie Digital Roadster S+ projectors. Interestingly, Fatone adds that all content is delivered via fiber. As he explains, the Photons run DVI content into a Think Logical unit, which converts it to fiber-ready media and sends it to a receiver box in the truss, where it is again turned into DVI for the Christie projectors. With this system, he adds, he can make any changes to the images—shuttering, etc. from his

laptop, which is set up backstage. (He also makes use of a Ross Video Synergy 3 switcher.) In addition to the screens, there are small plasma and LCD screens in the bar area, which run straight video of the show, to supplement the audience's view of the stage. There is also a Green Hippo V.2.24 system, which projects sponsorship imagery before the show; this was supplied to the tour by Scharff Weisberg. The rest of the video gear was supplied by Screenworks.

The video is a key component in the show's overall effect, which combines different levels of spectacle and intimacy at different times. The mix of layered content and IMAG also provides another level of abstraction in the design. Perhaps the most stunning video effect comes in the number "Losing My Way." Here, Timberlake is surrounded by screens on which are projected larger-than-life images of a red-robed gospel choir. The curved screens give a kind of 3-D quality to the images; the lighting isolates Timberlake. It's strangely disorienting moment in which reality and video blend into a seamless, indelible image.

Creating a studio sound live
Anyone who has a passing

acquaintance with Timberlake's music knows that it is rooted in a complex, highly engineered studio sound. Recreating that effectively in a live venue is another matter, and FOH mixer Andy Meyer has chosen his gear with that challenge in mind. "I've done tours in the round, but nothing like this," he says. The loudspeaker rig consists of a total of 96 Prism boxes from Showco, with 28 subs on the ground. (Clair Brothers supplied the tour. "No other company could do what they do," says Meyer. "Their support is fantastic.") Speaking of the Prisms, he says, "I chose this PA for its exemplary coverage."

Meyer runs the show on a Digidesign VENUE system. "I'm not a digital person, first and foremost," he says, adding that, on a show of this scale, digital was the only option. He adds, the Venue "is the first digital board that, in my opinion, sounds nice and warm. I can't say enough about it—it reacts like an analog desk." The reason for this is, he says, "because it has internal 48-bit processing, not 24-bit, like all the others."

Using the Venue system, Meyer says he's made about 60 snapshots that he can recall over the course of a single show, changing his pans,

Meyer: "It's the most challenging job I've ever had, with so many inputs—and all the kids screaming in the audience."

effects, MIDI, and EQ. "Each song is basically its own mix," he adds. Echoing everyone else interviewed in this piece, he mentions Timberlake's acute sensitivity about what works on a stage. "Justin and Kevin [musical director] Antunes both have great ears and know what they want. Everything Justin asks for is on point and reasonable. Also, when I suggest something, he gets it right away. It's nice to work with someone who gets it." He goes out of his way to point out that Timberlake's vocals are all live; it's all Justin, all the time.

Even though he's using the Digidesign console, however, Meyer does make use of some outboard gear, including a dbx 120 subharmonic for additional bottom end, two Waves L2 maximizers for the PA, and a T.C Electronic D2 delay. He's also running ProTools to record every show for archive purposes.

Timberlake uses Audio-Technica Artist Elite Series 5000 mics; Meyer and monitor engineer Kevin Glendenning prefer them as well. "We have a good relationship with them," says Meyer. "They're a great company."

Perhaps inevitably, in a show of this complexity, all performers are wearing in-ears, in this case, Sennheiser G2s. "Justin wanted everyone on wireless," says Glendenning. "Also, the artists like their smaller, lighter belt packs." He adds that with the large number of wireless systems—he's running 60 channels altogether—things can get complicated, especially with potential interference issues in certain venues, such as Phillips Arena, which is next door to CNN, and Madison Square Garden, a few blocks away from the Broadway theatre district. He cites the contribution of Kevin Kaplan, the tour's RF engineer, in keeping things sorted

out: "Without him, there's no show." He adds. (Besides the in-ears, there are a few wedges for the keyboards and percussion.)

In-ears, Glendenning adds, tend to be chosen by younger artists; the engineer himself is a fan of the technology. "If they're used right, they can conserve your hearing," he says. "If they're used with a bit of intelligence, the artist's ears shouldn't be ringing at the end of the show."

Like Meyer, Glendenning uses a Venue control system. (This is the rare tour where both engineers have very similar gear preferences.) "If I had a choice, I wouldn't use digital," Glendenning admits, "but with analog you'd have way too much console. In this show, each song is its own mix." He chose the Venue, he adds, because "many people I really respect, won't

use anything else." The monitor position is built directly into the set, in one of the bar areas. He handles Timberlake only; a separate engineer, Scotty Reikowsky, handles the band and backup vocals.

The challenges of mixing monitors on the tour have to do with the show's orientation—"you're getting reflections in 360°," he points out—and, of course, with the star's popularity. "You're always trying to defeat the noise from the screaming kids in the audience," so the performers can simply hear themselves.

Still, both Glendenning and Meyer express satisfaction with the tour. "It's the most challenging job, I've ever had, with so many inputs—and all the kids screaming in the audience," says Meyer. "But I liked being pushed—and, with everyone else, this is a really enjoyable environment in which to work." Seemingly, he speaks for the rest of his colleagues, and a good thing, too—because the end of the *FutureShow/LoveSongs* tour is nowhere in sight. 📸

