

# American Dreamer

By: David Barbour



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## Making the visual elements blend seamlessly in 21 Savage's new tour

“Twenty One Savage’s Toronto concert was one for the books,” writes critic Breanna Marcelo on *Now Toronto*’s website, noting the show’s “amazing visuals such as images of his childhood home, vibrant laser-like lights, an Atlanta backdrop, and, of course, the classic smoke effects.” All of these are seen in *The American Dream Tour*, which presents 21

Savage with a new level of touring production values.

The show is the fruit of a collaboration between Ben Wolin (creative director, co-scenic designer, and content director), Matty Bauerschmidt (show director), and Chris Denholm (scenic/lighting designer). Wolin has worked on tours starring Bad Bunny, Drake, and Kendrick Lamar. Bauerschmidt is co-CEO and co-

founder (with Jamil Davis) of The Revels Group, a multi-faceted creative company. Denholm has previously appeared in these pages for his work with the rapper NF (November 2021 and August 2023). Wolin has worked on tours starring Bad Bunny, Drake, and Kendrick Lamar. The creative team has assembled a tightly structured three-act show with dramatic lighting, plenty of special effects, and



The video screens consist of ROE Visual Carbon Series CB8 panels.

video content that is highly personal to the star. Each number has its own character: A battery of pyro effects leads in “No Heart.” “Jimmy Cooks” features turbocharged lighting chases while “Topia Twins” is dominated by overt strobe cues and bursts of flame, and “rockstar” by a wall of beams upstage. The video content includes footage from the star’s early years and a sequence alluding to his arrest by US Immigrant and Customs Enforcement.

“It’s all based on the American dream theme from Savage’s album,” Wolin says. “From our first conversations with him, we wanted to take a cohesive approach to the entire show. That led to the three-act structure. The visuals are based around the American dream theme; we wanted it to feel like a movie from start to finish.”

“The show manifests through three concurrent storylines: narrative, conceptual, and metaphorical,” Bauerschmidt says. “The narrative is Savage’s story; we were able to get archival footage from his team, showing him from boyhood through his teenage years and the massive success he’s having now. The conceptual



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thread focuses on a child who is sort of representative of Savage but not all the way. The metaphorical element focuses on a house that is the archetypal American dream, with a picket

fence, roses, and stuff like that.”

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Aside from archival footage, Wolin adds, “Pretty much everything in the show was shot by our team. We had a team in Atlanta [where the star now lives] but Savage was born in London, so a big part of it was filmed there.”



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tive. We had a team in Atlanta [where the star now lives]—headed up by Hidji World / Nuevo World—but Savage was born in London, so a big part of it was filmed there as well by Danny Seth and TBAC. It was logistically difficult, but it fit the American dream theme and allowed us to tell the story from start to finish. And within his American dream

story is immigration.” (21 Savage moved to Atlanta with his mother when he was a child; as an adult, his attempts at renewing his visa got stalled in the system. Meanwhile, while his star was ascending he was detained by ICE. Processing his case took several years thanks to backlogs in the Department of Immigration but is

now resolved.) “We personify him as the American dream,” Bauerschmidt says. “It’s the story of an immigrant who became one of the top ten rappers in the world.”

The production design reorients the stage as needed. The downstage video wall is roughly 7' tall and 40' wide. At the beginning of the show, it announces the tour’s title. “It conceals most of the set,” Wolin says. “In the first look of the show, it comes up like a spaceship and Savage walks out from under it. For the first three songs, we keep the stage dark behind it, really leaning into the negative space. Then it goes up and hides behind the lighting trusses, letting us use the upstage wall for the rest of the show.” Both screens consist of ROE Visual Carbon Series CB8 panels. Images are delivered using a Resolume media server.

The approach signaled in this opening sequence was fully endorsed by the star and his team. Bauerschmidt notes, “Savage said, ‘Avoid anything expected. I don’t want animated stuff. I don’t want chains and knives. I want it to feel cinematic’.”

### Scenery/lighting

Denholm was brought onboard the project to help with the task of filling the stage. Aware of the collective desire for a cohesive approach, he put together an environment featuring the upstage and downstage video screens, a lighting catwalk that makes a dynamic appearance, and a set of risers with a built-in toaster. (SGPS built and automated the scenery.) The schedule was unusually cruel, with Denholm joining up in mid-March for a tour that opened in May; this is one reason he turned to SGPS: “There are only so many vendors that can pull off something like that. I called Darren Murdock, automation production manager, and Jeremy Brown, rigging production manager, and they did a great job in a tight time frame.” (Scenic elements include guard rails on the lighting catwalk, which the star mounts and



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rides into the air.)

The tour plays venues of various sizes. "The timeline and the challenges of each amphitheatre as far as trims, widths, and depths, are part of why we wanted Chris to help us on the design and execution side to race towards feasibility," Bauerschmidt says. "It was his expertise with things like A, B, and C rigs; we wanted to design for 80% of venues and find that sweet spot where we had as many toys as possible for the biggest and smallest venues on the run. He was effective in getting the delicate balance between the trims of so many lighting trusses, the automation, and the mother grid."

"Blossom Music Center [in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio] is a venue that stands out to me," Denholm says by way of offering an example. "I've been through it as a production manager three or four times. The rigging capabilities there are very limited for a show of this scale." This is where the kit-of-parts approach pays off, he adds: "Having all these different pieces

allows us to go from the Blossom Centers and Bank of New Hampshire Pavilions to sold-out arenas in Los Angeles and Vancouver where the space is endless, and to capitalize on each one...it's always a balance."

Of course, with a deadline like that, getting the desired lighting gear wasn't easy. "Raphiki Rhodes the production manager went to PRG for a 360 deal, which was probably the smartest thing to do in that situation," Denholm notes.

Even with so many deployable features, Bauerschmidt says, "Ben and I are a bit minimalist. Besides the show's finale, we like to give each element its own turn. Every four or five songs, we turn off the LED wall and have a strictly lighting look. At other times, we go more video-heavy, which is the majority of the setlist, since it's based around a cinematic, narrative throughline. But we take turns with the lasers, visuals, pyro, etc., with different elements taking the forefront."

Denholm delivers a variety of looks ranging from kinetic cueing with plenty of saturated colors to starker, sim-

pler white-light effects. "We tried to build a technical throughline," Bauerschmidt says. "At the end of a song, we might flash a color that blends into the color of the next song, so the transition feels seamless. That way, each song has its own look, and it doesn't feel too choppy. Seventy percent of the songs are blended so there's no pre-roll to be hitting on [the first beat]. Sometimes we have to find cool tricks—a pyro or cryo element—to mask our changeover on the video or lighting side."

There is, Bauerschmidt adds, a sense of progression to the setlist. "The earlier songs are hungrier, representative of his early career. The middle is more introspective, dealing with emotional challenges. Then the third act has bigger songs," reflecting his current success. Further binding the production elements, he notes, "We worked with Savage's musical director, and day one DJ—Marc B—to build in sound design, so when you're seeing a dog on screen, you're hearing a dog; when you see a motorcycle, you're

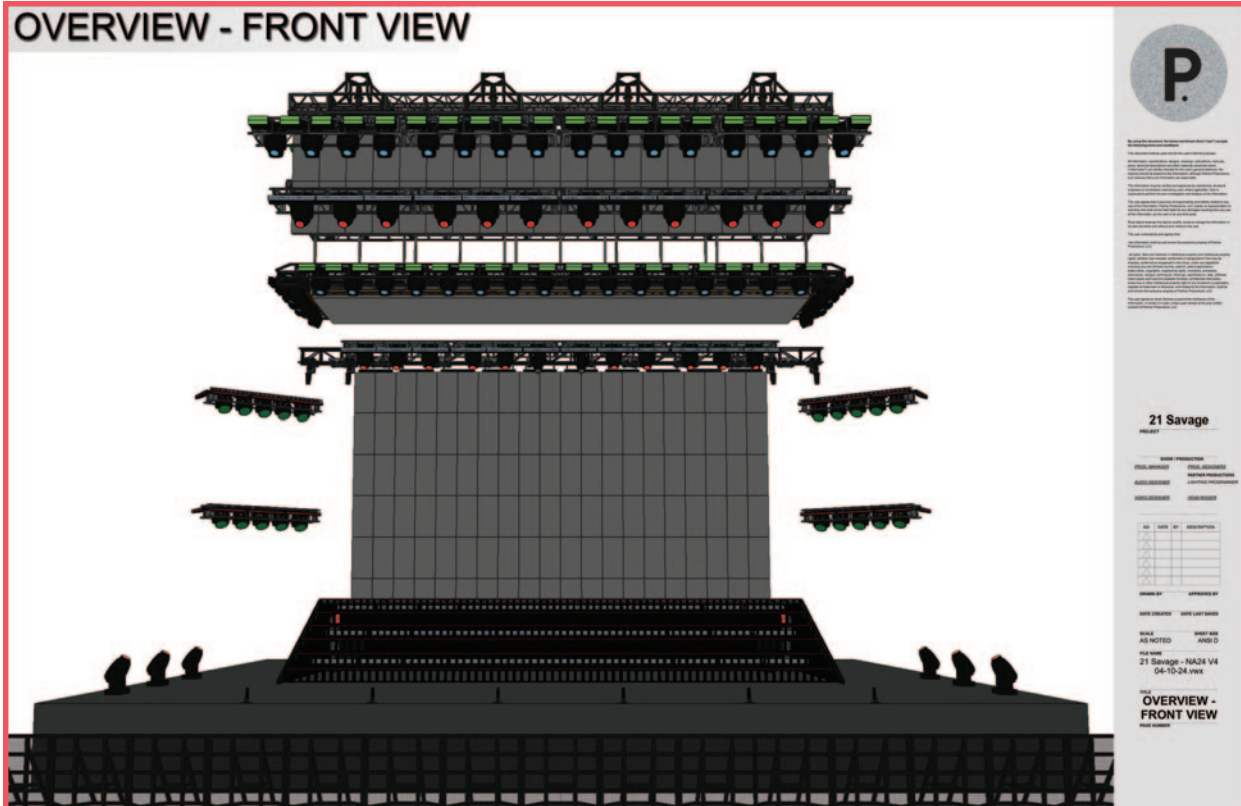
## CLOSE-UP: CONCERTS

hearing that. It's far more visceral to have a sound design bringing the visuals to life. It makes for a more immersive and 3D experience."

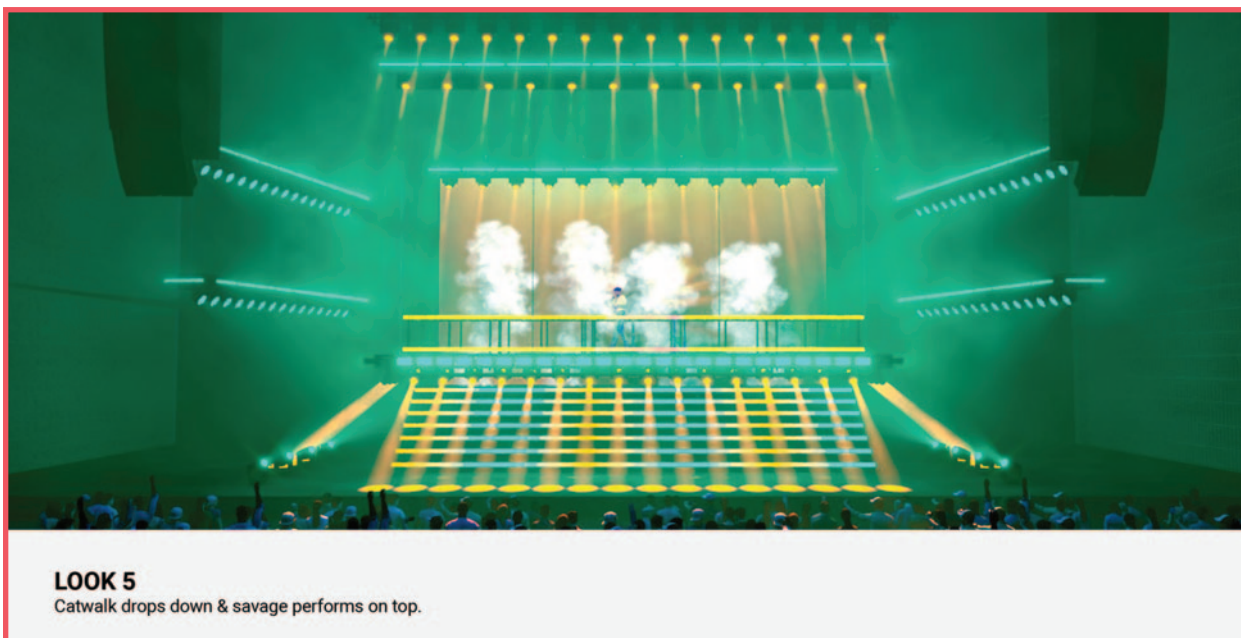
In terms of programming over 30-

plus songs, Bauerschmidt says, "We worked with Ryan Wiley, our LD, who was great at finding the baseline, the accents, and kicks. We used parts of the rig to highlight, and almost decon-

struct, the beat for a syncopated experience. We try not to be predictable." The tour has David Sprauve behind the grandMA3 calling and executing the show night to night.



Above and below: Aware of the collective desire for a cohesive approach, Denholm put together an environment featuring upstage and downstage video screens, a lighting catwalk that makes a dynamic appearance, and a set of risers with a built-in toaster.



The creative team made extensive use of Depence software to previsualize the production. “Each department operated their Depence file, and being able to see everything helped a lot,” Bauerschmidt says. “Sometimes we would bring the laser file into our video content edition software and match it up so the elements could play off of each other; we did the same with pyro. Each department was good at showing us the interplay between elements. It was invaluable to see everything in such resolution and detail.”

The lighting rig includes 65 GLP JDC1 strobes, 62 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, 48 Claypaky Mythos 2s, 32 Martin MAC Viper AirFX units, 24 Martin MAC Quantum Washes, 18 ACME Lighting PIXEL LINE IPs, five Robe FORTEs, and two Robe RoboSpot base stations. Lighting is controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA3 console, running in MA2 mode. The pyro effects package from Pyrotecnico includes 928 waterfall gerbs plus uFlamer Volcano Flame units, Cryo Jets, Le Maitre Freezefog Pros, a 25W full-color laser projection system, and a 4W burner full-color laser projection system.

Speaking about the gear, Denholm says, “We use the MAC Quantum Washes to fill the sides and make the rig look even bigger, offstage left and right, which are common in sheds. The double-stacked horizontal truss also provided ample sidelighting.” The PIXEL LINEs outline the same stacked truss, making use of “their smart-glass technology, which provides a clean frosted-lens look for the most visible linear fixtures in the design. Each truss is angled at 20° to allow for maximum visibility for the amphitheatre audiences, who often view the show from extreme angles of the stage.” The MAC Viper AirFX units “were not originally specified in the design but proved to be a good substitute for a wash/beam. Given the tight turn-around needed, some substitutions had to be made. The unit’s large beam looks and high output serve the design



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well.” Similarly, he adds, “The Claypaky Mythos 2 provide an available substitution for fast-moving hard-edge beams.” The FORTEs “were added for their ease of control, via the RoboSpot Base Stations, to light each artist. Without a standard front wash by design, we want to maintain the visibility of the artists for every patron. The supplemental followspot lighting is great, functionally and artistically.”

The impression X4 Bar 20s “are placed in the riser package and on

wash/beam trusses in the air to help create some architecture and some punch in the darkness, drawing hard lines that sometimes reveal the levels of the design.” The JDC1 strobes “were chosen for their brightness and tilt function; every hip-hop show needs good strobes!”

*The American Dream Tour* is now international, spending July and August in Europe before going to Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and United Arab Emirates. 📶

## 21 Savage: *American Dream Tour*

Creative Direction: Ben Wolin  
Show Direction: Matty Bauerschmidt  
Stage Design: Chris Denholm, Partner Production Services  
Lighting/Production Design: Chris Denholm  
Special Effects Design: Partner Production Services  
Lighting Programmer: Ryan Wiley  
Show Renders/Plots: Steven Morgan/Partner Production Services

Content Director: Ben Wolin  
Audio Design: David Marcus  
Production Manager: Raphiki Rhodes  
Tour Manager: Tone Lopez  
Project Coordinator: Victoria Verba  
Lighting Director: David Sprauve  
Scoring: Dirty Dave  
Video Director: Collin Wilkey  
VJ: Michael LaMartina  
FOH Engineer: Freddie Johns  
Monitor Engineer: Jair Crews  
Tour Rigger: Dan Gibbs