



# American Idol Carries On

The popular competition takes a fresh design approach for its pandemic season

By: Sharon Stancavage

This season's edition of *American Idol*, hosted by Ryan Seacrest and featuring judges Luke Bryan, Katy Perry, and Lionel Richie, premiered with a new design, shaped, in part, by pandemic conditions. "The biggest change was having a show with a very limited amount of audience," says production designer Florian Wieder, who adds that the audience situation was constantly in flux. "While we were in pre-production, due to the permanently changing COVID regulations, we had to face a different audience scenario almost every week."

The audience, or lack thereof, wasn't the only concern. "We had to do social distancing in terms of the band and contestants on the main stage as well as the audience, which made everything extremely complicated," Wieder says. "The circumstances pushed us in a certain direction. Because of the audience scenario, the stage became wider and deeper and the space for the band had to increase." Bob Hughes, of All Access Staging and Productions, provider of the show's set, says, "They usually do a multitiered setup with audience seating on three sides. This year, we made fewer levels and made them deeper to accommodate more of a lounge vibe to separate people out a little more."

At the same time, Wieder says, "There are a couple of other talent shows around, and some of them look pretty overloaded and busy. My job is to support the talent onstage, not just do something that looks great. It's a completely different point of view. It's a combination of

many things; it's not just lighting or the stage. It's there to support the artists' performances."

Nevertheless, the design went through several iterations. "After two months of going back and forth in terms of the audience, we realized that the ideal scenario was going to be expensive," Wieder says. This led to critical questions. For example, regarding the ceiling used in the previous season, he asked, "Why are we keeping this LED stuff up there? It's a huge chunk of money. Let's go back to the roots and come up with something a little more music-related. Let's make it feel less like a TV show and more like a concert. There would still be LEDs, but I wanted to scale them back, especially in the ceiling."

Wieder's concept, which involved turning the studio into a mini arena, harkened back to an earlier season. "I wanted the option of creating different environments with movable trusses, but in a different way," he says. "I came up with this concept of eight [lighting pods] on winches that allowed us to create tighter spaces, more open spaces, and so on. We made it feel more honest and less like a TV show."

The lighting pods "lived on [XLNT] Cyberhoists," says lighting designer Tom Sutherland, of DX7 Design. "We could change the architecture of the room, close it down, make interesting shapes in the ceiling, and do live moves. These are things we've never done on a show like this before; we've had it on [the Eurovision Song Contest] but to do this in a studio that size meant that the impact of it was massive."



Previous spread: Ryan Seacrest and the season's winner Chayce Beckham. Above: Chaka Khan and Deshaun Goncalves. Opposite: Cassandra Coleman and Lindsey Buckingham. All artists were guests on the finale.

The 36 Cyberhoists were provided by SGPS ShowRig. “To help with the programming,” Sutherland says, “each pod was levelly balanced and the same weight-wise, so it wouldn’t get overly complicated.” Kish Rigging provided 125 CM Lodestar chain hoists; overall, the production weighed 160,000lb.

Another key element was a SV3 LED wall behind the contestants, “the same product as last season,” Wieder says. It is a custom version of ROE Visual’s Black Pearl BP3 product, supplied by NEP Sweetwater. The wall “just became slightly bigger—wider, not higher,” he notes. It, too, was on Cyberhoists. “We could open the video wall in two sections,” he adds. “You could open it vertically in the center or to the left and right. If you opened it to the left-right and then opened the center, you had almost an open cross in the middle.”

Also, Sutherland says, “We created a proscenium arch that surrounds the video wall. The top section of the arch was also on Cyberhoists, so we could come in low and reshape the stage.”

Thanks to the combination of lighting, screen, and

proscenium arch automation, Wieder says, “We had so many different looks. Sometimes it was very tiny and intimate and then there could be grander looks. That is what this show needed.” Imagery was delivered by four Green Hippo Tierra media servers, supplied by Matt McAdam, of Nobius Production and Design, and programmed by Scott Chmielewski, of DMDS7UDIOS.

Lighting worked hand-in-hand with automation. “We came up with about 30 to 40 different automation looks, named them, and handed the list off to the automation operator to build during load-in,” Sutherland says. “That way, we could just refer to a position by name and easily get there. We would only get ten or 15 minutes of rehearsal time per act; having a library of things we could easily recall meant I was on the same page as the operator, and the creative director Brian Burke. We were able to transition easily from one position to another without having to stop for programming.”

The SV7F stage—a customized Roe Black Marble product—was 65’ wide and 45’ deep. “It had a center thrust connecting the judge’s platform, along with a stage-left

contestant bridge that connected the main stage to the contestant lounge area, which also had LED tiles,” says art director Steve Morden. SV3 panels were featured on the band fascia, corners, and house ribbon headers. “The audience dividers were composed of eight SV3Ls [a custom version of Roe’s CB3] and eighteen 1m [Martin by Harman] Sceptrons,” says Ron Drews, president of NEP Sweetwater. “The stairs, accents, and fascia accents were composed of seventy-six 1m Sceptrons and eleven 320mm Sceptrons.” Hughes adds that All Access supplied “aluminum grated decking for air flow, as a subdeck for the LED floor. We put it at the appropriate height, so the LED floor matches the upstage platform, for a seamless interface between the surfaces.”

Upstage, Sutherland says, “We had a massive light wall, firing through gaps in the screen when it opened. It consisted of Elation Professional SixBar 1000s and Claypaky Sharpys, so that was a whole different look.”

Around the audience, Sutherland says, was “a series of [SV3L] video screens with GLP Impression X4 Bar 20s in between, with a row of [Robe] MegaPointes above and below, which meant that for any kind of reverse shots we could extend the look out into the room.”

For floor lighting, he says, “We had 108 Sharpy Washes hidden inside the stage to shoot up through tinted glass, and rows of 32 MegaPointes across the floor just in front of the band risers.”

The judge’s key lighting, on the proscenium truss, con-

sisted of Martin by Harman MAC Encores. These LED units “give us the cleanest white out of the box, as opposed to arc fixtures, which tend to have a green tint,” Sutherland says. “The Encore is pretty much my key light workhorse on most of my shows now. It’s very even, the colors are good, they all match each other pretty well.” The production also included Elation SixBar 500s, Eurolite audience blinders, Chroma-Q Color Force IIs, and ETC Lustrs. The primary lighting vendor was Felix Lighting, with additional gear from PRG.

Key lighting was handled by followspots, Sutherland says. “We had four manual [Strong Lighting] Super Troupers at the front of house and six Robe RoboSpots in positions that were tricky to get to. Three [RoboSpots] were backlights on the automated proscenium truss. As the truss moved, the followspot operators had to keep an eye on it and adjust their positions. We had a really low center frontal RoboSpot as well. If the automation came into a low position, it would block the front four manually operated followspots. It was basically a front-of-house position level that you could lower and cover some of the performances when the rig dropped in.”

The followspots were called by associate lighting designer Hunter Selby, who says, “The RoboSpots were a couple of floors above the studio—they were not actually in the room—so they were just seeing it through the camera on the followspots. There wasn’t any tracking software; they were all manually operated.”





Above and below: The view from the judges' desks contrasted with the view from the stage.



Hunter Merits.



The expanded stage layout allowed for greater social distancing.

Selby continues, “Certain automation positions made using certain followspots difficult since they caused obstructions. You had to know which automation was coming up, and we played around with which one we were able to use. If the pods came in super-low, we couldn’t use any of the normal spots. So, we had to track which spots were blocked at the moment.”

Programming for the show proper was done by lighting directors Joe Holdman and Nate Files on two MA Lighting grandMA2 consoles. Sutherland adds, “Nate took control of all the back walls, the things around the audience, and the key light; Joe had all of the pods and the floor lights.” Lighting director and gaffer AJ Taylor managed the sizable crew, leading the load-in and out and also overseeing floor moves and fixes on a daily basis.

### Audio

Production mixer Patrick L. Smith says, “Randy Faustino does the music mix. He sends that mix to me, and then I mix that in with the audience, the dialogue, and the tape playback.” Mike Parker handled the PA mix. Smith adds,

“When you have Mike Parker and Randy Faustino, you know it’s going to be a great, fun collaborative endeavor!”

“For the judge’s lavaliers, we used a Sennheiser RF wireless system provided to us by Soundtronics,” Smith continues. “We had [Sennheiser] SK 5212 body packs using Shure TwinPlex TL47 microphones. The Twinplexes are extremely transparent; they have an incredible dynamic range, from whispering to screaming, and, most importantly, I can get them to sound great with minimal EQ. That is important when you’re in a room that is very hostile from an audio perspective. The desk mics were Neumann KM 100 with AK 45 heads. They’re also very transparent.”

Smith says that Seacrest “had a Sennheiser SK 5012 body pack and also a Shure TwinPlex TL47 lavalier. On the live shows, we double-laved him for redundancy. He also had a handheld just for emergencies.”

Like most production mixers in the broadcast world, Smith was on a Calrec Apollo console. “It’s flexible and you can have as many input/outputs as you’re ever going to need,” he says. “I have 64 channels of multitrack that I had to feed, also 12 XD record machines (96 channels)



Guest artists Fall Out Boy.

and eight Avid machines (64 channels). You can seamlessly send all of these signals to their destinations.”

For the band, contestants, and guest artists, Faustino used an Avid VENUE Profile system, which, he says, “sounds great and I’m able to use Virtual Soundcheck to preview mixes before we go live to air. I multi-track all of the band and vocal inputs in ProTools, then remix and store each performance before we go live. It’s very easy to use, extremely reliable, and it sounds great.”

For processing, he says, “I used SSL, [Tube-Tech] CL 1B, Waves C4, and Waves De-esser on vocals. I had Waves 1176 on bass and guitars; I also had TC Electronics reverbs and Waves DDLs. I used Waves L2s on the stereo band group and stereo vocal group, then the API 2500 on the main left and right buss to air. Finally, I used outboard [Universal Audio] 1176s on the performance vocals.”

Faustino handled microphone selection for the band, contestants, and guest artists. The band’s all-Sennheiser lineup included e 602s on the kick drums, e 905s on snares, e 604s on the toms, e 914s on the high-hats and overheads, e 906s on guitars, and MD 5235s on vocals.

Parker used a DiGiCo SD5 console, saying, “Because of its touch-screen layout, it’s perfect for most shows in television. I used the C6 multiband compressor on my vocal group and the WNS Noise Suppressor on my judges and contestants’ group along with the [Waves] F6 floating band dynamic EQ. Those were the only plug-ins.”

The PA was a JBL VTX V20 line array. “What I like about it is the performance in the vocal range,” Parker says. “With added JBL S28 subs, it’s ideal for the short distance that we had to accommodate on the soundstage. ATK [Audio, the production’s gear supplier] had four 9-box line

arrays with four S28 subs in a left-right configuration with two S28 subs split between the nine-box line array.” The monitor system was also from JBL.

### The season finale

The final show took place in-studio, while the introduction, featuring the remaining contestants and special guest Macklemore, took place on location. “It was shot on top of the Television City main building roof helipad,” says Morden, who handled the episode because Wieder was unavailable. “The main obstacle that we had to deal with, beyond budget constraints, was the roof capacity outside of the helipad.

“The roof is constructed of a tarp material; if you wore heels it would puncture right through,” he continues. “All of the other lights [not on the helipad] had to be set up and placed on black laminate boards that we laid out. These were not only a visual portion of the production, but they enabled the crew to safely traverse the roof. They served in both the design and the only areas that our crew could walk safely on. I also had the scene shop round over every corner of the laminate boards as an additional precaution against puncturing the roof material, which would be in the mid-tens of thousands to repair.” The scenery was built by Television City.

For the Macklemore performance, Sutherland had four Robe BMFL WashBeams, 48 GLP JDC1s, 78 Claypaky Sharpys, and 66 Robe Pointes. “We created a runway strip of lights behind the helipad and then a tower of squares within the helipad itself,” he says. “That meant we could achieve two different looks: one that looked a bit like a landing strip and a tower of lights that formed the helipad itself. It was red and white, mainly; white so we could get

as much punch out of the beams as possible and since we were in open air, so tactical hazing was an issue.” For atmosphere, there were four Look Solutions Unique Viper Deluxe units—“my go-to outdoor heavy hazers,” he adds.

For the in-studio final, Sutherland added more fixtures; specifically, 20 Portman P2s and 12 Robe ESPRITES. “The Portmans were nice pretty eye candy; we had the Esprites on the floor in the back, and we used them for the funky split-color thing they have,” he says.

The lasers seen in the finale were provided by ER Productions. “We had two hung and four across the floor. They were the AT-30 units, which are 30W; they’re my go-to standard lasers,” he adds.

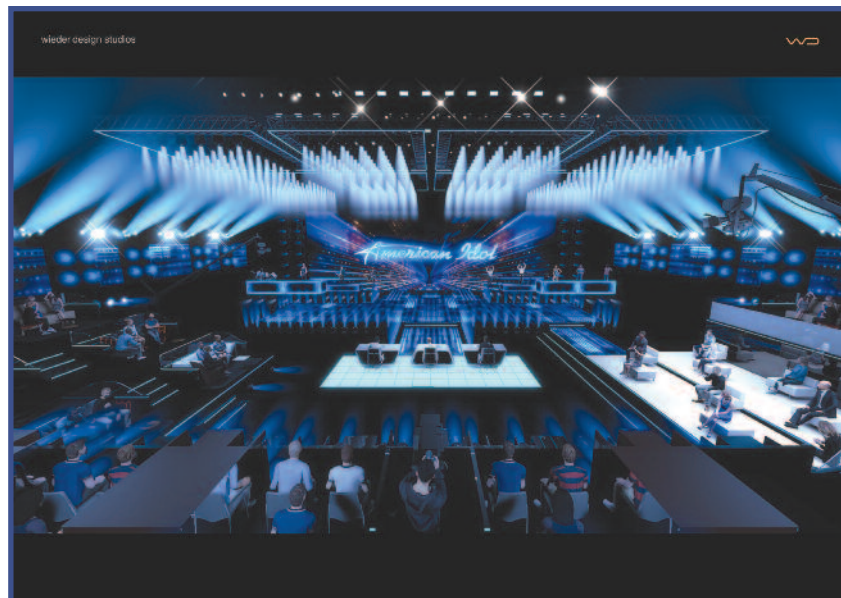
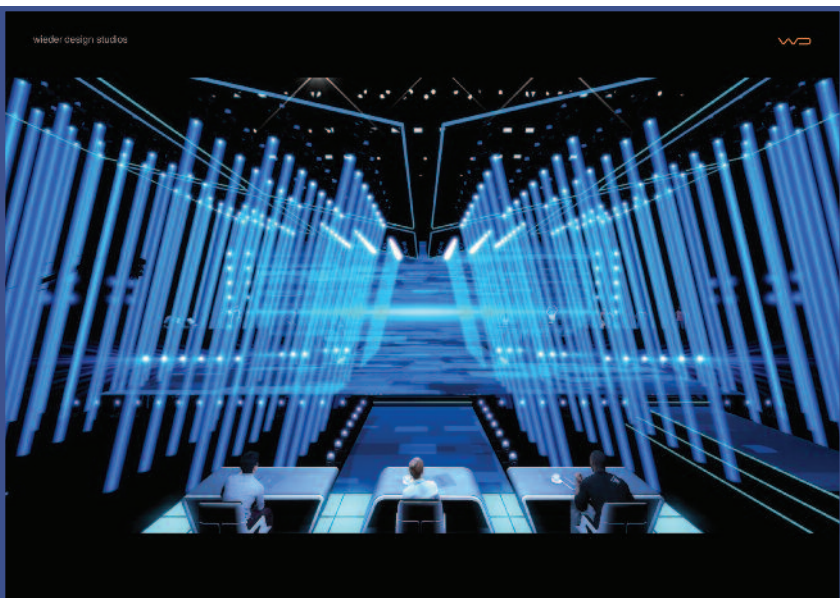
From an audio standpoint, much was the same for Smith. “We just had a lot more to do for the finale, because there were a lot more music and a lot more guests,” he notes.

The helipad remote, which was prerecorded, presented a slight cabling challenge, Smith notes. “With the Calrec Apollo and the great staff at CBS [Television City] we were able to run SMPTE cable over and connect the Hydra boxes on the roof. We had 16 outputs from the Hydra and 48 inputs, so we were able to do whatever we needed to do on the roof seamlessly.”

The roof also included fireworks, provided by ImageSFX. For the fireworks audio, Smith says, “I gave the crew a couple of shotgun microphones—Neumann KMR 81s; they ran them up, patched them in, plugged them into the Hydra box, I got them in the console, and mixed them in on the fly.”

*American Idol* has been renewed; the new season will premiere in the fall on ABC. 📡

Renderings below: Courtesy of Florian Wieder



The above renderings show the expanded stage layout and key lighting ideas.