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American Song Contest:

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The set, fabricated by Scenic Express, extends beyond the stage, taking in a mosh pit.

American Song Contest gives Eurovision a US-centric twist

By: Sharon Stancavage



For the uninitiated, the Eurovision Song Contest all but rules Europe, along with Israel and Australia. “Eurovision, when it was first performed in 1956 after World War II, was a way to bring the countries together in a cultural way,” says production designer Julio Himede, of Yellow Studio. Indeed, Eurovision is a continent-wide institution, noted for its elaborate, often campy, pop acts, over-the-top production design, and labyrinthine voting system. It’s a can’t-miss event each May, racking up enormous ratings. More recently, it has become available on American television through the streaming service Peacock.

Now comes American Song Contest, a dedicated attempt at bringing Eurovision’s mojo directly to viewers in the States. Ola Melzig, a well-known member of the industry and frequent head of production at Eurovision, is an executive producer. As opposed to Eurovision, which begins with national competitions then climaxes with a weeklong series of semi-finals and a grand final, American Song Contest is structured across eight weekly episodes. But just as Eurovision shines a favorable light on competing countries, American Song Contest celebrates the 50 states and associated territories.



Above and opposite: "They wanted a large-enough stage that could hold one performance at a time but with the ability to have different looks for each performance," Himede says.

Eurovision executive producer Audrey Morrissey contacted Himede, who says, "We started chatting about what the show meant, the idea of doing the show in America, and doing it like Eurovision, but American-style. American Song Contest was hosted in its initial season by Snoop Dogg and Kelly Clarkson and included a wide variety of performers, both known and unknown. "The whole point of this show is about the song, not the artist, and not the performers," notes broadcast audio mixer Randy Faustino.

"They wanted a large-enough stage that could hold one performance at a time but with the ability to have different looks for each performance," Himede says. "They wanted it so a performance could look intimate and the next to look large in scale with lots of production values, including lighting and pyro. We wanted the ability to transform from one performance to another.

"We started exploring what it meant to do a show that conceptualized the idea of an American competition, bringing all the states together in a harmonious and celebratory way," he continues. "We looked at how to represent America in a way that didn't feel political or feel too serious." The design team examined such iconic symbols as flags, eagles, and the Statue of Liberty. "In the end, we decided that a lot of that iconography was probably a little too on the nose and would seem almost nationalistic," he admits.

In addition, Himede says, "We explored the idea that

Americans love going on a road trip. Our landscape in America offers so much, and, growing up in America, going on a road trip is a traditional thing that's relatable." Thus, a visual road trip across America became the core of the scenic design. "That road is basically a V-shaped stage in forced perspective."

The set, fabricated by Scenic Express, extends beyond the stage, taking in a mosh pit. Beyond that, Himede says, "We have the seating area for all the contestants. Each state has its own banquette, and the contestants sit there with their relatives or band members. There are 11 banquettes for the 11 states [or territories] competing per show."

The banquettes have also been featured in recent Eurovision designs. "The contestants are having a having a party," Himede says. "They're basically waiting to see who gets to go to the next round and to the final." The banquettes are also used for host positions.

Travel is also at the heart of the video design, Himede says. "The whole design is based around a road map, and the concept of traveling on a journey on a highway. We wanted the landscape to be forever-changing as we travel America, looking for diversity from state to state. So, we designed large rectangular LED screens [approximately 24' high by 18' wide] that also travel around the same angle of the road; they go on a forced perspective. There are three on each side of the stage, and those LED screens are

there to provide the landscape that we are traveling through.” The LED side screens were 3mm ROE Visual Carbon; the automation was provided by PRG. In the audience/contestant area,” he adds. “We have eight additional video screens; all of the lines and the curves go in different directions.”

Located upstage is another 24'-high-by-20' wide 3mm ROE Carbon LED screen, called the hero screen. “It is there to make the space a little more intimate, to cut the visual road in half,” Himede says. “It lets us reveal talent for video performance and preset for the next performance. It gives us the transformational element that the set requires.

“When that screen [which is automated] is open,” Himede continues, “we have these giant circular rings upstage of our road, made of up several types of lighting units that create the sun at the end of the road. Vertical lighting units slide in and out in front of the sun, giving us another production element and making it more theatrical.” Video content was supplied by The Other House. “We collaborated with Chris Roth at TOH,” Himede says. “They came up with an official identity that represented our con-

cept of traveling state-by-state through America. If you watch the show, a lot of the house looks are scenes in saturated colors that represent all the landscapes of America.” The LED floor “is ROE Black Marble. That provides the sense of traveling.

“The biggest challenge was to create a design adaptable for 56 entries that could transform itself,” Himede says. “In the end, we have created a design that is adaptable through content and props and can be unique for each specific artist. That was one of the biggest considerations and challenges for us.”

He adds, “We have a built-in full-time art department of about five or six people and an art director who is there full-time. That art director [John Zuiker] not only delivers our set but is there to art-direct all 56 performances.” All props are built in-house.

Lighting

“The overhead lighting rig is a series of trusses in forced perspective along the side and a series of left and right overhead electric trusses between them,” says lighting





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designer Noah Mitz, of Full Flood. "The bulk of our overhead electrics are kind of simplified: [130 GLP] JDC1 strobes, [124] PRG Icon Edges, and they're outlined with [Martin by Harman VDO] Scepter 20s [in 1m and 320mm lengths]. When you see the wide shot of the set, it's the alignment and the trim that are prioritized; between them, we've tucked in the backlight and scenery light, side light, and followspots so they don't interrupt the visual ceiling."

Long side trusses are "full of [Claypaky] Mini-Bs and [164] Elation Smarty Hybrids," Mitz says. "The Mini-B is a small Claypaky wash light. We've used it a couple of times, but for this we're using them in quantity; over 200 in those positions alone. It's a really compact, very bright wash light; the face is pretty small, and it gets very narrow. It's fast in its pan/tilt motion. It's a nice way for us to fill that space densely and have a fixture that can do a lot of effects from that position." (There are three versions of the Elation Smarty: The Smarty Max, the Proteus Smarty Hybrid, and the Smarty Hybrid.)

Located upstage behind the hero screen is the sun, featuring a bevy of GLP impression X5 washes. "This is the

world premiere of the X5," Mitz says. "It is the evolution of the very successful X4. It's a multi-cell video pixel-enabled wash light with greater intensity and RGB color mixing. We are in love with it; it's very fast, very bright, and it switches seamlessly between video pixel effects and regular wash light duty." There are 96 on the sun. "The goal with the sun was not to spread them around the room, but to make one impressive statement with them." The X5 includes a virtual color wheel, with 64 Lee Filters-referenced colors, static patterns, dynamic patterns, pattern effects, and 16-bit dimming.

Also used in this effect are GLP 500 and 1000 JDC Line static hybrid strobes. "They're the linear version of the JDC1," Mitz says. "They are 1m and .5m, and they follow the perimeter of the sun. They're great. We have some in the back of the room as well. We also use a quantity of them in the band looks from week to week. We outline scenic walls with them; we also outlined a staircase as well." Lighting director Will Gossett adds, "They are bright in white and in color, which gives us the punch we need to follow the musicality of the performances."



The rig's complement of Ayrton MagicBlades, Gossett says, "comprise most of three independently sliding light walls; the three pieces can be configured as one wall element or used in different combinations. There is a grid of 54 MagicBlades in the center wall and 45 in each of the left and right walls."

On the floor, Gossett notes, "We have a lighting position along the screens that are [GLP impression] X4 Bar 20s and PRG Icon Edges in a repeating pattern." The rig also includes 168 Philips Vari-Lite VL2600 Profiles, 116 GLP X4 Atoms, 40 Martin RUSH Strobe CWLs, 30 ETC Source Four LED Series 3 Lustrs, and Solaris Flare, JR, and Q + LR strobes.

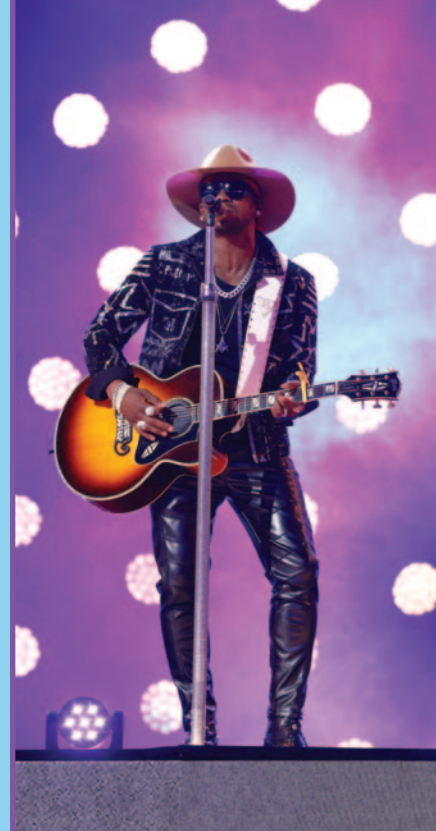
Carts used for individual performances "include Elation Artiste Mondrians, [Robe] MegaPointes, and [Elation] Proteus Excaliburs," Gossett says. The Excalibur is "a monster version of the Sharpy that's an LED source," Mitz says. "As far as competing with the screens, it's great. It's an arena-scale product, and any time we can put an arena-scale product on a soundstage it's very impressive." The Excalibur has a 10" front lens, 14 dichroic colors

including CTO and UV, eight interchangeable rotating/indexing glass gobos, and 17 static-stamped metal gobos. The Mondrian includes an CMYRGB array and variable linear CTO, a six-position color wheel, two rotating gobo wheels, dual prism, dual frost, and a full blackout framing system with 360° continuous index and rotation of shapes.

For spotlights, Gossett says, "We have eight [PRG] Best Boy GroundControls and four Robe Fortes," the latter used in RoboSpots. Mitz adds, "We wanted an LED engine option that had a bit of a narrower beam; something with a BMFL wash kind of punch to be some of the backlight, so that's what the Forte is doing—the backlight." Control is provided by three MA Lighting grandMA2 consoles and a disguise media server; the lighting equipment is provided by PRG and Volt. Lighting directors/programmers are Patrick Brazil, Rob Koenig, Darien Koop, Sam Paine, and Erin Anderson.

Audio

Because of conflicting production schedules due in part to



Above, left and right: Abbott says his use of processing is minimal. “I try to stay native and true to the original tone of the talent’s voice. Engineers sometimes insert a lot of plug-ins to manage the audio sources, which in turn alters the natural sound if not used sparingly. It’s a trap that a lot of us fall into.”

the ongoing pandemic, the audio department had several mixers throughout the run of the show. Michael Abbott provided the overall sound design and was the production mixer for the first episode of the show; Jeff Fusting took over for the duration of the project. The production audio mix platform was a Calrec Apollo console in the Denali “Silver” video truck. “I use a lot of different consoles, depending on the truck company and the facility, but most of the time I’m on a Calrec,” Abbott says. “It provides a user-friendly control surface that allows for quick programming.

“I use a Waves plug-in server for dialogue processing,” he continues. “I use the WNS noise-reduction plug-in for the dialogue and audience mics; it helps to minimize the cooling fan noise coming from video tiles and lighting instruments. There are 800-plus video tiles with fans and 300-plus lights providing a 75dBA noise floor, which is challenging for getting intelligible dialogue to the audience on the stage and the broadcast mix.”

Speaking about the hosts, Abbott says, “Snoop has a few high-frequency transients in his voice that I use a pair of de-esser processors to minimize—he also holds the mic in close proximity to his mouth, which creates an emphasis in the low-mid range of his voice. I use an 1176 [compressor] on him and Kelly to keep their dialogue at a consistent level.”

Overall, Abbott says his use of processing is minimal. “I try to stay native and true to the original tone of the talent’s voice. Engineers sometimes insert a lot of plug-ins to manage the audio sources, which in turn alters the natural sound if not used sparingly. It’s a trap that a lot of us fall

into; I, too, am capable of doing too much processing. It’s actually a challenge sometimes not to use processing; just because you can doesn’t mean that you should.”

For the hosts’ mics, Abbott says, “I’m using the Shure Axient Digital ADX Series [specifically AD4Q receivers with ADX2 transmitters], which is my go-to RF mic system; I’m using Beta 58 capsules on the dialogue mics. I have Shure TL 47 lavaliers as a backup as needed, but primarily it’s the Shure Beta 58 ADX that we use.”

Also, he says, “They wanted to do a lot of treatment in terms of microphone shells—the producers wanted to bling out microphones. Randy’s usual go-to is the Sennheiser 6235, and that’s a hard mic to retrofit; you can’t really put mic skins on those casings. So, we ended up using Shure ADXs across the board.”

Abbott deploys Sennheiser MK 416s as audience-reaction microphones. “I have a set of them hidden left/right of the stage; it’s difficult to position mics to not be in the camera shot, because the visuals are very important on the show with all the video walls. My challenges were where to put mics in the audience space; when I deploy audience mics, I try to create an aural sense of space in context to the on-camera look of the stage.”

In terms of the live bands, Faustino says, “We have Sennheiser mics on the band. The kick has 602s, with 905s on the snares and 604s on the tom-toms. We have e 914s on the high hats and overheads.” He also uses “Shure [KSM] 313s on the guitars, along with some [Shure SM] 57s.” Both Faustino and Tim Hatayama, another broadcast mixer, are on an Avid Venue Profile.



The JBL PA in the room, provided by Clair Global, is managed by front-of-house mixer Barrance D. Warrick; the main hang consists of JBL VTX A12 cabinets. There are also “six S28 subs, six AC26 front fills, and eight VRX 932 dialogue down fills,” he says. The system also includes “36 K-array Tornados in the banquettes for dialogue and [JBL] Control 25s in the rest of the audience seats for dialogue; we’re using 40 Powersoft K10 amps.” He’s mixing on a “DiGiCo SD5 console and DiGiCo SD racks.” The system was hung and tuned by Dave Scobbie. “Rick Bramlette helped me dial in all the different zones in the room,” Warrick says. “You know the saying that everybody has a guy? Well, I have two guys Dave and Rick and they are the best.”

The first season of American Song Contest wrapped up on May 9; the winner was K-Pop singer Alexa of Oklahoma. 📡



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