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Barry Manilow's Top 40

Taking a theatrical approach to a tour featuring Manilow and his 40 number-one songs

By: Sharon Stancavage



Disco balls-via video-are an unexpected part of Manilow's production.

'm doing every anti-concert thing there is," says Barry Manilow's creative director and production designer Seth Jackson, of 3SR Creative. Manilow's current tour, titled *One Last Time*, has no funky truss shapes nor complex automation. "I don't have a lot of lights in the air; there's next to nothing," the designer adds. "I don't have a huge Sharpy/strobe thing going on. In fact, there's very little beam graphic stuff in the show. Again, the anticoncert."

Jackson's approach was conceived in consultation with Manilow. "He and I crafted this show, from top to bottom, together," the designer says. This required many phone conversations. "We gave ourselves the time to just develop an idea and not feel bad if it couldn't fly and we had to cut it," he adds.

During these pre-production discussions, Manilow had two separate shows in development. One was a greatesthits roundup; the other was more of a production-based entertainment. "We ended up with a hybrid that has something for everyone, from longtime fan to a first-timer," Jackson says.

Manilow, a concert industry veteran if there ever was one, knew his opinions. Jackson says, "For months, Barry sent me link after link of other shows, saying, 'I like that element, I don't like that one,' and so on." As for the overall feel of the show, Jackson says, "He wanted it to be adult, but fun; elegant, but joyous."

Jackson, who also designs for theatre, knew exactly what Manilow needed for an adult, elegant show: "We have a set with no aluminum and no silver; it has an enormous amount of red velour and red drape with gold tassels and wood trim. We masked the band riser with a slatted wood fascia front, so you don't see knees and water bottles and cable. It's very clean across the stage, and his area is pristine in terms of performance space."

Sew What? Inc., of Rancho Dominguez, California, provided the layers upon layers of luxurious red velvet. "There's an 85' bi-parting curtain that starts the show, and it's an impressive thing right there," Jackson says. "We also mask the whole building, so you never see the seats behind; it's very specifically closed up, and that's a deliberate choice." The set, fabricated by All Access Staging & Productions, based in Torrance, California, includes two side stage extensions, which add width to the show, and a 28' underlit thrust with a hydraulic X lift inside, which is featured in the song "Moonlight Serenade."





Upstage center is a 13' x 33' Pixled F-7 wall—an element used in Manilow's show at the Paris Las Vegas Hotel and Casino. Jackson says, "The video wall sits in a space within the drapes. The red swags cut the corners; it's specifically masked so that you don't see the edges. I did not want that square back there."

Initially, Jackson's challenge was to avoid the "giant floating IMAG head" upstage. The solution came from content creator and media server programmer Brent Sandrock—who also happens to be Jackson's business partner. "What Brent came up with is genius—he decided it wasn't going to be a choice of content or IMAG; he was going to blend Barry into the content," the designer says. "When Barry's head is up there, you don't see the bass player behind him; there's content that's fitting to what's going on, and he's just layered in. It's a neat approach that solved my big headache, since I didn't just want to put his face up on the screen." Sandrock adds, "Our intent was for it to feel like Barry is part of the content, rather than just on top of it."

The masking is done via a d3 Technologies d3 media server, which was also used in the singer's long-running



and then Barry said, 'Let's do karaoke with a bouncing ball'." Sandrock was less than certain about the idea, but trusted Manilow's instinct: "We said, 'If we're going to do this, we want to take it to the extreme.' And that's what we did, because we didn't want it to look like we had just put up karaoke lyrics." Consequently, as Manilow sings, a smiley faces bounces along to the lyrics of the song, and practically demands the entire audience to smile and sing along. "Everybody is in love with it," Jackson reports.

In the past, "Mandy" featured video of a young Manilow on the old NBC music series *The Midnight Special*; it's a fan favorite. Sandrock explains. "The biggest challenge with him is incorporating elements and pieces that have been made before or that he loves while at the same time steering things in a different direction, adding new elements. You have a comfort level—'I've done this before, this has worked'—and when you're not trying to create a completely new show, that's oftentimes the most difficult part—blending elements seamlessly between the old and the new."

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Paris Las Vegas show. "We created many masks with different amounts of feathering on the edges," Sandrock says. "We made circle edges, straight edges, and even did patterns like stars. We tried everything. Once we started filling in content with each song, we discovered most of them were quieter ballads, so the curved gentle edge worked really well."

One of the show's high points occurs during "Can't Smile Without You." The concept came directly from Manilow, who initially envisioned the content for the song. Sandrock says, "The old content was just a smiley face, With that in mind, Jackson and Sandrock looked at "Mandy" from a slightly different angle. "For 'Mandy,' his current self is singing to his former self. It took us a while to figure out how we were going to do the camera work for it," Jackson admits. The number is performed via a split screen. "Initially, you're hearing the old version and watching footage of him from 1975," Sandrock says. "Then Barry sits down at the piano and starts playing. As the song crescendos, we fade up live IMAG on one side and the vintage footage on the other as the two Barrys sing the remainder of the song as a duet."

CONCERTS

Manilow worked with Sandrock during the content creation process. "Often you're tasked with brainstorming ideas based on either very little information or the artist's version of what they want, which can be filled with emotional verbiage rather than visuals you could tangibly put on the screen," he admits. However, Sandrock had the time to explore a variety of ideas with Manilow, working through what the artist wanted. He adds, "The amount of content that landed in the show is probably in the realm of 5% - 10% of what we created, mostly due to the flexibility in the set list as the show took form. When creating media for the gigantic 18-minute medley, we didn't know what all the songs were, so we had about 40 different elements ready, and then we placed what felt right." The medleywhich includes "One Voice," "Read 'Em and Weep," "Daybreak," and "I Write the Songs"-features different content for each song. Jackson notes, "It's basically all of the songs that aren't performed in full somewhere else in the show. At the end of the night, he's done all 40 of his number-one songs."

Sandrock and Nathan Scheuer handled the d3 programming. "We decided to operate the d3 in stand-alone mode. We built all our cues directly within the d3 interface, and triggered those cues from the lighting console," Sandrock notes. There are also the traditional left/right IMAG screens; support staff and the camera package are supplied by Delicate Productions Inc. of Camarillo, California

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Jackson, who also designed the show's lighting, created a streamlined rig with only 48 fixtures—not counting the single Lycian M2 truss spot backlighting Manilow and the lights on and below the runway. "I chose very powerful, very flexible fixtures to light this," he says.



Jackson used slatted wood fascias on the band risers to keep the stage looking clean.



Manilow dislikes being chained to his piano, and works the stage during the show.



Layers of red velour from Sew What? give the production a sophisticated look.

CONCERTS

For his profile—and, to a lesser extent, wash—light, Jackson turned to the new Robe BMFL, which he first encountered on a visit to the Robe factory in the Czech Republic. "We saw it in prototype last spring, and I thought, This is what I need for the show, because it does everything," he recalls. "It's a beam fixture that can look washy. It's got a ridiculous zoom, it has animations, it has gobos, it has a great color system—and even though it's big, it's fast, and the brightness is insane. It is my hardedge-gobo, heavy-color arc-lamp big gun."

Working in tandem with the BMFLs are 14 Clay Paky A.leda B-EYE K-20s. "As a wash light, it has a great color system, and even though it is an LED light, it holds its own with the BMFL; they're a great pair, intensity-wise," he states. "It has a great flexible zoom, you can do a nice wash, you can do a beamy pinspot thing, and it looks like it's a much heavier gun than it is. The color system is brilliant and the intensity is amazing, as well."

Also used are 10 Robe CycFX 8s. "It's an LED striplight that tilts; I use them to tone the curtains and the wood band fronts," Jackson adds.

Although he doesn't engage in excessive audience abuse, Jackson has eight Elation Professional CUEPIX Blinder WW2s. "They're two-cell Molefays, but they're LEDs and are incredible," he says. "They light the whole arena up and they have an adjustable dimming curve."

The rest of the rig includes 10 Robe ROBIN LEDBeam 100s downstage for fill light, a set of Robe Anolis ArcDots on the ramp, and 24 Bandit Lites GRN Wash 3-36 units under the runway up lighting it. "It's bigger than you think in terms of the look but it doesn't take a lot of gear to do it," Jackson says.

On the road, the lighting director and programmer Nate Alves is on an MA Lighting grandMA2 ultra-lite; the lighting gear is supplied by Bandit Lites. Jackson confides, "Bandit has been Barry's vendor for a long, long time and a lot of these guys have done runs with us before."

Sound

For his "last" tour, Manilow sounds as good as he ever has—thanks to front-of-house engineer Ken Newman and a Martin Audio MLA PA provided by Delicate Productions. Newman was introduced to the MLA (Multi-cellular Loudspeaker Array) system at the AES Show. He explains, "I attended a seminar called 'Not Your Father's Line Array,' where they talked about the new multicellular loudspeaker systems by Martin and EAW. They did a really good presentation about them; they are quite revolutionarily different than previous line array systems. And I said, 'That's what we need for the Barry Manilow show!'"

There are many reasons that Newman feels the MLA is the perfect product for Manilow: "Number one, it's going to give the entire audience the same sound; number two, it's going to give me more gain before feedback on his microphone, and number three, it's going to be great in every way," the engineer says with a smile.

Consistent SPL was a huge selling feature for Newman. "I know that it's not going to get any louder as you get closer to the stage, which is contrary to every other sound system. It's magical. Give or take a small amount, it's the same level from the front seat to the back seat, and that is spectacular."

The Martin Audio MLA DISPLAY2 intelligent software system also has some unique benefits. "The software allows for hard-avoid and non-audience areas when you're programming the system," Newman says. "When Phil [Reynolds], our MLA system tech, goes into a new venue, he can put in hard-avoid areas, such as the stage or the roof of a venue, so it doesn't bounce off like a normal sound system would. It just makes for a better sonic experience in all ways, because it's focusing the sound on the audience and only on the audience and keeping it off the places that it shouldn't be hitting; that way, it's not any more reverberant than it needs to be in a particular venue."

There are 22 MLA and 24 MLA Compact cabinets in the Manilow system, as well as 10 W8LM [mini-line array

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enclosures] for front fills and two MLDs for downfills. There are six MLX subs as well. Newman says, "There is the occasional impact effect that we'll want some low end for, but, aside from that, it's not particularly low-end heavy."

He adds, "I was impressed by the things that they told me [the MLA system] could do, and we're finding out it actually does those things. It's very different than an average sound system. The math going on as it is producing sound just boggles the mind. There are multiple drivers in each cabinet, and each driver is fed by its own amplifier channel; that's how they're able to direct the sound in the direction that you tell it to direct it in."

At the front of house, Newman is on a DiGiCo SD5; previously, he used a Soundcraft Vi6. He says, "I was pretty maxed out on the Vi6, so as much as I love it and it



Manilow had a hand in all the aspects of the tour, including the video content on the upstage LED wall.

worked really well, I said, 'It's time for me to learn how to use the DiGiCo console, which has a lot more capabilities'." He adds, "[The SD5] is so powerful, it's amazing; it has so many possibilities, so many options, and so many great things you can do to alter the sound. It's just fantastic mixing on that console; it feels like I'm mixing on one of the better analog consoles that I used in the past."

For many, analog consoles mean warmth; however, that's not a concern for Newman or Manilow. "Barry isn't interested in warm, he's interested in bright," Newman says. "This show is more about clarity, and making sure that the lead instrument is heard at the right time, and the right voice is heard at the right time."

Newman adds, "Whenever [Manilow is] singing, his voice always has some sort of effect on it; otherwise, he's not happy. He does not like a dry vocal sound, so it has to have some effect, and I vary them depending on the song. That goes for the band mix, as well. For example, 'Mandy;' the original recording, had what was known in the 1970s as the Mandy snare drum. It was this big-sounding snare drum—big as in lots of low end—but it had a big reverb on it so it sounded like it was in a cavern. 'I Write the Songs" has a somewhat similar snare drum sound, while 'Somewhere in the Night' also features some big drum reverb. 'For 'Moonlight Serenade,' I use a large hall reverb on his voice. That's from my [TC Electronic] M5000, which I've been using for decades."

Manilow has a role in mixing the show. "During rehearsals and soundchecks, Barry spends time next to me at the front of house," Newman says. "He'll tell me what changes to make—he's like a record producer, telling the engineer what to do as the band is playing. He will fine-tune it until it sounds right to him, and then he'll say, 'Now you have to duplicate that every night'."

Newman has a variety of microphones on stage; Manilow is on a Shure UHF-R KSM9. "The KSM9 is okay at a distance, but I rather prefer the Shure Beta 87 that he used in the past," the engineer notes. But Manilow is



One of the more colorful numbers in the production, "Copacabana," includes faux LED marquee lights.

accustomed to the KSM9, so Newman is making it work; the three backup singers are on UHF-R Beta 87s.

Newman has a variety of favorite mics for specific applications. He says, "The Shure Beta 98AMP [miniature cardoid drum] microphones, which we started using not too long ago on toms, sound great; they mount nicely and they really work."

There's also an interesting setup at monitors that includes Newman. "Barry has a number of speakers around the stage and he has his IEMs," he says. They're custom JH Audio IEMs that have an opening to allow him to hear the floor monitors [d&b audiotechnik M2s and M4s] and [Martin Audio] side fills.

Newman also has a hand in the actual monitor mix. "There is a mix from me that I call the mix minus—it's the house mix minus his vocal and minus his piano," he says. "Will Miller, Barry's monitor engineer, gets that mix minus feed, and puts it at just the right level, which varies constantly, in all the speakers, so he hears the band through the speakers by virtue of my mix minus coming to him. So I'm not only mixing the house, but I'm also sending that feed to the monitors so Barry can hear it to perform. And he's very particular about how loud that is, what it sounds like and so forth. That's where Will comes in, to make it sound just right." Miller is on a Yamaha PM1D; he shares it with Francois Paré, who mixes monitors for the band and singers; of course, they use two control surfaces.

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