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**Cher:**  
*Dressed to Kill*





# CHER

Gets Dressed  
to Kill



The star's new tour is all fabulous, all the time

By: Sharon Stancavage





At one point during her *Dressed to Kill* Tour, Cher asks, “What do audiences want?” Her answer is simple: “They want me to sing, dress in silly costumes, and be fabulous.”

These goals are accomplished—and then some—in the current tour. The production design is by Baz Halpin and Chris Nyfield, of Los Angeles-based Silent House Productions; the show director is Doriana Sanchez, who has worked alongside the star for the past 30 years. “When you’re dealing with an icon like Cher, she deserves nothing less than an extravaganza,” Nyfield says.

Planning for this extravaganza took place over a long time line, as rumors of the tour flourished and went cold. “It’s been two years in the making, and that time line is quite unique,” Halpin says. During that time, Sanchez, Cher, and the rest of the production team explored various concepts. “She’s got a career over 50 years long,” Halpin says. “And she has over 50 years’ worth of material. She’s not doing concept tours, she’s doing concepts acts within a tour. Her material is way too diverse to try and have one concept.”

### Staging

Halpin and Nyfield were tasked with creating a scenic design that was both distinctive and, to a degree, invisible. “We wanted to create a set that was transformable and nondescript—which, in one breath, could be a circus or vampire ball and, in another breath, *The Sonny and Cher Show*,” Halpin says. “You’re trying to create a set that can contain all these worlds and feel as natural as in her home,

because this is where she lives for as long as the tour goes on.”

Cher herself had very definite ideas about the design. “So much time goes into the fine detail—we literally looked at dozens of paint samples for finishes for each part of the set,” Halpin says. “We went through 12 different revisions just for the handrail.” Tyler Kicera, director of design at the Lititz, Pennsylvania-based scenic house TAIT, echoes that thought: “It was important to Cher that her set be built with museum-quality finishes. This extra attention to detail forced us to consider each solution’s impact on the artistic quality of the set.”

In the end, Halpin says, “The set has a very distinctive look—Moroccan sun-themed. It’s all gold, with lots of latticing, handrails, lamps, and a giant sun.”

The stylized sun-screen surround, equipped with integrated LED lighting, was also fabricated by Tait; it is lifted and lowered during the show using Tait’s Nav Hoists. The handrails and posts—which change color via LEDs—are also deliciously ornate. “Functional Moroccan lamps that double as handrail uprights were a bit of a challenge,” Kicera says. “We ended up vacuforming plastic and, like a clamshell, encased a load-bearing steel member.”

The production is laden with props. Cher enters the 64’-deep-by-70’ 6”-wide Tait stage on a column lift that takes her 25’ above the stage. That’s just a taste of the scenic treats the designers have for her. “The props set the stage for every little moment,” Nyfield says.

The first little moment after her entrance isn’t little at all. In *Dressed to Kill*, Cher “becomes the queen of the



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Cher in a duet with Sonny via Panasonic DZ 21K rear projectors.



The ShowFX *Burlesque* mirror is also the back of a gypsy caravan.

vampires,” Halpin says. “This sequence features three chandeliers; the largest provides a seat for Cher above the stage, did the lighting and the rigging within those pieces,” Nyfield says (see cover image). The scene also includes candelabra, fabricated by Burbank-based Global Entertainment Industries, who also handled the Moroccan lanterns in the opening scenes.

Cher, clad in a tiny bright red mini-dress, revisits her life in the swinging ‘60s in “The Beat Goes On” and “I Got You Babe.” From there, it’s a trip to a carnival, complete with sideshow caravans, for more of her earlier hits: “Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves,” “Dark Lady,” and “Half-Breed.”

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“The sideshow caravans have traveler tracks within them,” Nyfield says. “Each track holds a drop painted the style of a vintage sideshow poster. There is a drop for each sideshow act—the strongman, sword swallower, etc. They really help sell the story line.” The center unit, which is the largest, is approximately 11’ tall by 10’ wide by 6’ deep; all were fabricated by Show FX, of Santa Fe Springs, California.

The outer caravans leave the stage, and the center caravan spins and becomes a framed mirror for “Welcome to Burlesque,” a Bob Fosse-style dance number inspired by Cher’s 2010 film. “Since we were short on both transition time and storage space, we constructed the central caravan to serve two masters,” Nyfield says. “The side panels of the main caravan [which aren’t seen by the

audience], are actually the *Burlesque* mirror. The mirror is split and hinged; each panel swings closed to complete the Burlesque look.”

The most spectacular prop of the show—a 15’-tall golden Trojan horse—courtesy of Michael Curry, of Michael Curry Design, based in Scappoose, Oregon—appears during “Take It like a Man.” The horse is nicknamed “Troji.” “I know you didn’t think we would go there, but we did,” Nyfield admits with a laugh. Storing the horse could have been problematic, thanks to its massive size. “We needed to have it all the way upstage, but still have room for everything else back there,” Nyfield says. “Gabe Wood, our rigger, was tasked with flying Troji in back of the video wall; he was able to do it pretty effortlessly, because of the brilliantly efficient way it was constructed.”

After an *Unplugged*-style sequence and some rock numbers, the show comes to its fabulous conclusion. “Believe” features dancers in harlequin costumes and acrobats using two silver, LED-infused spheres, courtesy of Braun Productions.

The finale—“I Hope You Find It”—brings Cher out to the outer reaches of the venue via a flying arch controlled by a Tait Navigator automation system. “The fly system works off of four winch points, three static points, and one tracking point,” Kicera says. “The tracking point allows us to pick Cher up on the main stage and move her far enough downstage to have her flight path miss the PA and lighting trusses.”

### Video

Video, in the form of both pre-produced content and live IMAG, is an integral visual element within the overall production. “We made the back walls of the risers into video screens, but we put them behind this beautiful cutout latticework,” Halpin says, “We have a giant back-wall video screen, which can be a half-oval shape or a full rectangle, depending on how we use it.” The video behind the latticework is a new product, provided by Los Angeles-based VER. The new WinVision 9mm tiles “are square, so





Halpin's white and magenta color palette is reflected in the costumes on stage.

you can angle them more easily," notes content designer Olivier Goulet, of Montreal-based Geodezik. "They're smaller, so when you want to do a curve with it, you have more steps and the curve is smoother." The tiles are so new, he adds, "we might have the first ones on tour."

The video content helps to transform the set; it also serves a structural function. "The show is divided up by videos—there's the '60s era, the '70s era, the rock '80s era, the 'Believe' '90s era, all the movies she's been in that people forget, and the Oscars and Emmys that she's won," Halpin says. These sequences give Cher time to change elaborate costumes, which were designed by Hugh Duran. Also, says Goulet, "She sings everything live and she can get tired from singing like she does; the big challenge was to fill in those gaps where she's off stage."

Early in the production, the video imagery takes fans on a journey to the swinging '60s, including her signature song, "I Got You Babe," performed as a duet with footage of the late Sonny Bono. "It's a very, very important element of the show, because Cher never really sang that song live without Sonny," Goulet says.

For this number, "We fly in a projection screen, which is

Black Diamond on an RP screen on a custom-built frame which is 20' x 10'," Halpin says. Panasonic DZ 21K rear projectors deliver the images. "We roll the projectors on stage; it's very old-school," Goulet says. "I prefer that to rigging them—it's super-safe, and if there's a problem, you see it right away and can fix it." This is the first time Goulet has used Panasonic 21K projectors on the road. He says, "I don't know yet how they will react on tour—at first glance, they're great. They're small, easy, cheaper to re-lamp than Xenon projectors and, quality-wise, they're fine. They're very small, easy to install, and need little power." Three additional projectors are used on the Austrian curtain during the opening sequence, and are then quickly removed.

The camera package includes three manned cameras in the pit and two at the front of house; they are controlled by director Deb Collins on a Sony MVS 3000 switcher. "The camera goes through two [Green Hippo] Hippotizer media servers; the Hippo is great to work with LEDs," Goulet says. IMAG is minimal.

The system, which Goulet describes as "super-straight-forward," is controlled by lighting director Steve "Six"





The detailing in the set is reflected in the Moroccan lanterns above the stage.

Schwind on a Martin Professional M1 console. “We are running cameras through all the Hippos,” he says. “I’m calling up camera shots through them; sometimes what goes to the four side IMAG screens goes through my console.”

**“A lot of people, late in their careers, are not what they once were, but Cher has still got it.” — Bracey**

Time code, which is part of the glue that holds the show together, is also what binds video and lighting. “There’s the lighting desk and a separate video desk at the front of house,” Schwind says. “I have DMX out of the lighting console to the video console, which then sends remote triggers to the video desk. I also have Paul Bange, of the video crew, in charge of the Hippos. He sits with me. I’ve shown him little bits on the M1; I’ve gotten him to the point that if they change something—if they’ve added a minute or taken one away—I can give it to him and have him do it in the song.”

Schwind alludes to the fact that the show is not fully time-coded. “Things can change in a live show. There is time code when needed—like during the duets with Sonny—but not there at others—like when the band wants to vamp. I have an inhibitor that will kick off time code. If there’s a problem, we can take manual control of the show. It works way better on the lighting desk than with a video clip.”

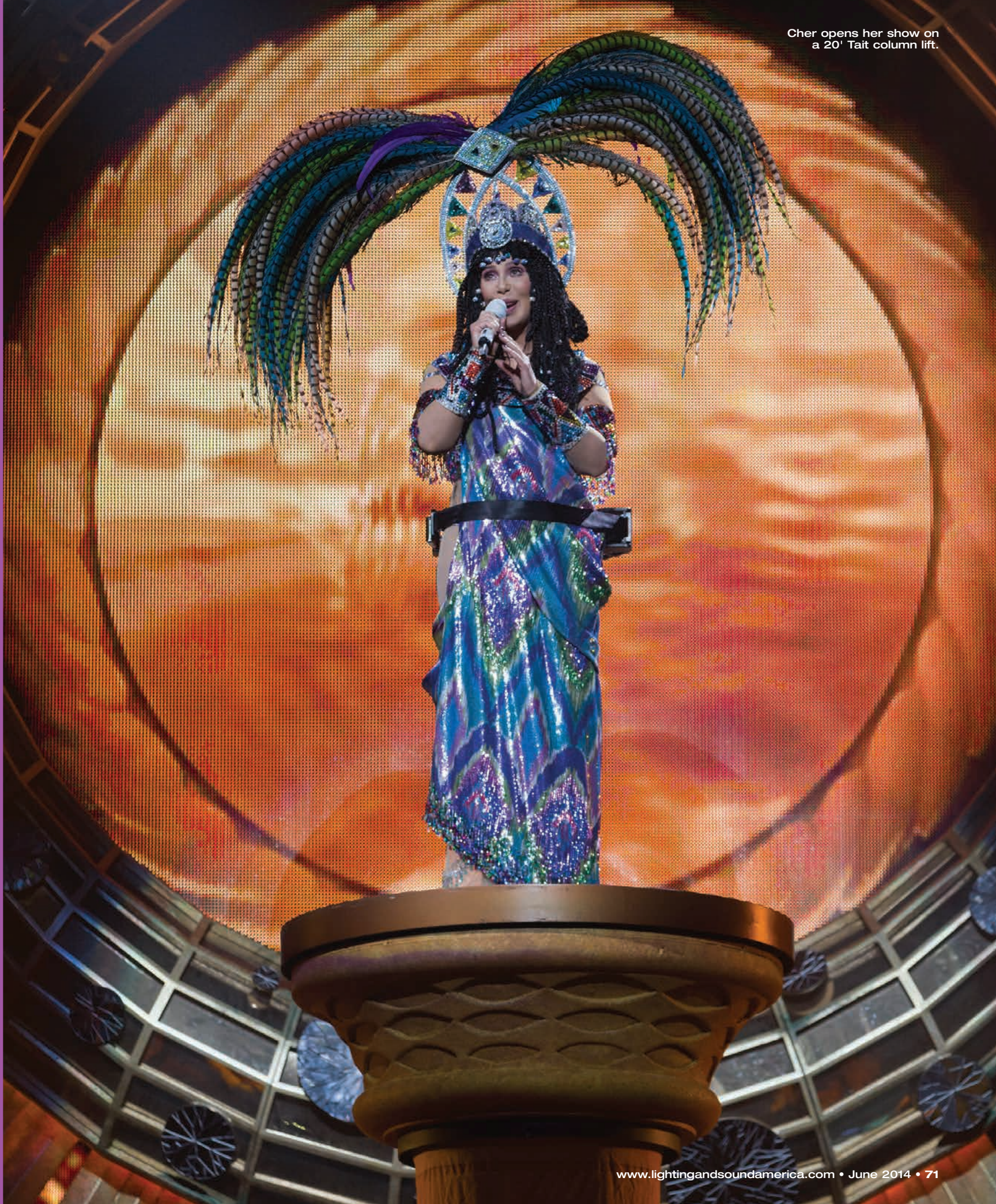
### Lighting

For the first time, Schwind is working with time-coded truss spots—PRG Best Boys with their spotlight function enabled. “If, on a rare occasion, there is a problem with a quick costume change, I tell the spotlight guys it’s more than likely their lights will come on before [Cher] comes out and she’ll walk into their light,” he says. If Cher exits early, or stays on stage longer than expected, Schwind also has a plan: “I put an inhibitor on [the followspots] in case it’s going to be a while or she decides to leave before the end of the cue list. I’m part LD and part truss spot operator.”

In addition to the truss spots, there are 42 Best Boy 4000s in the rig. Halpin, who designed the lighting, says,



Cher opens her show on  
a 20' Tait column lift.





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An early concept drawing of the opening of the production.

“We have a lot of [Martin Professional MAC] Viper Air FXs, a lot of [Clay Paky] Sharpys, a lot of i-Pix BB4s, and a lot of SGM strobes.” The Sharpys spots function as floor units and on the arch in front of the video screen; he also has Philips Vari\*Lite VL3500 Washes supplying sidelight, upstage floor light, and upstage wash light.

Halpin’s rig relies on two workhorse units. “The most multi-purpose light is either the Best Boy or Viper—they do air effects, they can give you a wash, they can give you a spot, they can give you frames, and they can give you gobos and color mixing,” he says. “We use the Viper for air effects backlight, and the Best Boys are used key lights and air effects.”

Also, says Schwind, “There are 40 GLP impression X4 wash lights.” The impression X4, he says, “can go from a nice, tight, hard-edge kind of beam—almost an ACL-type beam—to a massive, blooming beam, washing an entire arena out with four of them. The colors are wonderful, and it’s as fast as anything you have ever seen.”

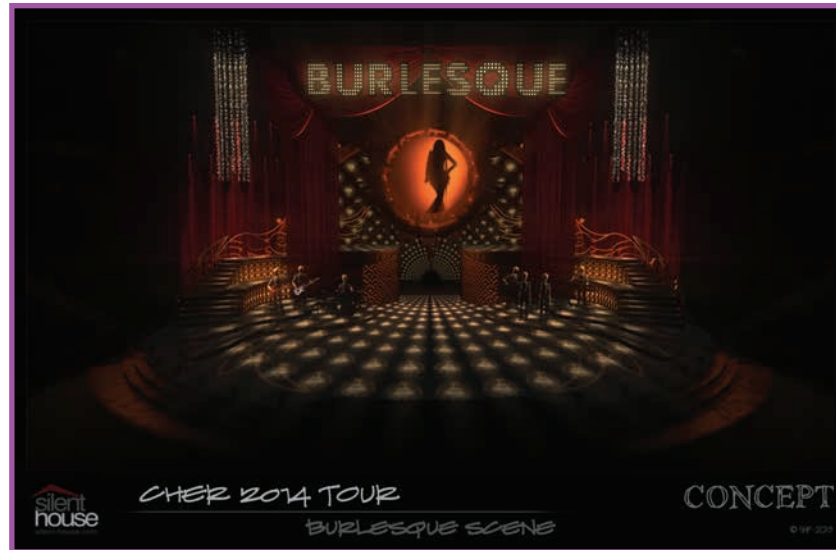
Lighting is also integrated into the rear LED screen. “It’s got a curved façade piece, with 16 Sharpys, that can move up and down out of the way,” notes Halpin.

As for the palette, one color is missing. “Cher is very specific about colors,” Halpin says. “There is no green, there is nothing that looks like green, there’s nothing in the spectrum of green. There are only warm yellows.”

The production was programmed by Bryan Barancik on the Martin M1. It’s a complex show; “I think we’re at 20 universes in the lighting rig,” notes Schwind. The lighting gear is provided by PRG.

### Sound

Many artists have secrets, which are kept by their front-of-house engineers. Cher is not one of them. “A lot of people,



From the start, the *Burlesque* scene included video drapes and a faux marquee sign.

late in their careers, are not what they once were, but Cher has still got it,” notes sound engineer Dave Bracey, who, like many others in the tour, came straight off of Pink’s most recent tour. “She’s been doing it for 50 years and the fact that she can still do it so well is fantastic.”

For his PA, Bracey relies on L-Acoustics, provided by Black Box Music, of Berlin, Germany. He is generally a fan of L-Acoustics, but admits, “We considered other systems as well. We were very open-minded about what we were going to take.”

Bracey used the L-Acoustics K1 box on the Pink tour; this time around, however, he had another option to consider: the brand-new K2 cabinet. “All of the side hangs and underhung boxes are K2s,” he says. “It’s a huge improvement over any combination of the former system. It’s a smaller box—it steps down from a 15” to a 12”—but, sonically, it’s exactly the same as the K1. Because both boxes have the same horizontal dimension, the K2 picks up perfectly below the K1, extending the functionality of the line array all the way down the hang.”

In addition to her songs, Cher regales the audience with her humor. “She’s hilarious; I laugh at every show,” says Bracey, who adds, “Intelligibility in the speech frequencies is extraordinarily important on this show.” Fortunately, the L-Acoustics PA gives him that throughout the venue. “The addition of the K2, especially around the side of the arena has turned it into a completely different beast,” he says. “The K2 pushes that same sonic signature right into the edges of the audience area. We can push that good, coherent sound out to the far seats; just because you’re in a top seat around the side, doesn’t mean you have to accept unintelligible audio.” The main PA features two hangs of 14 K1s each, two hangs of six K2s, providing downfill, and two hangs of eight K1SB subwoofers. The



side PA consists of two hangs of 12 K2s each and two hangs four K1SBs each. The rear PA features two hangs of 12 K2s each. Also used are 16 SB28 floor subs and six KARA boxes for near fill. The rig is driven by 50 flown and six grounded LA8 controllers fed by 96kHz AES and analog feedback.

The extended frequency response of the K2 means that Bracey and his team are able to do the show with fewer subwoofers. "In rehearsals, we concentrated on driving the system as well as we could without any subs, generating as much as we could from the main array. The main K1 hang itself is so efficient in the sub range that the actual subs are just sort of filling in the bottom 10Hz that the main hang can't get down to. The K1 has a lot of bass efficiency and, with the K2 under it extending the line array so much longer, the stuff we're generating in the air is nearly enough for this show without having any subs." For the disco-era and '80s rock songs in Cher's repertoire, Bracey uses the 16 L-Acoustics SB28s in a closed coupled sub arc on the floor and two hangs of eight K1SBs as low extension in contour mode beside the main hang.

Speaking of his console, Bracey says, "I have always mixed on a DiGiCo SD7, ever since they superseded the D5. It's the most engineer-friendly and best-sounding of the digital consoles, without a shadow of a doubt in my mind."

The console is the largest in the DiGiCo range, which Bracey needs for a show with so many inputs. "A show of this complexity does need a full-size desk—once you start getting up to 100-odd channels, then you need a console with that many faders and facilities. Almost exclusively, I use internal effects on every show that I mix on the SD7 and this one is no exception." The SD7 is also the choice of monitor engineers Jon Lewis, who mixes for Cher, and Horst Hartmann who mixes for the band; all three desks are on the same optical loop.

On stage is a variety of musicians, singers and, of course, Cher. However, Bracey describes his microphone package as "fairly regular—mainly there are Sennheiser mics up there." Cher "is on the Sennheiser 5235 head and a SKM 5200 series wireless." It's a mic that Bracey has used successfully with a variety of females, including Pink. "It's our go-to mic for female vocalists—Cher does have one in sparkly gold, sparkly silver, and sparkly black to match her different costumes," he notes.

Cher's tour continues through July; more dates are expected for this (wink-wink) "farewell" tour. "Cher makes it all work. Only Cher," Halpin concludes. 🎤



Above: Video content from Geodezik transports fans into the ancient world. Below: Michael Curry's Trojan Horse reveals Cher, not an invading army.

