Shapeshifters

Creating an ever-morphing design to suit the anything-can-happen ethos of Dave Matthews Band

By: David Barbour

Above and opposite: The tour features circular truss components overhead, which appear in various configurations, often as a trio of circles. Backing the band is a wide arch of light and a video screen with an oddly shapeshifting quality.

All Photos: Sanjay Suchak

Could it be summer without the Dave Matthews Band? Year after year, the group's long-running designers, including Fenton Williams (production design) and Aaron Stinebrink (lighting), have found fresh ways of expressing the band's good-times ethos. The 2008 tour was notable for its wide video screen and spiral-shaped lighting truss. The 2013 tour featured automated curved trusses seen in various configurations, including a series of tiers, complemented by a curved video wall. In 2015, geometric shapes, wrapped in ceiling tin, brought depth and texture to the set. A year later, the design featured five downstage high-res LED screens slightly angled back like a digital scoreboard, with three lengths of "ribbon board" video cladding the fronts of three curved trusses surrounding the band. By 2018, the designers turned to projection mapping on a 25'-tall-by-40'-wide custom surround based on the formation of geodes, a look that was extended by 12 lighting pods.

This year, the tour features circular truss components overhead, which appear in various configurations, often as a trio of circles. Backing the band is a wide arch of light and a video screen with an oddly shapeshifting quality. The truss pieces, including the circles and arch, were supplied by TMS, the production's Omaha-based lighting supplier. The production's automation, which allows those curved trusses to make many shapes, and the sub grid, were supplied by All Access Staging and Productions. These elements, plus an unusually fluid video design, guarantee an evening filled with surprises.

"For the past ten years or so," Williams says, "Dave and Tim [Reynolds, the guitarist], and I have been doing three nights down in Mexico. This event has given us the opportunity to test new design concepts on a smaller, more static level. If we see further potential, we can then expand upon the concept on a larger scale.

"In the late summer of 2024, we started on a concept that utilized motion control with LED walls. That's not really super-practical for three shows, so we came up with a completely new design that would allow us to make each night different for the folks who attend all three shows in Mexico. We loved the look and the potential for even more looks. We thought it might be a great design for 2026 since we were nearing the end of our design process for

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the previous concept for DMB 2025.

"We then got the 2025 dates, which were 35 shows as opposed to our normal average of 50. Our original 2025 concept would require significantly more one-time costs. We discussed how much we liked what we did in Mexico and decided to investigate expanding on that. For the upfront fabrication, one-time costs were significantly less, and we knew we loved what we had seen."

Stinebrink adds, "A couple of challenges that our vendors saw and addressed right out of the gate really made this a very efficient tour. The tour played sheds of various shapes and sizes, so All Access really thought out a slick design for the sub grid for the automation. They broke the system down into zones, which allowed us to push each zone around the stage to maximize trim height and allowable rigging. This really helped us maximize the trim height." The 18 one-ton CM smart hoists in the rig were run using Creative Conners Spikemark control software.

The design came with other spatial challenges, Stinebrink notes. "The spec also called for Elation [PROTEUS RAYZOR] BLADE Ls to be hung off the downstage face of the arch, which, at 75lb, really made the options for hanging them complicated to say the least. TMS designed a 'ski' solution that took the place of clamps. The ski slides from the top of the truss down a channel that has a stop on the bottom. This allowed for a more seamless attachment without hands having to hold the light in place while the clamps are tightened down. It also prevented any of the fixtures from slipping or rolling forward. It was a very slick design."

Overall, Stinebrink notes, "It really was a versatile, well-thought-out construction. All Access designed the sub grid into three different zones, which allows us to push the automation around to fit in various venues. There would have been issues in some venues if the tour carried one solid automation grid. TMS also did an amazing job with numerous fixture-hang solutions for a very efficient build. They also did a lot of custom engineering to hang LED tape on the bottoms of the half-circles. It was done in a way to make the best in and out possible."

All these elements contribute to the production's kinetic quality. Stinebrink adds, "Fenton wanted a design that would change and morph throughout the night. It is always a challenge to create a show progression with a fluid set list [a Dave Matthews Band specialty]. The first song one night might be the closer on the next. It really keeps you on your toes, trying to find the best moments to introduce more elements."

The production's shapeshifting quality is especially evident in its video element, which seems to grow, shrink, and change shape repeatedly. "Our team is aligned on the idea that if you have a main video wall, you don't have to

use all of it all the time," Williams says. "Use the negative space to let lighting breathe. Take advantage of creating smaller looks for content and IMAG both, to keep focus on the band. Our main content developer, Aaron Farrington, and I work with Aaron to create different shapes, sizes, and textures in an attempt to hopefully make it look like the video wall is, in fact, morphing into different shapes at times. We are working with six layers of video that we run on the fly as the set list is constantly changing." Adding a figure to give anyone pause, he says, "I believe the band did north of 150 songs on this past tour." The screen consists of ROE Visual MC7 video panels, with imagery fed by a Green Hippo Boreal+ MK2 media server. [Other video gear includes a Ross Carbonite 2m/e switcher and a Ross 34 by 34 router.] Williams says he and Farrington "work year-round together and have created quite a library of content." Video gear was supplied by Charlottesville, Virginia-based Pxlfield Productions.

In certain numbers, the video acquires a layered look, suggesting that multiple screens are placed on top of each other. But this, Stinebrink says, has to do with "the overall layering of multiple clips and masks to create different looks. In the end, Fenton is mixing four or five different combinations of graphic content, IMAG, motion masks, and hard masks. These are all mixed live, to varying degrees of opacity. It's impressive to see him mixing all these live, along with actively playing back lighting cues at the same time."

Lighting

Dissecting the lighting rig, Stinebrink says, "A number of systems were used to tie various visual elements together." He notes that two types of graphics systems are employed. "We use Robe MegaPointes on the arch and floor behind the band due to their speed and weight. Due to each of the MegaPointes being hung at an angle, fixture size was taken into consideration. Robe iFORTEs are used on the automated half-circles. We love the punch they provide. Plus, the number of features the iFORTE provides never leaves us wanting.

"The arch also has numerous Robe Spikie units situated in groups of four. They allow us to produce a lot of visual fan positions, and, with the arrangement, really frame the arch. The size of the fixture really makes it stand out for us. You can pack a large number of them in tight spaces to really get a large impact due to the vast numbers.

"We have two systems of wash fixtures. On the circles, the Elation PROTEUS RAYZOR 1960s have great punch,

wonderful zoom, and the pixel control really makes them a mainstay with us. We have Elation PROTEUS RAYZOR BLADE L fixtures on the arch. We use them as traditional wash units, but, as they are linear bars, we get wonderful effects that ring the arch. One reason we chose the BLADE was the white LED linear strobe on its face. These gave us pixel control that mimics the PULSE BAR L and S white strobes.

"Fenton has always enjoyed effects fixtures like these in our rigs," he says. "For years, we have specified GLP JDC1s. For this tour, we needed a lower-profile fixture that would sit on top of the circle truss and have a seamless look. These fixtures really fit the bill. The PULSE BARs are very punchy and have wonderful individual pixel control. I also really like the center RGB strobe strip, which mimics the LED tape hanging on the bottom of each half circle. This allows us to give the truss a third dimension when the RGB strobe and LED tape work in tandem."

Also featured is a set of Elation SŌL I BLINDERs. "We used Bowens mounts and added some large reflectors to them, giving each fixture a conventional scoop appearance," Stinebrink says. "They are very versatile fixtures and really pack a punch in such a small unit.

"For our key light, we used an additional set of iFORTE units. The light quality and punch on them are fantastic. Also, they look great on camera with high CRI filters."

Running the numbers, the rig includes 36 Elation Pulse Bar S units, 36 Robe Spikies, 24 Robe iFORTES, 22 Elation PROTEUS RAYZOR BLADE Ls, 21 Elation Pulse Bar Ls, 18 Elation SŌL Is, 17 Elation CHORUS LINE 16s, 14 Robe MegaPointes, 12 Elation PROTEUS RAYZOR 1960s, eight Martin Aura XIPs, and two Robe iFORTE FS units, which serve as followspots.

Also featured are 270' of Environmental Lights Eluxtra ProFlex PixelControl LED Neon RGB on the circle trusses. According to Chris Wood, of TMS, "The aluminum mounts were designed and machined here in Omaha. We wanted to ensure the neon maintained a perfect circular shape, so we 3D-printed brackets that bolted to the aluminum mounts to help the neon retain its form. The pixel drivers are Advatek PixLite A4-S Mk3s. We custom-built the enclosures for the drivers and power supplies."

For uplight on keyboardist Buddy Strong, the TMS staff designed and fabricated something called The Shadow Killer. "The light engine is 4,000K," Wood says. "It's intended to be a linear soft light. We knew they would be placed on Buddy's keys and organ, so we focused on making sure they wouldn't feel uncomfortable or distracting. The nice thing about custom-designing the units is that we can get feedback and adjust to ensure we meet everyone's needs. We used an RC4 Wireless Magic-900 DMX4dim and a Magic-900 DMXio-HG transceiver to control the

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three key lights. We chose the DMX4-dim because of its 19-bit dimming and the flexibility to select a PWM that could work with any camera situation. We wanted 900MHz for our wireless because it cuts through everything and is reliable. Their bodies were 3D-printed out of ASA [the 3D printing filament Acrylonitrile Styrene Acrylate]. This allowed for quick turnarounds for changes and kept the fixtures lightweight. ASA can handle decently high temperatures and is resistant to UV and moisture."

Some of the most striking looks feature saturated washes and sidelight that carve out the band members. "The band members are really not fans of traditional spotlights," Stinebrink says. "The downstage key light position, along with footlights, is relied on heavily. The key light is positioned off to the sides as much as possible. In fact, the downstage truss is split in two and moves offstage. Due to the automated system, we also have the key light truss lowered to allow us to get light under the onstage truss. By pushing the lighting offstage, it lends each band member a visual depth that you wouldn't otherwise get from a single source coming from straight downstage. Two Robe Spot iFORTE FS units are used in the downstage truss as well as the key light. This lets us highlight various players but still have a source from the side."

Control is via two MA grandMA3 Full-Size consoles, plus a grandMA3 Compact XT, five grandMA3 PU-Ls, two grandMA3 eight-port nodes, and two Robe RoboSpot base stations. The designers' choice of software reflects

Dave Matthews Band Summer Tour 2025

Production designer: Fenton Williams
Lighting designers: Fenton Williams, Aaron Stinebrink
Lighting programmer: Aaron Stinebrink
Production manager: Anthony Giordano
Lighting crew chief: Josh Albright
Lighting crew: Jerry Wolderski, Jerry Kaiser, Chris Tsuji, Bodie Tureson, Robert Chaize, Holden Fershee
Automation operator: Ben Ullmann
Automation crew: Ryan Trebon

Suppliers
Lighting: TMS
Video: PXLField Productions
Automation: All Access Staging and Productions

The screen consists of ROE Visual MC7 video panels, with imagery fed by a Green Hippo Boreal+ MK2 media server.

their long history with the band. “MA3 is a great platform that I am using on other shows,” Stinebrink says. “But we are still on MA2 for this tour. The number of songs we have programmed over the years precludes us from making the jump on this show right now. At some point, that time will come.”

And, of course, there’s Dave Matthews Band’s famous spontaneity. “Every night, we get the setlist about an hour before the show,” Stinebrink says. Because of this, he adds, “Fenton has really looked at show progression from a different viewpoint. We often have an ad hoc progression that introduces various elements throughout the beginning of the show. A lot of it revolves around using inhibitive masters to restrict what is visually being used. It goes through the first six or seven songs as we introduce elements. But even that changes night to night, depending on what the setlist looks like. It makes every night unique and allows us to build out the progression of the show in different ways every evening.”

Dave Matthews Band’s summer 2025 tour concluded in mid-September.