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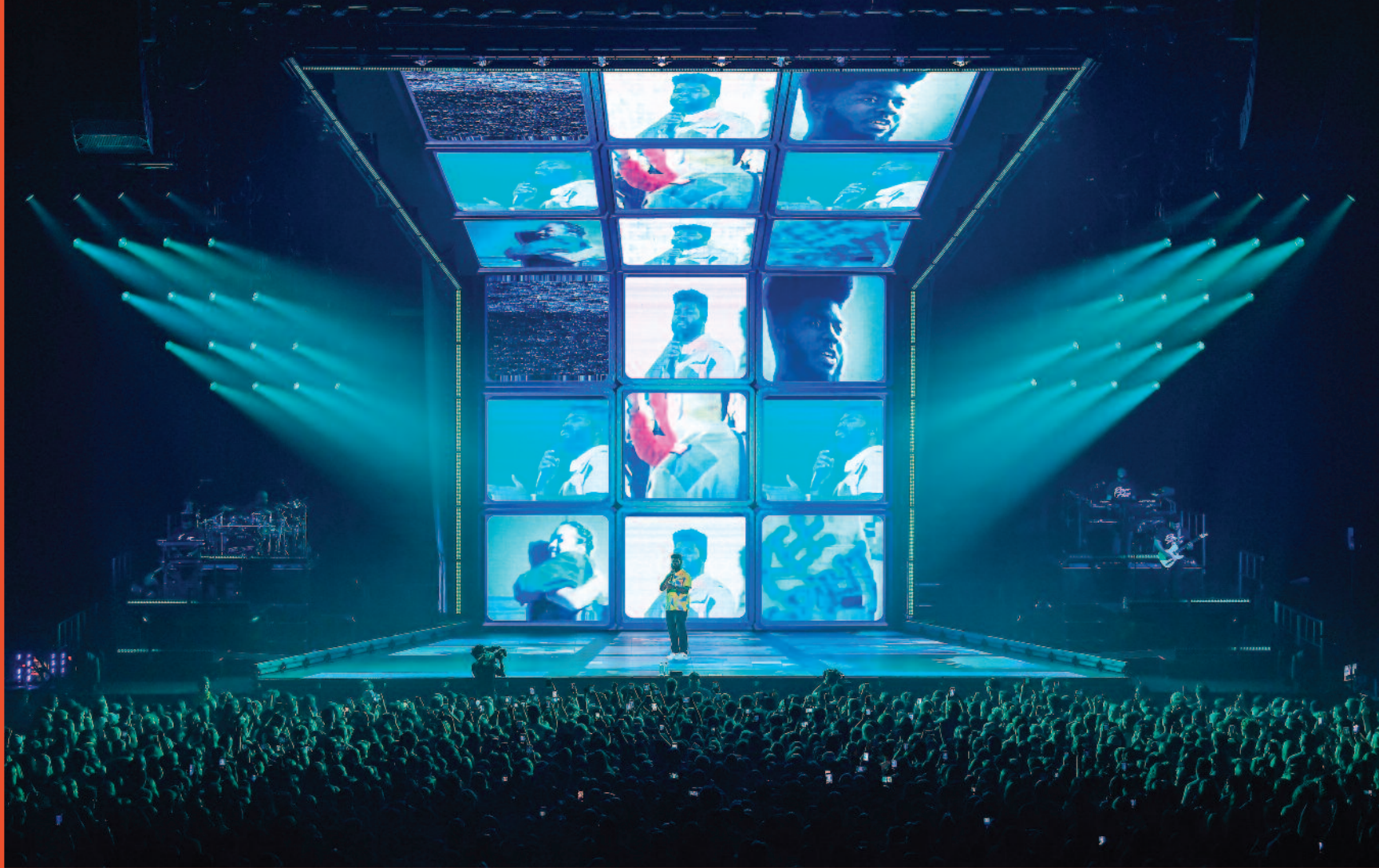
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The team behind Khalid's latest tour takes a fresh approach to problem-solving

By: Sharon Stancavage
Photos: Steve Jennings



"We grabbed our paint pens and started sketching a simple concept that consisted of an LED floor, rear wall, and ceiling," Halpin says.

he design process can be straightforward, winding, or somewhere in between. Baz Halpin and Alex Reardon, creative directors of the firm Silent House, note that they took the middle road in designing Khalid's *Free Spirit World Tour*. "We grabbed our paint pens and started sketching a simple concept that consisted of an LED floor, rear wall, and ceiling," Halpin says. "We added a taper to the roof and floor to create a sense of perspective. Our stage didn't change much from the first idea I drew on the glass in Alex's office."

Regarding the LED floor, Halpin says, "It was important that we submerge Khalid within the digital content. To do that, we had to have a specific number of LED tiles, and their resolution was critical. Once our vendor was confirmed and we knew the tile and touring frame sizes, we redrew the floor and ceiling to get the perfect shape."

Randy Mayer, director of concert touring for Screenworks NEP, supplier of the video gear, says, "The main challenge was the LED ceiling. We really had a short amount of time to pull this off. I reached out to Eric

Pearce, at SGPS, to see if he could help us, based on our time frame. Thankfully, he was able to make a custom framing system for the ceiling. We owe a lot to him for making our lives easier and safer." Mayer adds, "It's a pleasure working with everyone at Silent House Productions; they did an amazing job. They and [production manager/front-of-house engineer] C.J. Blair put their trust in us to deliver this show, which we appreciate."

The ceiling and upstage wall consist of ROE Visual CB5 five-millimeter tile; the floor employs YesTech 5mm tiles in All Access Staging & Production touring frames, placed on a 68'-wide x 40'-deep stage, also from All Access. "The LED stage, where Khalid performs, is approximately 22' wide at the upstage end to 50' wide on the downstage," Halpin says.

Halpin mentions another key consideration: "IMAG was important to Khalid and his manager, Courtney [Stewart]. Khalid is such an emotive and authentic artist that maintaining his visual connection with the audience throughout the show was critical. However, he is vibrant, young, and energetic, so we wanted to make sure that we could



Above: “The entire show is video content- and Notch-heavy,” Halpin says. Imagery is delivered using two gx 2 and one gx 2C media servers from disguise. Right: The string curtain, from Rose Brand, serves as a projection surface.

accomplish a large amount of IMAG integration without it ever feeling solely functional.” The camera package includes two Sony HXC-100 HD handhelds with 22X lens, two Sony HXC-100 HDs with 72X long lens, and two Panasonic AW-HE130 robo cams with controllers. Working with the left/right IMAG screens are two Barco HDF-W30 projectors.

Imagery is delivered using two gx 2 and one gx 2C media servers, from disguise (formerly d3 Technologies); the system uses Notch, the real-time workflow for production of video content. “The entire show is video content- and Notch-heavy,” Halpin says. “The IMAG on the main stage displays differently across the LED surfaces. Tyler Chappel is our video director; Tom Colbourne and Richard Cullen, from Blink Inc, are our video content producers.” Manuel Conde did the Notch programming.

“The only automation is the string curtain [from Rose Brand], which surrounds the LED stage,” Halpin says. Imagery is projected “on the front and sides to create a completely enclosed box; Khalid can perform from within or move through the curtain at any point. It’s a rather ingenious use of projection material.” The string curtain is one of the more challenging elements for Blair, who says, “It’s a weightless kind of curtain and it has been a little bit hard to get a track system that works nicely with it. I don’t

think anyone is doing anything like this; it’s cool and interesting, but it’s been a bit of a challenge.”

Then again, meeting logistical challenges is part of the designers’ role, Reardon says. “We at Silent House align ourselves to our core belief that there are three fundamental principles to the success of a show’s design: aesthetics, logistics, and finance. We work very closely with the production manager. It is vital to make sure that we don’t end up designing displays that outstrip the venue’s capacity, the number of crew and trucks available, nor the tour’s budget. We can design for a club or a stadium but, as the core outlook remains the same, we end up with a healthy roster of satisfied clients. Khalid’s team came to us not just for a show that would look great, but also for a process that would be enjoyable, considerate, and balanced in its approach.”

Necessarily, the lighting design works in tandem with the production’s video elements. “The purpose of the truss configuration is to frame the primary statement of the LED screens and embrace its shape,” Halpin says. “There are no lighting trusses that block the LED screens and there are no trusses downstage of the LED floor. We opted to light performers from the side. The end result is that the LED stage dominates the visual, with no other elements taking away from it.”

In the lighting rig, Halpin notes, “We use Ayrton MagicBlade-Rs [75 total], [TMB Solaris] Flare Q + LR [75], and [Robe] BMFL WashBeams [80] to create the look. We have some GLP Impression XBar 20s on the risers, reflecting the shape and layout of the trusses above.” Also featured are 45 TMB Solaris Flares on top of the downstage chord of the front truss.

The production makes use of ample side lighting from BMFL WashBeams located above and on the floor. “The floor lighting is primarily sidelight for dancers and Khalid,” Halpin says, adding, “It’s my first time using the BMFL WashBeam, and I was very impressed.” For key light on Khalid, Halpin and Reardon rely on house followspots. Solotech has provided the lighting package.

Lighting director Jonathan Camarillo runs the show using an MA Lighting grandMA2 console; Dan Norman did the programming. “All the songs are all pretty beefy in terms of programming,” Halpin says. “A couple of stand-outs are memorable because of it. Dan Norman and Alex worked intensely on ‘Another Sad Love Song,’ ‘21,’ and ‘Talk,’ using shapes created in Photoshop then loading and manipulating them in the d3 to play not only across the LED screens but also sync’d between the LED screens and

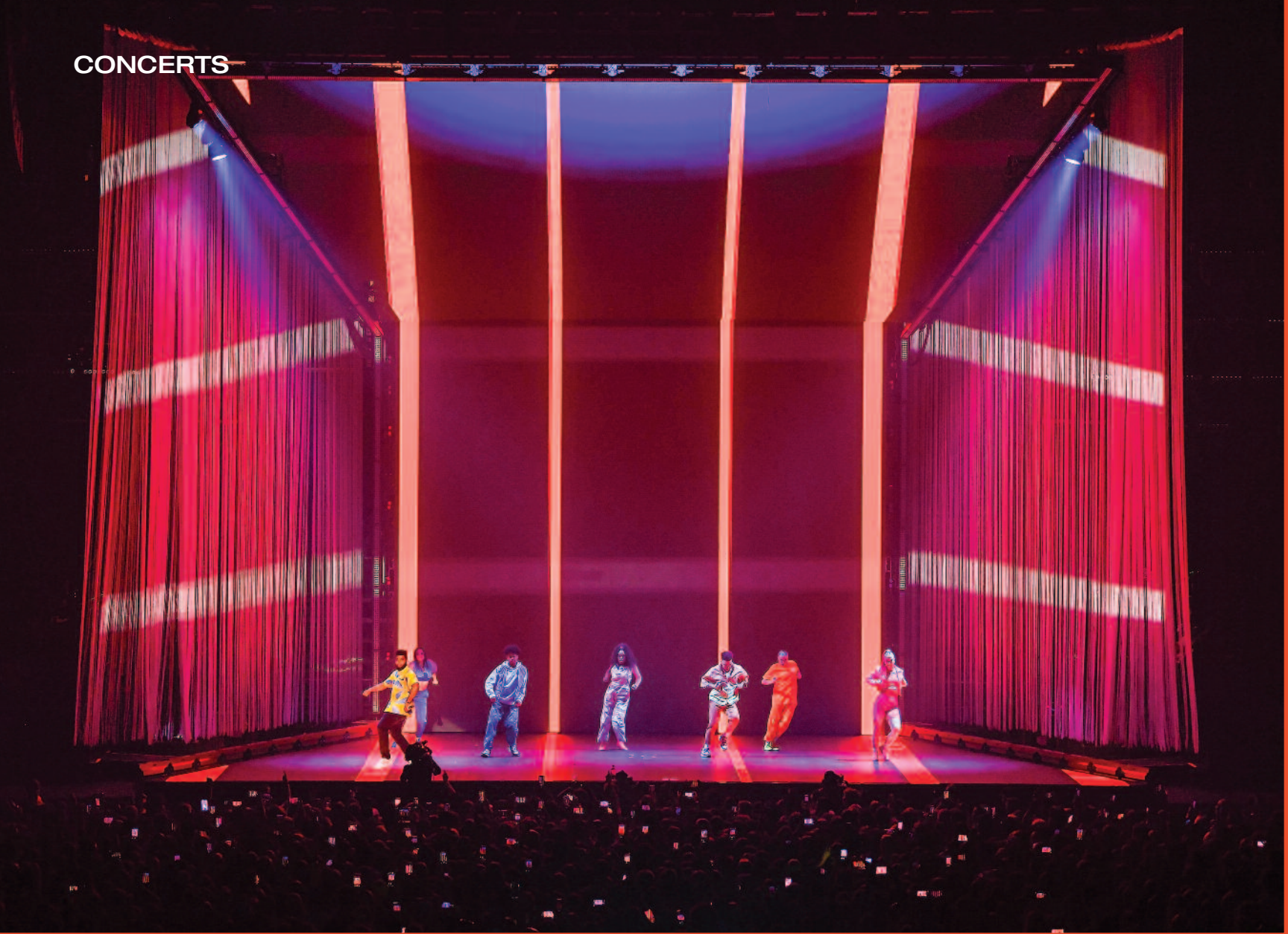
the Flare LR that surround the screen, making the LR an unexpected and dynamic extension of the LED screens.”

Halpin describes the color palette as “red, amber, fuchsia, soft blue, pale sand, and so on. We have tried to embrace them and also increase the warmth and inviting nature of these colors. Khalid is an open performer, full of warmth and positivity. There is nothing too harsh or stark, except for one song [“My Bad”], which is black and white. Outside of that, we have tried to keep it lush and warm.”

In terms of style, Reardon says, “There are rare moments where we get to blur the distinctions between design and art; on this occasion, the art world inspires the client and we got to explore [certain art concepts]. I’ve been a great fan of the work of Anthony McCall, Dan Flavin, the ubiquitously inspirational James Turrell, and Olafur Eliasson”—all of whom feature in their work.

“The architecture of the design allowed us to play with the bounding box of hard and soft surfaces and the interplay between projection and LED sources,” Reardon continues. “So, for ‘Another Sad Love Song,’ ‘21,’ and ‘Talk,’ we didn’t use traditional content; instead, we programmed the LED units and projectors as lights, also mapping into the Flare LR. However, as all lighting design is a ratio of





Shapes in the Notch system are used to create pieces of content that play across the surfaces of the screens and curtains.

illumination versus effect, we kept four x4s inside the curtain to satisfy the illumination required to see the artist.

“The use of LED as a light source has been something I’ve explored with clients like Tears for Fears,” Reardon continues. “However, this was the perfect storm of a client, production design, and the genius of Dan Norman and Manny Conde. Baz and I both knew that this design would be something we’d be able to get our teeth into, and the results were, to quote Khalid’s manager, ‘Epic!’”

As is often the case, the biggest challenge was time. “The show is nearly two hours long, and we don’t have much in terms of automation, props, and so on,” Halpin says. “We do have dancers who are a feature on about eight songs or so, but, for the most part, the biggest challenge is keeping each number visually interesting and feeling dynamic from act to act.”

Sound

The tour’s PA has been supplied by Clair Global. “We’ve been with Clair almost since the beginning,” Blair says. “For the last two years we’ve been touring, we’ve been using a Clair Cohesion CO-12. I love it. I like the amount of headroom that it has and also the amount of usable low end—even without the subs, which I don’t think a lot of other speaker systems have. The mid-range and low end are unparalleled compared to what other people are offering at the moment.”

Blair has the customary main, side, and rear hangs: The main consists of thirty-two CO-12s; the side has twenty-eight CO-12s, and the rear has twenty-four CO-10s. “We have subs in the air and on the ground,” he says. “We have loads of boxes everywhere. We started a sub-arc delay and now we have subs in the center [CP-218s] in cardioid and three subs per side flown [CP6s].”



The color palette makes frequent forays into the warm end of the spectrum.

Blair runs the show on an Avid S6L console. “I had to use an S6L at a festival in China, and I was blown away by how much better it sounded,” he says. “If I can take care of the sound on the front end, why wouldn’t I be using this?” The switch to the S6L produced dramatic results. “It’s almost a night-and-day difference. The midrange is more usable; on my previous consoles, I equalized a lot of things out, but I don’t have to do that with the S6L. From the get-go, you can turn up the preamps and they sound the way they should. Anything anybody can do to get a better sound coming from the source is good; I think the preamps sound more interesting and livelier.”

The transition to the S6L was a bit of a challenge, nevertheless: “It took me a little while to get used to—and I’m still getting used to—the workflow on it. Some visual things lay out a little bit more nicely than on other consoles. It looks intimidating, but it’s easy to walk up to and

start working on it.”

In terms of plug-ins, Blair explains, “I’ve just started using the [Universal Audio] UAD-2 Live rack, which Chris Rabold [front-of-house engineer for Bruno Mars and Kenny Chesney] sent me. Implementing the UAD Live stuff has been huge, especially as far as effects go. It’s such a robust piece of gear, and the fidelity is just night and day compared to a lot of stock plug-ins.”

Blair adds that he has some favorites in the UAD Live Rack: “I use the 1176 [Classic Limiter Collection] plug-ins, the Fairchild’s [vintage limiter/compressors], and the API 2500 [bus compressor]. I use the 1176 on all instrumentation other than his vocals; I’ll use it either lightly or heavily.” The API 2500 is applied to the subs.

Also, he says, “I started using the Neve Master Bus processor earlier this year. A million front-of-house guys are using it, talking about it, and loving it; I thought it



“Khalid is a really dynamic and soft singer at times,” Blair notes. “He can be screaming one minute and the next he’s dead quiet, and you’re trying to get him above a dense-sounding band.”

sounded interesting, and now I love it.”

Blair is also using the Rupert Neve Design Portico 5045 Primary Source Enhancer. He says, “It’s another thing I’ve heard a bunch of people talk about; they call it a timeline piece of gear. I say there’s no such thing, but I bought one, and before anything else gets processed, before EQ, I put his vocals into it and shave off 6dB or 8dB with the gate; then I put it into an Empirical Labs Distressor/Compressor. Khalid is a really dynamic and soft singer at times; he can be screaming one minute and the next he’s dead quiet and you’re trying to get him above a dense-sounding band. That’s a challenge every night. Having that reduction from the 5045—especially when he’s close to the PA, and even

when I’m riding his fader constantly—is kind of essential to making sure he’s heard at the right time. I think it’s the best his voice has ever sounded. The 5045 doesn’t completely solve the problem, but it helps a lot.”

Also, Blair notes, “There’s a reason there are a lot of front-of-house guys using the Neve Master Bus Processor and Portico 5045: They’re fairly simple to use, especially the 5045. You can, by turning a few knobs, have this very musical piece of gear that I think front-of-house engineers have needed for quite a while.”

Among other pieces of outboard gear at the front of house, Blair says, “I’m using an Empirical Labs Fatso [EL7x] on the guitar and an Empirical Labs Distressor on

his main and spare vocal.” He also has an outboard version of the API 2500. Playback is handled by an Ableton system. “Our playback engineer is a guru with Ableton. It’s been rock-solid,” he adds.

In terms of mics, Blair says, “We have a lot of the usual suspects; it’s mostly Shure.” The drums include Shure SM587s on the snares, Beyerdynamic TG D57s/Shure KSM32s on the toms and more KSM32s on the overheads. “I play drums as well, and I’m really obsessed with the drum sound. On the kick drum, we’ve been using the Telefunken M82, which has been essential to me at the front of house. I use a [Shure] Beta 91A inside the kick and the M82 outside, and it’s been awesome. It’s the heartbeat of the show.”

For Khalid, “We use the Axient digital system and a DPA d:facto capsule.” The latter is new to Blair. “I first heard about it from my neighbor the studio engineer. I knew about DPA, but I never listened to their capsules. We tried them out on his vocal last year at the start of our headline *Roxy Tour*. I think we tried five capsules [from different manufacturers]. I told our monitor engineer [Landon Storey] not to tell me which was which, and [the d:facto] was the winner. I like that, for a condenser mic, it provides a lot of rejection and does not let a lot of spill-ins. Our

drummer is very heavy-handed, so it is loud onstage. I was pretty surprised by the rejection, since it is a condenser, but, because he has such a deep voice, the biggest thing is getting something that sounds natural in the low-mids and this capsule works well for him.”

He adds, “With any artist, it’s always a balancing act of where the levels are at and how it translates in the PA, since how it sounds in the band’s ears could be very different. It could sound the same level-wise, but it may not push as much—or it might push too much—in the PA.”

Then there is the set design: “The overhead video wall makes the challenge of gain before feedback—kind of like a country singer with a hat on while he’s singing—which is not exactly your friend in terms of good gain before feedback, especially for a quiet singer. If I had a rock band with somebody shouting, or a rapper shouting into the microphone, it would be a lot less difficult. Making sure someone who is a very delicate speaker is heard, given some of the physical obstructions onstage, is a bit of a challenge.” How does Blair overcome this? “It’s all about how much I’m compressing on the distressor, whether I’m backing it up or hitting it more,” he confides.

Khalid’s *Free Spirit World Tour* continues in Europe until the third week of September. 📶



KHALID

FREE SPIRIT TOUR

FEATURING
VERSA ROLLING STAGE

STAGING & PRODUCTIONS

ALL ACCESSTM