

At Home with Mitski

By: David Barbour



Mitski's *Nothing's About to Happen to Me Tour* is a stylish study in melancholia

The singer/songwriter Mitski's latest tour is, like her new album, titled *Nothing's About to Happen to Me*, which seems counterintuitive, to say the least. *The Guardian*, reviewing her "masterful" show, notes, "A stage set recreates a fictional cozy residence, complete with two lamps that cast a soft glow over cushy chaises," adding,

"Backed by only acoustic guitar, she croons under soft purple light, creating a hush over the audience with her rich, soaring vocals in the same way that she used to in venues a 20th of the size." The homey set design contrasts with the projected visuals, the newspaper adds: "During a thrumming rendition of the ballad 'Buffalo Replaced'

from her album *The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We*, she projects old footage of buffalo migration and freight trains onto [David] Lynch-esque crushed velvet curtains, pushing American colonialism of the west to the front of one's mind."

As show designer Andi Watson notes, the tour is, in many ways,

All photos: Lexie Alley

unusual, beginning with its kickoff venue, The Shed in New York City, followed by the theatre at Hollywood High School. “When I saw the venue list, I thought, Oh my God,” says the designer, famed for his work with acts like Radiohead in rather larger venues. “But Hollywood High has a 60’-by-40’ stage and a whole flying system. And there’s a projection booth. It’s actually a proper theatre.”

This out-of-the-ordinary venue hasn’t been the tour’s only twist. “We’re doing an incredibly diverse set of venues,” Watson says. “This isn’t a conventional tour, so one day we may be playing a small theatre nightclub, the next the Auditorio Nacional in Mexico City, all the way up to arenas seating 15,000 in Asia, with Royal Albert Hall and the Sydney Opera House thrown in as well.”

How does one design for such contingencies? “It was difficult because I was designing it as the itinerary was being put together,” Watson says. “I’d get to a place where I thought, ‘I can make this work’. Then a bunch of new gigs would get added, some back-to-back, like Malaysia to Singapore. And going from 400-capacity theatres to a show for 15,000 in the round! It took a while to finally come up with something after a couple of failed attempts. But what we’ve ended up with is very flexible and works really well. It goes along with the concept and with Mitski’s character for the tour.”

The show, like Mitski’s previous outing, has a strongly theatrical aspect, not unlike Lily Allen’s *West End Girl*, covered in last month’s issue. The emphasis on intimacy is something of a trend, Watson notes. “Artists, especially the younger ones, are looking for something a bit different. When I talk to them initially, it’s important to know what they want. Sometimes it’s about the spectacle, and there’s nothing wrong with that, while at the other end are artists for whom it’s all about the music and connecting with the audience. Between them are these more theatrical productions.”



“With the darker songs, we create structural light beams onstage, making them really defined,” Watson says. This is useful, he adds, because the production design limits the amount of haze that can be used.

This show, Watson notes, “starts with Mitski in a domestic scene. Her character is created from various references. The album’s artwork is related to it; it’s an abandoned room in a house that perhaps once belonged to a famous Hollywood film director of the ‘20s, ‘30s, or ‘40s—one of those enormous houses with a full screening room and a proper cinema projector. It comes alive for the show. There’s a

chaise longue, a rolling bar cart, an old record player, and a bureau with various things on it, including a Tiffany lamp. Everything else comes from that.”

The screening room concept allows for an extensive projection design. “Working in so many different venues,” Watson says, “projection is great because it can expand and shrink. We choose different lenses and format things slightly differently; we’re able to



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"All of the video content is vintage," Watson says. "In discussing it with Mitski, I thought it would be nice to lean into the movies that would have played on this screen in the past. Working with my video editors, we recut the footage to make a different story, so the songs are, in a way, the score accompanying the films."

reduce and expand the stage when necessary, using projection as the main tool for that."

Discussing his choice of projection surfaces, Watson says, "I wanted a feeling of decayed luxury. No one's been in this room for a long time; rats have nibbled at the bottom of the screen. [The La Courneuve, France-based supplier] Blackout created the soft goods for the tour, including the legs and borders. The main fabric is an antique velvet, in a gunpowder color, which takes light unbelievably beautifully. The projection screen itself is a Trevira that is scenically treated, so it's ripped at the bottom, as if animals have scratched or eaten it. Tea was thrown at it to make these beautiful stains."

Interestingly, Watson adds, "All of the video content is vintage. In discussing it with Mitski, I thought it would be nice to lean into the movies that would have played on this screen

in the past. So, the show footage is all archival. Working with my video editors, we recut the footage to make a different story, so the songs are, in a way, the score accompanying the films. My team spent hundreds of hours watching old movies." (They include, among many others, the original *Dracula* and the 1960 thriller *The Amazing Transparent Man*.) He adds that Mitski, who is knowledgeable about film history, was involved with the choices.

The imagery contrasts strongly with the lighting design, which features many saturated color washes. "Because we have black-and-white footage," Watson says, "we can colorize it in two ways: We'll sometimes put a color tint over the video content itself, or alternatively, a color wash over the projection screen. Additionally, we have a line of CHAUVET Professional COLORado PXL Bar 16s along the bottom of the screen, uplighting it.

Varying their intensity and diffusing them, we can fill in the black components of the images with color." He uses color in other ways, too: "With the darker songs, we create structural light beams onstage, making them really defined." This is useful, he adds, because the production design limits the amount of haze that can be used.

Creating these looks involves a variety of units from different manufacturers. "We have ACME Lighting Lyras for the spots, and GLP X5s for the washes," Watson says. "The PXL Bar 16s are on the floor. There are also some GLP JDC-1 strobes and ACME Pulsar S2 spinning, double-sided units. And we have five customized Tubular Ripple Machines. White Light [the London-based lighting supplier] used to make an effects fixture called the Tubular Ripple. It was basically a tube with wavy slots cut into it, which rotated slowly in front of two linear 1.2K sources, to make a rippling, watery,



cross-fading effect. I loved them back in the day. I really wanted an LED version, so, on the last Mitski tour, I tasked John Bahnick at [the Illinois-based supplier] Upstaging with making them. I bought a couple of the original White Light units off eBay in the UK and tried using different LED sources, but nothing worked. Then John came back to me, saying, ‘Come and have a look at this. They had used a JDC Line 500 and managed to squeeze it into the machine with a lot of cunning. So now we have five Tubular Ripple Machines from the 1980s, with JDC Line 500 sources in them, allowing us to strobe and change color. Because we can modulate the LEDs in the JDC500, and the tube modulates the combined output, you get some really beautiful effects.’

The lighting rig is a continuously morphing entity thanks to the tour’s unusual circumstances. “Upstaging supplied the gear for rehearsals in Nashville.” Watson says, “and for the six shows at The Shed in New York.



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Above and opposite: The show, Watson notes, “starts with Mitski in a domestic scene. There’s a chaise longue, a rolling bar cart, an old record player, and a bureau with various things on it, including a Tiffany lamp.”

But because we’re going to so many strange, disparate places, and we have short gaps in the schedule, it was not financially viable to take the whole system everywhere with us. So, we have a small universal floor package with us and have been sourcing the rest of the rig locally. In Mexico City, we had [Martin MAC] Vipers instead of the Lyras, and the washes were [Robe] Spiiders. As we go around, different companies are supplying the lights in each region. It’s pretty much all over the place.”

On the video side, Watson says, “My preferred media server always was the [High End Systems] Catalyst, but sadly that is no longer viable. On this tour, we’re using Disguise and controlling everything from the grandMA [console]. The content is pretty much entirely pre-rendered except for a couple of moments when we use multiple layers and superimpose them.

Watson continues to use MA2 software. “I don’t program an awful lot of shows these days,” he says; when he does, he prefers to work with a familiar product. “With this show, and most others that I do, there’s nothing that needs MA3. I don’t need groups or recipes or a 3D matrix. It might be a better way of doing it, but I haven’t needed those tools yet.”

In any case, Watson has his hands full dealing with so many types of venues, “trying to figure out how to squeeze the band, lights, projection screens, props, and other elements in each space is often a puzzle. The projection is full stage, so Ben Krall, the tour’s video magician, scales and masks it at each venue so the images just sit on the screen, or they can include the band, or they can go over the whole stage, including the drapes and borders. We can expand and contract the design. But it’s not without its challenges.” Clearly, however, the crew is meeting the challenges in each venue.

Mitski’s tour continues through July, concluding in Japan on the 28th of the month. 🎧



Mitski - "Nothing's About To Happen To Me" Tour



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