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## MTV Video Music Awards:

Spectacle at Barclays Center

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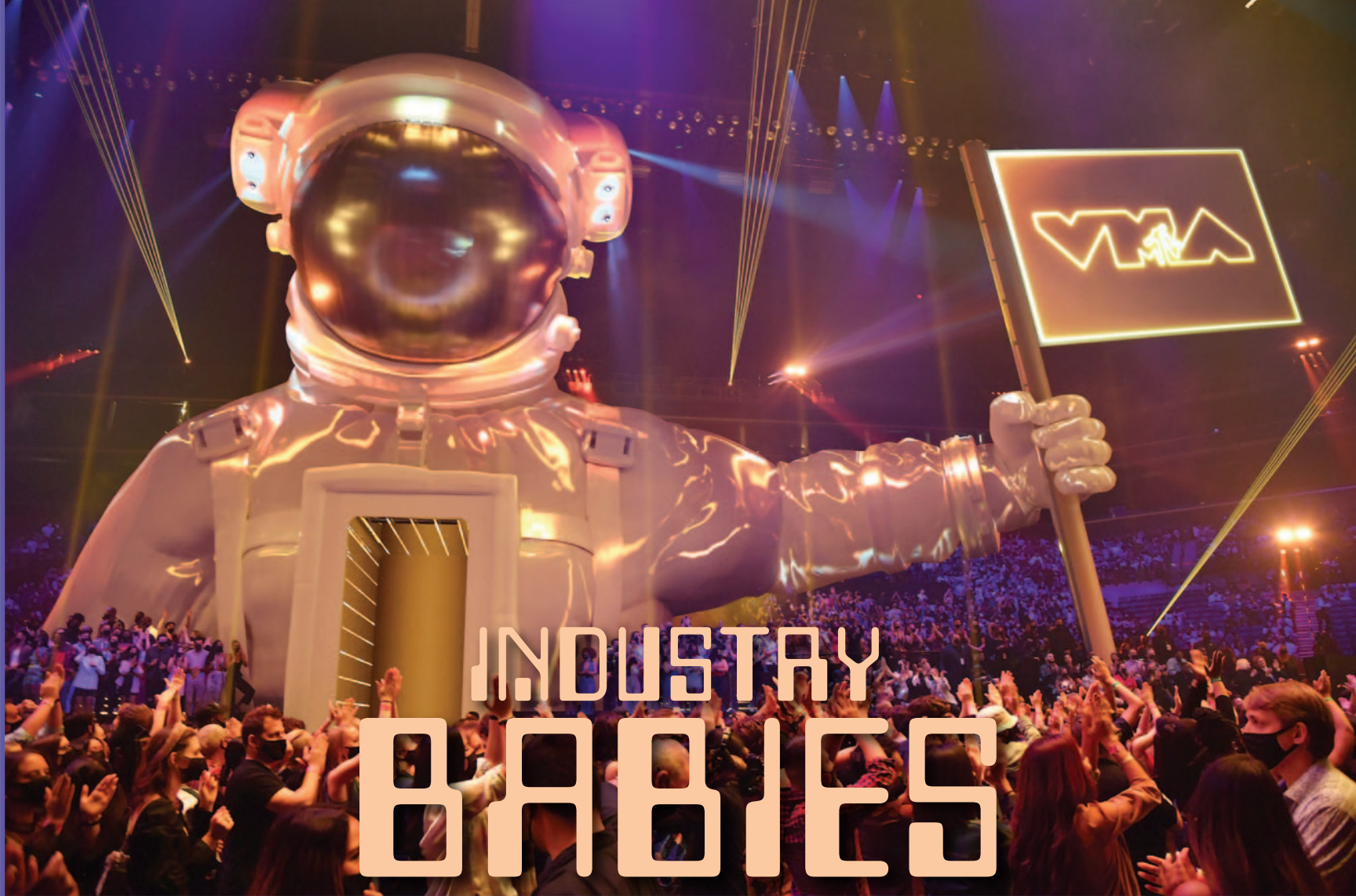
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Above and opposite: The inflatable Moon Person was the center of the design, allowing for sensational entrances (as in the case of Madonna, left) and functioning as a projection surface.

## Turning 40, MTV celebrates today's young talents at the Video Music Awards

By: David Barbour

Left: John Shearer/MTV VMAs 2021/Getty Images for Viacom/CBS  
Right: Jeff Kravitz/MTV VMAs 2021/Getty Images for Viacom/CBS

**I**t had the feeling of a homecoming, a revival, a comeback. After a 2021 edition shaped by the COVID pandemic, the MTV Video Music Awards returned to Barclays Center in Brooklyn, staged in front of a tumultuous audience. Presided over by Doja Cat, parading an outrageous series of outfits, it was an evening of then and now. Madonna made a sensational appearance and Cyndi Lauper earned ovations. The Foo Fighters and Busta Rhymes confirmed their status as elder statesmen. And the winner's list was packed with some of today's youngest stars, including Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, and Lil Nas X.

The live performances were abundant: Camila Cabello, Chlöe, The Foo Fighters, Jack Harlow, Justin Bieber, Kacey Musgraves, The Kid Laroi, Lil Nas X, Machine Gun Kelly, Olivia Rodrigo, Ozuna, Shawn Mendes, Busta Rhymes, Tainy, and Twenty One Pilots. And each number was a spectacle in itself, including Bieber's mountain-climbing expedition, Cabello's flamenco-inspired fandango in front of a pink, multi-tiered Spanish edifice; Kacey Musgraves' dark ballad, loaded with candles and neon hearts run through with knives, lit in film-noir fashion; and Doja Cat's otherworldly appearance, flying above the





Lil Nas X's "Industry Baby" was staged in front of "Montero Prison," a nod to the song's video.

stage, encircled in a ring of light. Most outrageous of all may have been Lil Nas X, entering, backlit by blinding white light, with a marching band and segueing into "Industry Baby," staged in front of a lavender-hued rendering of "Montero Prison," the setting for the song's award-winning video. It was an explosion of creativity, celebrating the return of live performance.

### Production design

The ultra-wide set design featured an enormous rendering of the famous MTV Moon Person, holding a flag, at stage center, complete with a built-in hallway at the chest level through which presenters made the entrances. At left and right were live performance stages, connected to each other via a passerelle; built into it was the mosh pit where a select group of fans cheered on the stars.

The set was the creation of Julio Himede and his team of designers at Yellow Studio. "Our brief was quite simple," he says, "It was a nod to 40 years of MTV. The idea was to reflect on the past and future of the brand. What's recognizable about the VMAs is the Moon Person; it's an

icon like the Oscar or Emmy or the Grammy."

Putting the Moon Person at the center of the action fulfilled a principal aspect of the design brief, says Himede, whose firm has designed the VMAs several times previously: "Having the Moon Person at center stage was a way for the brand to be present and to connect all the elements that we needed to tick in our brief."

In addition, Himede says, "The Moon Person allowed us to have a medium for projections. We mapped content on it, and we used AR around it to transition to the nomination packages. For example, when the nominations for Video of the Year were being announced, we had lighting, projection, and a layer of AR, all around the Moon Person. It was an exciting approach. Since we started integrating AR on the VMAs in 2018, we get better at it every year. The technology advances from year to year."

The dual-stage design had a practical dimension, too. "With 14 performances, we needed to provide as much turnover as possible," Himede says. "Having two equal stages with video, lighting, and pyro, and other special effects offered us the best way to do quick turnarounds."





Camila Cabello's flamenco-influenced number was backed by the image of a multitiered Spanish-style structure.

The Moon Person was a giant inflatable. Building it required an intensive effort. "It was 60' tall and 112' wide," Himede says. "It was made from a variety of vinyls and silver metallic materials. It consisted of 5,000 individual pieces of fabric sewn together, which took over 1,000 hours. It took more than 600 hours to design the pattern." The piece was built at Landmark Creations, in Burnsville, Minnesota. Himede says that Landmark "is very well-equipped for building something of this scale. During the process, we visited their headquarters several times. They have a laser cut-out every single pattern. A human being, behind a sewing machine, sews the patterns; the machine is connected to an iPad that tells each person which part of the sculpture they are sewing together." It's a method that guarantees accuracy, he adds.

"The blowers that inflated the Moon Person were located outside the arena," Himede says. "They fed the air through a tube that was 175' long. The flag held by the Moon Person was an LED pole and the flag itself was a projection surface. Overall, we had 19 projectors." The entranceway also contained video, LED channels, and a

CO2 waterfall, "which allowed the talent to make dramatic entrances," he adds. "There's something very powerful about Madonna, Doja Cat, Justin Bieber coming out of the Moon Person."

The side stage floors consisted of 1,048 ROE Visual Black Marble BM4 tiles. "I've never put that many down before," says Chris Peterson, of Fuse Technical Group, the production's video gear supplier. Peterson notes that the BM4s can easily take the stress of having performers standing on them doing their stuff: "That's why we like the product." He adds that one challenge involved finding enough glossy tops for the BM4s: "Matte tops are in larger supply right because they are used on XR stages." Himede adds, "Around the oval we had an LED outline made from a 250' length of mappable LED tape," a strategy that gave the design a sharper outline.

The video screens on each stage were built from 336 ROE CB3 tiles. The screens moved via the Navigator automation platform from TAIT. The company also provided scenic elements, automated rigging, and performing flying gear for Justin Bieber, Doja Cat, and Olivia Rodrigo. Also



providing scenic elements were Lititz, Pennsylvania-based Atomic and Brooklyn-based Scenicorp.

Marisa Rinchiuso, project manager at Tait, says, "Taking on the VMAs project gave us the ability to work on the sets for so many artists in tandem and it really spoke to the breadth and depth of our team's capabilities when under tight deadlines. Over the course of a few weeks, we worked closely with our clients on bringing their creative vision to life and we delivered stunning scenic elements, custom automated solutions, and performer flying stunts."

All Access, the staging company, provided the under-structure of the set using approximately 575 decks from its Versa Stage System. (With so many companies and personnel involved, one might wonder about the process. But Jennifer Davies of All Access, noting that all parties have worked together on previous VMAs, notes, "We all have very good connections, and we gel quite nicely.")

Images on the Moon Person and adjoining flag were delivered by 19 Barco UDX-4K40 projectors. A large disguise-based media server system handled all aspects of visual playback for screens, projection, and augmented reality, with processing for the LED screens by Brompton Technology SX40 units. (Some video gear was supplied by Monolith Virtual Production.) Other video personnel included Trevor Burk/Visual Noise Creative (creative screens producers/screens producer), Silent Partners Studio (main show screens and projection content), and Kirk Miller (media programmer).

The individual looks, especially the video, for each number were heavily influenced by the talent's creative directors, who interfaced with the production's creative director Paul Caslin. Still, Himede says, "Yellow Studio gets involved in so many conversations; we're part of the dialogue on content, house looks, how each presenter looks on the screen. We also get involved with the AR and we collaborate with [lighting designer] Tom Sutherland. And we work with some of the best art directors in the country." In this case, Matt Steinbrenner oversaw the main set and Gloria Lamb dealt with the other creatives. "They are the true blood of our design," Himede says.

He adds, "It was exciting, emotional, and comforting to have a full-scale production like the VMAs back in an arena. The positive energy of a fully vaccinated audience in our mosh pit was thrilling, and it paid off the months of hard work from the comfort of our homes."

### Lighting

Tom Sutherland, of DX7 Design, underscores MTV's desire to make this year's awards a splashy comeback from the months of the pandemic. As always, he notes, "The process begins with MTV, working with the executive producers [Bruce Gillmer, Jesse Ignjatovic, and Barb Bialkowski], Paul Caslin, and Julio. This year, they wanted the most performances they've ever had at the VMAS.



That led to having two stages of equal substance. We bounced around ideas of connecting the two stages with light, to make everything cohesive."

Of course, the talent has plenty of input to offer. "The party starts with the acts, their creative directors and management," Sutherland says. "We had 14 acts and 14 cre-





Sutherland lined the video screens with Robe MegaPointes, a strategy that allowed him to create striking beam effects.

ative directors, all of whom want to push the boundaries. It's our job to work with them, but there's only so much weight on the roof. We also have only an hour and a half onstage with an act. That time gives you only three to four

passes at a number. When you get it where it needs to be, it's time to move onto the next act."

Adding to the challenges, Sutherland says, "We were governed by the height of the Moon Person, which pushed



up the rig. At its highest point, it was 70'; in an arena, we're usually at 40' or 50'. That was concerning. At that height, it wasn't sensible to have manual followspot operators." As a result, the designer opted to go with Robe RoboSpots. "It's always a bit of a gamble having a followspot operator control via a camera/screen," he says. "The technology is newish and there wasn't any way to get bodies into the required locations. The spot operators turned out to be fantastic and the gamble paid off. We had 16 RoboSpots and seven manually controlled [Strong Lighting Super Troupers], as backups in the seats, in case part of the RoboSpot system went down—which it didn't."

The set design, Sutherland says, "was very wide, but the screens narrowed the natural shape of the television image. They created a natural proscenium arch." The designer took advantage of the screens, lining them with Robe MegaPointes, for beam effects, and TMB Solaris Flare LRs for bright bursts of light. "They were fantastic," he says of the latter units. "The line they made was so clear, it looked like neon. It gave the show the energy it wanted."

The video imagery on the screens also helped to shape Sutherland's approach. "Paul Caslin has very strong video visions," the designer says. "He's very creative in setting the scene via video. For us, it's a delicate job, supporting the creatives and their content, layering lighting but not overpowering the images. The artists don't rehearse until

late; we can only set up the profiles and, when the acts start trickling in, we look at the content and put in the lighting layer by layer. Sometimes we'd have to scrap something we had done in rehearsal and start again and sometimes we were already 90% there. It's really about leaning into what the artist's camp has given us."

For example, with Lil Nas X and "Industry Baby," Sutherland says, "We got the brief with the prison yard, the tunnel, and smoke machines. Because the content was pink and white, we layered in those colors as well." The number featured an exterior view of the prison on the video screen, which flew out, revealing the prison shower, also done in pink. "We downlit that and worked to layer in more energy," the designer says. "I had the idea of running in some strobe units when the camera was facing away"—because with Lil Nas X you can't have too much sparkle.

For Kacey Musgraves' number, Sutherland says, "We started with the lights off, to see what the candles and neon hearts gave us. Then, lamp by lamp, we slowly crept in, adding some backlight and some floor kickers. The original inspiration was Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, and we leaned into that as much as we could. We also layered in some AR, so it looked all blended together." It made for a strong contrast to the glittery numbers. Other notable looks included waves of saturated color for Busta Rhymes and powerful arrangement of stark white beams for Chlöe.



More strong beam looks were seen in Busta Rhymes' number.





Kacey Musgraves' ballad was inspired by the Baz Luhrmann film *Romeo + Juliet*.

In the case of Doja Cat's aerial act, Sutherland says, "The light ring came to us via Brett Nelson, her creative director. He'd seen the work of Nick Verstand, an artist who lives in Amsterdam, had spoken to him, and wanted to do this. Team MTV jumped on the phone with Nick and discussed how to create it. He had a ring in Amsterdam that was booked for a show—and, with COVID rules, there was no way to get it into the US. So, we said we could make it happen if Tait came onboard; Tait had the resources to build it and, two weeks later, it was in Tait's warehouse, being programmed."

"Doja Cat's performance used Tait's T-Winch flying rig to fly above the stage in sync with the 25'-diameter kinetic light ring, which was able to penny-roll and move up and down," Rinchiuso says. "To achieve the artistic lighting effect, we installed LED pixel tape on the interior and exte-

rior of the ring, which allowed lighting to run independent animations as Navigator controlled the motion of the ring."

What with all the space he had to cover and all the possible staging contingencies, Sutherland assembled an enormous rig, starting with 204 Robe BMFL WashBeams and 80 Robe MegaPointes. First of all, he says, "I called Solotech [the production's lighting gear provider] and said, 'What do you have most of?' I needed something with a lot of punch. The BMFLs were my workhorses on the dome trusses, providing air effects and accents. The MegaPointes are always a workhorse for me. There's so much in them. I know what they do. They're versatile and pretty reliable." As mentioned, many of the MegaPointes were used to line the edge of the video screen, from which they could create strong beam looks, especially for Olivia Rodrigo, who was lowered in on a kind of cloud made of crushed mirror balls. Other





Doja Cat, flying high over the stage, with a light ring illuminated using LED tape.

MegaPointes, placed downstage by the mosh pit, shot upward, adding punch to Busta Rhymes' number.

Other gear included 92 Claypaky Scenius Unicos and 16 Scenius Profiles, which, Sutherland says, provided much of the key light, and nine Vari-Lite VL6500 Wash units: "It was the first time I've used them," he notes. "We hid them behind the Moon Person; we wanted it to feel like he was smoking. We had several tactical haze positions and were constantly tweaking smoke levels, so you got this cold, smoky glow behind him; the VL6500s did that." The entrance tunnel was lined with Martin Sceptrons.

The rig also included plenty of ETC Source Four PAR WFLs, which were used in The Foo Fighters' performance. The number began with the video wall in place showing a multiscreen collage of footage of the band in action. Then the screen was raised to reveal a classic effect. "I wanted a big rock-and-roll look," Sutherland says. "I called Dan Hadley [The Foo Fighters' designer] and said, 'I want to build a big old PAR wall.' It was half-flown; the other half rolled in on carts."

Running the numbers, the automated portion of rig featured 204 Robe BMFL WashBeams, 92 Claypaky Scenius

Unicos, 90 Claypaky Mythos 2s, 80 Robe MegaPointes, 50 Robe Pointes, 48 Vari-Lite VL3500 Spots, 19 Claypaky Scenius Profiles, and nine VL6500 Wash units. LED gear included 236 Solaris Flare Q+ LRs, 80 Solaris Flare Q+s, and eight GLP X4 Atoms. Followspots included 10 Robe BMFL LTs, six BMFLs, and seven Super Troupers. Atmospheric effects included eight Reel EFX DF-50 hazers, eight hazebase Base Hazers, two MDG theONEs, and two Martin by Harman ZR44s.

Additional gear included 160 ETC Source Four PAR WFLs for The Foo Fighters, eight Astera AX5 TriplePars for Camila Cabello, four additional WashBeams for Lil Nas X, 24 MegaPointes for Busta Rhymes, and a grandMA2 console to control Doja Cat's light ring.

Special effects included 12 AT-30s lasers supplied by ER Productions. "Because the show was 360°, I wanted to fill out the room," Sutherland says. "I managed to cram in lasers, which Lawrence Wright, of ER, did for us." He adds, "It felt like wherever you sat, you were in the show. You were encompassed."

Overall control was provided by two grandMA2 full sizes, with two additional models for backup, plus two





This concept drawing from Yellow Studio shows the centrality of the Moon Person, especially as a projection surface.

grandMA2 lights and 12 grandMA NPUs.

Because the load-in was so massive, Sutherland says, “we managed to do a pre-rig on August 23. We put in most of the lighting trusses and everything not under the scoreboard. Then there was a basketball game and we returned on the 29th. The first day of rehearsal was Wednesday, September 8. Everything came from Solotech in pre-rig trusses; there was no messing around with flight cases. This allowed us to get the lighting rig installed in about half the time. Harry Forster and Dave Evans were with us from Solotech. And Mickey [Curbishley, Solotech USA’s president] was on top of things as well.”

Also on the lighting team: Joe Holdman and Hunter Selby (associate lighting designers); Jasmine Lesane (assistant lighting designer); James Coldicott (lighting director, along with Selby and Lesane), Brian Jenkins (lighting programmer, along with Holdman), Alen Sisul (gaffer), John Cox (best boy), and Dennis Sisul (lighting tech).

Summing up, Sutherland says the main challenge was “making it all look different and unique.” From the opening number to the finale, it’s a case of mission accomplished. The Moon Person made an excellent comeback. 📶



Doja Cat sporting one of her distinctive outfits.