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A New York State of Mind

The MTV Video Music Awards celebrates the city—and extended reality

By: Sharon Stancavage



Opposite: The Weeknd at Edge. Above: DaBaby and Jabbawockeez at XR Studios.

The MTV Video Music Awards ceremony is always an extravaganza and that was the plan again for 2020. But the original brief, delivered in February/March, was very different than the final product, thanks to, yes, COVID-19. “We wanted to change gears into something that was more COVID-friendly,” notes production designer Julio Himede, director of the firm Yellow Studio. The original plan was for an arena production at Brooklyn’s Barclays Center. “After COVID started,” Himede says, “we decided to focus on what was relevant to the current situation we are all living in and still deliver a show that celebrates music. Given that New York State was in such a bad condition with COVID, we decided to make the show a tribute to New York City.”

Himede adds, “We worked closely with the creative director on the show, Paul Caslin, to develop the set. Paul and I worked together with the artists in coming up with the look and feel of the performance. Furthermore, we have a strong art department team that worked with the artists’ creative directors to accommodate their visions.” Yellow Studio designer Christian Mason worked alongside

Himede on the project.

The final production was centered around three main venues: Edge, the highest outdoor sky deck in the Western Hemisphere, located in New York’s Hudson Yards; Brooklyn’s Skyline Drive-In, and an XR Studios stage in Los Angeles; all the numbers were recorded for the two-and-a-half-hour show. All three sites were subject to local COVID-19 guidelines, as well as those of Viacom/MTV.

On Edge

“We, including the producers and executive producers, wanted a location that spoke of New York City,” Himede says. “We looked for a 360° view that showcased the city.” Speaking of Edge, located on the 100th floor at 30 Hudson Yards, he says, “We liked the idea of a modern piece of architecture. We were able to highlight not only the skyscrapers of New York but also put on a phenomenal fireworks display.”

For The Weeknd’s performance at Edge, “We got this fantastic creative input from The Weeknd team,” says Tom Sutherland, lead designer at the lighting firm DX7 Design.



Travis Barker speaking onstage at the awards. Opposite: Maluma performing at the Skyline Drive-In.

"The concept was him coming out of a drunken haze to find himself on a ledge with a helicopter searchlight on him. He stumbles through a room and walks out onto the ledge, where he is greeted by this helicopter searchlight, 111 [Claypaky] Sharpys, and 106 [GLP impression] X4 Bar 20s." Programming was done by Jason Baeri; the lighting director, Nate Files, worked on an MA Lighting grandMA2 console. Sutherland adds, "PRG already had an installation for the building's grand opening and they knew the lay of the land, so they were our vendor."

The Sharpys and X4 Bars were the only standard luminaires on the ledge. "There were no conventional spotlights," Sutherland says. "[The Weeknd] was lit only from the helicopter searchlight as he came out. We had a perimeter of X4 Bars on the edge of his riser for a bit of uplight; the Sharpys filled out the rest of the space." The absence of standard spotlights was key to the mood of the performance, he says. "We had to make sure there was a lot of haze up there, to create the atmosphere for beams from the Sharpys and helicopter searchlight." The atmosphere was supplied by six Look Solutions Viper deLuxe hazers, "which are great. They chug in haze so quickly and with so much power. When you're 100 stories up in the air in Midtown Manhattan, there is a lot of wind, so we needed units that we could rely on to cover the whole of that space."

This is the first time Sutherland has done key lighting with a helicopter. "That idea came from the Weeknd's

team, and it was an awesome one," he says. "It pulled the attention of not only the nation but the world when we opened the VMAs with two helicopters navigating each other 100' in the air. I've never seen anything like it. There was one helicopter with a searchlight and one with a camera; they must have been 30' away from us. They had their own stunt coordinator, who was calling the two helicopters and telling them when to do their maneuvers. That alone was a sight to see."

In terms of the production time line, Himede says, "We preplanned and decided to shoot over two days because of weather; on the second day, we had extreme weather, which proved to be problematic. In the end, it was all fine and we shot quite well, but we were delayed by two or three hours."

All of the gear "was disinfected before it came out of the warehouse," Sutherland says. "We had to make sure that our crew was in a quarantine bubble in the same hotel, and everyone was tested three days before coming to the site or going to prep in the warehouse. They needed to show evidence of a clear test before they were allowed on-site. Hunter Selby, my assistant, looked after that for our whole team, and it was a full-time job."

Sutherland says the biggest challenge for him and his crew at Edge was the venue. "It's a brand-new building, still under construction, and we had [pieces of] 200 light, sound, and camera gear to load in on a tight schedule. We had to share the lift with the construction crews, which

forced us to work overnight. It was a bit of a push against the clock all round.”

Special effects at Edge were handled by Adam Biscow, of Strictly FX; the firm has been involved with the VMAs for several years. “The Weeknd pyro effects consisted of an all-out choreographed traditional fireworks display located on barges along the Hudson River just south of Edge,” Biscow says. “Strictly FX teamed up with long-time partners Garden State Fireworks, Chris Santore, and August Santore Jr. and Sr. [of the pyro manufacturer Santore and Sons] to produce this portion of the event.” The Weeknd’s creative team was specific about the colors of the pyro, Biscow notes. “They included a lot of gold, purple, and green. The display included thousands of shells up to 8” in diameter for the finale of the song ‘Blinding Lights’.”

Biscow adds, “The biggest challenge of getting this display done was the short notice. Typically, displays of this size require 30 days’ notice in New York City. The Coast Guard and NYPD Harbor Units must be notified, as the location is a major navigable waterway. Chris and Garden State, as well as Joe Meyer, of the NYFD Explosives Unit, were instrumental in making this part of the show a reality.”

Skyline Drive-In

“Our concept of the show was of New York City as a hero,” Himede says. “It was important for us to include wide views of the city from different locations. The Skyline Drive-In allowed us to showcase this incredible view from Brooklyn. It also provided an outdoor space for us to work in and allowed us to have a small audience parked in cars.”

Sutherland adds, “The lighting design was something that followed the roof of the stage and let us see the cityscape behind. We couldn’t go massively over the top on rigs that took a lot of time, because we had to be wary of the number of people we were putting into contact with each other. The greatest challenge was to deliver a VMA show that looked amazing while adjusting our plans to account for crew safety and a streamlined load-in. Everything was built in pre-rig truss so the guys could safely prep it in the warehouse, and it could just roll in on-site. The lights on towers and followspot platforms were built on lifts, so they could come up and down at night, rather than having the crews climb.”

The 60’ x 40’ stage, provided by Stageco, included ten towers (five on each side) filled with 21 Elation Professional





Lady Gaga performing at XR Studios.

Proteus Hybrids. “It was the first time I’ve used them,” Sutherland says. The Proteus Hybrid is an IP65-rated spot/beam/wash fixture that includes a zoom that goes from 2° to 40° [depending on the mode], CMY and linear CTO color mixing, 14 dichroic colors, eight rotating glass interchangeable and 14 static-stamped metal gobos, and a full 360° bidirectional animation wheel. “They’re quite impressive,” Sutherland says. “They were out in the elements—it rained—and they held up fine.” The site also featured nine Strong Xenon Super Trouper followspots. The rig also included “93 Robe BMFL WashBeams, 52 [GLP] JDC-1 strobes, and 60 GLP [impression] X4 Bar 20s rigged on lines of trusses that followed the curve of the roof.” Programming was by Eric Marchwinski on a grandMA2; the lighting directors were James Coldicott and Hunter Selby.

Audience members at the Skyline remained in their cars. Himede notes, “We had about 60. MTV and Viacom had a great protocol in terms of auditioning these people; this wasn’t just a free-for-all.”

“We had Astera Titan tubes placed between and under the cars,” Sutherland says. “They really helped to expand the world of the stage, immersing the cars into the performance. Because they were battery-powered and [controlled via] radio DMX, the crew could place them easily.” The lighting gear was provided by 4Wall Entertainment, vendor for the original arena show.

Pyro at the Skyline Drive-In was supplied by Strictly FX.

“The display consisted of about 400 pieces of product, including 60mm consumable shells,” Biscow says. “This was the first time these devices were used in New York City. A big problem with using aerial shells in proximity to structures or performers is the fallout they typically produce. Santore and Sons produce a completely clean product that burns away with no fallout whatsoever. The rest of the display consisted of 100mm mines, 45mm comets, and 60mm high-altitude mines. We also had approximately 60 gerbs from Next FX. Everything was fired on time code from a FireOne XL4 unit.” The latter features four electrically isolated, short-circuit-protected output channels and can operate in two-wire, wireless, or two-wire/wireless hybrid mode.

At the Skyline, the biggest challenge for Biscow and his team was “getting the production done safely in a COVID-19 climate. There were many precautions taken to do things the right way. I think that it proved that productions can go on safely during the pandemic, if everyone pitches in and follows the rules. If we all want to get back to work, this is how we do it.” Ted Maccabee, co-founder of Strictly FX, adds, “Our entire crew came out of the East Coast. Due to COVID, no traveling in and out of New York or tri-state area was permitted. That was most of the problem. Everyone got tested before they were allowed on-site and were retested every three days while on-site. MTV made the process fairly simple, having the testing facility located on the shoot site.”

XR Stage

"Back in May, when we started to shift gears, we started exploring what we could do in terms of the available technology," Himede says. "We looked at doing the whole set digitally. At some point, we approached XR Studios to help us." Cory FitzGerald, producer at XR Studios, adds, "Paul Caslin reached out to us earlier in the year to check out our technology. He wanted to know how we could use it to create an award show environment." For the XR portion of the show, Himede explains, "We designed a virtual rooftop based on our New York City concept."

Also, he says, "The energy of the audience always brings a great sense of enthusiasm to the production, so the moment we decided to go in the XR direction, we explored how to bring the energy of a digital audience."

The XR production took place at LA North Studios and included both the award portions of the show and musical numbers. "The stage was approximately 70' wide by 35' deep and was comprised of ROE [Visual] BM2 LED tiles [supplied by Fuse]," FitzGerald says. "We used a disguise xR workflow, including disguise gx 2c media servers, as

the backbone of the system, tying the various elements together to create XR [extended reality]. All of the systems—such as cameras, tracking cameras, media servers, real-time playback engines, camera switching, and shading—were totally integrated, which made one incredibly complex system to manage." The disguise xR RenderStream video-over-IP protocol worked with Unreal Engine to do real-time rendering for the performances by Lady Gaga and DaBaby.

JT Rooney, of XR Studios, notes, "Notch VFX was used for the main stage design for awards and hosting moments, with Silent Partners Studio designing and creating the scenes. Notch was chosen for its ease of use and great workflows for live productions, as well as stability and speedy workflows with video inputs and NDI signals, which drove the virtual billboards. SPS chose to use Notch as their real-time render engine for Miley Cyrus and the Black Eyed Peas, and Blink Inc used Notch for the content for the Doja Cat performance.

"Additionally, Unreal Engine was used for the Lady Gaga performance by Possible Productions, and the



CNCO at the Skyline Drive-In.

TELEVISION

DaBaby musical performance by Silent Partners Studio. Disguise was the selected media server for this project, using their xR workflow which is extremely valuable for its camera calibration and color calibration workflows, allowing for extended reality technology but the familiarity of a show/live-performance-based workflow in a media server.”

“This was the largest and most complex XR show we have had to support so far,” says Jamie Sunter, disguise senior support specialist.

When lighting an XR stage, “You have to immerse the artist in the virtual world that’s been created for them,” Sutherland says. “You have to avoid shadows; a lot of it is about blending the light into the environment. It has to be approached more like lighting theatre than a musical performance. You have to go scene by scene, cue by cue. Everything has to feel real, and that’s a time-consuming process. It’s something that was very much learned by trial and error as we were rehearsing and blocking.”

For the XR numbers, Sutherland says, “We had the Robe ESPRITE for our remote-control followspots, using

Robe’s RoboSpot system.” The Esprite has a 5.5° – 50° zoom range, nine static and seven rotating gobo wheels, an animation wheel, framing shutters, a prism, and numerous accessories. He continues, “It was my first time [with the product]; it’s their LED spot lamp which shutters in and I was quite impressed. It did exactly what we needed it to do. We had six of them for followspots, and another 16 for dancers and scenery.” Also, he says, “We had 20 Robe Spiiders, hung above the stage. That was it.”

Due to the accelerated shooting schedule, Sutherland was on-site at XR Studios only for Miley Cyrus’ performance. “We had a two-week window to get everything filmed in, which is nuts, especially in these times,” he says.

When Sutherland flew to New York City to oversee the multiple remotes, Jon Kusner, of the firm 22 Degrees, stepped in as lighting designer for the XR stage. “My time with the VMAs goes back five or six years,” he says. “I have typically done remote locations on the show but, with 2020 being a strange year, for obvious reasons, I had initially planned to be on a different project. That was can-

The four renderings below: Courtesy of Yellow Studio



A quartet of renderings by Himede reveal the varying approaches taken to the Skyline Drive-In and XR Studios locations.



CNCO at the Skyline Drive-In.

celebrated late into it; at the same time, when [the VMAs] decided not to have a large event in Barclays Center and split the show into many locations, Tom found himself needing a little help.”

From a workload standpoint, the award segments on the XR stage were some of the most straightforward. “Someone comes out, and they announce a winner,” Kusner says. “We were prerecording all of that. We did multiple versions announcing people so the surprise of the winner could be concealed. That was the quietest part of the process. Basically, we were lighting people with a screen behind them. It was to be cut into the experience, so it all seemed live.

“The most complex bit would probably be the Lady Gaga performance,” Kusner says. “It was the most traditional music experience that you would do on a show without XR concerns. Lady Gaga brought in [lighting designer] Harry Forster to design and help organize her performance and to be a creative conduit to the VMA team. Harry added strobes and LED two-lighters on the stage and the scenic environment of decking. Because we were concerned about the screens and XR surfaces, we had to be cautious of contamination or minimizing the success of the XR technology.” Programming was done by Joe Holdman on a grandMA3 full-size.

Himede notes, “The biggest challenge was educating the talent and their creative directors on how [XR] worked. This technology is new to a lot of people, even though we’ve done augmented reality at the VMAs. Once we educated ourselves and understood how it worked, we had to translate that knowledge to the talent, their management, and their creative teams, and we got there.”

According to *Variety*, the MTV VMAs had 6.4 million viewers and was carried on 12 other networks, including the CW. It also proved that it was possible to produce a splashy awards show, safely, during a pandemic. This alone is enough to make it a success. 📶