CHASING THE MOON MAN

MTV's 2013 VMAs take off from Barclays Center

By: Sharon Stancavage

The MTV Video Music Awards have typically garnered attention not for those taking home a statuette but for the live performances of the year's hit songs. This year's event was no exception, and, the day after, the world was abuzz with the controversial antics of Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke. There were also solid performances from Justin Timberlake, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, and Drake.

The scenic design, created by production designers Florian Wieder, of Wieder Design of Munich and Los Angeles, and Tamlyn Wright, of DesignWright, of Los Angeles, was based around several elements. It was the 30th anniversary of the VMAs, and the iconic Moonman Award was redesigned. The event also returned to New York, at Brooklyn's Barclays Center. "When the creative producers started thinking about the overall concept of the show, they brought in KAWS, a Brooklyn-based artist, and commissioned him to give his take, and his whole aesthetic, to the Moonman statue, which then became a new logo design," Wright explains.

The addition of KAWS' sensibility resulted in a production design that was a hybrid of an awards show, a live concert, and an art gallery. Lighting designer Tom Kenny explains, "The production joined the KAWS world of high art to our world of high-octane television and to the world of new cutting-edge lighting that we used."

The KAWS Moonman was highly visible. First, there was the 60' inflatable version, created by Netherlands-based Airworks Inflatable Décor and Design. "They did a fantastic job, and it came in flawlessly," Wright says. "However, [Airworks] generally needs a much longer build than a traditional scene shop. It was an incredible piece of digital modeling, patterning, printing, and construction. It was mind-boggling." Among other things, the inflatable Moonman required 3,000 pieces of fabric.

The process of rigging the inflatable was fairly straightforward. "For the 60'-tall standing Moonman, we had a sub grid with 14 inverted quarter-ton motors to pick up and provide adjustability for each individual point," says JR Cassidy, of Moorpark, California-based Kish Rigging. "As we started raising those points, he came out of the box and unfolded. Next, the fans were turned on, and he inflated very quickly." The interior of the inflated Moonman included strips of LEDs to illuminate its eyes, multiple fans, and complex internal air chambers. It weighed approximately 936lb.

Another, reclining Moonman was used as the nexus of the presenter area. "He was the same scale as our 60'-tall Moonman," Wright says. "He was, in effect, the same body mass, but because he was put into the level of the arena, he had a step counter-cut out of the backside of him. Then he rested into the arena cement, where some seats were pulled." The head of this Moonman was used for talent entrances, she adds. "The visor retracted, people emerged out of his head as it flipped back, and they came downstage from inside."

Along with Airworks, scenic vendors included TAIT and Atomic Design, both of Lititz, Pennsylvania, and ShowFX, based in Santa Fe Springs, California. The latter was responsible for the reclining Moonman. "The first part of our job, which occurred in June, was to build a maquette of our piece in the reclining position," says David Mendoza, founder and CEO of ShowFX. "We created a model of the arena, including the stair-stepped bleacher area, and then we took digital 3-D files of the Moonman statue. We produced him through our CNC process and created a model that went to KAWS for approval."

The Philips Showline SL NITRO 510s were used in Bruno Mars' appearance for their intense bursts of light and dynamic effects with more than 1,300 high-powered LEDs.

The approval process was lengthy, and this particular part of the design went through some revisions. "We made a new model," Mendoza says. "But this time, we took the KAWS statue, cut it up, and reassembled that into our mockup model, so our piece would be exactly off the KAWS model."

Approval came swiftly, and Mendoza and his team began fabrication—with the aid of several other scenic shops due to the accelerated time frame. "One shop was making arms, another was making legs, another was making the body," he says. "Toward the last week, all the parts came in, and we had to do a test assembly in the shop. We used rented decks, and we reconstructed the stair-step bleachers in the shop so we could actually lay the figure onto it and make sure all the pieces fit."

The body, including the arms and legs, were fabricated out of foam. "It was made out of fiberglass because it had to be a hollow shell," Mendoza says. "We created a

Photos: Rachael Wright

Styrofoam mold with a negative of the head, and from it we made a fiberglass face and head, and all that was integrated with the steel structure, which had rotating bearings and hydraulic cylinders that would make it open on cue." During the show, this cue was achieved manually by ShowFX carpenters. The piece also included a platform that led to a lift that took presenters to the stage floor.

Rigging the reclining Moonman up and over into the seats was very tricky, especially with the massive body parts and the need to protect the object's finish. Cassidy explains, "Due to the position of the lying Moonman, we installed a double super-track trolley system, which enabled us to pick up, track, and lower the body parts to the assembly area up in the seats."

The band shell

The band shell in the center of the main stage was arguably the most interesting piece in the room. Wright explains, "The band shell dome had an active surface of 180 [Martin Professional] MAC Auras as well as 1,800 pixels in a lattice formation that gave the piece this really interesting textural landscape behind the performers. The faceted areas inside were black glass polycarbonate, and they reflected off each other in a way that made it look like you were inside a black crystal. We weren't thinking Fabergé egg at the time, but it became that."

The band shell was also a feat of engineering. Brian Levine, director of project management group at Tait, says, "We had this free-standing massive dome with such an awkward geometry that had to house LED and lighting

Photos: Courtesy of TAIT

Tait constructed the band shell from 11 rows of custom plywood boxes, which were 11 rows tall and 13 modules wide.

fixtures in such a way that they were on pitch and serviceable. How do you make things safe and free-standing and also have all of the electronics that you need to house and [which will] give the look they want?"

The band shell was comprised of "11 different rows of custom plywood boxes, 11 rows tall and 13 modules wide," Levine says. "Each plywood box housed lighting fixtures, LEDs, and was faced with a black shiny polycarbonate to give it that kind of reflective surface."

The team from Kish stepped in, rigged, and built the band shell on site. "We designed a massive multipurpose mother grid that was the armature to raise the band shell," Cassidy says. "We hung our mother grid with 16 two-tons; on the mother grid, we installed 28 inverted one-tons, which gave us total control of the overall load as well as each individual point on the band shell. Basically, we had two construction options available to us during the installation and dismantling of the band shell. We could move the entire grid at once, leaving the existing load-bearing one-tons static; additionally, we could leave the grid static and utilize the individual one-tons to make connections and minor, but essential, load adjustments."

Installing the band shell was very much an up-and-down process; a layer would be built, rigged, safety-checked, and then flown. Then it would be rigged, the prior layers and grid would be lowered, and the new layer would be added until the entire structure was complete. "We did that move probably a hundred times to accommodate all the department's needs," Cassidy says. "The final moves were serious in that we accumulated 26,000lb of band shell load

Photo: Rachael Wright

The band shell dome had an active surface of 180 Martin Professional MAC Auras as well as 1,800 pixels in lattice formation.

and 12,000lb of mother grid moving at once. The mother grid was equipped with a load cell system, so we were able to monitor the load wirelessly; we were able to see exactly what was happening every time we added additional load and how the grid was reacting." The Ron StageMaster Wireless 6000 load-monitoring stage safety system from Eilon Engineering was used here. It can handle up to 32 load cells per system; it works via a laptop and measures and monitors in real time not only individual rigging points but groups of points as well.

"We had 26,000lb of band shell dangling in the air awaiting the arrival of its bottom neck section, which was built at the opposite end of the arena on top of the rolling 80' x 60' Tait deck," Cassidy says. "The deck was then manually rolled under the hanging band shell; we then lowered the flown portion onto the bottom."

As for load capacities, Cassidy says, "We knew back in January that we would be pushing the advertised rigging loads for Barclays Center, so we contacted and worked closely with Gary Storm, of [the engineering firm] Thornton Tomasetti, who designed the roof structure. Our rigging load was 272,000lb, which was analyzed and approved by Gary and his team. The building has a huge amount of capacity and height, a superstar rigging team, and a great place for a show like the VMAs."

Completing the scenic fabrication team was Atomic Design Inc. Joe McMonagle, one of the company's account managers, explains, "We provided the almost 60' catwalk ramp from the main stage to the 15' diameter circular B stage, the Justin Timberlake 'invisible' acrylic stepping stones—a series of clear acrylic columns for the artist to dance on from the B stage to the VIP stage—and a 10' VIP circular stage with stairs and a bridge from VIP seating." All of the stages except the columns built for Timberlake featured inlaid RGB LED tape with diffusion. The challenges faced by the Atomic team were similar to those faced by the rest of the production team. "The biggest challenge on any award show is responding to the late-breaking requests from the featured artists," McMonagle says. "These creative and exciting concepts are, by definition, the last parts of the show to crystallize, which makes them the hardest parts to react to and produce in time for the show opening. Fortunately, our team—led by project manager Kate Wicker—was up to the task and able to design the appropriate structures to satisfy these last-minute design initiatives."

The reclining Moonman was the nexus of the awards area, revealing presenters as its visor retracted.

Kenny's rig made use of a number of new products, including Robe Pointes, LEDWash 600s, and LEDWash 1200s; Chauvet Nexus 4x4s; and Philips Showline SL Nitro 510s.

Lighting

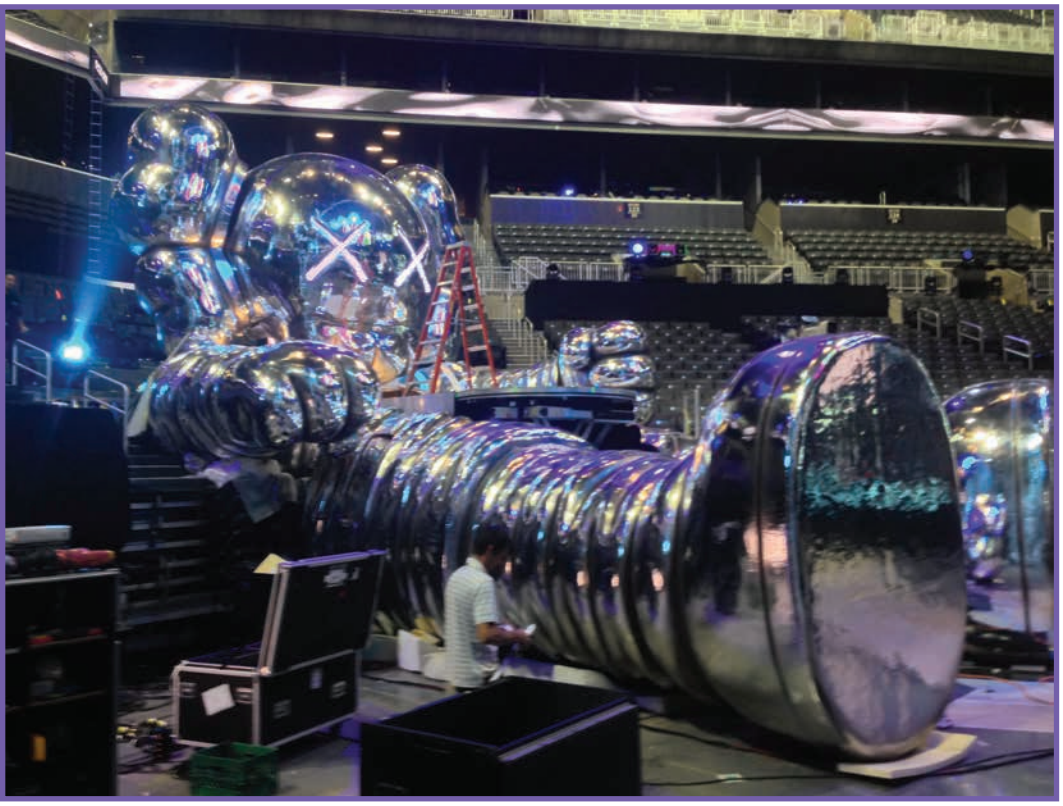
Working in harmony with Wieder and Wright's scenery was Kenny's lighting design, which was featured in the arena as well as in Katy Perry's performance on the Brooklyn Bridge. "We wanted it to feel like the audience was walking into a gallery in the middle of Brooklyn that had the top artists in the world," Kenny says. This was seen in the steel-blue bumper shots used throughout the show. "Early in the process, Lee

Photos: Rachael Wright

Lodge and Jesse Ignatovich, the executive producers, decided that we needed to keep it in one look and leave all the fire and color for the performances," Kenny adds.

Lighting positions were positioned around the scoreboard and the center of the arena, over the voms, and certain audience areas. In the ceiling, close to 4,000' of trussing was hung at a 70' – 80' lighting trim. "Above the main performance stage, we had very little fly space," Kenny says. "I managed to get in some lights and followspot positions, but we kept it clear for any sort of set flying or gags that the artists might come along with. On either side, I had this massive wall of lights, which were filled with Robe Pointes and Robe 600s."

Regarding the Pointe, Kenny says, "It's an amazing light. I was the first to use the [Clay Paky] Sharpy on television in the States, and I'm the first one to use this light in the States. The Sharpy had its day—now it's the Pointe's, and, without a doubt, Robe listened to designers and vendors and outdid every aspect of a light in the 21st century."



The body of the Moonman was constructed out of fiberglass integrated with a steel structure, including rotating bearings and hydraulic cylinders.

Photo: David Mendoza

Other new gear items included the Chauvet Professional Nexus 4x4 and Philips Showline SL Nitro 510. "The Nexus is a multi-LED panel that we used as scenery in Miley's performance on the band carts," Kenny says. The Nitro, which was used for Bruno Mars' performance, "is a fabulous LED strobe in custom-made mirror panels," he adds.

Also deployed was a large number of Martin Professional MAC Auras. "The color of the Aura is beyond compare," he says. "It's like the first time you saw a Vari*Lite—it's the same palette, it gets those same oranges and purples; they really have a winner. They can talk about the Viper, they can talk about the Mac 2 or the Mac 3, but the Mac Aura is by far the greatest light they've ever made. It's the best LED light out there." He adds that the Aura's light weight was also a plus factor. Also in the rig were Philips Vari*Lite units (specifically VLXs, VL3500s, VL3000s, and VL3500 Wash FXs), Clay Paky Sharpys and Sharpy Washes, GLP impression X4s, and Martin Atomic 3000 strobes. The lighting gear was supplied by VER, of Glendale, California.

The rig, which also included Solaris LED strobes, was augmented by 11 spotlights: eight in the house and three truss spots. Seven front-of-house spots were Strong Super 4k Gladiators; the other three were Lycian M2s. "Two of them were on the side for dancers and general pickups, while the final spot was above the reclining KAWS head, on a truss 100' in the air," Kenny explains.

"The great thing about the VMAs is that the performers bring along talented people who have great ideas. That adds to the excitement, and the artists are very collaborative with the VMAs as well," Kenny explains. Bruno Mars came with Roy Bennett and Corey FitzGerald, while Justin Timberlake brought along Nick Whitehouse. Lady Gaga appeared with avant-garde director Robert Wilson, and Miley Cyrus was with Diane Martel, her creative director. Kenny's team included programmers Mike Appel and Matthew Piercy, gaffer Mike Ryan, and lighting director Ronnie Skopac. "We did the show with four [MA Lighting] grandMA2s for the lighting—primary and secondary and backups—in my opinion, the grandMA is the only desk that can do live television," Kenny says. Another aspect of that collaboration was the local talent. "My real special effect on the show was people power—the fabulous crew of unbelievable spot ops and local electricians help me achieve a perfect game," Kenny notes.