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Michael Bublé's Summer Spree

By: David Barbour



The show alternated between big looks that took in the singer's 30-piece orchestra and dramatic isolations at center stage, like those seen above and opposite.

The star hops around the map with a flexible production design

For concert designers, the summer season is typically a journey into the unexpected. Unusual venues, outdoor atmospheric conditions, and festival rigs can pose all sorts of challenges. Undaunted, the design firm Lightswitch created a full production design, including scenery and lighting for pop singer Michael Bublé's summer jaunt across the UK, Malta, and Québec. It was an unusual itinerary, to be sure, but as lighting designer Jamie Davis notes, the show supported Bublé's distinctive style while remaining adaptable across a range of venues and locations.

Davis says the first question involved the full scale of Bublé's touring plans, including "conversations between myself and production manager Craig Finley figuring out how to put 30 musicians on a festival stage. [The singer travels with a full orchestra.] And, playing pop music, they need to be seated to see the conductor, hear each other, and be close enough to Michael to feel the energy coming off him so they can interact."

Attacking this puzzle, he says, "We went through five or six variations before landing on the layout we used. Then we started diving into the details, looking at how to make it feel really special. We went for a kind of '20s-'30s Art Deco big-band feel, with a bit of a top edge to it." The plan left no detail ignored, down to the handrails built into the set. Other considerations included placing the conductor at a height where he could be easily seen and making sure the music stands didn't block the musicians. TAIT built the stage setup.

"Then we got into the lighting design," Davis says, "figuring out how we could utilize festival air rigs, supplementing them in a couple of places. Lightswitch brands itself as providing pragmatic design; we call ourselves visual storytellers. I always say that the artist is writing a book, and it's our job to illustrate it. Everything we do has to be true to the

All photos: Callan Halliwell

story that we're telling, first and foremost. Second, make sure everybody is happy: the artist, production management, and everybody else. Early on, we asked Fin [Craig Finley], 'How many trucks do you want to fit the show into?' The mandate was four."

Certain lighting units in the rig also performed a scenic function. "Michael likes to talk to the audience between numbers," Davis says. So, being able to pull it down to just him was important. But when we did that, we didn't want a black void behind him. It still had to feel like a show." This is one reason for the Deco-style chandeliers constructed from Martin Sceptron XB units. "These are the new and superior models," he says. What makes them better? "They're significantly brighter. In half of our shows, it wasn't dark until late. So, for June and July in the northern UK, that extra punch made the chandeliers stand out in a way we weren't necessarily expecting. It really helped bring the stage to life. In camera shots, we didn't want a dark void behind Michael; the chandeliers helped fill it in, especially in wide shots or when we were looking up from the pit."

Providing an additional scenic touch were Robe PATT 2017s, units defined by their distinctive, big-scoop look. "They helped to fill in the background," Davis says. "There were two units on either side of his center entrance position; as he was walking in, he got a thrust beam in the background, which worked out well."

The rig's floor package, Davis says, included additional Sceptron XBs and, for scenic treatments, more PATT 2017s. ACME Lighting LYRAs served as profile units. "Covering the B stage were Martin MAC Aura Raven XIPs, which were really great," he notes. "They became the key light when the band's rhythm section came down there for three or four songs; as the musicians ran back up to the main stage, the units flipped up and became searchlights in the sky. The punch they packed was important for that look. We had ACME Pixel Lines along the front edge of the stage to add some of the sparkle that Michael was looking for. We started using these units on private events, and they're great. Behind the band, looking for something to fill in visually, we went with ACME Tornados because they offer five beams per head; we had eight or nine on either side of the band. We also deployed the Tornados' LED rings for some of the ballads, which featured close-ups of certain musicians." This touch, he says, "added some ambiance behind them." A single Martin MAC Ultra provided Bublé with strong backlight when he entered via the central walkway, aided by plenty of fog from an MDG theONE machine. "The MAC Ultra really made the moment stand out, even with the Irish winds," Davis says.

Running the numbers, the lighting package included, from Martin, 130 Sceptron 1000mm and 30 Sceptron 320mm units plus six MAC Aura Raven XIPs; from ACME, 32 Lyras, 13 Pixel Line IPs, and four Ultra Blinder IPs; from Robe, ten PATT 2017s and two iFORTE LX FS units; Elation





Above and opposite: "If you book Michael Bublé, you're going to get the whole band, too," Davis says. "So, when you put roughly 30 people onstage, you need a lot more than you do for a five-piece rock band." Note the chandeliers (made of Martin Sceptrons) and Robe PATT 2017s, which also performed a scenic function. "In camera shots, we didn't want a dark void behind Michael," the designer adds. "The chandeliers helped fill it in, especially in wide shots or when we were looking up from the pit."

SixPar 200 IPs, one MDG theONE, and one CHAUVET Professional Cloud 9 low fog generator.

Explaining the floor package's unusual size, the designer adds, "If you book Michael Bublé, you're going to get the whole band, too. So, when you put roughly 30 people onstage, you need a lot more than you do for a five-piece rock band." He adds, "It continued into the air rig. A lot of festivals had a limited amount of stuff on their downstage truss that we would advance. They had to supplement that with at least ten wash units because we needed front light for all these positions. It's an interesting challenge that not many people think about. We had to argue that we needed to add things like front light because six lights on a downstage truss wasn't going to light 30 musicians."

In terms of overhead lighting, Davis says, "The base show at the Lytham Festival [seen in this article's photos] didn't have any wash units overhead. It was all profiles. Then we'd go to other festivals, and it would be spot wash, spot wash, spot wash, and sometimes spot, wash, beam, and spot, wash, beam. As we encountered these situations, we adapted. With washes, we threw a color to fill out the stage and get more light on the band. The two times we encountered beams, we made them play along with the profiles in certain key moments, for example, when we pulled all the beams down to center on Michael. We'd add the beams into that, making that warm look even bigger than it did with only the profiles. That was fun when we had it."

The range of rig sizes was fairly extreme. "The biggest show was in Quebec," Davis notes. "I think we were into 100 universes just in the festival rig. Then we ran into some really tiny rigs, which were smaller than private events I've done. And we saw everything in between. On some days, you ask, 'How is the band going to fit onstage? What is the lighting like?' But we designed the set, and we knew it had to be somewhat mobile. It had to pivot, so we could angle it to fit onstage."

To keep the show adaptable, he says, "We came up with an idea of the bare minimum requirement, partly taken from a show we had done a month and a half earlier in Puerto Vallarta. It was a total custom design for us. We looked at how the fixtures were laid out and adapted them to the most minimal festival situation. Once we had that, adding to it became easy, especially with the MA3



console and its Recipes feature. With Recipes, you can store more lights into a group, snap them, and your timing works; your presets are all stored directly. It's magical, and it saved us a ton of time."

As the photos in the layout reveal, Davis' palette was fairly saturated. "Our rule of thumb is for the audience to see the band if they're playing," he says. "But they don't need to be under white light the entire time." White light could be used to pick out instrumentalists: Sometimes, we'd treat them more as scenery than performers. But when Michael interacted with them, we could desaturate the color."

On the video side, the show relied on each festival's screens. "Our package consisted of control, a handful of PTZ and POV cameras, and one lock lens. We always used the festival's lock lenses in addition, as well as whatever Bitcam edition they had. Their LED walls were various sizes, which was fun to play with every day. In resizing content and dealing with various video processors, we found that some didn't like it when we went really white; we'd get this weird pixelization. The next day, the processing would be totally fine. It was a fun, fun learning experience."

To get the show ready for each new venue, Davis says, "We did 8am morning load-ins. I had a front-of-house tech with me, who made sure the patches were good for me. Then I'd go through all the video content to make sure it was sized correctly and looking okay." The content, he notes, "was stuff Michael has used for the two or three tour cycles. We were doing eight shows only and didn't want to blow the budget on new content. We're saving that for next year, when we do a full tour cycle. The only thing we remade for this year was the opening sequence, which was really smoky, with Michael walking onstage during this big overture."

Also, he says, "Along the same lines, we agreed that we didn't want to reprogram the entire show into Disguise. For the last official tour, we were still running grandMA2; starting this year, we moved to MA3. For the private shows we've been doing, we've used ArKaos. Rather than take the time to reprogram it all into Disguise, we just ran it in ArKaos." Under the circumstances, he adds, ArKaos got pushed pretty much to its limit. "By the time we were done, we were upwards of 12 to 15 video layers at any given time. It was a fun challenge to do that on a fairly simple video server."

Davis started with Bublé as a programmer in 2018, moving up to lighting designer in 2022. In 2018, he imagined that the singer would be satisfied with a simple lighting design. Far from it, he has learned: "In the Québec show, we had over 500 pyro cues that we added on the day of. There were flames, confetti cues, 3'-wide balloons that got tossed in the audience. He likes a bang with his show." He notes that only three num-



"The base show at the Lytham Festival [seen above] didn't have any wash units overhead," Davis says. "It was all profiles. Then we'd go to other festivals, and it would be spot wash, spot wash, spot wash, and sometimes spot, wash, beam, and spot, wash, beam. As we encountered these situations, we adapted."

bers had timecode, largely because they call for more instruments than can be fit on the stage; otherwise, he ran the lighting live all night.

The Malta show, Davis notes, was something of an outlier, but a good one. "It was the most prepared for us. When we got there, the backline was already laid out. The risers were done, the audio pretty well dialed in. We had done a show the night before, four hours from Heathrow. We drove to Heathrow, stayed in a hotel long enough to shower, got on the plane, landed, dropped our bags in the hotel, and went to the Malta load-in, where I did overnight programming. The show was the next night. This was great; we walked in, and everything was right." It's the stuff of perfect summer memories.

Production Design: Lightswitch
Design Lead/Creative Director: Jamie Davis
Lead Draftsman: Anthony Forchielli

TOURING PRODUCTION
Production Manager: Craig "Fin" Finley
Tour Manager: Orla Clarke
Road Manager: Chris "Stapes" Stapleton
Production Coordinator: Sian Balogh
Stage Manager: Jake Vernum
Lead Carpenter: Harry Doherty

LIGHTING/VIDEO/AUDIO
Lighting Programmers/FOH Technicians: Aaron Carney and Gregg Bellon
Lighting Crew Chief: Sean Hardcastle
Lighting Technicians: Luke Rudge and Gary Rees
Video Director: John Moore
Lighting Supplier: Christie Lites
Christie Lites Project Support: Ian Gordon and Conrad Dew
Video Equipment and Riedel Intercom Supply: Adlib UK
Audio Equipment Supply: Solotech

SCENIC AND PHOTOGRAPHY
Scenic Fabrication: TAIT
Music-Stand Front Fabrication: The Next Stage UK
Photography: Callan Halliwell