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Muse

The Will of the People Tour

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Voices of the People

Muse's new tour portrays a society rocked by populist ideas

By: David Barbour
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We

live in strange times, a fact well-noted on the concert-touring circuit these days. The Weeknd's *After Hours Til Dawn Tour*, My Chemical Romance's *Foundations of Decay* tour, and Depeche Mode's *Memento Mori Tour* have all sounded notes of alarm about fascism, social decay, and the loss of individual freedoms. This isn't surprising; artists are the canaries in the coal mine of civilization, sensing the major stress points underpinning contemporary life. Working with diverse design teams, each tour has expressed similar ideas in highly distinct ways. Perhaps the most attention-getting of them is Muse's *Will of the People Tour*, with its mysterious scenic figures, angular lighting, and galvanizing sound.

The tour is named after Muse's new album, which takes a hard look at the way we live now. According to Mark Beaumont on the website *Classic Rock*, "Having already

made the decision that their ninth album would reflect world events, pickings were rich. It opens with the title track, a glam-rock satire of Trump's January 6 foot soldiers determined to 'push the emperors into the ocean' and 'smash a nation to pieces'....From there, we get a sonic newsreel of the pandemic era, from Black Lives Matter revolts to social-media witch-hunting, and end up on the most visceral condemnation of the global situation that Muse have yet conceived."

The tour captures the album's intimations of doom expressed in dynamic music. On the website *Brooklyn Vegan*, Bill Pearis declared the band's Madison Square performance as "unforgettable," adding that it "has been seared into my retinas. Lasers, strobes, fire. I can still see it when I close my eyes." Covering a performance in the Netherlands, Beaumont added, "The world [has], somewhat terrifyingly, caught up with Muse, making them more



Opposite: The hooded, mirrored figure known as Will is the product of a collaboration between Stout, Airworks Inflatables, and Qnetik. Above: The mirrored blades are part of Stout and Routhier's design concept, which dispenses with overhead lighting units.

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musically and thematically relevant than ever,” going on to describe the show as “ferocious and compulsive.” It’s a recipe that thrills Muse’s longtime fans while keeping the band relevant in an ever-changing music scene.

The tour combines the talents of Jesse Lee Stout, leader of the firm Metaform.Studio and Muse’s longtime creative director and production designer (his other clients include Phish, Seal, and Imagine Dragons), with co-production designer and lighting designer Sooner Routhier, who is well-known in these pages for her work with Coldplay, Evanescence, and The Lumineers, among others. It’s a striking case study in the interaction of scenery and lighting (plus some video); each creative decision seems to have dictated additional rounds of fresh thinking.

The early portion of the show is dominated by a large-scale figure, hooded, its face obscured by an arrangement of mirrored planes, its accompanying right hand pocked with disc-shaped lighting units. It’s the first clue that the production acts as a dark mirror on recent events. Stout notes that, as the album was being written and recorded, “We were going through the pandemic and masks were at the forefront of my mind. The band had a lot of interest in the extremities of political division and the insurrection that had just happened; we talked about the people storming the Capitol, how some felt they were justified in doing that, that they thought they were saving democracy while people who have other perspectives feel

it was an atrocity. We also talked about extreme-left groups like Anonymous, the hacker group that has shut down banks and governments.”

Such thoughts contributed to the conception of the faceless figure known to production insiders as Will. “He’s an anonymous vigilante,” says Stout, who also cites as influences James McTeigue’s 2005 film *V for Vendetta* and the Netflix sensation *Squid Game* along with online avatars and the Guy Fawkes mask favored by members of the group Anonymous. “I was also thinking about old-school cops with mirrored sunglasses worn as an act of intimidation.”

Will is an inflatable, an idea with a precedent in Muse’s history. “On the previous tour, I made a giant inflatable, and the band loved it,” Stout says, adding that it “was onstage for only two songs.” By contrast, Will is present for a substantial portion of the show, a figure with many uses. “I knew that shooting lights off it would make for amazing looks,” Stout adds. Will has also continued to evolve: “I had in mind a two-way mirror and LED gag but, because nobody had yet built an LED screen into an inflatable, we held off on it, doing it for the European leg.” Will, he notes, “is a collaboration between me, Airworks Inflatables, and Peter McKenzie, of Qnetik [both companies located in the Netherlands]. Peter was instrumental in engineering the LED video screen inside the inflatable.”

Speaking of the lighting units embedded in Will’s hand,





Above and opposite: Given the dictum about no overhead lighting, Routhier set about placing units just about everywhere else: under the deck, on the upstage and sidewalls, and in various floor positions. This layout leaves her well-situated to create the extremely kinetic and muscular beam effects that dominate the show.

Stout says the idea “was introduced in an early music video [for *Will of the People*], ‘You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween.’ It gives a pseudo-Marvel vibe to the character, which very much fits the zeitgeist.”

Later in the show, Will is replaced by another, even more sinister, figure, an armor-clad bull with enormous horns. “Matt [Bellamy, the band’s frontman] named him Baphomet,” Stout says. The name is derived from a deity supposedly worshipped by the Knights Templar in the Middle Ages, although it was later used more widely in occult circles. “He signifies extremes like totalitarianism. Also, as a bull, it can be read as a metaphor for Wall Street,” the designer says, citing the statue, Charging Bull, located in New York’s Financial District. (It also alludes to Baal, the idol worshipped by pagans in the Old Testament.) Baphomet was built by Landmark Creations, based in Burnsville, Minnesota. When the figures move onstage, it happens the old-fashioned way, with a crew member using wheels and pulleys.

One of the more interesting design features is the set of mirrored blades, or boxes, hanging overhead, forming vari-

ous configurations, and achieving an eerie orange glow during “Kill or Be Killed.” “They came out of a conversation with Sooner,” Stout says. “I was lamenting about always seeing shows with overhead beams. I proposed to her that we do a clear stage, with all the lighting underneath. She loved the idea.” Routhier adds, “It stemmed from the fact that the Claypaky Xtylos Aquas could create a perfect beam bounce off a mirror. It’s an idea I’ve had since the fixture came out during the pandemic—moving mirrors that moved the beam instead of the head of the moving light.” As we will see, Routhier also found many other positions with which to bathe the band in light.

“I also wanted pyro to shoot off them,” Stout says of the mirrored blades. “Sooner reinforced the looks I wanted by adding [GLP] JDC Lines 1000s along the bar’s edges, which works super well. I made drawings of different formations. For ‘Starlight,’ the bars make a kind of star formation. For ‘Uprising,’ a very military song, they do chevrons. For ‘Plug in Baby,’ I wanted to make a cube and have light bounce around inside it. Sooner said, ‘No way’—until she figured it out.” The blades’ movements are



Above and opposite: "The [Claypaky] Xtylos Aquas and [CHAUVET Professional] Color STRIKE Ms both play equally important roles," Routhier says. "It was important to have large quantities of the same types of fixtures distributed equally throughout the rig to make sure the system looked massive. They form a large grid of light with multiple functions throughout the set." Martin VDO Atomics are embedded in Will's hand.

controlled using a Kinesys K2 system. Aside from the inflatables, the set was built by Gallagher Staging.

The production is loaded with effects, including pyro and confetti. "Confetti is kind of a staple with Muse," Stout says. "This time, we do a snow effect. [See the cover image.] I wanted to create a feeling of ash, or debris, falling from the sky. It's very somber and it lasts for two songs."

The effects gear supplied by ER Productions includes, in addition to the company's bespoke Muse flaming propane logo, 14 MagicFX pump-based FlameBlazers; two stand-alone FlameBlazers; an additional six stand-alone FlameBlazers in the mirror blades; nine MagicFX Stadium Shots for streamers, fired with Galaxis wireless firing modules; 12 MagicFX Stadium Blasters; ten MagicFX Swirl Fan XLs; one MDG Ice Fog Q, one CO2 machine in Will's handpiece, fired wirelessly with Galaxis; an ER Smoke Sausage (a unique unit designed to disperse smoke evenly and vertically); four Look Solutions Unique 2.1 hazers; and four Look Solutions Viper deluxe fan units. To give you a sense of the extent of the show's effects component, each performance requires 132lb of confetti, 30lb of streamers, 25.6 gallons of isopropyl alcohol, 88lb of propane, and

220.5lb of CO2.

Somewhat surprisingly for these days, the show has a relatively limited video component. "I'm a bit exhausted with it," Stout notes. "We have the LED inside Will's face and two IMAG screens at stage left and stage right, both in landscape mode. We use a lot of Notch on the camera feeds, but often in subtle ways. The band is not so excited about super-heavy Notch effects where you can't see the artists very well. Hidden Road Studios [based in Los Angeles and London] did the effects. They created subtle looks; for example, sometimes the image's outer edges look a little unfocused. A lot of IMAG looks like cheap TV, so I had it slowed to 24 frames per second, to make it look like a film."

Stout notes that the show begins with a video sequence that sets the tone. "A guy in a black hoodie goes out, wearing a mask, to peacefully protest, on his knees, with a sign in front of a massive building. People come out with batons and beat him. Other people capture it on phones, causing a viral moment in which everyone wears masks and sets out to take back the power." Otherwise, however, the video is limited to live-capture footage.

The video gear lineup includes a disguise media server,



four Grass Valley LDX 150 cameras with Fujinon lenses, five Panasonic Robotic 150 cameras, four Dreamchip 4K Mini cameras, and two Barco UDX-40K projectors.

Stout's production design includes one especially kicky detail: "I designed a glove for Matt which he uses in two songs. I made it a musical instrument. He is actually fully playing the song on it. It's a mix of different parts, Frankensteined together; the instrumentation part is an iPod with specific software. Bluetooth shoots it over his tech, but he is playing it in real time."

Lighting

Given the dictum about no overhead lighting, Routhier set about placing units just about everywhere else: under the deck, on the upstage and sidewalls, and in various floor positions. This layout leaves her well-situated to create the extremely kinetic and muscular beam effects that dominate the show.

Indeed, the designer works well with various aspects of the scenic design, beginning with the mirrored blades. Echoing and expanding on Stout's comments, she says, "We wanted to get away from overhead trussing, keeping the airspace above the playing area free and clear from

clutter. But we still need audience lighting and a location for flown flame units. We also wanted a surface for the Claypaky Xtylos Aquas to bounce off. Mirrored material is a huge component of the visual language for the new album cycle, so the moving mirror boxes seemed to be the perfect approach. The idea was to make sure they were as thin as possible, so they didn't look like trusses with mirrored facias. We placed [GLP] JDC Line 1000s inside to act as audience lighting and allow the mirrors to become a lit scenic element."

The presence of so many reflective surfaces can be regarded as a challenge or an opportunity; Routhier sees them as both. "One challenge was keeping the beams focused in a symmetrical way. For example, the slightest trim change in the mirror boxes cause a reflected beam of light to be off by multiple feet." Aaron Luke, associate lighting designer and programmer, expands on this point, saying, "The various reflective surfaces are very much part of the design at some points; in others, they are something we have to be very intentional about avoiding. The automated mirror boxes are featured in the last third of the show; whatever position the boxes are in at each moment has a big impact on which lights we use to hit them to achieve the

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Above: Later in the show, Will is replaced by another, even more sinister, figure, an armor-clad bull with enormous horns. "Matt [Bellamy, the band's frontman] named him Baphomet," Stout says. The name is derived from a deity supposedly worshipped by the Knights Templar in the Middle Ages, although it was later used more widely in occult circles. "He signifies extremes like totalitarianism." Opposite: ER Productions supplied the plentiful special effects.

kind of reflection we want. At other points, we need to avoid hitting them; again, we have to be very specific about which groups of lights we use and where we focus them."

In terms of color, Routhier says, "Jesse gives us very specific color palettes to use throughout the run of the show. They are always chosen very intentionally and adhere to a specific color story that is influenced by the album cycle visuals." Stout adds that the palette is "more specific to this album, which is a bit heavier than anything the band has done in at least 20 years. It wanted a more aggressive feel and look. There's a rigidity to the lighting design. I wanted it to feel like a prison, a grid, very industrial-feeling. The predominant colors are amber and teal." It's a look inspired in part, he adds, by George Miller's 2015 film *Mad Max: Fury Road*. "I brought that into the album packaging, which I art-directed and did graphic design for. My job is to make it all connect, including the music videos and the photos."

Although the rig is reasonably eclectic, Routhier says, "The [Claypaky] Xtylos Aquas and [CHAUVET Professional] Color STRIKE Ms both play equally important roles. [Xtylos Aqua is an IP66-rated compact beam moving light; Color STRIKE M is a motorized strobe/wash.] It was important to have large quantities of the same types of fixtures distrib-

uted equally throughout the rig to make sure the system looked massive. They form a large grid of light with multiple functions throughout the set." Luke adds, "Having 184 of the Xtylos Aquas, and it being our only moving light, we obviously use it for a lot of the looks. But we also have 156 of the Color STRIKE Ms that we rely on quite a bit to get a lot of different looks and effects. Forty-four of them are under the clear stage decks, so a majority of what they do is upright the band and inflatables and add indirect movement to the show. Thirty-two of them are almost purely audience light, mounted on ladders from the delay towers in the house, but a couple of times we flip them around to light confetti as it shoots. Eighty are hung from truss, so, many times, they are facing the audience and provide a lot of the punches, but then we also tilt them down at times and create some moody looks with just the glow of indirect light."

Additional Xtylos Aquas and Color STRIKE Ms are built into the walls surrounding the band, along with Ayrton Perseos and Martin MAC Aura XIPs. Elsewhere, GLP impression X4 Bars are placed at stage right and stage left. Martin VDO Atomics are embedded in Will's hand. For followspots, Luke says, "We carry a Follow-Me system with three targets that control a total of 15 Ayrton Domino

LT fixtures—12 from the front; three from behind. One of my favorite things about the Follow-Me system is its flexibility. I can assign any of the 15 fixtures to follow any of the three targets at any point in the show, or I can quickly and easily take them out of Follow-Me control and control them fully with the console.”

Running the numbers, the rig includes 152 Xtylos Aquas, 120 Color STRIKE Ms, 36 JDC Line 1000s, 32 MAC Aura XIPs, 24 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, 24 VDO Atomic Bolds, 16 Perseos, 15 Domino LTs, eight ACME Lighting Scorpius units, and the Follow-Me system. Control is provided by three MA Lighting grandMA3 consoles, running MA2 software, plus 12 grandMA NPUs.

“Upstaging provided all the lighting for the US arena run,” Luke says. “When transitioned to stadiums in the UK and Europe, we shipped over all the Upstaging gear; LCR [Darwen, UK-based Lights Control Rigging] provided some supplemental lighting.” This includes 32 Xtylos Aquas, 48 Color STRIKE Ms, and 36 JDC Line 1000s.

Sound

The PA for the tour consists entirely of gear from d&b audiotechnik, including main hangs of GSL8s with side hangs of GSL8s and GSL2s, plus 180° hangs of KSL8s.

Front fill is provided by Y10Ps. The low end is handled by SL-SUBs. Front-of-house mixer Marc Carolan is known to be a fan of d&b gear. “It’s a very musical system, which really works for the level of dynamics I use in my mix,” he says. “It’s also incredibly clean onstage and performs excellently in stadium shows where off-site noise can be an issue.” The system is driven by Lake LM44s. “Though Lake is mainly used as a matrix for the various system inputs, we output them into the four elements—L/R, sub, and fill—and convert to Dante to run to the amplifiers,” says system engineer Matt Besford-Foster.

It might seem a challenge to fit the necessarily large audio rig into the elaborate stage setup, but monitor tech Liam Tucker says, “Team audio has a great relationship with production and the creative team. We had a conversation about the set and the Perspex deck before the tour started, so we were in a relatively good place. The thing in terms of getting it all together was the sub placement ended up changing during rehearsals, due to space in the pit; we put all the subs under the stage, which wasn’t the original plan, so the spacing changed due to it being more compact. We also had to consider the cable bridges interacting with lighting but, all in all, it was pretty smooth sailing.” Muse’s longtime audio gear supplier is Newbury, UK-



based Skan PA Hire.

Carolan runs the show on an Avid S6L console, another longtime favorite, paired with some analog outboard gear. “Usually, it’s things for which there is no comparable digital equivalent,” he explains. “For instance, the Neve 5059 summing amp, and plug-ins-wise, the McDSP and the new Soothe Live. I have also added a Live Professor platform, which gives me access to things like Softube and FabFilter.”

Monitor mixer Matt Napier runs his side of the show on a DiGiCo SD7 Quantum console. “DiGiCo has been my go-to console manufacturer for the past 20 years,” he says. “As a platform, it’s constantly expanding and evolving. To me, it’s still the most intuitive powerful console there is. Quantum 7 is the obvious choice for me when mixing a band like Muse. It can cope with any changes or requests and, as a platform, I know it will continue to evolve and keep at the forefront of technology. The main thing, though, is the openness of the sound; we have the 32-bit I/O and are connecting to the Wisycom [wireless IEM system] via AES so the signal path is very clean and dynamic.” Regarding the band’s in-ears, he adds, “For various historical reasons, they all prefer to stay on generics, so we are using Westone UM Pro 30s. I’ve built the mixes from day one with the Westones as my reference so, as long as the fit is correct, they sound great.”

Interestingly, he adds, “On the whole, I am not a huge fan of plug-ins and always try and get my mixes 99% of the way there using the console. That said, sometimes I do like to add some old analog emulation, so with Waves I am using SSL E Channel strips, 1176 compressors, G Bus compressors, and some LA-2A and LA-3A comps. Via UAD Apollo, I am also running some Avalon 737 plug-ins, and then the mainstage takes care of the isotope Vocoders for vocal effects.”

Noting that Matt Bellamy uses a Neumann KMS 105 mic, Napier says, “It really suits his voice. Muse have developed—long before I arrived—a really unique system of layering vocal distortion onto the vocals. Matt uses the mic to dig into it at certain points to just tip the saturation of the preamp into slight distortion. He treats it as an instrument in its own right; the 105 is ideal for this. Other songs require the vocal to be super-clean and defined and, again, the 105 does this really well. However, as with a lot of shows, we have a long runway into the crowd and in front of the PA. On these songs, the 105 isn’t the best option. So, rather than compromise, we change the mic/capsule, depending on where the song is performed. The Austrian Audio OD505 WL1 works fantastically well in front of the PA and is a great-sounding mic in its own right.”

The scale of the tour has only grown as it has moved on to Europe. “For the arenas, we were in 13 trucks total for the tour in North America,” Tucker says. “Now that we are in stadiums in Europe, we are up to 21 trucks, which

Will of the People Tour

Staging: Gallagher Staging

Inflatables: Airworks, Landmark Creations, Qnetik

Lighting: Upstaging, Lights Control Rigging

Video: NightHawk Video

Sound: Skan PA Hire

Special Effects: ER Productions

Co-production designer/creative director: Jesse Lee Stout

Co-production designer/lighting designer: Sooner Routhier

FOH engineer: Marc Carolan

Associate lighting designer: Aaron Luke

Upstaging account representative: John Bahnick

Upstaging project manager: Josh Wagner

Crew chief: Travis Robinson

Kinesys operator: James Diekhoff

Lighting technicians Willie Coster, Jorden Satterwhite,

Tyree Duncan, Richard Carr, Amy Kozak,

Hannah Ackerly

Video director: Tom Kirk

Video crew chief: Steve Tomanek

Polecam op/camera op: Mark “Hughsey” Hughes

Video engineer: David “DD” Diller

Disguise programmer/operator: Anthony “Texas” Condon

Camera operator/projectionist: Casey Lawson

Robo cam operator/projectionist: David “Detroit” Klann

NightHawk account manager: Todd Lapere

Director of engineering: Bryan Venhorst

Head of engineering: Brandon Dolderer

ER project manager: Ryan Hagan

SFX grandMA programmer: Chris Thoms

SFX crew chief/shooter: Asher Heigham

SFX No. 2: Rob Gifford

SFX techs: Tommy Sheen, Ryan Payer

FOH minder/system engineer: Eddie O’Brien

Audio system engineer: Matt Besford-Foster

PA tech/network: Rob Wilkins

PA tech/comms tech: Boden Birkett

Monitor tech: Liam Tucker

doesn’t include the structure or any site equipment like generators or delay towers.”

Napier adds, “All tours have their unique challenges; the fun of touring is coming up with creative ways to meet the challenges, both musical and logistical challenges. Just the concept of taking all this kit around the globe into all weather conditions is a challenge! It helps to have the support of a great audio vendor and the awesome crew they have supplied. Liam has been invaluable. He’s been with Muse for a long time, so his knowledge has really helped. It’s a team effort from all the Skan crew and that means we are in a good place to overcome any challenges.”

The *Will of the People Tour* continues in Europe through the beginning of October. 📶