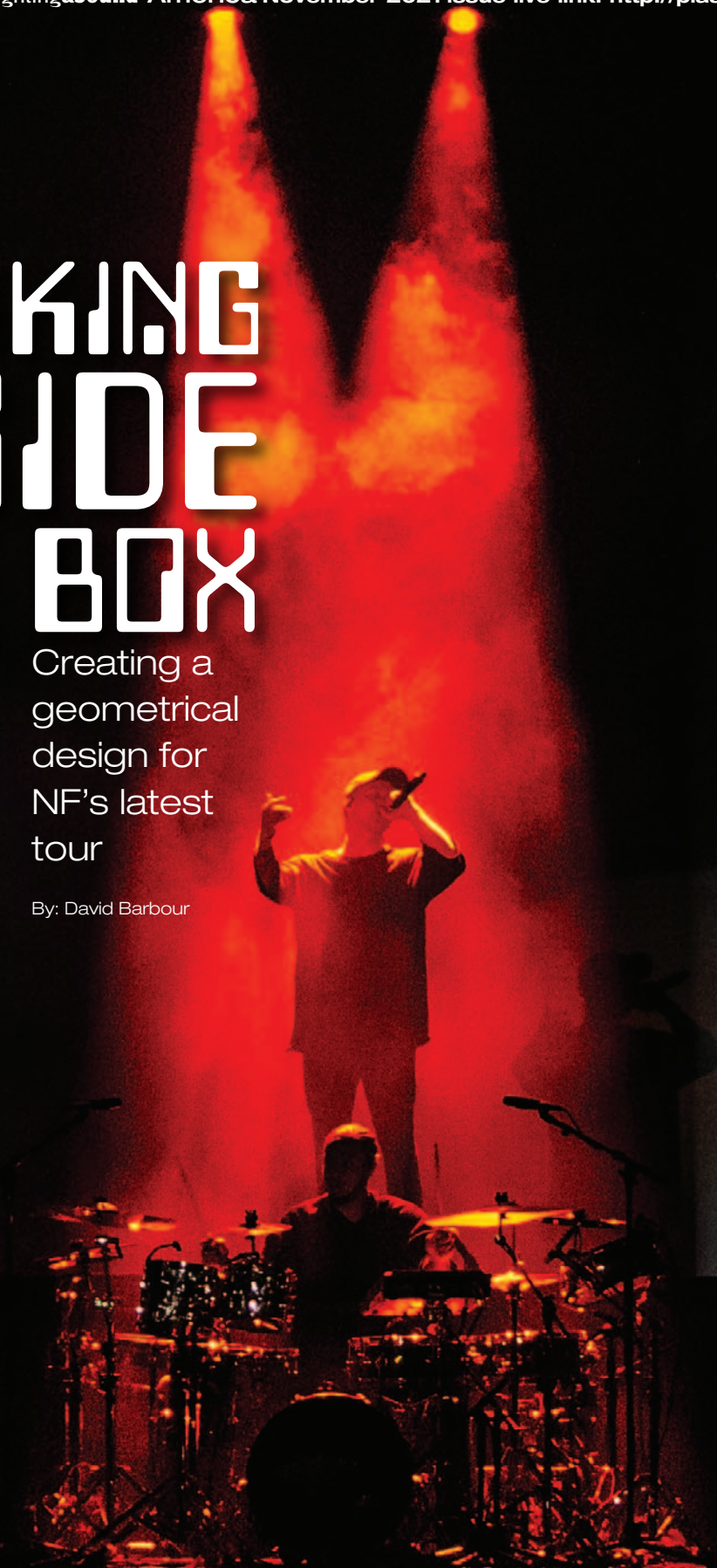


THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Creating a
geometrical
design for
NF's latest
tour

By: David Barbour





Left: A stark red downlight isolates NF and the drummer Rico Nichols, the only performers onstage. Above: Red is one of four colors—along with white, blue, and green—deployed by Denholm and Joiner for NF's shows.

The rapper NF (aka Nathan John Feuerstein) has toured several times since the release of his 2015 album *Mansion*; the recent *Clouds Tour*, tied to his new album *Clouds (The Mixtape)*, was his biggest effort yet, featuring a production design both precisely designed and explosive with energy, paired with a sound system tailored to his musical style. The team included Chris Denholm (creative director, music director, production designer), Clay Joiner (lighting and production designer, creative director), and Travis Stoker (front-of-house engineer, audio systems designer).

As the photos in this layout show, the design made striking use of geometric shapes to create a sense of a box exploding with lighting and video effects. Even the placement of the loudspeaker rig contributed to the sense of enclosure. It was a striking approach for a performer whose numbers are packed with energy and emotion.

Denholm says that NF and the creative team were in Europe in March 2020, planning for a spring run in the US. You know what happened next. During his pandemic downtime, the rapper put out *Clouds*, a collection of songs that called for a new design approach.

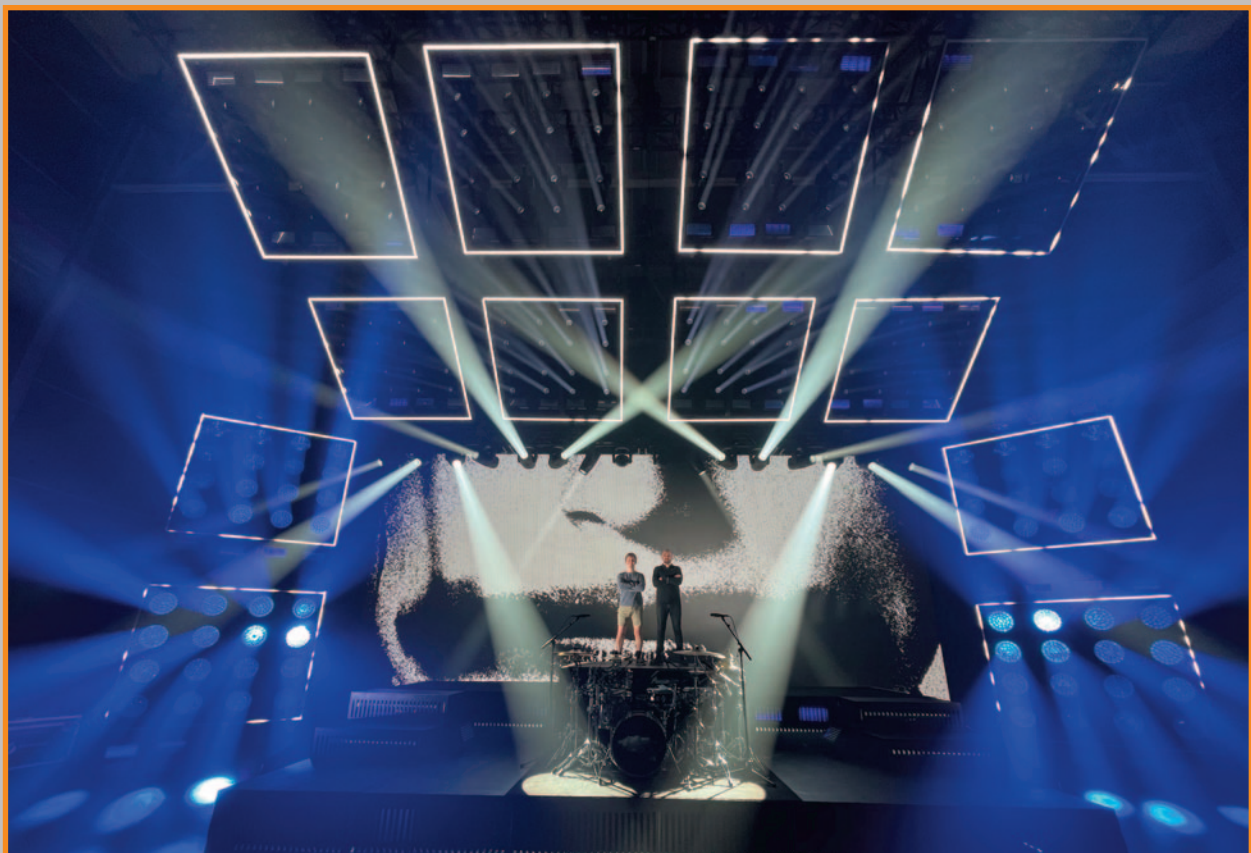
"When Chris and I were talking about the tour," Joiner says, "we focused on the fact that NF talks about a wide range of hard hitting topics. That got us thinking about something symmetrical. We had a couple of concepts in

mind, but we landed on the squares." The design pushed the star to the downstage edge, surrounded by light pods, an approach that highlighted him powerfully. "We put him in a box of lighting," Denholm says. Joiner adds, "It was a space for him to live in—intimate, but large."

The set, built by Nashville-based Accurate Staging, included a toaster (in front of the upstage screen for NF's initial reveal) and two lifts, several staging levels, and space for a live drummer at center stage. (Most of NF's music is typically played back, with him rapping live; a live drummer was added for this tour.) Denholm says that he and Joiner designed the grating on the fascia, creating a kind of jail-cell look. Upstage was a video screen, consisting of 100 Saco 6mm tiles in Solotech touring frames. As you can see on these pages, the looks were highly varied: NF and the drummer isolated in stark, blood-red downlight, with the dark stage outlined in beams of uplight. The rapper silhouetted against a blinding backdrop of white light and video. Complex configurations of beams and burst of fog; this was, after all, the *Clouds Tour*.

The lighting rig, supplied by Solotech (also provider of the video and audio gear), included 14 Robe BMFL WashBeams, two Robe RoboSpots, 116 TMB Solaris Flares, eight Elation Professional CuePix WW4 LED blinders; 64 Robe Tarrantulas; four Martin by Harman MAC

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Top: The lighting pods at work, featuring Robe Spikies and Tarrantulas plus TMB Solaris Flares; the pods were lined with Martin by Harman Sceptons. Below: Joiner and Denholm onstage.

Quantum Wash units; 128 Robe Spikies, 120 Martin Sceptrons, 24 GLP impression X Bar 20s, and two MDG Atmosphere hazers. Control was via a grandMA2 and grandMA2 light. Confetti, cryojets, and lasers were supplied by Strictly FX.

The Spikies and Solaris Flares were deployed in and around the overhead pods, which were lined with Sceptrons, an arrangement that came together to create punchy effects. Tarrantulas were deployed in the side pods, also combined with Solaris Flares. “What I love about Robe fixtures is they have nailed their colors,” Joiner says. “Also, their center flower effects. And they have been incredibly reliable.” The X Bar 20s were hidden behind the set’s risers. Both designers note that the lighting relied almost entirely on a palette of white, red, green, and blue. “It’s been that way for four years,” Joiner notes. “We try to put in a little CTO, too.”

“The side pods were a big challenge,” Denholm notes. “We used Tyler GT truss with four Tarrantulas, two Flares, and a Sceptron. We had a [Show Distribution] motor for each truss stick; the chain was visible, which we loved. It was gritty, matching the sewer grating on the fascias.”

The production made use of two Green Hippo Boreal-media servers, one for the upstage screen and one for the Sceptrons. As always, balancing lighting and video was a consideration. “We pulled everything down to where it all worked together and it was a comfortable viewing experience,” Joiner says. “The screen was at 30%. But Nate definitely wants it to be intense and energetic.”

Everything came together quickly, with the aid of the Depence2 visualization tool from Synchronorm. “With all the lasers, lighting, and video, we only had two weeks,” Denholm says. “It made so much difference to have Depence2.” And keeping the production compact was an important consideration, too. “We needed to fit it in four trucks,” he adds. “It wasn’t even a financial issue. Right now, one of the biggest challenges is getting truck drivers. We could have added a truck but there was no way to make that happen. Solotech helped us with a prefabricated pod solution. We worked together for a solid month of engineering and stress tests.”

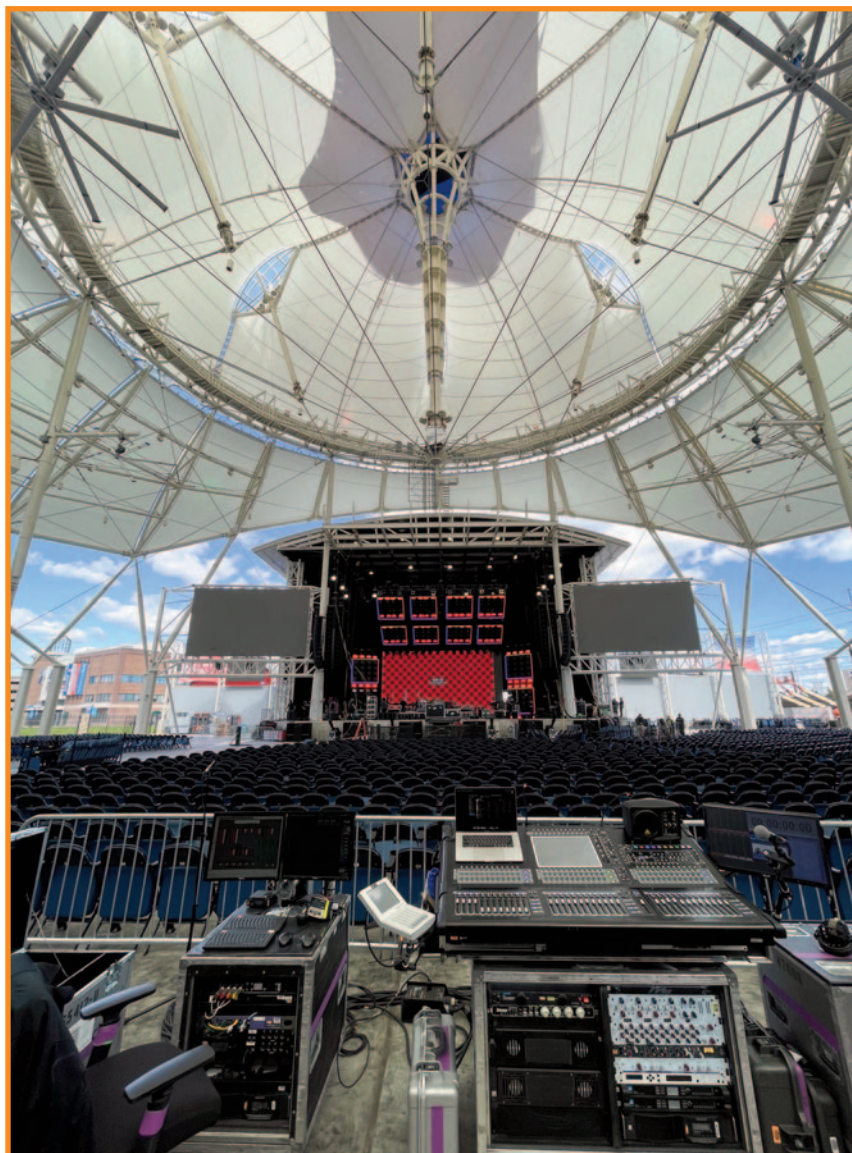
Sound

Stoker has been with NF for five years, the bulk of the performer’s touring life. Each production, he adds, has grown a little bigger: “This was our first tour carrying a full PA for the duration. It was a big step up. We’ve had tours with a PA for two weeks and the rest of the dates had local or house systems. That’s a mixed bag, especially with hip-hop, which requires a lot of low-end reinforcement.”

The *Clouds Tour* featured an L-Acoustics PA. “The main left-right hang had four K1s over 12 K2s per side,” he says. “We also had eight K1-SBs flown either upstage of the main left-right hang or off to the side. It was a low-end



Above: This preshow shot shows the lighting pods and L-Acoustics loudspeaker hangs. Below: “This tour is the biggest setup that NF has had in terms of venue sizes,” Stoker says. “We wanted to make sure that could do shows outdoors and cover those venues.”



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extension of the main arrays to get the low-end punch to everybody in the venue. We carried the new K3, 12 per side, for outfill; it was incredible from the get-go. We had six KARAs for the front fills plus ARCS IIs for additional outfill. Six groups of three KS28s in cardioid created a sub array off the downstage end. We did this to steer the low end around the venue a bit. All of this was distributed and driven with L-Acoustics P1 processors via AVB over AVNU-certified fiber switches. Alex Bibeau, our systems engineer from Solotech, did a great job deploying this system every day. We also had a monitor package of two ground-stacked KS28s and four flown K2s per side for side fills, plus eight X15 HiQ wedges. It's a lot of gear and Solotech did an amazing job of packaging it to fit in one truck."

L-Acoustics gear, Stoker adds, "has always been a favorite of mine. Our first experience with it was on a tour we did with Logic in 2018. We got to experience it in large environments; after that, there was no turning back. NF was happy with it because he could feel the energy onstage. We've been happy with it every time we had it on one-offs. I feel like this PA is made for what we're doing."

At the front of house, Stoker ran the show using a DiGiCo SD10 console, with, he adds, "a good amount of outboard gear," including Rupert Neve and TC Electronics 6000 for reverb. Monitors were controlled by an Avid S6L-24C mixer. "Murphy Johnson joined us for the first time on monitors," Stoker says. "He has tons of experience and we've known him from prior tours."

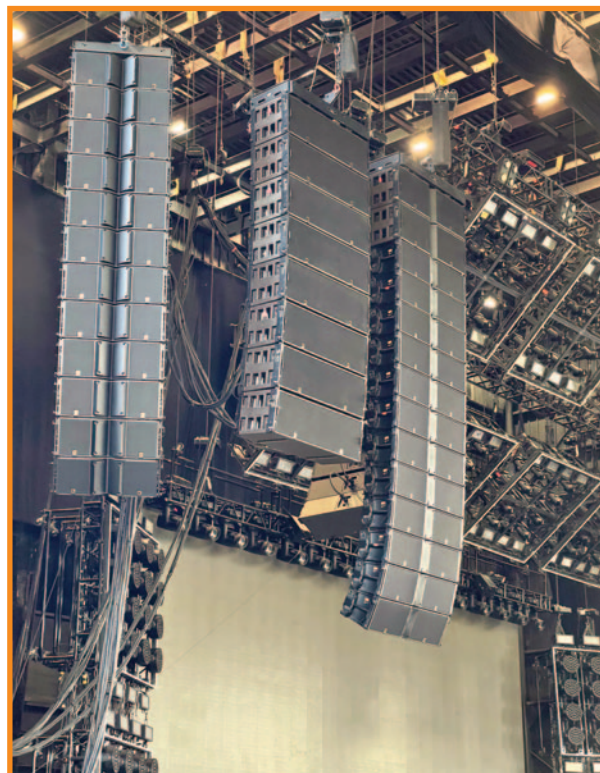
Overall, Stoker says, "Our biggest challenge has been our playback rig, which we built in 2019. This was handled by our former monitor engineer, Chandler Puckett, and TJ Bechill at NEAT Audio. It's fully digital with analog redundancy. We don't have a DJ onstage; we ran stems for everything, giving Murphy and me control over the mix. We can push the strings tracks or whatever we need; we're currently at 24 tracks with playback. We can do up to 32 channels of playback and can really hone in on things in our mix. We can also mix for each environment; it's a big game-changer." He describes the setup: "Two MacBook Pros run Ableton Live 10 with the Strange Electronics Setlist plug-in, which controls both machines playback simultaneously. These Macbooks independently feed two RME MadiFace USB interfaces that both connect to a DirectOut ExBox BLDS, which handles the MADI redundancy side of things; a Ferrofish A32 does the D-to-A conversion for analog redundancy in case we lose the MADI streams on either side." He adds, "We clock everything in the system, since we use digital playback. We have an Antelope word clock to handle the sample rate."

For Rico Nichols, the live drummer, "we ran about 19 inputs," Stoker adds. "With all the playback and analog redundancy, we were up there in terms of input count. Even with the digital MADI playback, there was still a fair

amount of copper." Nichols' drums were miked with an array of units. "One favorite is the DPA 4099, for the snares and toms," Stoker says. "It's an incredible mic, transparent and clear. It's really cool how different you can get the drums to sound with the placement of the mics. We used Shure Beta 52 and 91 for the kick and Audio-Technica AT-30 for the secondary snare top, in conjunction with the DPA. On the hats, we had a Shure KSM137, plus some Sennheiser 604s for the snare bottoms, AKG C414s for the overheads, and a Shure Beta 52 for the gong drum. He also used some triggers with samples via a Roland SPD-SX, which adds so much to the music."



Drummer Rico Nichols is silhouetted against the Saco 6mm video wall.



The L-Acoustics loudspeaker rig included K1s, K2s, and K3s, among other boxes.



Confetti, cryo jets, and lasers were supplied by Strictly FX.

NF used a Shure SM58 capsule on an Axient wireless unit. “We’ve tried different things,” Stoker says. “You see hip-hop and rap artists holding mics in different ways. He cups the diaphragm, but we’re used to that; he does it to drive his mic harder. With the DiGiCo and Avid consoles, we could make changes quickly, grabbing some outboard gear to get his voice to sit right in the mix.”

Stoker notes that getting the playback sessions together involved extensive prep work. “It was fun putting it together this time. NF has given me a lot of control over the playback. I got all his sessions from the producers, mixed down the stems, and set them up for live performance. A lot of it is cinematic, with stark reverbs. One challenge in the past was throwing really wet, dark reverbs into big rooms with reflective spaces; it doesn’t work. We worked to get the instruments defined with his vocals in a combination of remixing and live reverb to get him across and control the playback in the space. Another part of this work is time-coding every single song and moment. I worked closely with Clay and Chris on this. We time-coded the whole show, which made things easier for all of the departments

to have a consistent show every single night.” He adds, “Once we start an album cycle, the prep time diminishes quite a bit because playback does not change that much. By the second tour of a cycle, we have everything built out in playback, so it is a matter of building the rest of the system out. We worked with vendors for a couple of days, building out in shop. In rehearsals [at Soundcheck and the Steel Mill, both in Nashville], we made sure the artists were comfortable and happy with the mix.”

Again, space was a big consideration. “This tour is the biggest setup that NF has had in terms of venue sizes,” Stoker says. “We wanted to make sure we could do shows outdoors and cover those venues. The tour is in four trucks and most of the PA is in one truck. Switching to the L-Acoustics K3, a two-way active box, cut down on our amp count. But we still needed boxes for the wide corners of the room. We were at 48 LA12X amps across the whole system.”

Whatever the challenges, NF played to packed houses, an example of successful touring even as the pandemic persisted. When he goes out next spring, one suspects that his team will bring new innovations with them. 📶