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NF

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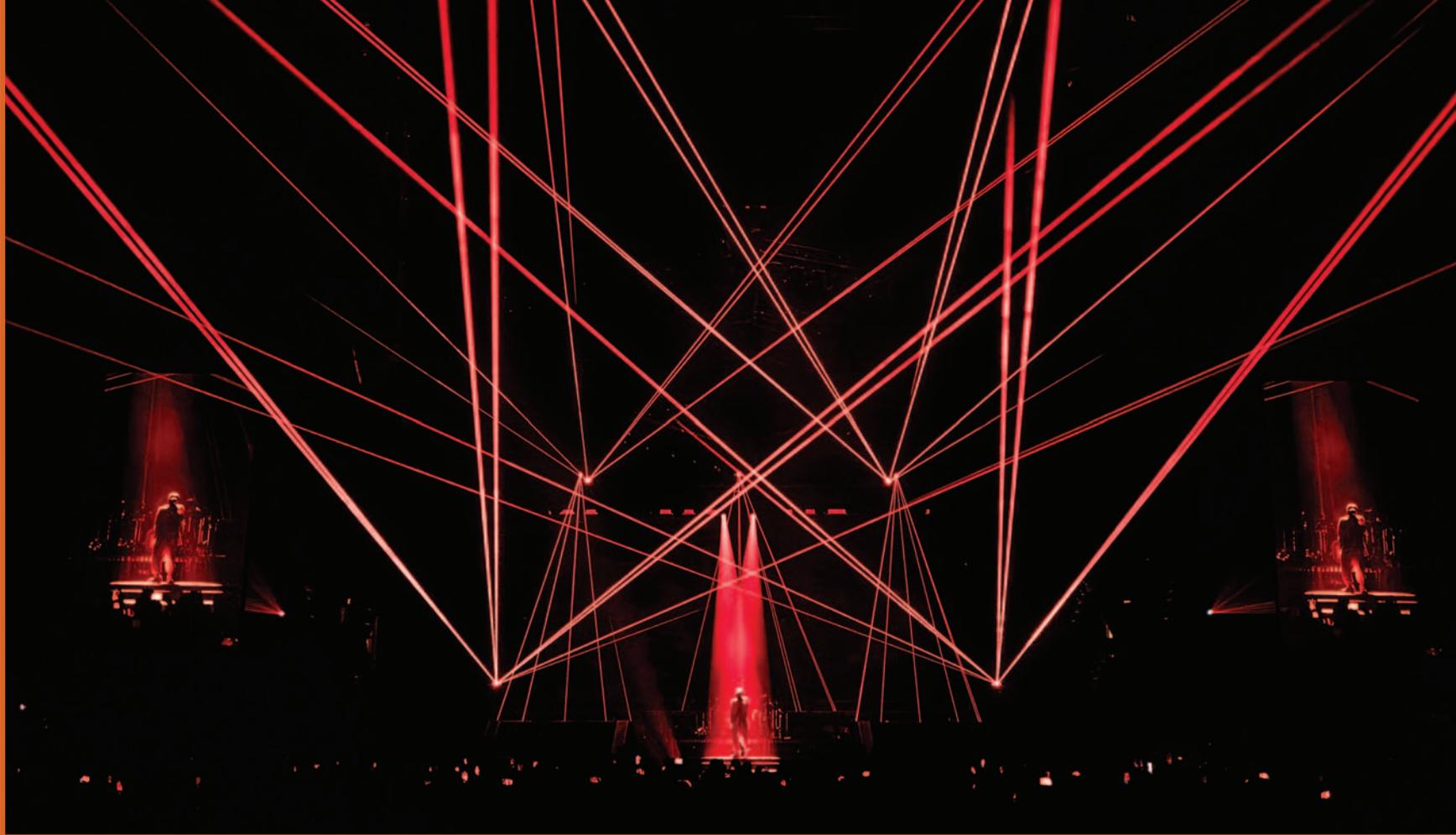


THE HOPE PROJECT



NF's first arena tour takes him to a new level of production

By: David Barbour



This page and opposite: The tour is defined by dualities—light versus dark—framed in a design filled with sharply opposed angles. Chiaroscuro lighting, heavy fog effects, and highly personal video content combine to create an introspective, dreamlike environment that still provides room for the rapper’s dynamic performance style, supported by starkly theatrical looks and plenty of kinetic cueing.

The career of the rapper NF (aka Nathan Feuerstein) hit a new level in July when he kicked off his *HOPE TOUR* at the Schottenstein Center in Columbus, Ohio. “I think the first show I played here was, like, 300 people,” he said to an audience of 12,000. On his first headline arena tour, he has played one sold-out gig after another. Offering an example of the artist’s deeply personal music, *Music Mayhem Magazine* noted, “After performing ‘Hate Myself,’ the stage backdrop suddenly transformed into a montage of personal family footage, featuring clips of NF and his family (including his mom and dad), just before he launched into the song ‘MAMA’ [a tribute to his late mother]. The family footage continued to flood the backdrop throughout his several-minute performance of the track, which the sold-out arena helped him sing.”

NF’s vision and storytelling woven across his musical and visual works, coupled with his interplay of contrasting black and white themes, provides the foundation for his team to craft a captivating stage production for his tour. Helping to take NF to this next stage is his long-running team, consisting of Chris Denholm (creative director, music director, production designer), Clay Joiner (lighting and production designer, creative director), and Travis Stoker (front-of-house engineer, audio system designer). Their clear rapport with the artist and his music has provided a space for him to carve out a distinc-

tive onstage persona on ever-larger stages.

When we last caught up with Denholm, Joiner, and Stoker, it was on the 2021 *CLOUDS TOUR*, which made use of geometric shapes to create the sense of a box exploding with lighting and video effects. The new tour is both more expansive and framed in dualities—light versus dark—framed in a design filled with sharply opposed angles. Chiaroscuro lighting, heavy fog effects, and highly personal video content combine to create an introspective, dreamlike environment that still provides room for the rapper’s dynamic performance style, supported by starkly theatrical looks and plenty of kinetic cueing. “We wanted to build on what we’ve done,” Denholm says, “but to do it in a new way.”

Scenery/video

Regarding the basic layout, Denholm says the aim was “to make something modern-looking, with the feel of an award show.” The result is a multilevel arrangement of risers with custom facias featuring LED tape. As usual, the stage layout makes room for the production’s live drummer; the remainder of the live show is remastered live via the tour’s playback system and Stoker’s audio design. Equally important, beginning with a memorable entrance via toaster, are the staging elements. “We have ego risers at right and left and a B stage, which is part of NF’s growth into

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arenas,” Denholm says. “Clay and I spent a lot of time focusing on the importance of taking the experience out into the crowd. At times, we didn’t know if it would happen, but we’re happy with how it turned out. We sneak him out there during a drum solo moment. We get him on the B stage, where he does ‘Let You Down,’ his biggest single, which brings him back to where he started. To get NF back to the stage, they utilize the song ‘GONE,’ which is by NF and Julia Michaels. Then he goes into the second half of ‘GONE,’ by which time he’s flying high, interacting with the fans. It’s something we wouldn’t have been able to pull off in past years; it’s another part of his evolution.” Nashville-based Accurate Staging provided the scenery, custom-fabricated fascia, lifts, and toaster.

Upstage center is an enormous video screen. “He likes to have large video surfaces,” Joiner says. “It’s always a big part of every design we do with him. Chris and I are very meticulous about designing around it. With a wall that big, you want to make sure the content isn’t overpowering. We spent hours walking around the arena in rehearsals, watching the wall play and making adjustments.” These, Denholm says, involved “turning down the intensity and giving the rest of the production the chance to breathe.” The center video screen consists of ROE Visual Carbon CB8 8.3mm panels in landscape format. “A lot of the content lends itself to that,” Joiner says. “In the past, we’ve used music videos,

spliced with IMAG and B-roll, but this time was very different. It’s another progress that’s great to be part of.” Much of the content, apart from the previously mentioned home videos, was creatively directed by Denholm and Joiner. Imagery is delivered via a disguise gx 2c media server. The RP screens, located at left and right, feature IMAG.

And then there are balloons that hover over NF during certain numbers. “They’re metaphors for the burdens that one carries around,” Denholm says. This element is part of the show’s ongoing battle between light and darkness. “We found a way to suggest it in the video content, too, dressing him in different outfits and creating opposing characters.”

Prepping the balloons is part of the show’s daily routine. “I’m the tour’s production manager and although there’s not much we need as far as the stage is concerned, we do have to have help with blowing up 40 balloons,” Denholm says. “You should see the looks on the crew’s faces when they find out they have to do that.” Joiner adds, laughing, “The balloons have such a heavy meaning in the show, but they come in a box that says, ‘party pack.’”

Lighting

The show’s dualities are also reflected in the layout of the lighting rig, which looks almost as if the box in the *CLOUDS TOUR* had been blown wide open. Overhead are





Opposite: The B stage “is part of Nathan’s growth into arenas,” Denholm says. “Clay and I spent a lot of time focusing on the importance of taking the experience out into the crowd.” Above: The show’s dualities are also reflected in the layout of the lighting rig, which looks almost as if the box in the *CLOUDS TOUR* had been blown wide open. Overhead are four chevron-shaped trusses, three pointing north and a fourth pointing south.

four chevron-shaped trusses, three pointing north and a fourth pointing south. A lower horizontal bar is also placed over the stage, with three vertical bars each at stage left and right. “We didn’t want to do light pods this time,” Joiner says, “but we didn’t want to use too many rigging points. How could we get the same firepower without using too much truck space?”

Therefore, Joiner adds, “We developed the idea of having two rows of Spikies [Robe’s compact wash/beam unit] on each line of truss, one in front and one in back. We’ve used Spikies in the past. You can get a lot of energy in your eyeballs with them; they work with this kind of programming.” The rig includes other Robe gear, too: “The bar against the video wall has RoboSpots and BMFL WashBeams. The idea is to use as few fixture types as possible.”

On the vertical trusses, the designers wanted to use an LED wash/beam unit to pace the numbers. “NF wants lots of energy,” Denholm says. “Previously, we had Robe Tarrantulas but this time we went with Claypaky [A.leda] B-EYES. Despite their age, the shapers are great for creating intimate looks that are also very powerful. We also have [GLP] impression X Bar 20s on the side, for the modern lin-

ear look, and [TMB] Solaris Flare Q+ LRs for strobe effects.” The bountiful fog effects are created by five foggers under the deck: two downstage, one upstage, one underneath the thrust stage, and one under the toaster. “The low-lying fog is so heavy, it comes out of the fascia,” Joiner says. “But we also have a [Martin Jem] ZR45 fogger that rises.”

Lighting is controlled by two grandMA 3 consoles running in 2 mode. “I have a workflow that feels so comfortable,” Joiner says. “I can program three songs in a 12-hour day, spending four hours on each song. We have as many as 250 cues in a song; along with time code, it can be north of 500 actions, making for a lot of detail and movement. I want to make sure nothing looks the same.” He adds, “We’re very on-brand with the color palette, relying on very saturated reds, blues, greens, and some purples and cyans. Overall, it’s eight colors stretched over 21 songs.” Denholm adds, “Eighteen songs are in three colors each.” With such a limited palette, Joiner notes, “We have to find creative ways to make two songs back-to-back in white or red or blue look and feel very different. It definitely makes programming challenging.” PRG supplied audio, lighting, and video gear.





Above and opposite: The bountiful fog effects are created by custom units from Strictly FX as well as Le Maitre Low Smoke Generators. Strictly FX also supplied six Coral Series lasers.

Sound

The *CLOUDS TOUR* marked the first time that NF toured with a full audio rig. “This is the biggest NF tour yet, with definitely more PA than we’ve ever carried before,” says Stoker. “We’re up to two trucks of audio gear. In some arenas, our coverage goes right up to the 270 line.”

The *CLOUDS TOUR* featured an L-Acoustics loudspeaker rig; this time out, Stoker sees no reason to fool around with success. The PRG-supplied rig, assembled with input from David Brooks, L-Acoustics touring outreach manager, includes main hangs of fourteen K1 long-throw units plus four K2s. “We have side hangs of six K1s over eight K2s and a 270 hang of an additional twelve K2s. Most of the time, we have 12 flown KS28 [subs] per side, which helps with the elevations in the room, and another twelve KS28s on the ground in containers of two, with two-high KARAs on each container. A couple of ARCS fill in the corners and a few more KARAs fill the downstage edge of the thrust.

“It’s a booming rig,” he says, adding that NF “likes to

feel it onstage. He also wants the crowd to really feel the music, especially the kick drums and low-end bass. I call them the psychoacoustic moments; You are not only perceiving the music by hearing it, you can really feel the low end. The KS28s are smooth and punchy and the high end on the K1 and K2s is clear and crisp.” The monitor rig, Stoker says, features eight 115XT HiQ wedges onstage with four K2s per side for side fill and, under them, two additional KS28s. “It’s been a really good system.

“In this show, lyrics matter,” Stoker continues. “There are moments when the music producers have done orchestrations with strings, choirs, horn hits, bass lines, and percussion. It is very important for me to be able to get NF’s vocal to sit clearly in the mix of all of this in these moments. We also have a live drummer. I’m running 30 inputs with the drums alone. It’s incredible what L-Acoustics has done with these boxes, using the filters and zones to get a good experience to all the seating areas.”

Stoker, who describes the song list as “an emotional



Speaking of the all-L-Acoustics loudspeaker system supplied by PRG, Stoker says, “It’s a booming rig.” He notes that NF “likes to feel it onstage. He also wants the crowd to really feel the music, especially the kick drums and low-end bass.”

roller-coaster,” says the music tracks “work very well. I’ve taken over printing the stems for the live shows. I get the ProTools sessions from the producers and mix engineers, then I pull back reverbs or print them specifically for live shows, so we are not playing reverberant tracks in a room that is already reverberant. I’m carrying a nice outboard rack with Bricasti and Valhalla reverbs, which give me a lot of control for live reverb.”

This time, however, Stoker made a significant change in mics. “We started using DPA mics on the *CLOUDS TOUR*, including 4099s on drums. Now we’ve gone full DPA; I’m a die-hard believer in their mics. I’ve got 4099s on every snare and tom, the new 4055s on the gong drum and kick drum, 2012s as a second snare mic and close mics on the cymbals and hi-hats, and the new 2015 as a stereo pair of overheads. I’m really happy with them. The biggest change is NF’s mic. His D:Facto 4018VL has let me get consistent vocal sound even on the B stage.”

NF uses a Wisycom wireless IEM system. “We are carrying eight channels of transmitters and a plethora of receiver packs,” Stoker says. “They have been incredible. Going from city to city with Wisycom, we can look across more of the bands and choose a frequency with a low noise floor. Dallas has a lot of RF; Chicago is the same. This gives us a lot of flexibility.”

Control is provided by DiGiCo SD5 consoles as the front of house and monitors, with one SD-Rack and SD-MINI Rack for stage inputs and another SD-MINI Rack for

all of the outboard gear at the front of house. “They’re loaded with the 32-bit cards from DiGiCo for the pres and line out cards,” Stoker says. Both monitors and the front of house have outboard gear that consists of Rupert Neve, Empirical Labs, and Bricasti units. “We also have a time-code network between audio, lighting, and special effects. We all get the same timeline, essentially. This gives us a consistent show every night.”

The main challenge, Stoker says, is “the bigger rooms that [NF is] doing and setting him up for consistent vocals. He’s definitely moving a lot more, especially with the B stage. He’s never done anything like that before. The fans get to be close to him, moving to the barricade at the front of house, filming and screaming. The fans are great; they’ve really shown a lot of energy on this one.”

Additional personnel on the tour include Dane Kick (lighting operator and show renders), Luke Schoenhals (Notch block and video content), and Luke Schoenhals and Chris Schoenman (video content). The *HOPE TOUR* heads to Europe and the UK in September and October, wrapping up with a festival performance in Mexico in November.

“Being in arenas gives us a clean slate to do what we couldn’t in theatres or amphitheatre,” Joiner says. “We have moments that we couldn’t have before.” Denholm adds, “It’s pretty emotional seeing it all happen I’ve been with him since 2016. We’ve done 800 shows around the world. To see this come to life is massive. 🎶”