

PHIL COLLINS

STILL HAS A STORY TO TELL

And The Phil Collins Story tells it well, via a docu-concert production with vintage-ish sound, lights, and video

By: Dan Daley



Left: Seth Eliser, the vocalist portraying Collins, uses the same handheld Beyerdynamic M88 microphone Collins used onstage when fronting Genesis or his own bands. Above: “Knowing we were creating a docu-concert, it was important to me to maintain a theatrical aspect,” Heguy says.

In an era of AI-driven music creation and virtual concert appearances—we’re looking at you, ABBA—another portmanteau descriptor has entered the production lexicon: docu-concert. This year we saw the Tribeca Film Festival open with the documentary *Earth, Wind & Fire (To Be Celestial vs That’s the Weight of the World)* accompanied by a live performance by that legendary funk band and director Questlove’s own ensemble, The Roots. Other music-themed cinema saw their subjects, including Madonna, Sara Bareilles, Peter Dinklage, and Katy Perry, sticking around the theatres for post-premiere chats.

A project that has taken the integration of picture, person, and production to an even higher degree is *The Phil Collins Story*. The two-hour-long presentation chronicles the life, career, and music of Grammy, Golden Globe, and Academy Award-winning performer and songwriter, from his time in prog-rock progenitors Genesis to a solo career that defined the 1980s in funk and fashion. And like most rock-and-roll efforts of the era, it promptly embarked on a 50-city North American theatre tour beginning February 3, featuring impactful audio, dynamic projection, and intricate, emotional lighting.

“It’s the story of Phil’s life, and it goes through a lot of the stories and all the hits, including with Genesis, with live musicians onstage,” says Theodore “Ted” Woolsey, front-of-house mixer and audio designer for *The Phil Collins Story*. “It’s pretty spectacular.”

Phil Collins’ storied sound

As a drummer, Collins’ sonic signature was defined by his explosive tom-tom sound, achieved by applying cathe-

dral-sized reverb effects that were then contained, within milliseconds, by digital gates that tightly controlled each detonation, giving every attack undeniable definition but without diminishing their impact. His fill across his kit’s rack toms on “In the Air Tonight” is quintessential Collins and archetypal ‘80s music production, an extended riff on the elegantly spare fills that Ringo Starr had two decades earlier established as what drums could and would be for pop music in the back half of the 20th century. In finding ways to recreate Collins’ signature sounds, Woolsey—who, at 27, was born well after the singer’s heyday of hits—had to become a kind of sonic sleuth, an historian researching how records were made nearly a half-century ago. He was helped by a couple of factors: multiple generations of music technicians who are endlessly fascinated by 20th-century production technology and the intervention of private equity. The latter has poured billions of dollars into copyright acquisitions, which have been ceaselessly repurposed in commercials and films, like the gorilla that plays that same drum fill for UK mega-dairy Cadbury. Woolsey pored through Collins’ production canon in pro-audio trade-magazine departments like “Classic Tracks” to find the electronic alchemy that would reproduce those records onstage.

For instance, he made sure that onstage, Seth Eliser, the vocalist portraying Collins, is using the same handheld Beyerdynamic M88 microphone Collins used onstage when fronting Genesis or his own bands; when he’s behind the drums, he wears a wireless Crown CM311 headset, which Collins also used when seated and singing. (The M88 does not have a capsule that can be integrated in a wireless mic

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body, so he instead attaches it to a Shure QLXD14/83 wireless transmitter.) And Sennheiser 421 microphones are on the toms now, as they were 40 years ago.

The process by which to recreate Collins' vocal and drum sounds began before the first downbeat, during days of rehearsal and pre-production, starting with building out his input and processor lists at his home studio, working with A2 Ethan Ginsberg-Margo. "I wanted to have that cohesiveness that a live show needs where we're still using the original microphones, and in terms of effects and stuff, I recreated a lot of the sound between my analog rack effects and Waves [plug-ins], having them change with snapshots to get the tone that I want for each song," he explains. "The way I did it was to record the whole show in [multitrack recording software] Reaper as a virtual soundcheck while the lighting and video designers were dialing in their aspects of the show during tech rehearsals." That gave Woolsey a stem mix of those rehearsal recordings on several faders of the DiGiCo Quantum 225 console he uses at the front of house, paired with the original stereo recordings on another set of faders, allowing him to constantly A/B both the classic and

current performances of each song. This allowed him to use the sounds of the former to more precisely dial in those of the latter. It was a painstaking workflow, but one that perfectly recreates those musical moments, night after night on the tour.

Some of the audio processing used to make the original records is only easily available now as a plug-in avatar, such as the UREI 1176 compressors used at London's Townhouse Studios back in the day. In one instance, Woolsey employs a Yamaha SPX2000, itself a two-decade-old remake of the groundbreaking SPX90 multi-processor twice its age, to establish the fundamentals of that drum sound on "In the Air Tonight." "It has a preset called 'Full Metal Gate,' and that was a great template because it was already a metallic, gated-reverb preset," he says. "I changed some of the parameters, and then I put that through a Waves reverb stack, including the Waves Aphex vintage aural exciter plug-in, which together creates that cannon-like sound of the toms. I played it for the show's producers, and they were like, 'Which one is the record?' That's when I knew I had nailed it."





Above and opposite: "If there's anything I took from Phil's concerts, he loved having hundreds of beams surrounding this band cutting through the fog, and that was my big takeaway," Heguy says.

Local sound systems

Since the tour doesn't travel with its own sound system, Woolsey has to adapt his rig to each venue's own PA system, which has so far included L-Acoustics, d&b audiotechnik, and JBL. "The first thing I do is SMAART the room [using Rational Acoustics' acoustical-measurement software], checking delay on every zone, because even when a venue has a system time-aligned, I know that my rig is going to have a potential of creating some sort of latency between zones," he explains. "So, I'm checking all of the delays, and I'm getting the frequency response of each zone as well, and I'm taking out the frequencies that are reflecting in the room based on the SMAART curve." The initial corrective equalization and delays are made through a Meyer Sound GALAXY 816 processor, followed by tonal shaping via an SSL Fusion mastering rack, and Waves DeEsser to pull back any exceptionally harsh tones.

"The goal is essentially taming air as [SPL] increases in the room and reflections become amplified, to pull harsh frequencies out of the room," he says. At each stop on the tour, he'll pull out a record—usually "Another Day in Paradise" because of its drums and low end—and use that as the content for the room-tuning process, which also involves applying a Waves F6 dynamic EQ and compression from a Waves Magma channel strip. The goal is to ensure each performance sounds as consistent as possible despite being in different venues using different PA systems

at each stop. "It's all very surgical," he says, "but with so many different spaces at the end of the day, everything is a prediction. What gets me paid and keeps me around is that I'm really good at predicting each outcome."

Surprisingly for a live multimedia show, the production is not timecoded. Instead, the live musicians are cued by the musical director on a Logic platform, which sends a click track to everyone's in-ear monitors through the KLANG DMI card on the console. "Everyone can just sync up with each other naturally," he says. "It's a really fluid show, and we have live narration happening between songs, and you can't really timecode that."

While commercials and movie synchs help keep Collins' music contemporary, the show's audience can be a reminder of how long it's actually been around. "What makes me feel really good is when a family comes over to me at the console and the daughter's grandparents tell me it sounded just like they remembered it," says Woolsey. "They're emotionally connected to it. They'll say, 'It sounded just like when I saw Phil years ago. It sounds like Phil was right there. You took me back in time.' It's beautiful."

Something in the air to-light

Lighting The Phil Collins Story encountered the same techno-historical divide that audio did: just as Collins' music was performed and largely recorded analog, his shows were illuminated before the advent of LED. And, like



Above and opposite: While the content, some of which was archival footage and some original graphics created using Adobe After Effects, was fully rendered digitally, it might have looked at home as 4:3, with Stuart feeding some of it through an analog VHS processor to get that pre-digital, NTSC-grainy video effect, then played back by QLab software on a pair of Apple Mac Studio computers.

Woolsey for sound, lighting designer David Heguy had some history homework to do. Fortunately for him, it wasn't a chore. "I was a huge Phil Collins fan to begin with, so I already knew all the music," he says. "But I hadn't watched a lot of his old tours, so that was my first thing to do. They wanted it to feel like a Phil Collins tour but to take the environment of what he [created onstage] and bring it to today. I drew inspiration from Phil Collins' past concerts, but I tried not to watch too many videos, because the goal was never to copy but rather to reflect the spirit and ideas of his tours. Phil used tons of movers to create incredible beam work that expanded the lighting beyond the stage, often engulfing the entire venue in light. This was a goal of my design and of the gear chosen."

(In fact, during Collins' time in Genesis, some of that history was actually being made: The band was not only among the first users of tour-systems provider Showco's new VL-Zero dichroic color-fading wash unit in the 1980s—which would become a foundational product for Vari-Lite—but they also invested \$1 million in the new technology. [See sidebar.] "Originally, I wanted to do an all [Vari-Lite] tour, but I knew the maintenance on them was not going to last the way I needed it, so I opted for everything new," says Heguy.)

Historical accuracy had to coexist with logistical practicality, however. Heguy says the primary intent was to reduce load-in time while building the visual strength from the deck rather than overhead. "I knew it would feel more

replicable to work with two electrics overhead and concentrate most of the investment into the deck fixtures," he explains. "Since the electrics travel below the borders, I also wanted a clean plot with strong visual presence, which led to a combination of Ayrton Perseo Beams, Martin MAC Aura XBs, and ACME Tornados. One of my earliest ideas was to incorporate a row of [GLP] FR1 fixtures behind the band platforms. These became an essential part of the design and were very vital for transitions and speaking moments. I also wanted strong beam looks coming from the deck and reaching out into the house to create a true concert atmosphere, which led to adding six Perseo Beams on the deck. Additionally, I wanted impactful blinders that could also provide rich color fills, so we chose [GLP] JDC1s for audience hits, paired with [Chroma-Q] Color Force IIs to light the band while adding texture and visual interest through pixel mapping on both fixtures."

By studying video stills and understanding the production's scope and scale, Heguy says he was able to assemble a plot that echoed the essence of what audiences might have experienced at a real Phil Collins concert, while still putting his own spin on it with new equipment and fresh ideas. "For example, the FR1s echo concepts from past shows, the Perseo Beams on the electrics and deck reference the expansive beam work Phil often used, and the LED neon around each deck platform nods to his illuminated set pieces," he explains. "These ideas are rooted in his tours, but the overall design and execution are very



much my own. I didn't feel pressured to recreate any specific iconic looks; I embraced them as they fit the show. I also had a feeling the Perseo Beam would become a workhorse for the show, as it was key to making the entire rig sing. It had a great ability to create looks that were both saturated and punchy, and create lighter, cooler colors in exactly the shades I wanted. The ACME Tornado, on the other hand, was a last-minute 'Hail Mary' addition, and it ended up being the biggest workhorse of the show. I had never worked with this fixture before, but I immediately fell in love with its versatility: five moving heads, all independently controlled. I knew those were perfect. While drafting the plot, I had two gaps in the second electric and was debating how to fill them. These units added the flair the design needed. They're bright, have amazing color, are simple to program, and could perform multiple roles to impress the audience."

Suspension of disbelief

Engaging the audience with lighting was an important goal, Heguy emphasizes, as was creating a concert atmosphere within a theatrical environment. "Knowing we were creating a docu-concert, it was important to me to maintain a theatrical aspect," he says. "Many sections of the show feature our 'Phil,' Seth Eliser, speaking to the audience about how Phil became Phil, starting with Genesis and moving through his solo work. I wanted the show to have all the concert 'toys' while also supporting these more neutral, storytelling-driven moments. I want them to feel like this guy onstage is Phil Collins, and we're at a Phil Collins show. The Tornados are essential to help-

ing the audience feel part of it; because we have such low trim heights [which varied from venue to venue] that I can throw those all out from above to complement the ground package and then keep the main profiles to light the people up above."

And no '80s concert would be complete without fog, and a pair of Ultratec Radiance hazers gets a workout every night. "We had tons of haze—enough where the producers would complain," Heguy laughs. "If there's anything I took from Phil's concerts, he loved having hundreds of beams surrounding this band cutting through the fog, and that was my big takeaway. So, everything on the deck was able to give me some sort of shape in the air."

I want my MTV-esque video!

Depending on where one sees The Phil Collins Story, the video will be either a Panasonic 30K projection screen, illuminated by a very wide-angle lens from a pair of Panasonic 12K projectors on a truss above the band, or the house LED display. Like the other AVL aspects of the show, video designer Taylor Edelle Stuart used the same sort of slide-rule calculations that her 1980s' counterparts would have in the era before LED. "The main challenge was really just doing a lot of math and figuring out where the throw wants to be," she says. In fact, while the content, some of which was archival footage and some original graphics created using Adobe After Effects, was fully rendered digitally, it might have looked at home as 4:3, with Stuart feeding some of it through an analog VHS processor to get that pre-digital, NTSC-grainy video effect, then played back by QLab software on a pair of Apple

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Mac Studio computers. “It was a fun way to get a unified look on a lot of these 4K source materials,” she says gleefully.

“[Our generation] has become less interested in new technology [than] finding ways to marry new technologies with old technologies,” she notes. “And I find that to be a really fascinating sort of lane of design at the moment.”

The results fall between cinematic and poetic, and at times even impressionistic. For instance, the empty cityscapes contrast with rich neon colors for “Against All Odds,” which, she says, captures the essence of loss and longing; evocative without being maudlin.

Stuart says she worked closely with Heguy to coordinate between video and lighting. “Sometimes with lighting designers, you just speak the same language, and he and I definitely were on the same page. The music does a lot of the work, and you follow the beats as they appear, but it’s so interesting to think about what colors certain songs are. Sometimes there’s the easy choice, but sometimes your collaboration will take you to the harder choice. Phil’s music just leaves so much room for the imagination.”

The fact that none of the elements are linked by time-code meant there is some room for a little live improvisation night to night. A pair of BirdDog PTZ cameras, one focused on “Phil” on the handheld microphone and one overhead of the drum kit, allows Chris Lubick, operating



The show’s DiGiCo Quantum 225 front-of-house console.

the Blackmagic ATEM switcher on the tour (neither Stuart nor Heguy travels with the show), to fade live superimposed shots in and out with the other video playback. “We had our ideas of where we think this should happen, but I

Top photo: Courtesy of DiGiCo
Bottom: Garrett Underbelly Studios



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gave [Chris] liberty to say, 'Look, if something interesting is happening onstage, then let's see it'. People went to that show to see Seth perform because he's absolutely phenomenal, and the more time we could get him in close-up, I think the better."

The story continues...

As with much of his cohort, experiencing Collins via *The Phil Collins Story* is now the only way his fans can continue to connect directly with him. He's faced several overlapping health issues over the last two decades, including a 2007 spinal injury that caused severe nerve damage, and extensive joint issues that are physically anathema for a drummer. These challenges eventually led to his retirement from touring in 2022, following the final Genesis reunion show at London's O2 Arena. But as the catch phrase for *Beatlemania*, the granddaddy of these types of shows, once proclaimed on Broadway: "Not the Beatles but an incredible simulation!" *The Phil Collins Story* is a tribute show, but it's also its own event. As Heguy recalls of the show's premiere, "It wasn't until that first audience came in, the lights dimmed, and a crowd of over 3,000 people erupted that I knew we had created something special, magical. The excitement in the room was profound. These moments made every bit of work worth it. Now, seeing every stop sell out...brings a huge smile to my face." 🎧



Theodore "Ted" Woolsey, front-of-house mixer and audio designer.

Phil Collins is Part of Vari-Lite's (His)story

In 1980, Showco engineer Jim Bornhorst discovered that twisting dichroic filters alters the frequencies of filtered light, resulting in an apparent color change. The company exploited this by constructing a fixture equipped with two motors to move the light. An initial prototype of a fully automated lighting system was built in a matter of weeks. Showco reps demonstrated the prototype, known today as the VL-Zero, to members of the band Genesis, having programmed it to enact two simple cues. Genesis, already a regular Showco client, promptly invested \$1 million in the new technology, although a working model, later known as the VL1, took more time to build before they could take it on tour. Showco used the capital to develop other lighting products, and a subsequent company incorporated as Vari-Lite Inc. struck distribution deals to introduce the product into international markets.

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The Phil Collins Story:

Director: Dean Elliot
Video Designer: Taylor Edelle Stuart
Scenic Designer: Chris Osborn
Production Manager: Noah Smith
Audio mixer/Sound Designer: Theodore "Ted" Woolsey
Lighting Designer: David Heguy