Rat Pack Rev Val

Robbie Williams takes Vegas with a residency that has plenty of that old-time swing

By: Sharon Stancavage



Left: Williams using the Corona mic, from Sontronics, with visual enhancement by FlixFX. Above, the GoGo frames were provided by ShowFX, with wireless lighting control by RC4 Wireless.

the Albert Hall, Robbie did a Frank Sinatra-Dean Martin-Rat Pack kind of show. One of his ambitions was to do a swing show in Vegas because he's so enamored of The Rat Pack." So says Sean Burke, of the design firm Holes in the Dark, speaking about Robbie Williams. "He's a hugely successful artist in Europe-and does stadium tours there-but he's never really broken in the US," notes Burke, who handled the production and lighting design for Williams' sold-out run at the Encore Theater at Wynn Las Vegas. The front-of-house sound engineer Simon Kemp adds, "Robbie's stage presence is phenomenal, and he has the crowd in total control. This is my first time with Robbie and the band and I'm loving it; it's a mixture of big band, Vegas tunes, and his massive hits."

Burke got involved after he received a call from production manager Omar Abderrahman: "Omar was approached by Rob's management in the UK to look at the feasibility of doing Rob's 'normal' big show in a small room. They asked if I wanted to have a look at it. Then it was really trying to figure out how to maximize that kind of a show in such a tiny space. The proscenium arch is only 48' and the stage 32' deep; there are three backing singers, a threepiece horn section, two guitars, bass player, and keyboards."

Noting that he collaborated on the design—including the scenic elements—with Williams' director, Barry Lather, of B-Rock Inc., Burke says, "We had several long conversations about how he saw the show and the direction he wanted to take it; he wanted it to be like a swing show, with as many dancers as we could get on the stage and the big band."

In terms of style, Burke says, "The show needed to look classy, leaning back to the '40s and '50s. There are bits and pieces in the theatre that lean that way. Art deco seemed right for the set list and the feel they were going for. There are a lot of clichés in Vegas; we went for something classy, not a typical Vegas show.

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"We ended up with a horseshoe-shaped stage set with the band on circular rises," Burke continues. "We had two side ramps and a center ramp with underlit LEDs." The set was fabricated by SGPS. "The dancing action took place on the ramp, the big lift in the back, and the front slot," he adds. The ramps were 5' wide and ranged from floor level to 6' tall upstage. "The main thing with the ramps was to try to keep them at a decent angle so that they didn't turn into a ski slope for the dancers. It's always difficult to get dancers to feel comfortable on something tilted. We had several mechanisms to reduce the angle, including step units coming off the big lift in the back and a smaller step unit at the front. The main lift in back was 12' wide and 5' deep; it was a telescoping SGPS mast lift that could reach up to 18' and down to floor level. Props and dancers were loaded onto it between songs; Robbie used it several times."

Video

The show began with video projected on a red Kabuki supplied by the soft goods manufacturer Sew What? At showtime, Burke says, the animated Robbie Williams logo seen during the preshow "caught fire, setting up an opening sequence on the Kabuki. We shot the opening sequence in Vegas on a very tight budget. It's just Rob on a deck, interspersed with typical shots of the Vegas skyline." Video content, supplied by the UK-based company We Are Shop, was delivered by two 20K Barco HDX-W20 FLEX short-throw projectors placed on the balcony, about 40' from the stage, and driven by a disguise [formerly d3 Technologies] gx 2 server.

Also, Burke says, "At the back of the stage we had three ROE Visual CB5 LED screens [provided by Colonel Tom Touring], two of which were curved; the third had a 4 x 3 ratio in the center. The CB5s have carbon fiber frames and the outside screens were curved at 5° . They were not that big but, then again, the height of the proscenium is only 26'."

The three-screen look also worked better for IMAG, says Burke: "For something like this, you don't need lots of big IMAG. Robbie was standing there, directly in front of you; you could almost touch him. The other reason I wanted to break it up is that the lighting rig—a combination of the house system and a system we brought in—was mostly on the floor and in towers positioned between the video walls. It worked quite well."





Left: ShowFx also provided big martini glasses that added to the ring-a-ding atmosphere. Above: The ROE Visual CB5 screens displayed content by the UK-based company We Are Shop.

Lighting

Burke also served as lighting designer and director. "We dealt with Christie Lites in Vegas," he says. "Jeff Johnson is our account handler, but Mark 'Marko' Stewart is the chap I dealt with all the time. This is my first time working with Christie in Las Vegas, and I found them to be fantastic."

Burke says he was practical about his gear choices. "These days, if there's a preference from production or management for a particular vendor, I ring them up and ask, 'What have you got in stock? Send me a gear list.' That's what I did with Marko; he said, 'We're the biggest dealer for Martin [by Harman] in the US. So I started looking through all the Martin stuff and came across the Axioms, which I've heard about but never used." The production used 54 MAC Axiom Hybrids, most of them placed between the video walls. "Because of the way the Axioms were positioned on the upstage towers, they were right in front of the audience and we got a lot impact from them."

Burke also used Martin Rush MH10s to solve a problem regarding the show's opening moments. "We wanted to draw attention to the platform that Robbie was on, and we wanted to light it up. I wanted to put moving lights underneath it, but there were obstructions in the roof, proscenium arch, and trusses. It had to be a certain size to fit in a certain place to land where it landed." At 42" deep and 96" wide, the platform wasn't large. "The problem was that when the deck landed, it would only have a couple of inches of clearance between the bottom of the deck and the floor. It became quite a process to find a lighting fixture that would fit in that space. The Rush MH10s were absolutely perfect; each one has an LED ring around the front that's a throwback to something like the [High End Systems] SHOWGUN; it also has a really narrow beam and it's as bright as a bloody [Claypaky] Sharpy."

Other Martin gear in the rig included, he says, "Viper Performances, Mac 2000 Wash lights, Atomic LED strobes, and Viper Profiles; [the latter] did a lot of the overhead gobo work." In addition, Burke used GLP impression X4s units, impression X4 Bar 20s, ETC Source Four Lekos, and Vari-Lite VL3000 Spots. A house Lycian 1290 followspot kept the focus on Williams.

Eight units, built by SGPS to look like pantographs, were placed on a truss with an SGPS motion-control system. Four matching units were put on stands onstage. "The truss units were vintage Mole-Richardson Studio 2Ws and the floor units were the same company's Baby 2kWs," Burke says.

Burke controlled the show via a High End Systems Full Boar console. "That's my weapon of choice," he says. "The Full Boar is a brilliant concept. We used a Full Boar 4 and a

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Playback Wing 4 for lighting and video content control. The video content was triggered via Art-Net. We also had a second set as full backup on the network. We had four DP 8000 [DMX processor units]: two active and two spares, for a full redundancy on the system. Two units ran as a HogNet network, which went to the rental lighting gear. We ran the HogNet DPs to sACN devices, giving us DMX. The other two DP 8000 units were outputting Art-Net, which took over the house system. We also had a Road Hog on the laser system."

Special effects

"Barry Lather came up with a very fun-packed show that didn't let up; once it started, it was a little roller coaster," Burke says. It included a bevy of special effects, including lasers from ER Productions, programmed by ER's Lawrence Wright. "We used BB4 and Storm lasers," Burke adds. "The Storms were mounted, two at the top center video wall and one on each of the four upstage lighting towers." The Storm is a small, lightweight diode laser that can perform audience-scanning effects. The BB4, Burke says, "is a fantastic little unit; about 6" square. It does everything the Storm can do at a lower power, and it has serious burst effects."

In addition, Burke says, "We had pyrotechnics, confetti, and the usual bits." These included 10 Antari M-7 geysers located on the outside curved of the set. "They shoot streams of smoke vertically in tight columns, and you can use various fluids, from one that's very dense and hangs a long time to a light mist. On top of the unit is an array of RGBA LEDs: When you fire a jet, you can color it." The production also included pyro, streamer cannons, and flame projectors, provided, like everything mentioned above, by Volt Live.

Props

"There were lots and lots of props; they come from two companies in the US," Burke says, adding that they were supplied by the firms ShowFx and FlixFX. "We had a bunch of red dice, about 32" cubed, made of red Perspex. The girls pushed them around; they had stomp brakes on the back, so they could lock them, then dance on them. They were used in the first number, 'Let Me Entertain You'."

Four light sleds, fabricated by FlixFX, appeared in the numbers "Angels" and "My Way." "They were aluminum frame on wheels, with RGBA LEDs around them," Burke says. "They were, basically, little dollies, 3' wide by 8' long. ShowFX did the two 6' tall by 4' wide martini glasses and GoGo frames, which were the open aluminum LED frames that the dancers pushed around and danced inside. The Martini glasses and frames are completely wireless, using RC4 Wireless gear; specifically, six RC4Magic S3 DMX4dim four-channel wireless dimmers, one RC4Magic S3 DMXio-HG data transceiver with exter-



nal antenna, and an RC4Magic 2.4GHz USB XStick configuration dongle. I have to say I've been pleased with this gear; we have had no problems at all. They are easy to address, easy to set, and we didn't come across any inter-



Burke opted for an art deco look, in part for its classic quality and in part because it worked with elements of the theatre's design.

ference or dropout."

The circular microphone was supplied by Corona [see below] and its external decorative element was created by FlixFX. "We had LED microphone stands, made by a com-

pany called Rebel in the UK," Burke says. "We also had some blinged-up microphones; they are normal microphones that have been taken apart, covered in rhinestones and diamonds, and they are from Rebel as well."

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Audio

Like Burke, Kemp received a call from Abderrahman. "Omar really wasn't too familiar with Robbie, being American," he says. "Being English, I knew exactly who Robbie was. He's massive, so I jumped at the chance to work with him."

The Encore Theatre "has an L-Acoustics V-DOSC system," Kemp says. "I've worked with L-Acoustics PAs in different places and at different times, so I'm very familiar with it. The PA is fine, and it works really well; I can't fault it. It's a good-sounding room as well."

For his control package, Kemp turned to Major Tom: "We've worked with these guys a lot over the years; they're brilliant. They're based in the UK and now in the US, which is great. They are definitely my first choice for a sound company.

"I had a DiGiCo SD7 [console] for the show," he contin-

ues. "I've used it for seven years. I love it, it's still my console of choice." For this project, he used Waves plug-ins, externally, on a touch-screen PC rather than the SD7. "I'm not a big Waves guy; it's a new thing for me. I've reluctantly found the benefits of it. If you have something as simple as Waves, it's just another computer and a server and it has great outboard and reverbs, so why not? You're never going to travel around with 20 Bricastis or anything like that; that's crazy talk. If you can have better effects why not?"

Kemp also employed a few pieces of outboard gear: "I had four Empirical Lab EL8 Distressors and two Bricasti M7 [stereo reverb processors]. I also had a Lexicon 960L [digital effects system], for drum reverbs, and two Empirical Lil FrEQs." The latter unit "is a parametric EQ deesser; it's a tiny little thing and it's brilliant. It's been around for five, six, or seven years and it's more of a studio piece."



Mole-Richardson units were seen in the pantographs, built by SGPS, and onstage floor lights.



The show's laser effects were supplied by ER Productions and programmed by Lawrence Wright.

A Meyer Galaxy 816 AC network processor was used for EQ-ing the room.

Williams performed with 11 musicians, so there were mics aplenty on stage. "Robbie was on the Sennheiser MD 9235 capsule on a Sennheiser Digital 6000 wireless system. I'm new to it and I really, really like it. It's perfect for somebody like Robbie. He has a great mic technique and it really suits his voice." The backup singers used the same combination of gear.

The FlixFX-enhanced microphone is a Corona. "It looks like an old carbon microphone," Kemp says. "I asked a friend of mine who owns a studio in Sydney if he had any old-style mics. He said, 'Don't go old. There's a company called Sontronics who make something called a Corona.' It's an absolutely fantastic-sounding dynamic mic that's dressed up to look like an old carbon microphone. We use it for a gag in the show, when the microphone drops down from the roof, and Robbie sings the first half of a song called 'Feel' on it'."

The drum package included Sennheiser e901s and Shure Beta 91As on the kicks, and Shure Beta 57A and Beta 98AMPs on the snare, rock, and floor toms. Kemp says, "Another microphone that I really like is the DPA 2011, which is a tiny little pencil condenser unit; I have them on the overheads, the ride, and the hi-hat. I used them on a hi-hat when working with Mariah Carey a few years back. The cool thing about them is that they are tiny; it looked like there were barely any microphones on the drum kit. I'm really happy with them."

Robbie Williams' *Live in Las Vegas* concluded its run earlier in the month. Talks are in progress about another Williams production in Sin City.