

THE 1975's DESIGN BRIEF



How to create a smartphone-friendly arena tour

By: Sarah Rushton-Read



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From the moment The 1975 hit the road for its latest album campaign, *A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships*, both the mainstream and music press exploded with positive editorial and headlines describing the stunning stage design.

Created by Tobias Rylander, in close collaboration with The 1975's enigmatic frontman, Matthew Healy, the design's portrait orientations makes it supremely seductive for the band's smartphone-wielding, Instagram-snapping fans, while its sharply architectural shapes, carved out by video, deliver a stunning image from every possible viewing angle.

For a 1975 fan, the live show is the ultimate gift; for The 1975, it is a playground, a physical manifestation of Healy's pop-star persona and a platform for a heartfelt conversation with the band's tribe.

There is a rare equality between the visual and sonic elements of The 1975's latest tour design. Carefully crafted from LED video screens, judiciously chosen lighting fixtures, and an effective PA, it is the band and its message

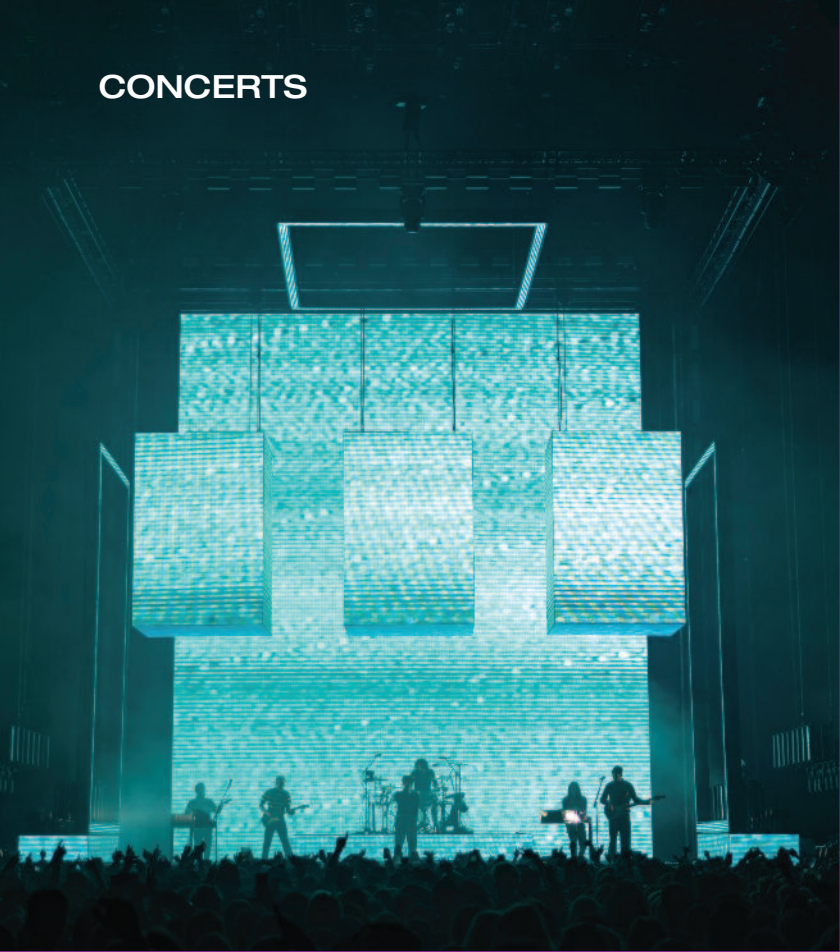
that is up front and present, not the technology.

The entire visual element is driven by video, while sound is packed with environmental effects that complement the slow movement of the heavy set pieces; as a Foley artist would enhance a film, you don't know it's there until you know.

Spaces within spaces, ideas within ideas

Deliciously photogenic, the design is crammed with clever, perspective-bending gags and huge dynamic scenic elements, beautifully choreographed to interrelate, both in terms of the content they broadcast and the way they interact in three-dimensional space. As eclectic as the musical style of the band's latest album, the design seems to represent a coming-of-age, a shift into something more mature as much as it feels like a multisensory art exhibition.

Three large, rectangular LED frames hang at the rear and either side of the stage, while three imposing video screen-clad cubes hang above. The 1975's ubiquitous rec-



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tangular logo looms, ever present, but this time it has acquired a dynamic weight, depth, and detail it never had before.

Video-mapped GLP impression X4 bars and SGM Q-10 fixtures carve up the stage and reach out into the haze-filled auditorium to produce huge cathedral-like walls of saturated color and light. The portrait-configured WinVision Air 9mm IMAG screens are as much a part of the design as the stage, and video content from the main screen (also WVAir 9mm) blends seamlessly with the live camera feeds of the band.

Rylander is a master at blurring the boundaries between pixels and lights. The narratives are complex, yet cohesive; his shows are circular and all content—including the band and its music—is intertwined.

“It’s about the weight of technology on youth culture, screen addiction, and phone swiping,” says Rylander. “We wanted a design that was influenced by the digital media the band are referencing. It’s about breaking down barriers, smashing through the fourth wall, coming out of the digital and into the real world and trying to find a truth.

“Matty is all about giving the hardcore fan little visual gemstones and nuggets of information, hidden in The 1975’s content. He does it with album artwork, social media campaigns, music videos, everything. They all have little details that the fans will figure out. He knows what

people want to see, but the show design challenges them to think again and see things in a different light.”

The last tour pioneered the idea of a “social media-ready” show, and this time Rylander has honed the concept: “I spent a lot of time inside the 3D model, imagining the different Insta-stories that would come out. It had to be camera-friendly from any angle and immediately recognizable as The 1975.”

Kerstin Hovland, who, with Emery Martin (both of Electronic Countermeasures), made up the screens producing and video design team for the tour, elaborates: “The 1975 has a sophisticated marketing campaign and a well-established visual language. There was much to digest to ensure a cohesive picture, not just onstage but also in line with the band’s other creative output. Their mission is to build an alternative reality around the band’s persona. Our job is to create the pixel language and environment they perform in. Fans then take pictures and reflect it back via social media, so the show has to look good from all angles.”

LED video and lighting fixtures are both a source of light and a mapped surface, constantly challenging the audiences’ sense of perspective with negative and positive space: “All the frames and 3D video surfaces are physical objects that can either cast dramatic shadows or be turned off,” Rylander says. “We use shadows, contrast, and brightness to create negative space, confusing the audience’s sense of scale and perspective.”

Hovland adds, “We don’t treat screens as rectangles of light or flat surfaces. To us, each surface represents an infinite space in which we can build another multidimensional world; it’s infinite space.”

Design thinking

Healy and Rylander spend a lot of time thinking about the show’s live environment. Rylander is part of the creative process from the outset, not simply an add-on when the album is in the bag. “Some of our ideas seemed mad at first, but most of them have become real,” Rylander laughs. “Once we have agreed the canvas for the show, we storyboard the narrative and scope out the different looks for each song. At the same time, we work with Kerstin and her team to create the video building blocks.

I then work closely with lighting director and programmer Darren Purves, and video programmer Morgan Brown, in a previz studio to build the lighting, camera, video, scenic automation, and transitions for each song.”

“Tobias doesn’t program in a linear way,” explains Darren Purves. “He deconstructs the song, picking out sounds or lyrics he wants to highlight. We’ll build a cue stack and then we’ll build some buttons that work with particular sounds. Once the video elements are finished and uploaded, we time-code content to each song. It is an intricate, but exciting, way to work.”

Morgan Brown adds, "Tobias is really good at holding the design concept and not going off on a tangent. We're working with roughly 1,100 pieces of content, stitching them together to synchronize with live camera feeds across both screens and fixtures. We mix and blend content inside Green Hippo Taiga+ servers, almost as if they are lighting fixtures with infinite gobos and color changing ability. We then layer that with the onboard effects, of which there are many."

Rylander says he is allergic to eye candy: "I can't bear walls of fixtures, gobos, and constantly flashing lights. We work closely with the music. It's about the feel of the song, as opposed to it being cue after cue on every musical hit. We program lots of little tinkles on executors and buttons, every subtle hand move is recorded to time code."

"We use the bitmapper function in the MA console to send the video to the lighting fixtures," Purves continues. "Kerstin renders copies of the main screen video content at a lower resolution; we then line it up with time code so it matches up with what is on the main screen. So, although video is controlling the lighting fixtures, it's not coming directly from the media server."

Sound

In terms of live audio, the band works as proactively with the sound department as with the visuals team. Front-of-house engineer Jay Rigby says, "Matty and drummer George Daniel both engineer and produce their own albums. They know exactly how they should sound live and they have the technical expertise to communicate that effectively. The band are all phenomenal musicians and hence very rewarding to mix."

Rigby is a purist. For the band's last tour, he took out an analog classic, a Midas XL4. "I loved it. For me it's still the best-sounding console and it makes mixing more fun. The 1975 are basically drums, bass, and two guitars; however, this time, the channel list expanded, so I switched to a Solid State Logic L500. It's the first digital console I've used that really sounds like an XL4!"

Rigby has used rental outfit Eighth Day Sound for The 1975 for the past seven years. This time, the PA he specified was the brand-new KSL system, from the d&b audiotechnik SL-Series. Far from being an eyesore, the neat new d&b KSL PA deliberately frames the portrait set.

"With The 1975, the fans hang on every word Matty



The mic component includes a Telefunken M80 for Healy plus Shure KSM8s, Beta 65s, and SM58s, along with Shure Axient and ULX-D digital wireless systems.

CONCERTS

sings,” explains Rigby. “Nowadays, most PA systems are great, but the KSL is stunning! Total clarity on the vocal, great dispersion. It’s also scalable. We bounce into different-sized venues on an almost daily basis and it sounds great in all of them.”

PA tech Dan Bluhm and monitor tech, Eoin Collins, both from Eighth Day Sound, toured with Rigby on the last album cycle and, much to Rigby’s delight, they’re back. “Dan and Eoin are the backbone of what monitor engineer François Pare and I do. Our collective relationship means we can line-check the whole 64 channel show in about two minutes!”

Over on monitors, Pare is mixing on a DiGiCo SD5. He comments: “Everybody wants a general mix of everything, with themselves a bit louder. The band are on in-ears, they’re not unusual in the kind of mixes they like. Production has its own mix, as do the dancers, backline and front of house. I hover between around 16 and 20 mixes of wireless IEM systems. I’ve also got some hard-wire mixes for George the drummer, the playback guy, and Darren, the lighting director.”

Pare says he has learned a lot working with The 1975—firstly, that consistency is key. “It’s my job to deliver the same thing every day, so when your artist arrives on stage, nothing feels different or out of place. I’m meticulous; the mic heights and angles have to be exactly the same, every day.”

In-ears are Roxannes from Jerry Harvey Audio. “They have been a game changer,” says Pare. “Ross, the bass player, had them first and said he was blown away at the difference. He convinced everyone to make the switch instantly. The stereo image is wider. Musicians like a lot of bottom end, sparkly top, and a bit of scoop in the middle, and these are just really musical.”

Complementing the in-ear mix are four d&b B22 subs on the side of the stage so the band can feel the sound. Audience mics also play an important role, says Pare. “For Matty, it’s important to have audience in his mix, sometimes at full tilt—it enhances his connection with the fans. I pay a lot of attention to Matty; if he points the mic into the audience, he has to hear them coming back.”

From concept to concert

The success of a precision show design like this one relies on an invested production team who care about the show and make it their mission to honor the values of the design, not just for the first two weeks but every show for the next two years.

Production manager Dermot Lynch started working with The 1975 on the second album campaign. “Tobias is an exacting designer; honoring his concept demands a skilled and collaborative team. Also, we don’t have defined A and B shows; our mission is to give the fans as much as we can in each venue.”



Head rigger Simon Lawrence agrees: “Tobias always inspires me to find the best solution, because the results he achieves are so stunning. His design relies on precision rigging. We’re down to 50mm clearance on trusses. Some



Rylander says he is allergic to eye candy: "I can't bear walls of fixtures, gobos, and constantly flashing lights," he notes.

of the static elements have to be positioned in fixed locations on the mother grid. It's not a particularly heavy show, but it's designed in portrait, so our loads are concentrated in a smaller area over the stage. Tobias is a stickler for

clean lines, so all cable has to be out of sight. Although the perfect solution is still in development, we use automated cable reels for the tracking frame upstage and Scan Rig's chain sliders for the large video cubes in the roof."

CONCERTS



"I have to be able to speak to the person at the back of the arena; the live presentation has to scale to that," Healy says.

Safety is a priority, and Lawrence works towards the PL and SIL (Safety Integrity Level) ratings: "Everything that is flown will have been weighed in rehearsals. I then use the BroadWeigh dynamic wireless load monitoring system with the new 'Twist Link,' which saves some time. Three safety spotters, plus myself and lighting crew chief, Josh Barnes,

ensure the band is safe during live automation. There are a number of deadman handles and E-stops around the stage. If any member of the crew feels there's an emergency, they can stop the automation. There's no come-back."

For Josh Barnes, the challenges are equally pressing:



“We have 12m-high vertical towers of GLP X4 Bars and SGM Q-10 strobes either side of the back wall video screen. They have to line up perfectly. If a few lights are off-angle, especially if they move in unison, the impact would be lost. We wanted to avoid spending lots of time aligning fixtures, so we designed custom-made stand-

offs that hold any fixture at precisely 90° to the truss. In addition, there were no touring trusses that could take the SGM Q-10s, especially as they had to be rigged in portrait, so we made something ourselves. We’ve also introduced infrared camera tracking for the Kinesys system, which saves the safety spotters having to use torches and enables Kinesys operator, Jimmy Johnson, to see clearly, whether the lights are flashing or it’s a complete blackout.”

With over 800 LED panels, many in custom set pieces, video crew chief Ed Lawlor and his team have a big task: “Nothing here is done the easy way—we have gone to great lengths to achieve the highest quality LED finish we can, staying true to the design. It’s a long day’s work, but I’m lucky to have a great video crew—everyone is proud of the show and goes the extra mile to keep it looking its best.”

Joining the tour this year is camera director James Valpy: “Tobias wants hero shots of Matty, but the show is not choreographed, and the band move all over the stage—amazing for the fans, but challenging for the camera operators!”

IMAG is in portrait; the cameras shoot in landscape so it took time to find the sense of the image. “Camerawork has to be close-up to ensure a connection between the band and the audience,” continues Valpy. “We use a lot of haze, which looks fantastic, but it can be a challenge for cameras to cut through.” Lawlor confirms: “It’s a smoky show with extreme light levels—which we don’t want to compromise, so shading the cameras is a difficult task. The equipment is definitely working at its limits!”

It’s clear that Lynch gives every member of his team the professional respect and autonomy they need to carry out their jobs and go that extra mile when required.

“We have 43 in the touring crew,” explains stage manager Jack Dunnett. “We are all very proud to be working on this tour, we treat it as if it were an art installation—it is a precision operation. Big tours like this can often be segregated by department, but that just doesn’t happen on this one. We have a proactive team.”

With a remarkably low ticket price of just £30 — 40 for an arena show, it’s clear The 1975 does not balance the budget for its live productions purely on box office takings. Instead, the artistic ambition and high production values of its live show are part of a 360° offering the band creates for its fans. As Healy says, “I have to be able to speak to the person at the back of the arena; the live presentation has to scale to that.

“I think the thing I’m most proud of about this show is that it’s still fan-led. The set, the shapes, the reference to the video: It wasn’t about us making our band bigger, it’s about extending our relationship with our fans. That’s what we spend the money on.” 🎧