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The Weeknd:

*The After Hours
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The Weeknd's
After Hours til Dawn Tour
conjures an apocalyptic
city after dark

By: David Barbour



case you haven't noticed, ambitious concert-touring productions are back. During the pandemic, speculation was rife that, when musical acts once again hit the road, they would do so modestly, with simple production values and a minimum of gear. Instead, the biggest names in music are rolling the dice with spectacles that attract fans in droves. Exhibit A was last month's story on Ed Sheeran's *Mathematics Tour*, with its massive LED Halo. Now comes The Weeknd's *After Hours til Dawn Tour*, an extravaganza featuring a Fritz-Lang-meets-Ridley-Scott cityscape, an enormous moon, and a performance runway spanning hundreds of feet. The creation of this massive stadium show was overseen by Abel Tesfaye (The Weeknd's offstage name), his creative director La Mar Taylor, and production designer Es Devlin.

Taylor notes that the tour was intended, pre-pandemic, to play arenas. But COVID happened and the schedule was revised several times, as new waves of the virus appeared. "It was the game of going, not going," he says. "Then the Super Bowl happened, and it was Abel's biggest stage." This was in 2021; the halftime show, also guided by Tesfaye, Taylor, and Devlin, featured an elaborate stage set with Tesfaye performing on the football field. (See *LSA*, March 2021.) "After that," says the creative director, "how do you go back to arenas?" Making something special for Tesfaye's fans remained at top of mind: "After postponing two or three times, people were frustrated. We wanted to give them the biggest bang for the buck.

"The interesting thing about the Super Bowl is that it inspired the concept you see now," Taylor continues. Noting the limitations imposed by the halftime show format, he says, "We couldn't do a fully realized version of what we wanted; on top of that, we had to deal with COVID." He adds that additional inspiration was found in Devlin's design of the 2011 touring spectacle *Batman Live*.

After Hours til Dawn comes with many innovations, including that enormous moon and a company of female dancers dressed in veiled garb; the production is also notable for the intensive integration of Jason Baeri's pulsing lighting, the surreal projections by the multimedia studio Sila Sveta, and special effects supplied by the firm Pyrotecnico. The stadium-spanning production also created challenges for front-of-house engineer Derek Brener. Touring this mammoth setup was no easy matter, requiring the steady hand of production manager Rob DeCeglio.

"Abel, La Mar, and I have been working on the ideas for this show for a number of years," says Devlin, who also collaborated on The Weeknd's 2017 *Starboy: Legends of the Fall Tour*. "The initial ideas were rooted in the world Abel and Lamar created around [the album] *After Hours*," which Tesfaye has described as "my thoughts from 3am to 5am." Devlin characterizes the initial production concept as "a distorted, through-the-looking-glass city, as if Abel's

life had cracked open at a specific chapter and he couldn't escape a particular scene in Vegas playing on constant distorted repeat. As we shifted from arena to stadium design, Vegas started to take on mythological proportions, rising out of the desert and encompassing a series of real, fictional, and science-fictional cities."

She adds, "Like many exceptional artists, Abel is a conduit for the energy of the times: The choice of veiled women in the context of a dystopian city was instinctive rather than premeditated but seems to acquire more resonance in the evolving context of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the murder of Mahsa Amini," the Iranian woman whose death, at the hands of the country's morality police, has sparked waves of protests.

Indeed, the production was conceived in a far more holistic way than most concert tours, featuring an underlying narrative. Polina Zakh, of Sila Sveta, says, "It is more like a rock opera." Influencing the design was the January release of The Weeknd's new album *Dawn FM*, which, many reviewers have noted, is a more upbeat piece of work. Thus, Devlin says, "The dystopian North American city was joined by a chorus of veiled women and a 30' invocation of the moon. The stage is conceived as a journey from *After Hours* to the *Dawn*, from the detailed dystopian desert city to the archetypal moon." Taylor describes it as "Abel's journey through Purgatory."

Scenery

The task of realizing the urban skyline fell to scenic design producer Jason Ardizzone-West, who will be familiar to readers of *LSA* for his work with Blue Man Group and on the NBC broadcast *Jesus Christ Superstar Live*. "Jason and I have been collaborating on theatre projects since 2013," Devlin says. "It was a real joy to introduce him to my studio lead associate designer Gonzalo Padilla, who drew up the city in detail. Gonzalo is a trained architect who has worked at Frank Gehry and Norman Foster's studios."

For the urban skyline, Devlin says, "Gonzalo did an immense amount of architectural research in preparation for the drawings. Each building is based on a real, fictional, or science-fictional building. Jason worked very closely with the scenic artists at [scenic fabricators] TAIT, bringing his immense Broadway scenic experience to produce the finish we envisaged. Jason has a fantastic eye for detail and is incredibly exacting whilst being very pragmatic. He brings his fantastically generous spirit to the team and energizes the whole process with positivity."

DeCeglio says the scenic layout breaks down into several pieces. First comes the city set, followed by "the LED stage, the widest part of which is 6m [19.7'] wide and 16m [52.5'] long. Then you jump down to the runway, which is 16m, and you get to the 30'-diameter circular stage. The next part of the runway is of variable length, depending on the venue. Most of the time, it is 16m long, but it can go to

CONCERTS

22m [72.2']. After that is the [diamond-shaped] mountain stage, which is 6m by 6m." Suspended over the mountain stage is the moon, fabricated by Netherlands-based Airworks Inflatables, which, DeCeglio says, "is rigged between two speaker delay towers. It weighs only 350lb, but it is 30' in diameter, and, with the wind forces, you need 20,000lb per side of counterweight to keep it safe."

Realizing this layout was an enormous challenge, DeCeglio says. "Jason and I are typically brought in pretty early in the process to have a practical look at the design. From the time the stadium tour was announced, the timeline was pretty tight. Of course, this summer, things you take for granted were much harder," thanks to pandemic-induced supply-chain and staffing issues.

"My primary role was to focus on the buildings," Ardizzone-West says, "bridging the space between Es' conceptual vision and Tait's need to make it tourable as well as water- and fireproof. The design was inspired by Abel's fascination with dystopian movies, the fall of an empire." The buildings are seen in various states of repair, with some reduced to husks. "It's a cityscape partially being taken back by the elements," the designer adds. "There's a range of intact buildings, in smaller scale, downstage; upstage; they transition to a larger scale and a more severe level of ruin. A few more, located upstage, are

intact, as if spared whatever ruined the others. Some are transparent, so you can see the LED screen behind."

In an Instagram post, Devlin describes the layout as "a composite North American city of future relics, drawn from elements of the 1904 Whitehall Building and the 1937 American Radiator Building in New York City, the 1925 Tribune Tower in Chicago, the 1935 Griffith Observatory in LA, the 1976 CN Tower in Toronto, and the science-fictional cinematic architectures of east and west."

"The interesting part," Ardizzone-West says, "was the collaboration with Tait—figuring out how to work with their engineering and internal design departments to translate Es' renderings and Gonzalo's [Rhinoceros 3D] models into full-scale objects that could break down quickly, get loaded into carts, and not have the visible seam breaks that would make it look fake. Also, working to maximize the sculpted details and dimensionality and integrate lighting, smoke, and flame effects while making it efficiently tourable."

Marisa Rinchiuso, a co-project manager (with Alex Serrano) from Tait, says, "The city is comprised of 17 buildings. The six small ones travel as whole units inside custom carts. The three mid-stage buildings are comprised of four walls surrounding a Mag Deck platform or a lift. [Mag Deck is Tait's proprietary elevated deck system.] Each wall splits into at least two sections to pack efficient-



Dawn rises over the cityscape set, a video effect that is augmented and extended by lighting.

Photos: Jason Ardizzone-West



Ardizzone-West says, "There are tons of lighting, effects, and pyro built in" to each building; at one point, the entire skyline is aflame. The fire effects are part of a package supplied by Pyrotecnico.

ly. The eight larger buildings are broken into several small pieces. Each building is unique, so each of their pack styles varies. Generally speaking, they travel in one of three ways: whole sections of buildings sliced into packable pieces, two downstage walls with aluminum framing and support braces added on the upstage side when constructed, and buildings with truss-like structures that build into an L-shape with a fully dimensional top piece. Each large building is supported by a ballast cart underneath the stage, allowing the buildings to sustain high winds in the stadium environments."

Rinchiuso adds, "We worked with Stageco in creating the mainstage and moon rig. They provided a subdeck that supported our mainstage structure, as well as the 'skeleton'/steel structure with the over-stage finger trusses that, in addition to the large screen and PAs, hung a truss utilized for assembly of the buildings. At the front of house, we utilized Stageco's delay towers to mount our catenary rig for the moon." DeCeglio adds, "There are three different systems of the steel structure/subdeck, doing the leapfrog," so the production can begin setting up in the next city on the tour schedule. Tom Fredrickx, of Stageco, adds, "A normal build schedule includes three steel days, a production day, the show day, and a load-out day."

Special effects

Ardizzone-West says, "There are tons of lighting, effects, and pyro built in" to each building; at one point, the entire skyline is aflame. Rocco Vitale, of Pyrotecnico, the special effects supplier, says, "The three main components are a substantive laser package, fire, and a black smoke effect." Most of these are built into the city set, with eight additional flame units in the thrust stage. The black smoke effect happens during the song "Hurricane," Vitale adds. "The video content has black smoke and lightning bolts. We put in black smoke at the bottom of the set to mirror it. The city literally disappears.

"We spent a lot of time with Rob DeCeglio, Jason Baeri, Jason Ardizzone-West, and the folks at Tait, finding a way to ensure that the fire in the scenic buildings met the scale of the stadium in a way that wouldn't cause damage to them," Vitale continues. DeCeglio says, "We spent what felt like days of our lives looking at 3D model of these buildings, figuring out where a laser and flame head could fit in."

Vitale notes, "Everything was custom-cut to fit each building," each of which "has a vinyl covering applied on it that matches the scenery," effectively keeping it concealed. "We also painted the laser units' rain covers the color of the scenic. It took great teamwork to get those effects."



Above and opposite: Baeri's lighting design is notable both for its scale—the sheer coverage it must provide—and its electric energy. "It's a high-density rig," he says. "We had to match the scale of the massive video screen and the enormous physical cityscape." Solotech provided more than 1,100 units to the production.

"This was one of my favorite parts!" Rinchiuso says. "Fireproofing is a typical part of our process, but for The Weeknd it was especially important. We worked with Pyrotecnico's team to test different flame effects with sample pieces of our scenery, trying different distances, durations, and effect types. We carved out portions of building windows to allow lasers to shoot through, and scenically treated laser and pyro units to camouflage in the scenery."

The lasers are Kvant 25W units, some equipped with BeamBrush technology, which can change the size of a projected beam in real time, enabling the replication of moving-head and wash-light effects. "With the BeamBrush, you can be doing big-beam looks then go right to eye-safe audience-scanning effects," Vitale says. "It's pretty rad technology." He adds that Tyler Barbone, the laser programmer/operator, worked closely with Baeri and Taylor, among other members of the team, to create a universe of effects: "I'm super-proud of the work our entire team did. Our people collectively came together, performed magically, and the results were extraordinary."

Video

The design includes an enormous LED wall behind the city set, which DeCeglio says, is 180' wide and 42' high. Noting that the brief was to hide all motors, Fredrickx

says, "We reused construction [for holding the screen] from U2's 2017 tour. For that project, the motors were not visible either, because we had a scenic header above the screen. They didn't want that for The Weeknd. So we went with a system we've used before, with motors on the deck and the cables running on shiv wheels; we go over the structure with cables, picking up the video screen that way."

Polina Zakh, responsible for the video content design, came onboard as a creative director of Sila Sveta, which she recently left to start her own design practice. "We wanted to create an illusion, so that it is difficult to tell what is physical scenery and what is not," she says. "At Sila Sveta we do a lot of 3D illusions; working with La Mar Taylor, we wanted to make an architectural piece that correlates to what's happening on the physical set."

Zakh also created transformative environmental imagery, showing "the city traveling through different worlds." This meant working closely with lighting and scenery. "Polina was tasked with coming up with 90 minutes of making a cityscape feeling breathing and alive," Baeri says.

"When creating the visuals, La Mar and I worked together, with a lot of collaboration from Abel," Zakh says. "At first, we explored various directions of what we wanted

to see on-screen, then we landed on this weird, immersive feeling where you can't tell what is real and what is not."

"At Sila, we mostly work in Cinema 4D, After Effects, Unreal Engine, Blender, and Houdini for simulation," Zakh says. "When we travel from one world to another, Houdini is incredible for the creation of things like water or clouds. The song 'Hurricane' is the climax; the pyro and the visuals 'destroy' the city."

Noting that the video component extends to the stage deck and runway, Loren Barton, the screens director, says, "We had to figure out how to rehearse the show in a way that let us know what it would look like. We fit two-thirds of the main video wall and all of the runway into the Rock Lititz facility, but we had to chop up chunks of the runway; these sections had to work in parallel so that we could view them from overhead." On tour, the screen size never changes, but the catwalk can be altered to fit different playing areas.

"The other big challenge was figuring out how the LED wall and scenic city design would work together," Barton continues. "The screen content is mostly there to help the audience understand the physical set and extend it into the backdrop." This meant providing different contexts for

the city set, surrounding it with sand dunes or "extending it into a bigger, hard-to-place city in Asia, where it scrolls from the tops of the buildings down to the underworld."

The video wall consists of 3,782 SACO S12 twelve-millimeter LED tiles, with the runway deck requiring 1,180 Theatrxx XV 8.9mm tiles. (Another 502 Saco S9 tiles are used for the four IMAG screens.) Imagery is delivered via four disguise gx 2c media servers. The servers are controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA3 lite console connected to the main show file. Richy Parkin, video director, specified the camera package which includes six high-definition Grass Valley units with a GV Korona video production center plus four robocams and one POV camera, along with a Lightware matrix switcher.

Working with Joe Bay, the production's lighting programmer, Barton came up with a custom piece of technology: "The IMAG screens are in portrait and the video is in extreme landscape. There wasn't a good way to communicate to the camera operators which aspect ratio they are shooting for. Our idea was to come up with a system of returns to each camera, giving an overlay of the song, its aspect ratio, and a visual representation of the screen they were shooting for. In the end, The Weeknd didn't want that





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much IMAG on the main screen, so we shot primarily for the portrait screens.” Still, one imagines that the product, called ForeSight, is likely to prove useful in the future. It is,

he says, rooted in “a fundamental belief: As I work closely with Jason [Baeri], it is even more critical that traditional media server programming get more integrated with the



Photo: Steve Jennings

cameras so, instead of just documenting what's onstage, they're part of the show."

He adds, "Jason and I have worked together for about a decade, many times on Roy Bennett projects. It's incredibly important to have video and lighting be on the same

page, deciding where the lights pull out and we pop in with video. It's not about just going full-out in each department and trying to weave them together."

Given the size of the production, Barton says, "The cameras are spread out much farther than they typically would be. The scale of it is so big, we are at the end of longest lens we could use; to get closeups, Richy had to use a lens doubler. We don't have many handhelds; instead, we have the cameras in front-of-house positions and robocams on places like the circle stage. We also have a reverse shot from the top center of the video screen to get a wide perspective shot of the entire arena."

Because of the omnipresent risk of bad weather, Barton says, "Most of the servers and sensitive electronics are in cow sheds backstage; they're industrial Stageco creations, made of heavy plasticized canvas." For the video crew, he adds, "It was about putting together a package that gives us the ability to be switching, programming, and looking at cameras without having to leave the front-of-house area." Ian Bertrand, from Solotech, is in charge of operating the media servers.

Lighting

Jason Baeri's lighting design is notable both for its scale—the sheer coverage it must provide—and its electric energy. "It's a high-density rig," he says. "We had to match the scale of the massive video screen and the enormous physical cityscape, made even larger by Polina's endless cityscape content. Initially, we had planned to use the space more theatrically, carving out unique sub-spaces out of the entire world Es built before finally tying it all together to create one big world. When we got into rehearsals, Abel was just everywhere; he spent the entire 90-plus minutes running up and down that stage, connecting with every single person in the audience and finding all the energy in the room to play to. I must admit, it was surprising to me. No reflection on him or anyone, but professional football players run up and down the same size field for [only] 15 minutes of an hour, and they're not even singing! [Tesfaye's] feeling was, we're in the entire room all night; we have to make sure every place has the same energy. So we had to change gears and match his energy in the whole room all night, which made for interesting challenges; now we have to use everything but find a new way to make everything feel unique and purposeful in every song." This approach includes extensive audience lighting, which supports the star's connection to the fans.

Fortunately, Baeri adds, "It's one of the most collaborative camps I've ever worked with. We all had group discussions about what was going on in every part of the room. Es and Jason were really good about sending models and I would throw light through them in pre-viz to make sure we could make them feel as haunting in real life. Loren helped me shape the looks through every step of



Lining the runway, providing some attention-getting uplighting effects, are 191 Proteus Excaliburs. “The goal was to create this endless tunnel of light beams that shoot into space and define Abel’s path through Purgatory.”

the design process, and, of course, La Mar always has his eye on the scene as a whole, making sure no detail is forgotten.”

Inserted into the scenic buildings are Chroma-Q Color Force IIs, along with LED tape “lighting some of the more difficult corners.” The set’s exterior is covered with Chauvet Professional PXL Bar 16s; the units are “vinyl-wrapped to have the same texture as the floor.”

Baeri also worked closely with Zakh to integrate video and lighting effects. For example, a blinding sunrise effect “is both video and lighting,” he says. “The majority was Polina creating this city of colossal scale on the screens, with me supporting that scale by extending the real world depth” using Vari-Lite VL3500 WASH FX units. He adds, “A hundred years from now, I’m still going to try and use [VL3500s] on shows. They have a big, fat lens and a super wide beam which is exactly what that spot needed.”

Baeri has two workhorse units, both from Elation Professional. “Overhead, it’s Proteus Hybrids [267 in total]. I used them with [lighting designer] Corey FitzGerald on the Beyoncé and Jay-Z *On the Run Tour*. It’s a stadium rock fixture, there is absolutely nothing subtle about it, loud and obnoxious, but it shoots a beam of light 500’; it has a really clean color field inside of it that lets you shoot

concentrated beams of light in saturated colors without losing their edge.” Lining the runway, providing some attention-getting uplighting effects, are 191 Proteus Excaliburs. “The goal was to create this endless tunnel of light beams that shoot into space and define Abel’s path through Purgatory, also highlighting how, on your journey, you tend to go ‘where the night takes you,’ and are at times almost trapped by that invisible path the journey has decided for you.”

In addition to the Proteus gear, the rig includes 90 Claypaky Sharpy Plus units, 46 VL3600 Wash FX units, 11 VL4000 BeamWashes, 24 Robe Spiiders, 68 GLP FR10 bars, 84 Chauvet COLORado PXL Bar 16s, 91 Acme Thunderbolt strobes, 22 TMB Solaris FLARE strobes, 82 Color Force II 72s, 120 Color Force II 12s, 17 Robe BMFL long-throw followspots, and 13 RoboSpot controllers. “It was challenge to create looks that are simple and iconic with 1,100 units while also keeping those looks feeling specific and fresh time the whole night,” Baeri says. “You have to find a way to keep the energy at full tilt when he is at full-tilt.” Effects gear includes 10 MDG TheOne hazer/foggers and two Martin JEM ZR45 foggers.

Control is provided by a pair of grandMA3 consoles (running MA2 software) and 13 MA3 processing units. “We

did the previz with MA3, because it talks to Depence2 via Viz-Key," Baeri says. "I can call it up in the console without having to use a rendering program in between. It has endlessly simplified my workflow. I model in Vectorworks and send that file straight to MA3 and D2 and within 15 minutes I can look at it, see if it works the way I want, and start churning out renders."

Assembling a rig this large in the era of supply-chain problems was no small task, although Solotech, provider of the lighting and video gear, was up to it. "Rob Kennedy [of Solotech] scoured the corners of the world to get units," Baeri says. "There were phone calls when he said, 'I know you want 300. I can get 280.' Then he would mysteriously pull the rest of them out of nowhere, anyway."

"Yes, it was challenging," Kennedy says. "It's a struggle when so many clients are suddenly working at the same time. Jason was very accommodating with substitutions, working with us to preserve the integrity of his design." (At least one gear manufacturer had its planned delivery disrupted by the war in Ukraine, while another, hampered by the inability to get the necessary parts, delivered a set of specified units long after the tour had begun.)

Again, because of the numbers involved, Kennedy says, "We knew we wouldn't be able to replicate the package to leapfrog it." Therefore, "We have a substantive pre-rig and a universal kit that goes in for every show. The leapfrog kit has motors, powers, and wind bracing for the upstage video screen; in outdoor venues, we have 2,000 linear feet of truss to support the screen." The overall package includes 26 two-tons, 90 one-tons, four ½-tons, and four ⅓ tons.

Kennedy adds that the bulk of the fixtures are pre-rigged using Tyler Truss. "The major issue was 1,134 active fixtures traveling with the uni-



Suspended over the mountain stage is the moon, fabricated by Netherlands-based Airworks Inflatables, which, DeCeglio says, "is rigged between two speaker delay towers. It weighs only 350lb, but it is 30' in diameter and, with the wind forces, you need 20,000lb per side of counterweight to keep it safe."



The main performance runway spans hundreds of feet.

versal package, figuring out how to deploy them in a one-day load-in. We custom-built touring carts for the floor fixtures; we used inverted Tyler Truss to make a basket that each fixture sits in. We also have a number of carts, made by Tait, in which the fixtures travel. Essentially, we are loading in everything by forklift, right onto the stage or floor, to shorten the load-in time. Our lighting team eventually got it down to eight hours.”

Baeri’s lighting is defined by strong saturated color looks, especially the persistent use of deeply saturated red, Tesfaye’s favorite color. “Between the Color Forces and the RoboSpots, he is almost always lit in mixed colors,” the designer says. “I double up on him for brightness,” a necessary move when shooting light from a distance of 300’.

Talking about cuing, Baeri says, “The whole idea of the show was meant to be operatic. We had a story and theme, but we collectively switched gears to make it less story-driven over time. The understanding is that we were getting dragged down by minutiae. Abel wanted to get out there and sing and connect with the audience, but everything has to meet the Ring Cycle nature of the show. It’s got to feel like it’s always on and always going.” We were supremely lucky to have Joe Bay with us as a programmer and assistant LD. He one of the most naturally talented programmers I’ve ever come across, with just a great

sense of style and art that keeps the show big.”

An additional lighting effect involves the use of PixMob wristbands for the audience members. “We’ve used two products on the tour,” says Stefan Zubovic, PixMob programmer. “We started with the X2R wristband, which uses recycled plastic, then moved onto the X3, which has a paper strap and a more diffuse casing that allows the LED to shine brighter.” He adds that the idea of using PixMob “came from Abel. He wanted it to look like a constellation of stars around him.” That certainly describes the effect: Given the enormous audiences, PixMob has been handing out tens of thousands of wristbands at each performance.” Then again, Zubovic notes, the company “produces millions each year for concerts and sporting events.” To manage so many wristbands, they are shipped to each venue.

The PixMob effects perform in sync with Baeri’s lighting. “We programmed the wristbands on the same show file” as the production, Zubovic says. “All the PixMob elements are time-coded in their own world, so they don’t interfere with Jason’s cues. Jason would program a song, we would see what it looked like, and then we would add in extra moments. It was a tag-team thing.”

Sound

The size of the physical production has implications for front-of-house engineer Derek Brener. “Video took a major

precedent over everything, aesthetically,” he says. “So, I have to hang the PA about 30' higher than it normally would be. The upstage video wall is massive, the biggest one I’ve ever seen, and the creative team didn’t want anything in front of it. Thus, the farther away a PA is, the less power it will have and will incur additional latency.” Still, he says, he found ways to deliver a big, present sound.

The audio gear is supplied by Clair Global, and the loudspeaker rig consists mostly of the company’s Cohesion Series CO-12 speakers. “I have only 16 per hang, again because of the video screen,” Brener says. “The PA is hung on cantilevers, and all the CP-218 subs are on the floor. There are four onstage hangs and four delay towers. The spaces we’re in are gigantic, the biggest I’ve ever done.”

In addition to the main hang of 32 CO-12s are 32 CO-12s for the side hangs and 36 CP-218 ground subs. Sixteen CO-10s provide front fill, with another 48 for delays. Six Lab Gruppen PLM 20K44SP amps are also in the mix.

Brener adds that, early on, he was pressed to increase the sound to the point where “it’s 6dB louder from where I feel comfortable; it’s about 105–106dB for the entire show.” However, he says, “I have a couple of tricks up my sleeve. I use Waves X-FDBK [a feedback elimination plug-in]. During soundcheck, Lewis Lowder, the monitor engineer, comes out with Abel’s mic and patiently works with me, taking the mic to four different positions where Abel is for most of the show. He’ll give me some really hard ‘esses,’ causing the mic to feed back; the plug-in will insert notch filters to the frequencies that are feeding back really quickly—so I don’t have to sit there with SMAART and cut it myself. That has helped tremendously with time and accuracy.” He also relies on the Rupert Neve Design 5045 Primary Source Enhancer. “I use it on the vocal to additionally dodge feedback and reduce PA bleed.”

Unusually, the onstage musicians are hidden behind the scenery. “The intention was to have them on top of the [cityscape] buildings,” Brener says. “But once they were up there, there was a size/perspective issue; the creative team realized that they looked like giants. An executive decision was made to position them behind the set.”

Interestingly, Brener says, “Because of the way the PA has been hung, it actually helps me that the musicians are behind the scenery. There were certain sections of the audience that are so close to the drummer that you would hear the acoustic energy before you would hear the PA. There was no way around it, which made my stomach drop. I was committed to making it work, but when they got put behind the set, there was some relief.”

Tesfaye, Brener notes, “has been on a Sennheiser MD 5235 [capsule] for as long as I’ve been with him, which has been seven years now. We tried to shift him to Sennheiser’s 6000 Series, but it didn’t sound the same,

and he doesn’t like the way it feels in his hand. He went back to his old, trusty steed.” Band mics include a mix of Shure Beta 81s, SM57s, KSM 147s, and VP88s; Telefunken M82s and M80s; Sennheiser 604s and 421s, and Royer 122s.

Brener runs the show on a Yamaha PM10 RIVAGE console. “My career started with Bruno Mars, and I was on a [DiGiCo] SD7 the whole time. When I started with The Weeknd, there was, at first, very little budget for sound, so I chose an Avid Profile, working on that for a long time. When they discontinued support for it, I figured I’d better shift gears and I have been wanting to try the Yamaha. The Rivage is a great desk. It’s the functionality that I fell in love with; you can make custom banks, which I do, but it really functions like an analog console. I love the onboard effects, like the Bricasti reverbs and DYN4. And the desk just naturally sounds amazing.” Lowder’s monitor console is a DiGiCo SD5.

Working with The Weeknd’s music is “a much different experience than Bruno Mars,” Brener says. “There’s definitely a lot more playback with The Weeknd because the music is so electronically driven. It’s a much more synthetic project, rather than organic. My main goal with him has been to gel the band into the tracks, to make them sound like they are originally part of the songs. You don’t hear track and band; you hear a cohesive musical art piece. Panda, the playback engineer, has been with The Weeknd longer than I have. He and Patrick Greenaway, the musical director, make sure the tracks are sorted out in the early stages of production. Panda works closely with the band, so that anything they’re playing isn’t in the tracks and vice versa.” It’s about bringing separate pieces into a unified, harmonic effect.

Teamwork

The tour has played to tumultuous crowds. Zakh says Tesfaye “is one of the few artists who is ready to take risks. He and La Mar are genuinely willing to create a show that people haven’t seen before and they work with a fantastic team.” Vitale adds, “What’s so awesome about Es’ team and La Mar is they push you out of your comfort zone. And you learn so much in that moment. Being part of this creative vision was an honor.”

“More than any other production I’ve ever been involved in, this camp is filled with people that just want to create art together,” Baeri says. “There are no egos, and no one needs to stand out as the hero. We start every moment by asking ourselves not what is the ‘right’ thing to do for this moment, but what is the ‘best’ thing to do in this moment, and we are supported in that journey every step of the way, from the top down.” The *After Hours til Dawn Tour* wraps up what is billed as its first leg on November 27 and 28 in Los Angeles. 🎶