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LeRoy Bennett's Design for The Weeknd's Fall Madness Tour

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The Weeknd recently wrapped up the sold-out *The Madness Fall Tour*, which was in support of the artist's second studio album, *Beauty Behind the Madness*. Known by the stage name The Weeknd, Canadian singer, songwriter, and producer Abel Tesfaye wanted to build on the success of the album with the tour through extremely effective use of production elements to support his music. Production and lighting designer LeRoy Bennett, one of the principals in Seven Design Works, was asked to realize that goal.

Every aspect of Bennett's design supported The Weeknd's creative vision in a cohesive and creative visual manner. "Abel has a creative team; his own creative directors who work on all of his album artwork, all video concepts, all of that," explains Bennett. "So they had a basic concept that they gave me. I took that and developed it into what it is now. Abel has found a very unique niche with his music; there's nobody like him, doing what he's doing at the moment. It's not pop music; some of it is a kind of dark R&B soul music in a way. It has almost some Michael Jackson feel to it, but it's definitely got a Nine Inch Nails/Trent Reznor darkness to it. I wanted to reflect that uniqueness in the design. It's a very deep, moving show at times; most of the time, it is very

contrast-y. It's not like a pop show. It's very spatial with a lot of negative space in there."

This tour was a big step up for The Weeknd in terms of scale of production and the sizes of the venues that he would be playing on this tour. Bennett, whose renowned career has including working with some of the biggest names in the music industry, enjoys the opportunities to work with a young artist on that "breakout" tour. "For me, this is an exciting project. This is what I live for as a designer," says Bennett. "I love the chance to work with an artist as they are moving from one level to the next. This tour, it's the next big step for him. And it's exciting to do that as a designer because it's challenging, it's a huge learning curve for everybody. You're part of showing them what is possible on this level, helping them understand why you are doing certain things and the importance of doing them. That's what I love about it; everyone is open to all the options and ideas."

Bennett was very pleased with the collaborative environment of the creative team with the artist. "They obviously had a lot of people do their research about me before they called me. They might have seen something I had done and then thought, 'Oh, maybe this is the guy that we want.' However it happened that they selected me, I am glad to have been brought on to the team. It was a very collaborative effort, they liked my direction and I felt that everything that I put forward in the design is there in the show. Abel's creative director, who is also his partner in The Weeknd, La Mar Taylor, has certain visions of stuff, and I enjoyed working with him. Abel's the public face; he's the main dude, but La Mar is equally as important to The Weeknd's artistic vision. Certainly the actual looks are my design, but it was a collaboration artistically that I really enjoyed. One of the best experiences I've ever had; they are a great bunch of people."

Visual Layers

Today, video is an integral part of concert production design, in no small part due to Bennett himself putting it front and center in recent well-received, technology-pushing designs, and *The Madness Fall Tour* is no exception. For the video aspects of his design, Bennett is employing the PRG Nocturne

V-Thru LED video screens for some innovative transparent video looks. "The creative team wanted Abel to be able to appear through the screen at times," describes Bennett. "I don't know what their inspiration was or what they'd seen before, but anytime you say that, the first thing I'm going to say is V-Thru. That is the product you are talking about. There's nothing else like it out there, and it's a great tool. That unique transforming transparent effect was my main purpose of choosing that particular product for the video screens. There are two layers of video and, naturally, V-Thru would be my choice for the mid-stage screen. In this design, both the mid-stage screen and the upstage screen are the PRG Nocturne V-Thru product. I like layers; that is very much in my thinking as a designer. I also wanted the consistency with the quality of the video content." The upstage screen is 64'-8" wide by 17'-8" tall. The mid-stage walls, stage right and stage left are 23'-6" wide by 13'-3" tall, and the downstage center portion is 29'-5" wide by 13'-3" tall.

The PRG Nocturne V-Thru is a structured video scrim with high transparency for layering looks, perfect for Bennett's design. In fact, it is perfect for Bennett's design style because the V-Thru developed from an idea that Bennett brought to Nocturne for his design of the Nine Inch Nails *Tension 2013* Tour. V-Thru has a pixel pitch of 28mm and the LEDs are housed in clear plastic tubes for a 66 percent transparency. All of the power and data cabling are hidden in the V-Thru support rails so they do not interfere with the high visibility through the LED tile, allowing them to act essentially as a video scrim.

There's a point in the show where the video wall lowered and a catwalk scissor lift would raise up from the stage floor so that the artist would appear to be walking along the top of the video wall. Since the creative team didn't want to have bunch of truss and rigging gack at The Weeknd's feet, Tait fabricated a six-inch, low-profile steel rigging bumper that gave a really slick and clean look.

The content creator for the tour was Strangeloop, a.k.a. David Wexler, a Los Angeles-based audio-visual artist and founder of Strangeloop Studios a/v. "Strangeloop was great; they were cool people to work with," Bennett notes. "Something I found interesting about the content in this show, and how it all fell into place, is that bits and pieces of content became, over the course of the show, almost like characters. The content gives the show an interesting journey

feel "

The design also requires a lot of scenic automation in the show including the mid-stage V-Thru screen, which was flown in and out throughout the show to change up the looks. In addition to the video screen automation, Bennett has a number of lighting pods that can be flown in and out for more changeable layered looks that pair lighting and video elements. The set has a "ceiling" that consists of custom, movable pods that contain Ayrton IntelliPix-R units.

"Basically, there are pods of the [Ayrton] IntelliPix that move up and down," Bennett says. "There are six individual pods, and they each fly independently. It originally started off as a series of cubes that were all flown independently. They would move up and down. I then refined it and ended up with basically all of the IntelliPix that were available at that time. I just wanted a dimensional, cubic arrangement. It was just another video and lighting surface; it's an architectural-feeling element."

All of the flying automation was controlled by the Tait Navigator automation control system. Tait also built and supplied all of the set, scenery, the Catwalk Scissor Lift and the custom lighting pods, which along with the V-Thru were all suspended from Tait Nav Hoists. The IntelliPix-R fixtures were sent from Upstaging to Tait so that custom brackets and mounting for the units could be designed that allowed them to quickly connect to a structure, fly as a unit, and then at the end of the night disconnect very quickly and go into custom-built transportation carts.

Tait also designed the mounting for the Ayrton MagicDot-R fixtures, which are positioned on the face of the band riser platform. An element they refer to as a double decker, it has the band riser about twelve feet off the arena floor, and then they placed and integrated individual MagicDots across the whole face of the band riser.

The Light Shines Through

One of the ways Bennett's overall production design marries the lighting and video is by using the negative space to good effect. "Because of the gaps between all the LED pixels, I can layer light through them; it was another way of adding life to the show. It's a multipurpose thing and it had its own character. We were going to feed content to the lighting, but this show is so maxed out as far as being able to push that much information through. Actually, we have to run two MA consoles because we maxed out the main one." For the lighting alone, without media servers, they used 85,800 MA Lighting grandMA2 parameters; 71,600 channels of DMX; and 140 universes. They do run content through the Ayrton Magic Panel 602s. All of the lighting was provided by Upstaging, who also handled the trucking for the tour.

For The Weeknd, Bennett's team includes many who work with him regularly. "I've got my usual suspects," states the designer. "I've got Loren Barton as the media server programmer and Jason Baeri as my lighting programmer. The lighting director, out on tour, was Chris Cockrill." The team used one of the new PRG Los Angeles previsualization suites to pre-program the tour prior to heading to Rock Lititz for production rehearsals.

Due to the tight timeframe of this production's preparation — just two weeks from getting an order — Upstaging shipped the IntelliPix to Tait so they could be installed during the rehearsal period at Tait's Rock Lititz rehearsal facility. "I had great companies supporting me on this project. PRG Nocturne, Tait, and Upstaging all have a great passion for what they do, just as I do. They're willing to take whatever I drop on the table for them and go for it."

Bennett's lighting design included mainly Ayrton products with a range of MagicDot-R, Magic Panel 602, and IntelliPix-R units. He is also used Robe BMFLs and Philips Vari-Lite VL4000s. "Primarily — I would say 90 percent — of the system is all Ayrton products; above the system we have Robe BMFLs, and then upstage is a wall of VL4000s," comments Bennett. "Upstage, there's the wall with the V-Thru screens, a wall of MagicPanels, and then behind that, the layer of the VL4000s. That let me really layer the lighting looks with the video imagery." The upstage wall consisted of custom frames from Upstaging that held the MagicPanels.

Bennett notes that he carefully selected his color palette to merge with the music, "A lot of it is in the red and blue range. There's a couple of green songs, but that's pretty much the spectrum that I'm using. It kind of goes a little colorful for a moment; sort of multicolored, but not multicolored like a rainbow. The design really sticks within that palette; very dark, fiery, emotional colors. There is an emotional core to the show."

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Ignition

This tour features a few numbers that employ pyrotechnics, which were supplied by Pyrotecnico. "Basically, we provided fire and flame effects, and there was some concussion pyro for one of the songs we did the flame in as well," explains Rocco Vitale, creative director for Pyrotecnico. "We used 12 of Le Maitre's Quad Salamander Pros for the song "Crew Love." For the song, "The Hills" — that was where we did the concussion effects, and we had eight custom flame trees that were burning. Those were interesting, they are vertical flame bars that burned throughout the entire song, and there were six moments during the song where they actually burst at the top; it was a really great look. It was a vision that Roy had, and it was a very unique. We called them the 'flame trees.' There were eight of them around the stage, and Abel was in the middle of all of them, which created a lighting effect for him as well."

Bennett wraps up by pointing out that it was an incredible working experience and took a lot of effort by everyone involved to pull it off in the extremely compressed time-frame. "We pulled it off, great, but I wouldn't want to do this again in this time frame. We were lucky. We were lucky that Tait had the time to do it; that Upstaging could work with us getting all the lights; that Nocturne could get us the screens. Everyone managed to pull it together and they were all super helpful. I rely on these guys to do stuff for me all the time; I know how busy they all are and it was just amazing timing that it was able to come together on this one with such tight schedules. I even said to the manager, 'Don't get any ideas, this can't happen consistently.' It was massive, but that is the beauty of this creative team — they saw the design and said, 'This is what we want. We love this, we're going to go for it.' And it was a bit of a push to make things happen, but it's what I believed in my heart was needed to take The Weeknd from where Abel was to where he needed to go."

Certainly the audiences agreed, as *The Madness Fall Tour* sold out. Bennett was not surprised. "I think that is awesome. For me, musically, it's like the perfect storm. The combination of the people, the music, the artists, everything just fell in together. It's an amazing show. And I have to say that I'm very excited about it. I always believe I can do better. I don't even feel like I've reached my peak yet; not even close, but this is something that's another step in the things that I've done and my progression as an artist. I just think this tour is not like anything else, and that reflects Abel, who is unlike anyone else. Very cool stuff."

The Weeknd/Madness Fall Tour

Crew

Production Designer/LD: LeRoy Bennett

Lighting Programmer: Jason Baeri

Media Server Programmer: Loren Barton

Lighting Director: Chris Cockrill

Lighting Co: Upstaging

Lighting Techs: Thomas Walls (Crew Chief), Wade Cotton, Fraser MacKeen, Yoshiko Shinohara, Joe Pacini, Jason Blaylock

Video Co: PRG Nocturne

Video Crew: Kevin Carswell (Video Director), Jason Lipton (Engineer), John Moore (Crew Chief), Adam Cline (LED Tech/ Cam Op), Steve Tomanek (LED Tech/ Projectionist/ Cam Op), Barrie Roney (LED Tech/ Projectionist/ Cam Op)

Video Content: David Wexler/Strangeloop Studios

Pyro Co: Pyrotecnico

Pyro Crew: Rocco Vitale (Creative Director), Doug Aller (Crew Chief), Brad Burkhardt, RJ Pacella

Scenerv/Automation: Tait

Gear

3	grandMA2 Full consoles w/22 NPUs
256	Ayrton IntelliPix-R LED 5x5 Panels
12	Ayrton Madesigns
240	Ayrton MagicPanel 602s
140	Ayrton MagicDot-Rs
14	Vari*Lite VL4000 Beam/Washes
22	Robe BMFL Spots
2	Lycian M2 2500W followspots
4	Reel EFX DF-50 hazers
1	PRG Nocturne V-Thru 28mm LED wall (upstage, 64'-8" x 17'-8")
2	PRG Nocturne V-Thru 28mm LED walls (L-R, 23'-6" x 13'-3")
1	PRG Nocturne V-Thru LED Wall (downstage, 29'-5" x 13'-3")
2	21'x12' Side Screens
4	Barco FLM 20K Projectors
2	Green Hippo V4 Media Servers
1	PRG Nocturne HD Flypack w/Grass Valley Karerra 2ME Switcher, various lenses and cameras

For more tour photos of The Weeknd's Fall Madness Tour 2015 by Steve Jennings, go to www.plsn.me/PLSN-Weeknd.

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