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## How I Did That: Designing The 15th Anniversary Of The 2009 Essence Music Festival

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While studying in Hanover, Germany, back in 1995, a new program was just starting up in interior architecture and production design at my school. I was already serious about architecture, but after registering for the course, I immediately knew that this was what I wanted to do: temporary structures and installations. I worked as a set designer for trade show booths and set construction, which is a bit of a different world, but still, there is the opportunity to create this little city, a unique temporary world. I knew then that I didn't just want to do architecture.

The entertainment industry allows for temporary solutions that go beyond the line between architecture and temporary structures—the beauty of having the ability to be creative in a very short time frame. One can create numerous layers through CGI, animations, lighting, and other technology that don't translate as easily in architecture. For me, live entertainment is about working through all the media surrounding, inspiring, and influencing our daily lives and culture.

I moved to Los Angeles in 1999 and worked for an independent architectural firm called Graft. In 2007, Graft collaborated with Brad Pitt and his Make It Right foundation, and I flew down to New Orleans to take on the role as executive producer for the Pink Project. There, I met Stephen Rehage, founder of Rehage Entertainment and cofounder of our new joint venture, RE:BE Design. At that time, Rehage was signed to produce the 2008 Essence Music Festival, and I was contracted to do production design for the event.

The Essence Music Festival is a three-day concert and cultural seminar held in the Louisiana Superdome and Louis Armstrong Convention Center, respectively. It is the largest African-American music and empowerment event in the country, and 2009 saw the highest attendance in Essence history, with top performers including Beyoncé, Lionel Richie, Anita Baker, Ne-Yo, John Legend, and Maxwell.

The steps in my early design process required sketching out an idea, fleshing it out in CAD and 3D, including vendors and the supplementary drawings for additional crew, such as lighting and rigging, and then creating renderings for visual representation. Aside from renderings of the main stage and a VIP area, we created vignettes for artists, specific to their tastes, such as a digital rain backdrop for Ne-Yo and a candlelight atmosphere for John Legend. We were very lucky that Beyoncé and her crew were already working on a tour design while I was designing the Essence stage, so we had frequent communication with her crew regarding equipment, as well as video and set components.

This design was about revamping the one from 2008, basing the line drawings and video elements on the components of the prior year and updating it with large-scale, Barco MTriX curved LED walls. The walls would make the stage more readable as one cohesive sculpture, as opposed to an arrangement of single video components. It was most important to have one fluid look, something readable horizontally from left to right and vertically from the top of the stage down. This required an integration of stage elements, avoiding free-floating screens by framing and connecting them, yielding a winged effect, curving toward upstage, and then forming a header that evolved into the Essence logo. This then curved stage-front onto the stage floor itself.

This was also the 15th anniversary of the festival, and my design aimed to abstractly reflect both a celebration, with imagery such as fireworks, as well as a timeline showing the significance of this recurrent festival in a digital format. I used Element Labs Versa Tubes to communicate the appearance of light traveling, having a pulse running through these lines like a comet—an explosion of different colors, disappearing and reappearing, fading in and out, creating a sort of circuit board effect. The Versa Tubes became part of the video-controlled elements, instead of lighting, as these were docked into the MPix



panels; the curved MPix lines were then docked onto MTrix screens left and right of stage, integrating with Barco SLite 10XP screens for I-Mag. The upstage backdrop was Pixled F-30 modules, the product's first appearance on a production.

Working with three different video media—for varied appearances—that required separate control created challenges, including programming the content to travel through the Versa Tubes continuously, with frequent line shifts and pulses, and creating a digital texture of fill in between these lines on the MTrix screens. These acted as a mask so that video content would shift throughout the entire stage yet remain visible only through the filled out portion of that screen. Like the pulsating content racing through the circuit board, these effects could shrink, grow, and disappear.

From day one, we required candid conversation with each camp involved in the production, from lighting to video to rigging departments. Event Producers, with whom we also worked in 2008, brought in video equipment, some of which was supplied by XL Video, and Premier Global Production Company did the lighting. Our main focus was to execute the video elements and line drawing look. Lighting for TV One, the station that aired *TV One Night Only: Live from the Essence Music Festival*, added the challenge of avoiding interference with the set lighting, designed by John Clarke, and the video-broadcast lighting, directed by Ray Ziegler, with the media server content, manned by Dan Valcich of Visibility Media.

Additionally, four to five acts performed nightly, each changing sets within ten minutes, so the stage design had to be flexible enough to accommodate each act while maintaining the integrity of the overall design.

Nine days prior to the event, we heard the news that Michael Jackson had passed away. While we wanted to keep the festival focused on New Orleans, we needed to create a tribute. During the normal set changes, we added a center Hibino Chromatek 6mm screen that descended for tribute imagery, creating a semi-translucent look from the audience perspective. The New Orleans Jazz Band entered the stage for the tribute, playing a funeral-like march, accompanied by all stage lines going white—a pure white line look. The audience focused on the large center screen that became the backdrop for the emcee, so the attention was on the foreground, while set changes occurred in the background behind the screen. At the end of the tribute, all the lines were simultaneously faded and sucked into the center, and the screen ascended.

As a production designer, I often work toward the branding of an event, creating a motif and narrative that integrates itself into one identity. It's key to attain one visual look by finding the right elements for each area being tackled. In this case, the branding had to be consistent for the stage, the VIP area off stage-left behind the MTrix screen, and the convention center public areas. I came out of 2008 thinking about how I could aesthetically tie the areas together, knowing I wanted to incorporate this circuit board theme into the convention center, sponsor areas, art market, and vendor booths.

I created a ceiling treatment, with 2'-wide red fabric running like a ribbon throughout the halls, lobby, and main center, making turns and drops in the same design as the lines in MTrix and Versa Tubes on stage. Sporadically, the ribbon dropped down to the floor to frame seating areas for guests. The intention was for the guests to go from the seminars during the day to the evening performances and recognize the same angles throughout.

The same went for the VIP area—to have the stage design leak into the lounge, giving the feeling of not only being part of the performances but on the actual stage. For this, I installed light tape onto the makeshift floor, creating multiple lit paths for the guests to follow. These complemented the lines on the main stage, and there were times the light in the tape flickered similarly to the Versa Tubes.

The most enjoyable aspect for me is always the design process itself, but the reward comes at the precise moment that the curtain rises, and you see, along with a sold-out stadium, your idea become a reality.

*Stefan Beese is a native German production designer and architect who moved to Los Angeles in 1999 where he founded Beesign. He studied at the University of Applied Science, Kiel, and at the University of Design and Media in Hanover, Germany. He is the co-founder of RE:BE Design, a joint entertainment design company with Stephen Rehage. He resides in New Orleans, LA.*

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