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Essence Festival 2010:

A New Look for a Classic New Orleans Event

One of New Orleans' hardest perennial is the Essence Festival, held each July. Originated by the publishers of *Essence Magazine*, it differs from nearly every other summer music festival by combining live performances with an extensive lifestyle exhibition. Once again, this year's festival, which featured performances by Janet Jackson, Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, and Earth Wind and Fire, had a production design by Stefan Beese, of RE:BE Design.

As always, Beese is interested in merging the design's scenic and projection elements. "The design is based on the convergence of fluid masses, which allow for variability in surface content and appearance," he says. His organically sculpted stage, which was built by Event Producers, Inc., featured spandex fabric surfaces wrapped over a substructure of truss. Using 35,000 sq. yds. of silver and white spandex, 12,800' of nylon polyester thread, 9,000' of rope and aircraft cables, and 6,000' of aluminum pipe, the structure served as a surface for the projection of custom video content, via video-mapping technology, using ten Barco 22K projectors, and an AV Stumpfl Wings Vioso media server.

"Angling the stage canopies toward the audience masked the back-of-house production elements, such as the work deck and VIP area, while maximizing visibility of video and performance content for both the floor and upper levels," says Beese. "The 2010 stage was an endoskeleton structure, consisting of two fluid volumes utilizing video mapping and large-scale projections to create one uniform sculpture. This stage sculpture sat atop a glossed black surface, with two additional side catwalks, providing the ability to move far left and right directly in front of two curved Barco MiSTRIP screens and alongside the

lower projection surface of the stage. We also created two areas within the canopied projection area that were masked out into an organic shape that could switch from video to IMAG content. This was targeted towards the audience in the upper levels of the Superdome, allowing special performance moments to be seen on these rooftop canopies."

In addition, a Pixled F40 30' x 50'

upstage screen functioned as a backdrop and two curved Barco MiSTRIP walls were used to frame the performance area. Two Hibino Chromatek 6mm black 15' by 215' screens were built in and masked out into the spandex surface at stage left and right, in order to provide IMAG. A third 15' x 25' IMAG screen, located upstage center and made of Pixled F7 video display panels, also functioned as a



Photo: Heather Bird Gleichrist

single curtain for set changes. Images were delivered to the set via three PRG Mbox EXtreme media servers, linked to a MA Lighting grandMA console, which controlled the lighting.

"This was the 40th anniversary of *Essence Magazine*, so we wanted to take it over the top, but with organic elements," says Steven Rehage, Besse's partner in RE:BE Design, and also head of Rehage Entertainment, the production company behind the event. As a result, adds Beese, "We decided on two effects for the large-scale stage surface and the LED screens. One was a kind of tiling effect, with multiple covers from *Essence's* history layered all over the surface of the set. In addition, we used a zoom-in-and-out effect, in which the covers almost seemed to fly out at the audience. These were used during the set changes and were very well-received; they highlighted the history of the magazine.

The festival's lighting, designed by John Clark, made use of 18 Martin Professional MAC 700 Wash units, 24 Mac 2000 Wash units, 16 Philips Vari*Lite VL3500 Wash units, six ACL bars, four 8-light Moles, eight Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlaze 72s, 12 Martin Atomic 3000 strobes, six Coemar Panoramas, 28 High End Systems Studio Beams, and 12 High End xSpots.

In addition, says Rehage, "We designed Janet Jackson's only show of the year." To give the star an appropriately exciting entrance, the team came up with what Beese calls "a modern Pepper's ghost effect." "She appeared behind a piece of foil," says Rehage, who notes that the material was invisible to the audience. "A projector was aimed at a mirror, which bounced the image up onto the foil." This approach allowed for Jackson to appear with life-size projected images of herself. "She sang the first verse of 'Pleasure Principle,' and then—thanks to the projection—there were two Janet Jacksons, and then three," says Rehage. Beese adds, "We had three days of rehearsal with her; she choreo-

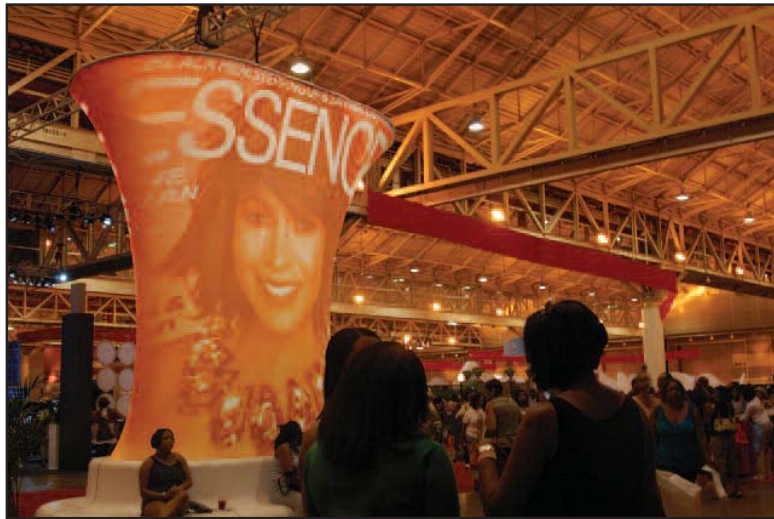


Photo: Heather Bird Glöckner

graphed it so that she and the hologram versions of her moved did the same steps." "And," says Rehage, "she staged the dance so the images of Janet Jackson on the left and right faced inward, and the real Janet interacted with them.

"It was the first time that Janet Jackson has done a one-off of this magnitude," adds Rehage. "We worked with Vince Foster"—Jackson's regular designer—"and it was a great collaboration," says Beese. "We went through all her material prior to setting up at the Superdome"—the setting of the music festival—"to create customized solutions for the projection. The video mapping was very difficult, because of the organic shape of the stage. We did a montage of portions of her videos, focusing on sequences showing off her dance moves. We told Janet we'd like to map the set with 21 number-one songs, to take the audience back to when they first heard them." He notes that the material reached back to her the earliest days of her career, when she appeared in the hit '70s situation comedy *Good Times*. "We also had some moments of her and her brothers, as well; this was all built into the show to allow costume changes, when she would return to focus on another theme." In one of the most striking effects, he says, "We took her photo, and, using After Effects, reduced it to particles

that appeared all over the surface." Last year's *Essence Festival*, which took place just after the death of Michael Jackson, featured a last-minute tribute to the King of Pop. By featuring Janet Jackson this year, the festival had a feeling of coming full circle.

Of course, Beese also concentrated on other aspects of the event, creating a design throughline that linked the backstage area to the stage and the music festival to the lifestyle exhibition across the street at Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. "There was a discussion about creating an extended VIP area backstage, which would allow for someone sitting there to also get a view of the stage just as the audience sees it," says Beese. "To achieve that, we designed an extended volume that opened up, almost like an eyelid. VIP guests could walk out there and see the performance from a raised platform. To make it more organic, we designed rounded furniture pieces." The orange floor was broken up with curving red lines, which added to that sinuous visual theme. "We also added a huge Barco projection screen for this area, similar to the one we had on stage."

The VIP area was more important that it might sound at first, adds Rehage: "It's such a high-profile event, with so many dignitaries—but it's important to keep the stage deck

clear. It's a real challenge not to have your VIPs standing on the stage line. You're trying to flip each set in 15-20 minutes. It's imperative that the VIP area be enticing enough to keep people there and out of the line of work."

As before, Beese used a red-ribbon motif to link the various exhibits in the Morial Center. This year, however, to highlight the 40th-anniversary theme, he also implemented a series of ellipsoidal-shaped spandex columns with a seating vignette surrounding it for visitors to rest on, which were projected covers from the magazine's long history, using eight Sanyo 12K LCD projectors supplied by See Hear Productions Inc. As Rehage notes about this and other aspects of the event, "We took modern technology and storyboarded 40 years of the magazine."

The festival's lighting gear was supplied by Premier Global Productions, of Nashville; the company also provided two roof structures and 500' of supporting 20" box truss. Rigging was



under the supervision of Steve Brown, of Rhino Staging, based in Rhin, Louisiana. Video gear was supplied by XL Video. Also involved were Matt Webb (media server programmer), Dana Hunt (content programmer), Seyavash Zohoori (3D Content), Emanuel Zueger (software operator, Wings Vioso system,; Gary Madura (LED engineer), Trace Dero and Prince Rilahun (LED technicians), and

Danny Whetstone (projection).

There's no rest for Beese and Rehage. Now that the Essence Festival is over for the year, they're onto the Voodoo Music Experience—another New Orleans tradition—which runs the last weekend in October. This year's lineup includes Muse, Ozzy Osbourne, MGMT, Drake, and a panoply of local talent, including the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. 📶

Photo: Heather Bird Gilchrist

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