



ESSENCE of PURPOSE

Designing the 15th
Anniversary Of
The Essence Music
Festival

BY STEFAN BEESE



PHOTO JESSICA TRUJILLO

» Barco MiTriX and MiPix units, Element Labs Versa Tubes, and Pixled F-30 screens comprised the video elements on stage.



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, where 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 had 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 and preferred look, such as digital rain backdrop for Ne-Yo and 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 year was about revamping the design from 2008, basing the line drawings and video elements on the components of last year, and updating it with large-scale, Barco MiTriX curved LED walls. The walls would make the stage be more readable as one cohesive sculpture, as opposed to a collection of single video components arrangement. What was most important was 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 and connection of the different elements on stage, to avoid free floating screens by framing and connecting the screens, which created a winged effect, curving toward upstage, and then creating a header

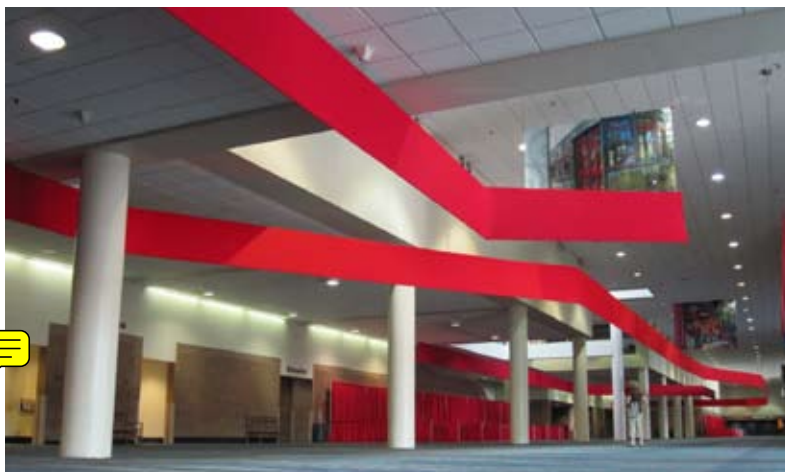


PHOTO BY XXXX

» Fabric mimicking ribbon ran throughout public areas of the convention center, echoing the lines of the video elements on stage.

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STEFAN BEESE

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 MiPix panels; the curved MiPix lines were then docked onto MiTriX 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 different appearances that required separate control created challenges, including programming the content to travel through the Versa Tubes continuously, with frequent line shifts and pulses, with the additional element of creating a digital texture of fill in between these lines on the MiTriX 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 technicians. 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. The main focus was to execute the video elements and line drawing look, controlled by Event Producers and us. Lighting for TV One, the station that broadcast the first night live, added the challenge of avoiding interference with the set lighting, designed for the broadcast by Ray Ziegler, and with the media server content, manned by Dan Valcich of Visibility Media.

Additionally, there were four to five acts

nightly, 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. Everyone was receptive to preserving the consistency throughout, making it such an enjoyable environment in which to work.

Nine days prior to the event, we heard the tragic news that Michael Jackson passed away. I immediately spoke to Rehage, and while we wanted to keep the festival focused on New Orleans, we needed to create a tribute to Jackson. During the normal set changes, a center Hibino Chromatek 6mm screen descended and created a semi-translucent look from the audience perspective, then raised again as the next performance began. This element



DESIGN

Stefan Beese, Production Designer
(RE:BE Design)

Rash Zohoori, 3D Modeling

Ray Ziegler, Lighting Design

VENDORS

Event Producers, Video

XL Video, Video

Visibility Media, Video

Premier Global Production

Company, Lighting

Rhino Louisiana, LLC, Rigging

Mardi Gras Productions Inc.,
Soft Goods/VIP Lounge

PHOTO BY LAINA KEPLAY

» The video elements in Stefan Tasse's production design had to work well with Ray Ziegler's television lighting since the concert segments were broadcast live by TV One.

VIDEO GEAR

1,975 Barco MiTriX Panel
 36 Barco TopMix Panel
 (Comprising MiPix Modules)
 2 Barco SLite 10 XP Screen
 (112 Modules)
 312 Element Labs Versa Tube
 (1m, 2m, and 5m)
 1 Pixled F-30 Screen (180 Modules)
 1 Hibino Chromatek 6mm Screen
 (88 Modules)
 1 Barco High End Systems Wholehog
 3 Console
 1 Barco High End Systems Hog3PC
 Console (Backup)
 7 SAMSC Catalyst PM v4 Media Server
 1 Content Management

3 Playback To Creative LED screens
 3 Backup To LED screens

LIGHTING GEAR

2 MA Lighting grandMA 2 Console
 30 Martin Professional MAC
 2000 Profile
 30 Martin Professional MAC
 2000 Wash
 32 Barco/High End Systems
 x.Spot Extreme
 4 Novalight High Ground
 6 Coemar Panorama Cyc
 60' MR16 Zip Strip
 20 PAR64 1,000W
 7 Mole Richardson Mole Fay 8-Light

6 ETC Source Four Ellipsoidal 19°
 2 ETC Sensor+ 48-Way Dimmer Rack
 2 Motion Labs 60-Way 208V Distro
 1 ProPower 48-Way 208V Distro
 30 1-Ton Hoist
 25 8' x 30" x 31" Black Aluminum
 Moving Light Truss
 12 8' x 20" x 20" Black
 Aluminum Truss

VIDEO CREW

Dan Valcich, Media Server
 Programmer
Dustin McCollum, Graphic Artist

XL VIDEO CREW

Gary Madura, LED Engineer
Steve Otten, LED Technician
Prince Tilahun, LED Technician
Luke Pilato, LED Technician
David Chapman, LED Technician

LIGHTING CREW

John Clarke
 Ron Fietmaster
 Rob Chase
 Lance Dennis
 John Bailey
 Matt Gassey

RIGGING

Steve Brown, Rhino Staging

was used for the Jackson tribute. The New Orleans Jazz Band entered the stage playing a funeral-like march, accompanied by all stage lines going white—a pure white line look—and at the end, all the lines were simultaneously faded and sucked into the center, as the screen went up featuring highlight footage of Jackson. The audience focused on the large center screen that became the backdrop for the emcee, so the attention was paid to the foreground, while set changes occurred in the background behind the screen.

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 MiTriX 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 MiTriX 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 in

the day to the evening performances and recognize the same angles throughout.

The same went for the VIP area—to have that set 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 beams of the Versa Tubes.

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