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By: David Barbour

Creating a design that blurs the lines between scenery and projections

The Essence Music Festival, held in New Orleans, got a major makeover in this, its 15th year. As produced by Essence Communications, the owner of *Essence Magazine*, it combines top-of-the-line music acts with seminars and presentations of interest to the African-American community. This year's festival, held at the beginning of July, had a starry lineup that included Beyoncé, John Legend, Ne-Yo, Maxwell, Robin Thicke, and Al Green, mingling with local names like the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, Little Freddie King, and the Blind Boys of Alabama. In addition, attendees could take part in seminars featuring Bill Cosby; Omarosa, the former contestant on *The Apprentice*; the Rev. Al Sharpton; the radio personality Tom Joyner; and New Orleans' former mayor Marc Morial. In addition, a trib-

ute to T.D. Jakes, pastor of the megachurch The Potter's House, featured CeCe Winans and Kirk Franklin, among others. The musical program takes place in the New Orleans Superdome; the other events are held in the New Orleans Convention Center.

This is the second year of the festival's new regime. Last year, Essence Communications contacted Rehage Entertainment, which has offices in New York and New Orleans, to produce the event. Stephen Rehage, of Rehage Entertainment, brought in the production designer Stefan Beese to work on the event. (Many of these events are recounted in the profile of Beese, which ran in the March '09 issue.)

In a piece published just before this year's festival, Keith Spera, a music critic for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*,

wrote, "Since its 1995 inception as a celebration of *Essence Magazine's* 25th anniversary, Essence Fest has evolved into the world's premier showcase of urban contemporary music. Memorable moments abound. The well-dressed, discriminating audience delivers standing ovations or silence based on the quality of each act."

Spera added that, last year, "Stephen Rehage's team gave the main Essence stage a makeover, ditching the standard curtain in favor of a giant video screen. Look for additional flash this weekend courtesy of stage designer Stefan Beese."

And additional flash is exactly what Beese provided, with a set design that included even more video than last year, along with embedded strips of light that gave the design an entirely new feeling. These days, it is commonplace for a concert set to feature many video components. Beese raised the ante by creating a set that was almost entirely composed of LED products. The result was a distinctive looking creation; comparisons have been made to a computer chip or a circuit board. "In pre-production, a lot of people were referring to it as the *Tron* look," says Beese, referring to the 1982 Disney cult film, with its pioneering use of computer graphics.

The design was realized in collaboration with Event Producers, using a variety of gear. Placed upstage was a backdrop made of 30mm Spider LED, a lightweight system by PIXLED featuring panels that were 96 x 96cm.

A Hibino Chromatek screen was raised and lowered to provide IMAG above the stage. It could be lowered to stage level, or raised to a header position over the proscenium. At left and right of the stage were towers of curved LED panels, consisting of Barco MiTRIX modules. Placed further out at right and left were Barco S-Lite screens, used for IMAG. Framing the design, and embedded in it, were dozens of horizontal and vertical lines made up of Barco MiTRIX and Element Labs Versa TUBE LED strips.

"The main goal was to combine the

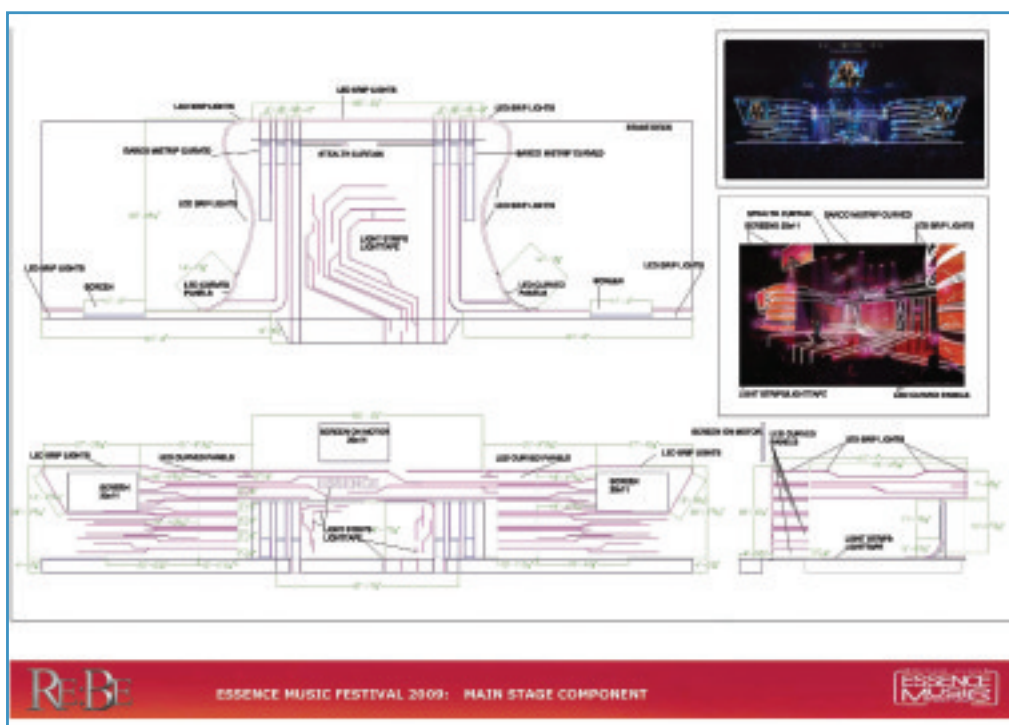


Image: Courtesy of Stefan Beese



Above right: The music festival's set. Above left: A view of the VIP area, which extended the set's design. Opposite page: A set drawing showing the placement of various LED products. Left: The red-ribbon motif in the convention center.

screens at the right and left of the stage, and to tie it all together into one sculpture," says the designer. "I wanted to work with last year's design, but I felt that the curved MiTriX panels were too isolated; basically, they were hanging free. With the LED lines, I was able to make it all into one structure; the lines made for a smaller element that we could work with. The nice thing about it is it reminds people of a circuit board. This is the age of technology, and, for the 15th anniversary, I wanted to remind people of how fast everything is moving."

The bulk of the LED lines were created using Barco MiSTRIP; however, Beese says that, in the upstage header position, he supplemented them with Element Labs Versa TUBE, and, as the upstage-downstage lines curved onto the stage lip, they became Barco's MiTriX. One reason for the switch in elements had to do with the products' varying weights. "The MiTriX was lightweight and helped with the rigging. We originally planned on doing everything with Versa Tubes, but the framework needed for rigging was too heavy."

Aside from the IMAG, the content seen on the various LED panels was largely abstract shapes and colors. However, the upstage Chromatek screen came in handy when, at the last minute, it became necessary to plan a tribute to the late Michael Jackson. "He died nine days before the show," says Rehage. "Our instinct was to do something, but our fear was, after nine days of coverage, it might seem stale. If we did something, would it seem too much or too little—or would people be offended if we did nothing at all?"

In the end, he says, "We decided to do a traditional New Orleans jazz funeral march. Twelve musicians walked to center stage, took their hats off, and bowed to the screen. We ran a four-minute tribute to him, and then they walked off. All non-IMAG content was provided by seven Catalyst V4 media servers, controlled by a High End Systems Wholehog III console, with a Hog3PC console for backup.

Overall, the combination of LED elements in Beese's design allowed him to create many lighting-like effects—including color and brightness chases. At the same time, Steven "Creech" Anderson, who was in charge of the lighting, worked with a rig that included 30 Martin MAC 2000 Profiles, 30 Mac 2000 Wash

units, 32 High End Systems x.Spot Xtremes, four Nova Lites, six Panoramas, 60' of MR16 zip strips, twenty 1,000W PAR 64s, seven 8-light Molefays, and six ETC 19° Source Four Lekos. Control was provided by a pair of MA Lighting grandMA 2 consoles, with power provided by two ETC dimmers, two Motion Labs 208V distros, and one TMB ProPower distro. Lighting gear was supplied by Premier Global, of Nashville. XL Video supplied the video gear.

Also this year, Beese was able to more fully implement his notion of a total design concept for the event. As he did at the Voodoo Music Experience, another big New Orleans music festival produced by Rehage Entertainment, he designed a sleek VIP area. Located behind the stage, it also made use of the LED-strip/computer-chip idea, with strips embedded in the floor. Then, to link the music festival with the other events at the convention center, he made use of a red ribbon ceiling treatment. "It was a very simple idea," he says.

Overall, Beese's work made a provocative case for taking a more holistic approach to the design of music festivals. As we go to press, the plan is to develop these ideas further at Voodoo Music Experience. 🎧