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Panic! At the Disco Finds Inspiration in Circus Atmosphere

Written by Steve Jennings (Photos and text)
February 15, 2007



They weren't just clowning around when the band Panic! At the Disco said they wanted a circus atmosphere for their then-upcoming tour.

"When I was first contacted by the band, we discussed the vaudeville/burlesque theme," said Robb Jibson, lighting designer/director. "Carrying that into a 'Moulin Rouge' look for the summer, we decided to apply those themes and colors to a really exaggerated carnival environment for the fall."

The band was aware of a set built by Tait Towers and Atomic Design, and they thought it would be appropriate for their tour. But when they inquired about renting it, they found that, besides having the wrong colors, it had "a few large burn holes."

In came production manager David "51" Norman, and the two started to look for a scenic vendor to help design and build a new set. Jibson had previously worked with Soren West of Atomic Design on another project, and he "remembered the great experience I had with him." So the two got together and started tossing ideas back and forth. West, in turn, brought in Atomic Design colleague Mike Rhoads, and they started producing renderings and designing "the more intricate details" of the set pieces.

"Robb came to us looking to present the band with a concept sketch of the circus canopy/tent idea," said Rhoads. "Since the band had admired Justin Collie's design of Mötley Crüe's circus tent set and was looking for a similar treatment, Robb initially turned to Tait Towers, as they had built the Crüe tour. Then Tait referred him to us, as we had patterned, built and painted the canopy and tent goods."

Rhoads, who has a background in theatre, was a scenic artist with Atomic Design for five years before moving into the "design dungeon." His background and experience paid off handsomely on this project. "Researching for the set was fun," he said. "I came across a book of old circus and fairground images and of course the Internet is a great source for design inspiration. For example, I found great images of antique carousel horses to use for the drum riser/carousel piece. Because the set is fairly minimalist (a cello riser, a drum riser and a keyboard riser), each piece had to concisely convey the spirit of the show so the florid ornamentation on the cello riser 'elephant stand,' the gilded tracery on the keyboard 'lion cage' and the extreme aging and distressing of the striped canopy all allude to the idea of a once-upon-a-time circus tent."

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Who You Gonna Call?



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extreme aging and distressing of the striped canopy all allude to the idea of a once-extravagant circus gone to seed. Even the close-down curtain became a cross between an old burlesque theatre curtain and a sideshow tent, hinting that something titillating was going to happen behind it."

Conway Allison, whom Rhoads calls "Atomic designer and Vectorworks master bar none," engineered and patterned the canopy. Atomic's softgoods department built a one-inch scale model "to fine-tune the patterns before producing the real thing."

"Adam Davis, Mike Long and Avery White of Tait Towers were extremely helpful in the design, engineering and building of the three instrument risers and integrating them to their decks," said Rhoads. The rest of the softgoods were produced by I. Weiss.

But the biggest challenge of the scenic design and fabrication was the creation of a Victorian audience backdrop. A week before they were to ship the final product, Rhoads found out that the artist who was originally supposed to create the backdrop couldn't meet the deadline.

"The band understandably did not want to start their tour without such a major piece," said Rhoads. "We decided to go the digital printing route, but our print house needed the artwork in 48 hours to guarantee a timely delivery. With only hours before I had to board a plane for a trade show in Atlanta, I scanned every bit of Victorian clip art of male and female figures I could get my hands on. At the airport I cut, pasted and Photoshopped the scans, building a composition based on the band's requests. That night I sent out a black and white proof for the band's approval and then handed the artwork off to Joanna Seedorf. She took the black and white file and in Photoshop hand colored each figure. We sent that to the band, made some adjustments, tweaked the image with filters to give it a more painterly feel and sent it off to a large-format print house."

In the meantime, Atomic, artist Tim Nies, Tom McPhillips and Rhoads put the finishing touches on the band risers. When the backdrop came back, they hemmed it before turning it around for pre-production. "In real time," said Rhoads, "the artwork was done in about 12 hours. The drop came to Atomic for finishing and was overnighted to Florida for the first day of load-in." It turned out to be one of the scenic elements Rhoads was most proud of.

For the lighting, Jibson's design started with a muted color palette from which he rarely strayed. "When we did stray," he said, "it provided for a great contrast." He also identified and emphasized the direction of the key light.

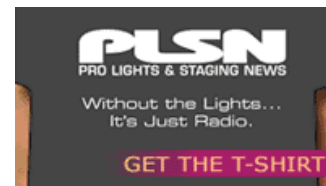
"On this project, it's really about keeping the performers and action lit," said Jibson. "Having the key light systems covering the action, I was able to really dedicate the effects systems to different looks in each song. I think that really made the show look different."

What was not so different about this show was Jibson's choice of lighting. He stuck by his favorites, the Vari*Lite VL3000 Spot and VL2500 Wash. "The VL2500 Wash is a no-brainer: extensive optics, that series 300 color wheel and color mixing. I also love the glass dimmer wheel. In my mind the VL3000 Spot has the best feature set, and the stock gobos are very workable," Jibson said.

But he also tried out a new favorite, the Martin MAC 700 Spot. "We chose the MAC 700s over VL2500 Profiles and MAC 2000 with custom gobos because of budgetary issues. Upstaging Senior Account Executive John Bahnick asked me if I was open to it, and I said that I won't take lights that I've never used before, so we set up a shootout at Upstaging. Looking at it side-by-side with the 2K, it's got all the punch, has a few more features and is priced right."

He also used two other fixtures for the first time: the High End Systems Studio Command 1200 and the Zap Technologies BigLite. "I had used tungsten so much over the summer that I wanted to get the punch from an arc source and expand that color range," Jibson said. "The Studio Command 1200 emits light with all three dichroics dialed in. The lamp strobe is a useful feature that I used in a song to make the entire song look like it was on film. It has a nice and punchy tight beam, and though it could stand to zoom a bit larger to be a really good all around light, I was able to place it correctly to let the beam develop for coverage.

"Originally I had spec'd Syncrolite SX3Ks. Upstaging has made a large investment in BigLites, and it really helps your budget. With Syncro*Lites you need an extra guy out to tech them, but since the Big Lites come from Upstaging, their techs are able to work on them. I liked the three-gel string system in them and was able to change my default values so you could get pretty quick color bumps for a fixture that size. With that said, it's a really, well, big light."



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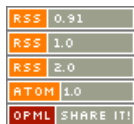
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One of the greatest challenges for any production is getting time for pre-production. For Jibson, it was no different. Or was it?

"I actually had quite a bit of time on pre-production," he said. "Production manager 51 had been telling me about Upstaging's programming facility because of the awesome space they have. Basically, when they prep their systems, they fly them complete, every cable, every detail, to trim. It's not that much more difficult for them to schedule programming time with the system right there in their prep space."

At first, Jibson was skeptical. "I have been using ESP Vision since its inception, and I am a big backer of that tool. It gives you such an advantage to have all your rough cueing done before production rehearsals. I thought that the chaotic shop environment would not be very productive with all the day-to-day distractions, but I was able to get the entire show roughed in after two days and was able to go back and clean up transitions and timing for the last two days. So it worked out great.

"For the past couple of years I have been using VLPS/Fourth Phase/PRG because of their large stock of Vari*Lite fixtures, excellent service and the ability to provide for my clients across the globe. I had never used Upstaging, even though I am a Chicago guy, but on this project it just made sense. John Bahnick, Chris Johnson and the rest of the 'family' took great care to make sure the transition was smooth. They gave me an outstanding crew in Ron Shilling, Kendra Sandoval, Chris Barclay and Brian Kasten, and they bought some Vari*lites I wanted, as well as others.

"One of the things I really feared was losing access to the PRG color and gobo palettes from the Series 300 stuff. Having access to those saves your client lots of expendable money! Who knew that Apollo could make those little wedges? And for not much cost! Apollo is amazing!"

If Jibson is happy with the tour, then Rhoads is over the moon. "I can't stress enough how agreeable both Robb and Dave Norman were to work with," said Rhoads. "There was flexibility on all sides, and I think there was a real and clear respect among us for how each part fit into the whole, particularly on site during a perilously short two-day load-in and rehearsal. Unfortunately, I did not get to interact much with show director Andrew Logan. Most of his collaboration took place with Robb in the conceptual stages. On site, during load-in, the crew was fantastic. Brian Woodrell (rigging), Ray Amico (SM), and Courtney Whitehead (head carpenter) all made the install go without incident."

You could say there was no panic on Panic! At The Disco.

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