

Deconstructing Lighting for Doobie Brothers 50th Anniversary Tour

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Darkroom Creative, a fusion of imagination, ideas and production design from lighting and visual experts Seth Jackson and Nathan Alves, combined history, nostalgia, and reinvention in a blind pitch for the lighting and production design of the much-acclaimed Doobie Brothers 50th Anniversary tour, which they won.

The tour was originally scheduled for 2020, was halted amid the initial pandemic shutdowns, and is now back on the road across North America.

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The lighting design includes 92 x Robe Spikie moving lights which play a vital role in shaping the show's unique aesthetic, which takes inspiration from a collage of classic stage lighting design gems emanating from the 1970s and 1980s ... when the industry we know today was in its infancy.

Stylistically reminiscent of that era, there are no cameras or IMAG video elements. However, unlike then, the lighting rig encapsulating the foot-tapping Doobie Brothers' music and harmonies that spanned five glorious decades ... is completely LED.

Seth and Nate are - by their own description - "walking encyclopedias" on the history of concert touring lighting, so they enthusiastically developed this concept, noting that any eagle-eyed lighting nerds will spot essences of Marc Brickman, Steve Cohen, Peter Morse, Jeff Ravitz, Marilyn Lowey, Alan Owen, Howard Ungerleider and so many more of those early-stage lighting design influencers in this show.

"We wanted to pay homage to all that amazing history with a design reflecting the era of the band, and without it feeling dated" stated Seth.

Stealthily woven into the show's lighting cueing - overseen on the road by lighting director Steve Owens, himself legendary and a long-term Doobie Brothers LD - are a pack of ground-breaking "hat tips and homages" to those 'greats' of our own industry from that pioneering era.



For Seth it was achieving an overall tungsten look and effect, rather than using any specific light sources, that was important, and especially when grouping fixtures together in fours and sixes as was standard 'back in the day' when PAR cans were packaged in 4 or 6-lamp bars for touring.

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He and Nathan are huge tungsten effect fans and love those big post blackout afterglow “sighs” from the lighting rig. Like it’s a piece of live art.

As the “PAR can vibe” idea developed, they started looking for a small format light that was punchy enough and would work within the budget.

Enter the Robe Spikies in this leading role!

“Spikie really did everything we needed with a few gags up its sleeve to make for some interesting and special moments” elucidated Nathan, who has been talking up Spikies for some years. “For a little light they pack a mighty amount of usefulness” so he suggested Spikie as a perfect candidate for the large-scale PAR can emulation that they wanted to fulfil this design.

For Seth, the biggest issue was that the light had to be bright enough, have sufficient features and be able to travel side by side in the truss sections.

“The versatility of the Spikie allowed us to do everything we needed! They can be PAR washes, tight beam graphics, they can be air effects ... even wide zoom audience washes! They are the predominant fixture on the rig, and we have utilized and worked through all of their applications” he enthused.

The fixtures – all supplied by lighting vendor Solotech – are configured to resemble a 1970s style PAR can rig, clumped together in fours and sixes to give the retro pre-rigged truss section appearance, but in a very organized way. This was orchestrated by crew chief Dave Carr who imagineered an ingenious pipe assembly allowing the fixtures to hang in exactly the way Seth and Nathan envisioned.

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“The guy is a genius” stated Nathan, “... AND he wears really cool T-shirts!”

When it came to useful Spikie features, Seth found that the zoom invaluable. It is used constantly in the show and enables “multiple ‘appearances’ to be extracted instantly from the fixtures”. They have also maximized the Spikie’s two versatile air effects, bringing another layer of available lighting treatments to the party.

For Nathan, as a creative director / designer, it is the sheer amount of Spikie punch in a fast, precise, and reliable form – that makes it such a winner.

Design challenges on the tour have included managing haze and smoke! The band are not keen on clouds of atmosphere, and certainly not on large accumulations of haze wafting across the stage and given the difficulty in avoiding this on outdoor shows, it has determined the positioning of all the lighting looks and scenes right from the off.

All the air graphics, beam focuses, etc., are fixed so if the smoke is there, great, and if it’s not ... then they still have a succession of dynamic looks, transitions and accents and a visually interesting show.

In crafting a masterpiece visual showcase to help celebrate the Doobie Brothers’ musical achievements, they have enjoyed the consummate professionalism of the band and the fantastic support from both Solotech and the Doobie Brothers’ own production team, all of which has ensured that everything keeps running smoothly.

Projected video – also part of the Darkroom Creative design concept – is used as a scenic enhancement, with landmark album cover graphics and other archival artwork reimagined as new visual animations and projected onto rows of constructivist scenic panels across the stage.

The tour is currently scheduled to run through October 2021.

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Backstory: Seth & Nate's inspiration from the stars.

For Seth, these iconic lighting designers of the 1970's and 1980s - even before the term was properly coined - invented this industry we have today.

The names above were "the second tier of concert designers and the first to build an industry, leading it through a revolutionary period" he states with passion. "What took decades in the theatre, they achieved in about 15 years".

Most of them started in the early 70s and dealt with numerous idiosyncrasies with the kit, like hydraulic lifts that lost air during the shows to the first 'double hung' truss concepts to the 'stopwatch' automation of the pioneering moving light systems to the blockbuster large scale arena shows and PAR can rigs of the 1980s and 1990s circa AC/DC, Queen, Van Halen, etc. ... "That's where I learned it all - as it was created!"

He and Nathan are indebted to this cast of characters.

Nathan spent several years working with Marc Brickman (famous for his lighting artistry for Pink

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Floyd), and Seth worked with Steve Cohen (Billy Joel's LD for 40+ years) for many years, and all of them have been friends for a long time.

Nathan relates, "Marc Brickman always reminds me (and threatens to share) the "I want to be you / work with you" letters that he mailed back then! "Jeff Ravitz included me whenever possible, and Marilyn Lowey, Peter Morse, and Steve Cohen all responded. Brickman even phoned me from London one time, which to a starry-eyed Midwestern teenager ... was just too cool!"

Steve Cohen allowed a young Seth to sit beside him through the programming process. "All of these incredible people went out of their way for us" says Seth, "and that's why developing this Doobie Brothers 50th anniversary show based on how much they inspired us was so much fun. I hope we are also mindful of that as we start to get those same contact requests from the next generation in line!"

Nathan still has the first drawings he sent Marc Brickman years ago. "The fact that he humored me and was gracious enough to call my scribbles 'designs' is something I can only smile about as I remember!"

He recalls sitting behind countless designers fascinated that they could get to do this job for a living and remembers the first time he heard the phrase 'painting with light and smoke'. "I owe my career one thousand percent to all the creatives who let me tag a long and listen to bad stories, and most importantly, were willing to give a scrappy kid a crack at it!"

Like Seth, Nathan is "forever grateful" to the names on that list. "Some for the leg up they gave me personally, and all for the motivation they fueled along the way. We can only hope to be there for the next set of creatives ... as these legends were for us!"

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Photos: Darkroom Creative