

Interview with International Lighting Designer Michael Ledesma



Growing up in South Africa in the Apartheid era, what wouldn't teenagers have done to attend live international music concerts? But with the boycotts there were few performers visiting the country, and when they did, shows would usually be held two hours away from Johannesburg at Sun City, which then fell under the so called "independent homeland" of Bophuthatswana. Even those shows were sparse.

It's no wonder that today, international artists on tour are being lapped up by the South African audiences where those in the forties and fifties – the forever young – slip into tight jeans, throw caution to the wind and pay up to see the big names they previously only got to hear on vinyl. It was no different when Carlos Santana, one of the world's greatest guitarists, came to South Africa at the end of February to play at full houses in Cape Town and Johannesburg with the full technical supplied by Gearhouse Group.

Santana's team included renowned lighting designer Michael Ledesma, whose distinguished signature has seen him paint stages in vivid colours and hues for the past 25 years. It's no secret that it's a privilege for South African rental companies to meet up with these talented individuals. This was Ledesma's third visit to South Africa, the first being in 1992 for the historic Paul Simon South Africa Tour in which Lighting Unlimited (now Gearhouse), supplied the technical requirements, and his second was in 1997.



While Ledesma has worked with artists such as Gloria Estefan, Shakira, Sting, Toni Braxton, Megadeth, Kenny Loggins, Simon & Garfunkel and Diana Ross, one of his career highlights remains the Paul Simon tour to SA. This marked the lifting of boycotts, the early days of a democracy. "It was awesome," Ledesma reminisces. He will never forget Ofer Lapid who was then owner of Lighting Unlimited and Crew Chief.

Ofer Lapid of Gearhouse shares the sentiment. "It was a privilege to reconnect with someone that I worked with in the past and who was witness to the birth of Lighting Unlimited all that time ago," Lapid commented.

“Gearhouse has come a long way since then and now we are well established in this industry having developed into a much more complete technical solution group. It is a fantastic experience to work with Michael Ledesma both then and now, and he is someone that I greatly respect. I experienced a real flashback to my origins again this year when we saw each other on the Carlos Santana tour.”

We talk to Michael Ledesma



Michael Ledesma

Waiting in the foyer at a hotel at Montecasino, Johannesburg, to interview Ledesma for this article, it was again apparent how things had changed in South Africa with international stars regularly zipping in and out of the country. Looking up, there was Santana – in the flesh – casual, likeable and smiling... it all seemed like a dream. And then, the opportunity to sit down and chat with Ledesma, someone approachable, very likeable and extremely comfortable in his own skin, allowing those he comes into contact with, to be comfortable in theirs.

Ledesma says he is not the typical, international cool guy. “I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I am lucky to still be working,” he said. “I’ve done great touring and worked with great musical acts. Now I am with who I want to be with. I grew up listening to Santana. He is real and true to his art. I’ve been in many situations where I’ve been introduced to an artist and then would wait until they acknowledge me. With Carlos Santana he makes eye contact, he stands up, shakes your hand and says “Welcome to the family.”

Ledesma came on board with Santana at the end of the American summer and was able to get a good grasp of the show while it ran at the House of Blues at Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas before coming to SA and playing at the GrandWest Casino, Cape Town, and FNB Stadium in Johannesburg. “It was good to get familiar with the music, learn the cues and get ideas together. I was happy about that. I love the music.”



On a tight schedule, as was the South African tour, Ledesma reaches a point when he knows there is nothing more he can do with the time allocated to make the show any better or to make the set up go any quicker. That is when he surrenders and puts his confidence in the hands of the technical team, in this case Gearhouse. “And they have been absolutely great. Ofer hasn’t changed. He has the same work ethic, same humanism. It’s so great working with him,” he said. “When Ofer came to LDi, it was a good time. We remembered the good old days, the Paul Simon Concert, the great experience, the music, the whole South African cultural thing. I miss those days. I have a lot of experience and you cannot buy experience. And one of the best experiences for me was in 1992 when the South African politics was still crazy. How can I ever do anything as cool as that? I was there, a technician... I am of that age.”

Ledesma has been independent for the past 25 years, and his established resume has seen him work as LD and scenic designer for all kinds of events, both live acts and corporate shows.



His love for the arts started at a young age. “I kinda wanted to do the actor thing and to get that perspective,” he recalls. “In High School, the school built a new theatre and I was very enthusiastic. I volunteered to work on the shows and ended up lighting my senior play.”

In an era where many technicians or lighting designers did not receive formal training, Ledesma went to university to study theatre and developed a love for saturated colours and layers.

After college, he joined Caesars Palace at Lake Tahoe in 1980 working with various lighting designers and a variety of acts. “I had all that equipment for artists like Frank Sinatra, and, I was able to work in a really good environment as Follow Operator with an annual salary,” he said. One of the toughest shows was being a Follow Operator for David Copperfield, not lighting the strings or giving away the illusions! He also got to rub shoulders with prominent lighting designers of the time.



Although the youngest employee at Caesars, within his first year he became the relief board operator, working on a Kliegl Console – a 96 manual slider with 8 floppy discs. “I learned on that,” he smiles. “I had a working relationship with the owner of Morpheus Lights, John Richardson. One day John brought in a new robot-like light. He showed me the controller, and I said, ‘I know this controller’. This is the smaller version of what we have at Caesars.” The Morpheus system – the original moving light people along with Vari-Lite—was controlled by the Kiegl. Ledesma’s knowledge of the board opened doors for him to work on television shows including the American Bandstand in the mid-1980s.

As for the ‘robot’ lights, people wondered if these fixtures would put them out of work. Little did they know how that this meant the growth of the entertainment industry. “I like the way business is going, moving from par cans to moving lights, but I still use the Lekos all the time.”

Working with layers, Ledesma requires responsive time and quick colour changing, and would rather give up fixtures than be slow. Most of his programming is done on a Hog 3 or Hog 4. “With bigger shows, I have used the grandMA,” he says.

Family & Lifestyle

Ledesma’s career has seen him put in the long hours and be part of the tough tours, but he says he has always tried to maintain family life.



“I have a good quality of life, we live in Lake Tahoe and its beautiful sunshine, clear days, the lake, fresh water. In winter it snows a lot. Its California, it’s clean and it can get super cold,” Ledesma describes. “I enjoy my time at home. I try not to work too much. I have two adult children aged 28 and 32 and I have been married to the

same woman for 38 years. I am so lucky to have her and she has stood by me all these years.

“There are many sporadic, younger hands and older ones who work for a living. But for me it’s a different thing. Everyone wants to be on the A list. I had my day on super scale, but I would rather do something smaller with a quality of life. If you want to be successful, you have to put the time in. During touring that was my time to put in my work. My wife understood. From a young age we always taught the children how to communicate when given the phone. When I would call, they could say, ‘I played ball today.’”

Summer was rock and roll, and corporate events kept him busy from November to May. Every year he had five large projects and this allowed him to stay at home in the Winter. He has taken his daughter on tour as his production assistant, or as she referred to it, his “personal slave”. Now she is grown up, has become a teacher and has a little guy of her own. “My son went to music school and was a drummer. We encouraged him and it kept him busy. He didn’t want to be a teacher or a starving musician. He is now a drum technician. Over the last two to three years, he has done 100 shows and I’m proud of him. With both kids, I couldn’t have asked for more.”



Ledesma is constant, he is who he is, and an easy going individual you would want to get to know. “You can have a life and do this. You can be a respectable person. I’m not divided by my work. When I go home I’m not rock and roll. Another big deal in our business is the relationships and leading by example. I think the younger guys don’t have a lot of that. I had a really good mentor, Tim Ison at Caesars. I was a young guy out of college. He used to say, “You settle down and please know I have five senior guys who can do this! He taught me colour and definition.”

He ends, “We are lucky to be in this business. We are doing something that we love. Ofer is a good example. He makes out that he hates every minute... but he actually thrives on it.”

