

Jackson's Magic

Julian Williams gets L+SI the background on the Michael Jackson tour - a major logistics exercise that involves a travelling crew of 55 and an on-site crew of 40.

In a theatre it would be a stunning family show. And Michael Jackson's show is pure theatre - complete with costume changes, choreography and illusionary tricks.

Rivited by watching Michael Jackson in person amidst the colour spectacle on stage, and watching his every move on the giant video screen alongside, some 200 feet away, one questions why much of the total potential effect of a show with so much entertainment in it has also to be missed because of the sheer size of the audience demanding to be accommodated in such a vast stadium.

On their return to the States at Christmas last year, their historic Victory tour now a couple of years old, the Jackson camp mounted a completely new show for the rest of the first world tour - the new 'Bad' tour.

An unusual peculiarity of this tour, which is mounted in football grounds, stadiums and parks, and which is covering most of Europe, is that some of the visual animated lighting effects are restricted due to the length of time it takes for the sun to go down. The lights may not get their chance (playing in open white, no-colour) until over halfway through the performance. (While playing Gothenburg in Sweden the sun didn't even go down! . . . Not to mention the fact that there is a curfew placed on Wembley for a 10.30pm finale.)

The current tour means a commitment to a year-and-a-half on the road for all involved, giving the crew about 6-8 weeks break in a year. It is an unusual length of time, but Michael Jackson has a strong commitment to his work, and tends to want to tour more than most other artists. I spoke to Nocturne Productions crew chief Steve Hamelin on the centre of the stage at Wembley Stadium while he was directing the rigging of the show at the start of the British tour in July.

Detailing the crew for the show, Steve, who has worked on Kenny Rogers and Bruce Springsteen world tours, said the lighting consists of 1 board operator and assistant, 12 follow spot operators, 1 fog and motor controller on stage, 2 technicians troubleshooting on the backline and 3 Vari-Lite technicians - all part of a total 55 travelling crew. There are also 8 sound technicians and 10 band crew as there is sophisticated band gear in use, including 2 Synclaviers (requiring a totally self-contained studio environment mounted on stage right in the wings with its own sound engineers.) There are also 6 carpenters. Additionally, 40 crew members are taken on site at each venue for the get-in, not forgetting the pre-rig crew!

As Steve guided me around the rig, discussing the background to what each effect does, he started out with the 400 ACL riser panels, which are mounted in rows along the audience side of the mini Par floats and which act as 'blinders' at the start of the show, rising up to 6 feet.

Complementing the large light rig with the Allen Branton designed lighting scheme are the new Vari-Lite VL2 and VL3 units, together with their newly designed console, which has faster setting times and a facility for standardised cue set-ups, for updating revised positions where slight alteration of a position



Michael Jackson - an electric performer.

is required. Senior Vari-Lite consultant Jim Waits, who travels with the show and operates the system, explained the VL3 units which are like a Par lamp, and used as a 'wash' light with an incandescent lamp. The VL2's are more like a spot, with an iris and soft and hard focus, and with an arc lamp. "There are 24 VL3 units and 46 VL2 units in the rig, 50 of these are in the 'air', with 40 of them on the 5th electric truss and 20 units are on the stage floor," explained Steve.

Apart from the pyrotechnics, the show has some unique effects in it, with some of the more conventional slower styles of theatrical production blended with modern 'pace'. Michael Jackson appears to be the main driving force behind these effects, as he paces his show from beginning to end, allowing for

some spontaneity and also fast changes. He spends a lot of time at the rehearsal stage in refining every cue, said Steve. He knows what he wants, working more alongside the technicians than most other artistes. He listens to their ideas, and will even adapt his own choreography to incorporate them.

There are a series of 6 rising panel blades mounted in the depth of the stage floor to form a configuration of back projected light for a particular cameo effect. At the back of the set there are giant louvers to mask off the background, creating an interchangeable backdrop.

Even the conventional mirror ball is suspended and it is complemented by a giant mirror-wheel that flips up out of a box in front of the floats and is 'hit' by the FOH follow spots, creating a glorified mirror ball.

A big fog is created by Rosco's Fog machines, from the back rail behind the band, with a further two machines downstage in the wings, enabling the whole area to be filled in spite of the huge downstage stage proscenium opening. These machines are generating smoke continuously throughout the show, with a specially designed 'density' sensor control system allowing for wind changes at dusk.

A clever piece of theatre trickery is used when Jackson disappears while being suspended in a shroud, and immediately reappears, costume changed, down stage left on a pivoted platform (with a heavy duty fog unit under, blasting up through a 3ft diameter wind machine illuminated from underneath by Par lamps) which come up out of the stage like the jib of a crane with Michael standing on it. He is then swung out almost 90° and suspended above the audience before dropping back into the stage floor again.

Steve went on to explain the rig and said that there are ACL's and Lekos used as specials on the band. There are about 100 scroll-type colour changers, which are custom designed and integrally mounted with the spotlight



Fit-up in progress at Wembley Stadium.

Photo: Bob George

yoke, avoiding the necessity of front mounting on to the spotlights after the truss is assembled.

Two 2Kw Zenon lamps on the 1st electrics truss are used as specials for one effect, creating a narrow 4ft beam on the stage. Upstage of this there is specially made vertically mounted 4Kw Zenon on an automated trolley track which traverses the stage following Michael's 'Moonwalking' in his famous Billie Jean routine, creating a 12ft circular beam which track with him.

For follow-spots work there are 12 Strong Zenon Follow Spots which include 1600W stage follow spots. Two are used as personal backspots in trolley chairs which are operator controlled and traverse independently from each side to centre stage, and 2 on each side of the stage in the perch positions. Two rows of 3 2k Super Troupers are mounted above the front control booth, almost 180 feet from the stage. An interesting feature in use with this equipment is a new LCD dowser (Liquid Crystal) which shades itself darker or will lighten up, allowing an operator to remotely control the speed of it.

Between the 1st and the 2nd Electrics Truss projection screens are lowered, and back projection used on Michael Jackson and two dancers in a silhouetted dance routine. As a backdrop, there is a complete wall of about 2000 mini-Par lamps, which creates some graphic displays in the 'Bad' number, being operated locally from up-stage right with a PC computer.

All the show gear travels in 12 trucks (3 for lighting, 3 for sound, 3 for scenery, 2 for band gear and 1 for ancillary equipment) in specially designed case units. As the show has two steel structure sets for the rigging to be mounted on to, these are alternated



The set, showing louver backing and riser panel blades.

Photo: Bob George

ahead of each show and pre-rigged allowing a fast get-in and get-out throughout the tour.

The video set-up is a 5 camera unit which is live mixed from the control booth out front, with 2 giant Star Vision screens mounted on either side of the proscenium walls.

To maintain the flow of these four-and-a-half-hour fit-ups Steve endeavours to put together the best crew on the market. He claims it is the people who are the biggest part of the job, and motivates his crew to be flexible in covering each other's positions to complete a scheduled fit-up.

He went on to explain about the rigging gear and that every piece of equipment is specifically designed for fast rigging with the minimum effort. The swing wing trusses are custom designed, each housing its own power unit controlled from an Avolites Motor Commander digital controller. With all motor cables on the system illuminated, they hope shortly to add software to fully computerise the system. The dimmers are also integrally mounted within the trusses, where each receptacle for a spotlight has its own dimmer beside it, incorporating a local



Michael Jackson in action on stage and on big screen.

Photo: Bob George



The Wembley Stadium fit-up.



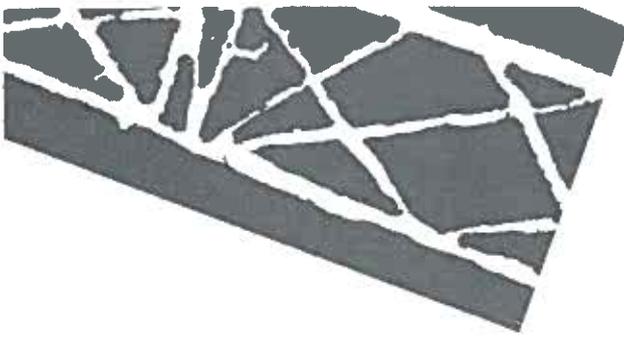
Crew chief Steve Hamelin inspects a Uni-Strut spotlight clamp.



Jim Waits at the Vari-Lite Artisan control console.



Merle McClain and his assistant at the Avolites desk.



Astralloy

GROUP HOLDINGS

73 Meadow Lane (2nd Floor)
Leeds LS11 5DW
Telephone 0532 465331
Fax 0532 421342 Telex 55113 FLYFOR G

The manufacturers of

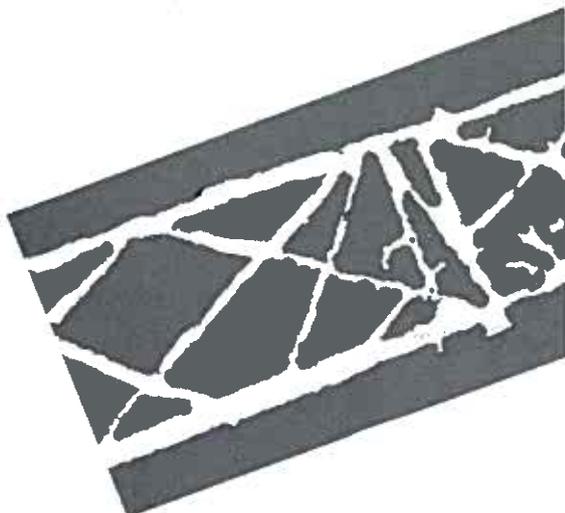
Astralite

Structalite

Minilite

Quatralite

Bilite



switch, and lamp fault indicator. They will also shortly be up-rating this part of the system by replacing each dimmer with a modular Avab digital dimmer into dimmer module compartments, allowing for an adaptable 1K, 2K or 6K module with its own switch and fuse receptacle to be rigged for an appropriate show.

Each truss is fed by its own feeder and circuit breaker, and each spotlight position has an adapted clamp which is bolted straight-on at the front to a Unit-Strut mounted on to the truss enabling one technician to complete a whole truss inside an hour.

Lighting operator/director Merle McClain discussed the operational requirements of the show, explaining details of the Avolites QM500 180 way control system. He said that it is comparatively twice as big as most of the control systems for this sort of show, and said he requested this particular board because of its ease of operation, being specialised in its layout for the lighting control for entertainers in the music industry.

Merle, who comes from Los Angeles, is in his sixteenth year in the business, and has worked for Yes, Kansas, and Journey world tours. He normally designs and operates, and this is the first show he has worked on where he is the operator working with a separate LD. He explained that there are more instances these days where a designer will design a show and also take on a fully qualified operator who takes the show on once it is running.

He has an assistant board operator who controls the Gel Stream colour changers, the Pro-Patch for instant channel grouping and dimmer patching, and the Colour Max colour cue that changes the colour scrolls in front of the back 9 lights units mounted beneath the translucent band rostrum. All are controlled by PC computers.

As there can be 17 performers, including the dancers, singers, and the band, all working on stage at one time, the lighting team is kept busy whilst at the same time the light level has to be constantly compensated for the on-going video cameras shooting live.

Lighting designer Allen Branton said that when it comes down to it, it is not all the technology or lighting design, which also utilises conventional techniques including shin-busters and footlights, which make this show, but Michael Jackson himself. When he performs on stage his talents inspire all those around him through his energy, effort and hardworking seriousness towards his craft, at the highest professional level of entertainment.

Having seen the show, I can vouch for that!

Avolites
are proud to
have provided
Lighting Control
Equipment
for
Michael Jackson's
current
World Tour

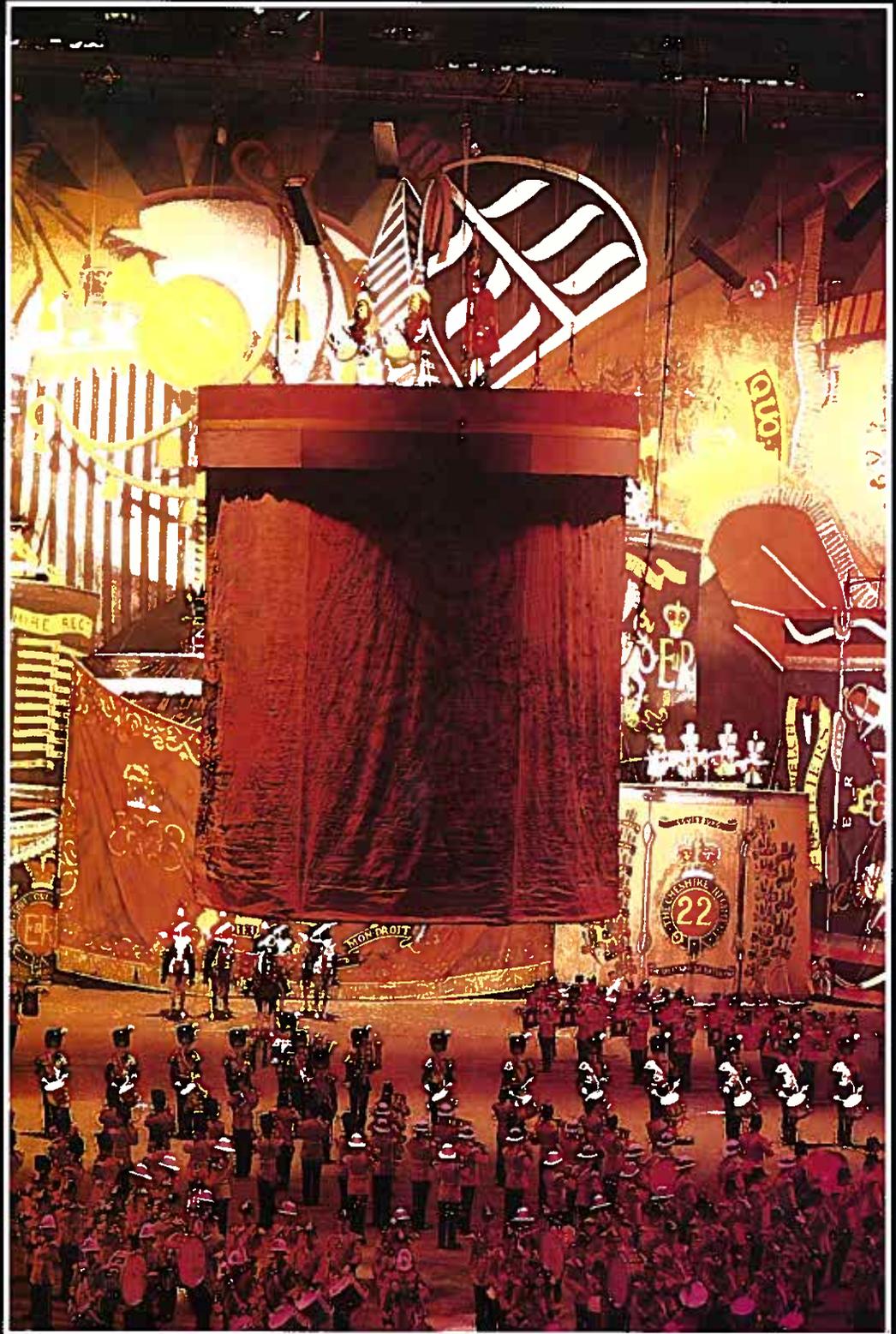


Avolites Production Company Limited.

184 Park Avenue, London, NW10 7XL

Telephone 01-965 8522

LIGHTING+*Sound* International



Lighting the Royal Tournament - see cover story page 5.

PLASA

Published by the Professional Lighting and Sound Association

August 1988

Volume 3 No.8

£1.50