

# Steve Lieberman: Inspired Light

Chauvet Professional

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His massive and intricately detailed lighting designs are created with some of the most sophisticated software tools available. But when this Los Angeles-based LD sits down to begin a project, he starts as he always has for over 25 years – by putting his ideas to pencil and paper. Working this way, free from the technology that he uses so skillfully at festivals and clubs, is the surest way to connect to the inspiration that stirs inside him.

Lighting design for Lieberman is a very personal endeavor, a cauldron of free floating ideas, random impressions and emotional experiences that never follows a predictable pattern. This is why, despite the international acclaim he's earned as a result of his designs at Coachella, Electric Daisy Carnival, Ultra, Lollapalooza and other festivals, he still regards running his own boards as one of the highlights of his work, since it gets him closer to the flow of the crowd and the music.

Combining this highly personalized approach to design with a meticulous attention to detail and a mastery of technology, Lieberman has left an unmistakable mark on EDM lighting, beginning with his seminal work for the early Electric Daisy Carnival festivals. He's also been responsible for some of the highest profile nightclub designs at venues around the world, such as XS at the Wynn in Las Vegas and LIV in Miami. Speaking to us from his office at the company he founded, SJ Lighting, Lieberman shared some insights into his highly personalized creative process.

**You've achieved great success as a lighting designer, but you still like to run your own boards at EDM festivals, why is that?**

"Part of the experience of being an LD is actually running your show. It really is the embodiment and culmination of all of your work."

**How does an EDM lighting design differ from a design at a rock or metal concert?**

"One of the primary differences between EDM shows and other types of shows is that the audience is not sitting down. There are no seats being sold; it's general admission, and you are free to move around from the front of the stage to the back of the house, wherever feels good. EDM shows are focused on being a dance event. It's where thousands of people congregate en masse, to be a part of an experience that is bigger than themselves."

Where does the creative process begin for you when you design for a festival stage? Do you start by looking at the truss structure? The type of lighting display or video that you want? Is there something you start with first and then design out from there? "There is no easy answer to this question. Every stage has a unique set of requirements, be it different artists performing, indoor or outdoor venues, different genres of music, budgets, timeframes; the list goes on. And while all of the previously mentioned items are critical to the design and execution of the environment, there is a creative element that still needs to grow from something inspirational. Where that comes from is different for everything we do. The best advice I can give for coming up with a design would be to maintain an open mind and a clear perspective of your environment, and be observant. Anything from the shape and geometry of architecture, to a piece of artwork in a museum or even a cloud in the sky. I recently modeled a stage concept from the 'pyramid with the eye' from the back of a one-dollar bill."

**How do you get inspired creatively?**

"I've been working in festivals for a lifetime. I close my eyes and I can see it. Creativity is something that stirs inside of you. I can't speak for every creative person in the world, but for me, I am always on the lookout for ideas, concepts, and inspiration. It can be from reading a magazine, going on a walk, just a thought, sketching on a pad: there is no right or wrong answer."



**How about when you design for clubs, where do you start?**

“Club design has fixed parameters. At the very least, it has a definitive shape to its environment. What’s important when designing clubs is that the system is cohesive with the rest of the space. Since there are typically multiple consultants: interior designers, architects, owners/operators and more, there are many things to consider. Designing the system to highlight and accentuate the space is so important, as opposed to just hanging a system that doesn’t necessarily have any relevance to the interior design philosophy. Accenting the geometry of the space to bring the room alive and, additionally, creating something that can stand the test of time are all part of a successful design. You don’t want the audience to get the ‘been there, done that’ vibe.”

**Going back to EDM festivals, LED video panels have gotten bolder and brighter. What impact has that had on your design?**

“LED is a tool in the toolbox. My answer to this question has not changed in 25 years. It’s not the commodities that make a good design; it’s the designer and it’s the idea. The available resources are simply a means to an end.”

**We now also have LED fixtures that are bright enough to be used as blinders. Has this changed the way you use blinders?**

“Absolutely!! Efficiencies in design are at the forefront of what we do. If you can get the same effect with 10% of the power consumption that it would take to use conventional equipment... that is huge!! LEDs offer lower power, lower cost, internal dimming, faster response via DMX and nearly eliminate the need to replace lamps.”

**Do you ever get feedback from the artists who will be playing at a festival before you design?**

“Sometimes – it really depends on the relationship I have with that artist. For the Carl Cox stage in Miami, I always show Carl the design before we finalize it. We have similar ideas on how shows should operate, and so far we are batting 1000! This year is no different! We are very proud of what we’ve produced, and Carl loves it too. I actually got a ‘Wow, holy \$&%^!!!!’ from him. That said, on other shows we are given the latitude to produce designs that are in line with the brand of the festival. The artists are considered, but not consulted.”

**It seems like scenic elements are playing a bigger role in festival lighting; is this changing the way you design? How do you support scenic elements with light?**

“Scenery has its place in stage design. When it is a part of what we are doing, it is treated like art and we make sure it is lit. There are fixtures that are designed with one purpose: to light the scenery.”

**On that subject — there are more moving panels and rotating linear fixtures today. Do you incorporate them into your design?**

“More tools in the toolbox. We’ve used just about every fixture on the market. Moving panels and rotating linear fixtures are no exception. The major difference with these types of lights is that they are a very specific look and are recognizable as such, whereas a more traditional moving light can just fill the overall vision instead of a very specific detail. It really just depends on what we are trying to achieve with the design.”

**Do you try to hold things back when you design, so you have something to surprise audiences with later?**

“Anytime we operate a show, we never want to give it all away when the doors open. However, at electronic dance music events, we get aggressive a little earlier than a typical concert. It is just the nature of the business.”

**Indeed, your designs are intense and bright, but does dark space also play role in making them more impactful?**

“You can’t have a light without a dark to stick it in, said Arlo Guthrie. Negative space is critical to make your design stand out. Therefore, everything in balance, including dark space.”

**What do you design in?**

“My office is highly invested in software. We use the following: Autocad, Revit, Vectorworks, Sketchup, Cinema 4D, Lightwave, 3D studio Max, Photoshop... There is more, but you get the idea. However, it all starts on a sketch pad! Nothing beats pencil and paper to get an idea out of your head.”

**What are your thoughts on timecoding?**

“I have programmed thousands of hours of timecode. When you want something perfectly repeatable and predictable, it’s the only way to go. When running a live show, I like to be a little more lyrical about the way the show operates.”



**Can you overuse a particular effect in a club design?**

“Anything can be overused. As with all things in life, there must be balance.”

**You often have DJ booths in your club designs. Do you draw on your EDM experience when designing them?**

“Booths are an integral part of the design. They are not a secondary item. More often than not, they are front and center, so the design is critical. When I design, it’s not based on my EDM experience. It is just based on my experience— all of it.”

**How did you get started in lighting?**

“My first job in a club was 1986. Throughout high school, I worked summers in the Hamptons at a nightclub. In college, I ran a bar/nightclub, and whenever I came home for break, I would help set up lighting at raves. After college, I thought it would be a good idea to work in nightclubs. What originally seemed like maybe not such a great idea, turned into something over time. As the culture and industry grew, I grew with it.”

**Is there a Steve Lieberman look? How would you describe it?**

“If I were to describe my look it would be: edgy, unique, atypical, appropriate, and emotional. At the end of the day, I design what feels good to me. That has been a formula that has worked well and translated into an experience that the audience has enjoyed.”

**What are the three characteristics that are most important in a lighting designer?**

“Timing, Perspective, Humility.”

**How do you want to be remembered as a designer?**

“After a lifetime of working in this industry, I hope I’m remembered as someone who supported his colleagues, who gave back more than he took, who inspired the audiences that stood in front of my shows, and someone who helped the up-and-comers find their way. And someone who created kick ass shows that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up!”

**You’ve done some of the highest profile clubs in the world. If you had to sum it up in a few sentences, what makes a good club design?**

“Application and execution of your details. Coherent elements that don’t look like you hung production elements in a permanent venue, and hiding your design in plain sight. And, of course, when the owners, operators, performers and customers leave with a smile on their face.”

