

LIVE DESIGN

- [LDI](#)
- [Master Classes](#)
- [Gear](#)
 - [Lighting](#)
 - [Projection](#)
 - [Staging](#)
 - [Sound](#)
 - [Live Gear Gallery](#)
- [Concerts](#)
 - [U2 360°tour](#)
- [Theatre](#)
- [Staging Rental](#)
- [Venues](#)
- [Architainment](#)

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Idols of Imagery

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Behind the glitzy faades of Las Vegas hotels, where a million megawatts of electricity illuminate the night, nightclubs have discovered that video is the verve, adding layers of

visual texture and even supplanting traditional lighting effects. From JET at the Mirage to Moon at The Palms, and the new Rok Vegas at New York, New York, imagery reigns supreme.

Jet Fuel

Video-DJ Rooney G., winner of the 2008 Club World Award for “Best Resident VJ” for his residency at JET at the Mirage, has the support of Steven Lockwood, VP of marketing for Light Group, when it comes to being a top video guru. “He really understands the vibe and pushes the limit to make sure that the audiovisual experience that I provide is complemented by dozens of plasmas, electric motorized screens, and a very dominating presence of video. It's important to know that video can be *too* much in a club (i.e. too bright, etc.), but with the extra crew at JET, we really melt the visuals into the environment, and it becomes the experience,” says Lockwood.

To create his visual terrain, Rooney G. uses two Pioneer DVJ-1000s, a Pioneer SVM-1000 audio/video mixer, an Edirol V-4 video mixer, and a laptop to run additional video content via ArKaos or Resolume software. “I also have a wide-angle camera for shooting live shots of the crowd — or of myself — for incorporating into the show,” he notes, adding that JET has one of the best video systems in Las Vegas, in his opinion. “This system includes eight 50" LG Electronics 50PC5DC monitors, six motorized 12'x8' opaque video screens that drop down, and six High End Systems DL.1 video projectors. Pretty much wherever you look, there is video.

“A large percentage of my music videos come from Promo Only,” continues Rooney G. “I also edit a lot of movie trailers and various pop culture stuff that is on the Internet.” He also has a video production company, the Video Assassins, to shoot and create his own videos.

An artist, first and foremost, Rooney G. strives to break new ground, he says, “by combining not just eclectic genres of music as a DJ, but because of my video mixing element, I'm also combining visual stimulation to totally create a new experience of entertainment. I will add or remix a video only if it will enhance the audio and the experience.”

Rooney G. will also create an entire piece of audiovisual art based on something from current events, “like the Bernie Mac video vignette, where I mix a Bernie Mac short over a beat. This hypes up the crowd and would never work the same way with just audio. With the video, the crowd can totally relate, and this creates energy and excitement for the room,” he says.

Another of his popular pieces features Kanye West's song “Golddigger” audio mixed with [Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band's] “A Fifth Of Beethoven.” “I remixed the video, adding elements of *Saturday Night Fever* along with the music, but also adding rare footage of John Travolta dancing,” says Rooney G. “It was one of my first pieces, but it works incredibly well, and I get requested to drop it all the time.”

In terms of interaction with the lighting system, Rooney G. points out, “JET has an awesome lighting operator, Neil Kull, who controls the system by MIDI control through ShowCAD. JET also has a video ceiling grid that is connected with the lighting system, so the colors and lighting changes are synchronized.” As a man who has set the standard for video mixing in the club environment, Rooney G's message is very clear: “Video is definitely the future of nightlife.”

Moon Gazing

The “video is the future” message also comes through loud and clear at Moon, a space-age club

with a retractable roof at The Palms. “The concept for Moon was something really spacey, with a very cutting-edge look,” says Adam Wuertz, lighting systems designer for the clubs at The Palms. “Everything is very geometric, with stainless steel finishes, hexagonal tiles on the walls, and no soft edges.”

The retractable roof, built by OpenAire, is controlled from the tech booth. Its three panels take only 90 seconds to retract, opening the dance floor to the heavens. “The wow factor is great,” notes Wuertz, who adds that the edges of the roof, like every other surface in the club, are fair game for video images. “We even moved the main loudspeakers closer to the dance floor and painted them silver for projections.”

Eight High End Systems DL.2s comprise the heart of the projection system. “We do a lot of multiple images and intense layering, so the DL.2s are central to the design,” says Wuertz. “We create eight of every shot so the content can really pop at the push of a button and show different, but coordinated, video everywhere in the room.” Vello Virkhaus, CEO of V Squared Labs in Los Angeles, came in to create custom video content for the eight DL.2s, edge-blending to create one large image when desired. An Edirol V4 video mixer and a Pioneer DVJ X-1 DVD player are used for playback backup options, in addition to the DL.2s.

Wuertz points out that, when the club was first designed, there was a series of Christie Digital projectors to create a large image on the ceiling, which have since been removed. “They were simply too bright for a nightclub,” he admits. “It was like turning the house lights on. Instead, we do more programming with the [Philips Solid-State Lighting Solutions] ColorBlasts shining on the roof to create more of a changing color palette than a projection surface. In a nightclub for 500 people, you need to be very conscious of how bright you make it. You want low light levels from the video as well. The goal is total atmospheric domination.”

To coordinate the lighting with the video and the retractable roof, Wuertz opted for 18 Martin Professional MAC 250 Krypton fixtures. “When we first talked about the design of the room, with the roof opening, they said there couldn’t be any lights over the dance floor, but I knew we had to find a solution,” he says. The solution came via Tomcat truss and a custom-designed system of six light tracks that look like I-beams that retract under the edges of the room when the roof opens. There are three MAC 250 Kryptons and one MAC 250 Wash per beam. “The Kryptons are the core of the lighting system over the dance floor,” adds Wuertz. Additional fixtures include six Martin MAC 250 washes, 16 Martin MX-10 Extremes, two Martin Atomic 3000s, and three Robe 150ATs. Eight Jem Clubsmoke foggers add to the effects, along with three Laser Design lasers and a Pangolin LivePro control system.

The video images cover all surfaces in the club, as there are no specific screens for that purpose. “All of the video is designed to be atmospheric texturing while maintaining a sexy club environment,” notes Wuertz. Additional tools in the projection toolkit are more than 1,300 LED tiles custom-built by 555 in Chicago, with each tile acting as a separate RGB fixture. Wuertz attributes the success in the efficient programming of the tiles to the bitmap generator in the MA Lighting grandMA console, which controls the club along with one grandMA Lite and three grandMA NSPs. “We have so many fixtures that we can’t patch another thing unless we add another NSP,” says Wuertz.

Vegas Rocks

With its grand opening at New York, New York on Labor Day weekend 2008, Rok Vegas is one of the newest clubs on The Strip. The 8,500sq-ft. venue is outfitted with a 360° elliptical screen fed

by 14 High End Systems Axon media servers and 14 Christie Digital LX-380 projectors to create a seamless, blended image across the 14 sections of the screen, which was custom made by Dazian.

“The club has a very rock ‘n’ roll environment,” notes Steve Lieberman, who designed the lighting and video systems for Rok Vegas, with an overall look of dark wood floors and textured red furniture designed by interior designer François Frossard of Miami. Lieberman used Philips Solid-State Lighting Solutions iCove QL as LED accents behind banquettes and on the kickers on the bars. There are also 22 ColorBlasts to detail the shape of custom, curved ladder truss from Total Structures.

The lighting rig includes 16 Martin MAC 250 Kryptons, five Martin 250 Entours, six Martin Atomic Strobes, two Martin ZR-33 foggers to add atmosphere, six ETC Source Four PARs, 10 Source Four ellipsoidals, and 12 Coemar ParLite LEDs that provide backlight on the stage area that is used for live music performances. A laser system includes one Trinity Semi Pro 500MW RGB projector, two Trinity Disco 300MW RGB projectors, and 12 bounce mirrors. Lieberman sub-contracted LD Robert Singer of Robert Singer & Associates to do the architectural lighting design. An MA Lighting grandMA Lite console controls all the lighting and video.

“In spite all of the lighting gear, the video creates the primary entertainment package for the visual side of the club,” says Lieberman, who worked on the club design for two years. Scott Chmielewski of Digital Media Designs did the programming of the Axon media servers, with Vello Virkhaus of V Squared Labs creating custom content. “The content is very rock ‘n’ roll driven and aggressive,” says Lieberman, listing such stereotypical rock images as scantily clad women, cars, skulls, and Harley Davidsons with fire coming out of the exhaust pipes.

“The owners wanted an immersive video environment,” says Lieberman, in relation to the 360° image. “It is a rock ‘n’ roll club, not a traditional nightclub with a disco feel.” The video system is designed so that it can create the one seamless 360° image on the elliptical screen, or it can be broken down into 14 individual images, or any other combination, depending on content. A fifteenth Axon media server is used on the input side of the Extron MAV-2424AV matrix for additional versatility, with a Crestron TPS15 15“ touchscreen control system. “Outside, VJs can use DVD ports via the Axons and blast their content onto the screens,” says Lieberman.

“This is an unprecedented system,” says Chmielewski, who used every bell and whistle on the Axons to program onto the seamless ellipse, including custom edge-blending software and multi-server synching. “No matter where you are in the space, you can see three-quarters of the imagery.” The screen sits 15' off the floor and stretches up 12' toward the ceiling, with a total of 100 linear feet running around the room. “Vello did a stunning job with the content. It's very high contrast, dynamic, and in-your-face,” notes Chmielewski, indicating that the use of the word “Rok” adds subliminal branding for the club and its hard-edged, industrial environment.

So is video the new king of club design? “I don't know that it has necessarily taken over,” says Lieberman, “but there are a lot of new toys to play with that are video-based. I think there are just more tools in the toolbox, and designers are like children. We binge on things and then get tired of them. I think the video elements in a nightclub help to occupy the wandering eye. Everybody in a nightclub, whether you're with your friends or just holding up the wall, is always looking around to make sure they don't miss anything. The video element helps occupy some of their time.” Not to mention, it's hip!

A Legend Lives

Just downstairs from Moon, yet connected via an interior escalator, is the world's only Playboy Club, touted as “a legend reborn,” with quite a different look from Moon. “It is more of an ultra lounge with gaming and is a celebrity-driven environment,” Wuertz explains. With nine blackjack tables and one roulette table, there is also a small dance floor animated by eight Elation Easy Color fixtures that fit the bill according to Wuertz. “We wanted color and movement but not effects or gobos, just a nice atmosphere in the room,” he says. “These fixtures move fast enough and there are great colors, so they worked out perfectly.” Control is via an Elation Show Designer 2CF.

Video flashes on the south wall of the club with a massive array of 62 TVs arranged in a collage, once again created by 555. Rather than use traditional media servers, the choice was made to employ digital signage software by CoolSign. “The digital signage network can handle an infinite number of programs and can repurpose content on the fly,” notes Wuertz, adding that the Playboy Club is open 365 days per year, and they needed a system that was rock-solid. “If this system crashes, it resets itself when it sees the problem,” he says. “This is ideal in a non-operator-driven design scenario.” Images include Playboy heritage footage and video from current Playboy events.

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