

LIGHTING DIMENSIONS

Jay-Z Rocs the Garden

by David Barbour

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If you're going to go, go in style. That's what Jay-Z did on November 25th in a concert at Madison Square Garden to celebrate the release of what the hip-hop star has said will be his last CD, *The Black Album*. Helping him say farewell was list of rap royalty, including R. Kelly, Mary J. Blige, and Beyonce. Giving him an especially stylish send-off was LD Gary Westcott, who put together some new technology to create a stunningly sleek design

Using the two hot-button technologies of the moment, Westcott deployed the G-LEC LED Curtain as well as the Mbox™ digital media software program from Fourth Phase/Light & Sound Design. Combined with ten Barco video screens, supplied by Matt Pearson of PSL Los Angeles, and a battalion of moving lights and conventional units, Westcott's design has a hard-edged industrial quality.

For the concert, the LD says he set out to create something that was different from most hip-hop shows. "It's clean, modern," he says; "everything is gray, black, or silver. Keeping a clean look onstage was Jay's wish. It was, after all, the *Black Album* release concert."

At any rate, it is loaded with stunning video imagery. The unit containing the show's band, The Illadelphonic, is located upstage, with a G-LEC LED Curtain placed in front and back; both Curtains can be raised or lowered. Above, seven Barco DLite 7 screens are suspended via Branam wire winches, with another three hung upstage on chain motors. They are reconfigured for each number, creating depth of field and layers of video elements.

Westcott, who also did Jay-Z's *Roc the Mic* tour last summer, has worked extensively with concert LD Roy Bennet; he says the design was inspired by Bennett's work last year on the Paul McCartney tour. "It [the Jay-Z show] is not a copy [of the McCartney show] but is a reference to how theatrical technology and new industrial video can mix."

The designer says he had never seen the G-LEC Curtain until recently, when Nick Jackson of Light & Sound Design (provider of the production's lighting equipment), suggested it. The product was shipped from Germany and set up at the Fourth Phase headquarters in New Jersey. "We tested it for color values and brightness. The big questions was, would it hold up to the Barcos?" says Westcott. The answer was yes, and 48 panels of the curtain were assembled for the production; the order was so large that some panels were shipped from Japan, where they had been used on a car show.

The G-LEC Curtain consists of a series of bars, 2.4" (60mm) apart, each of which contains LEDs; the result is a 70% transparent "curtain" which allows colors, images, animations, and graphics to appear in the foreground while the rest of the curtain appears transparent. Even when it hosts the same images as on the Barcos above, the effect is startlingly different. Westcott cites the Branam wire winches, which moved the screens, for their performance: "They're silent, fast, and very, very effective," he says.

Imagery on all of the screens was created by the Mbox. Billed as “the ultimate integration of video and lighting,” it is operated off a lighting console, which allows video and image effects to be easily sequenced with lighting cues. It is run on a rack-mounted Apple G4™ or Xserve™ computer that is controlled over Ethernet via a lighting console. Adds art and production assistant Peter Aquinde, “Think of Mbox as a real-time compositing system as well as a video stream server. It can recolor, scale, trim, blur, key, layer, and more on the fly and it never loses sync.” Westcott says about the video, “I also had 2×8 channel-vector manipulation for the matrixes of the screen routing, which was programmed by Dave Jolly; this allowed us to control the imagery and placement of live cameras to the screens, leaving the camera director, Pat Paulsen, to concentrate on cameras and not the look of the screens.”

Although the Mbox comes equipped with 120 stock video clips and 700 gobo masks, Westcott created his own video, working with Aquinde. “We resourced from our library of content from previous [Jay-Z] productions done earlier this year, then added more location content from New York,” says Westcott. “We shot bars, nightclubs, hotels, and Grand Central Station focusing on light fixtures, arches, windows.” Adds Aquinde, “We shot stuff around the Brooklyn Bridge, got some architectural details in the Financial District. John Meneilly [the show director and Jay's business manager] wanted to do environmental looks, as opposed to quick-cut, hip-hop video things.” Aquinde then worked with content developer and editor Vello Virkhaus to pull the images together for use in the show. Westcott adds, “John is very much involved with the creative process; he can translate Jay's ideas into the show concept and keep things original, and adds unique style not seen in traditional hip-hop shows.”

The Mbox was designed to be run off an Icon console from Light & Sound Design. However, for this production, Westcott opted for the grandMA console, from MA Lighting (distributed in the US by A.C.T Lighting). The production required two grandMAs — one for lighting and one for video. He chose the board, Westcott says, “because we could link them; the boards back each other up. That way, you can't lose your data. If something went wrong with one board, we could run the show off the other.” (There were, in fact, two backup consoles onsite.) He also cites the board's editing abilities in running Mbox.

Finally, he notes, the grandMA was chosen because the production is going to tour, starting in February. “I had never run a show on grandMA,” the LD says, adding “Drew Findley [the Mbox programmer] had worked with it. We had a learning curve with it. I'm interested in talking to MA about it doing new tricks.” He says that the board's modeling program “is great for a touring show — you can keep updating the design as you move from a venue with a low trim one with a high trim.” (He adds that Steve Lieberman was brought in to help with the initial programming.)

In case you were wondering, yes there is lighting in the show, as well, a combination of gear from Martin, Coemar, and Syncrolite, with three police beacons placed on the bottom of each downstage Barco screen, and 8-Lites placed high for audience lighting. The designer varied his color palette throughout: “I wanted to stylize the lighting to offset the video. One number used black and white images, so I went with lots of steel blues and CTO. For more colorful songs, I went with blues, magentas.” He's not one for wild color mixes: “I'm a fan of emotional lighting — if you use too many colors, it becomes too Versace.”

On the other hand, the LD had the chance to use plenty of color — the song list for the production ballooned to 48, as different acts joined the lineup. “Hip-hop is like bebop jazz,” says Westcott. “The musicians are always quoting other musicians in their own songs. In rap, someone does a song, then there's another version with remixes or quotes in it. It's free-form, very live.” As a result, he says, in performance, “You kind of know what's going to happen next, but it often goes off on tangents. We did

48 songs in two and a half hours — think about how many more songs were quoted.”

Even so, the design required plenty of preparation, in this case, with Westcott using WYSIWIG to previsualize his design. “We used Prelite NY — Tom Thompson [of Prelite's San Francisco office] helped me put the preprogram package together. With 49 songs [one was eventually dropped] and new artists coming aboard all the time, Prelite sent a remote WYSIWIG unit to Studio Instrument Rentals in NY — we programmed the lighting and Mbox there. The artists were rehearsing at SIR — We'd pop into their room, listen to a song, then pop back into our room and light the songs in real time — then artists would come in and see how their songs would look while we were making them. It was an unusual and rapid way to create a show.”

Westcott says the final result went very smoothly and he has high praise for Aquinde (“He's absolutely indispensable”) and the Fourth Phase crew (“They all deserve thanks for a good job done”). The touring version, which, as of this writing, is scheduled to go out in February, may be slightly modified, but will essentially be the same. Very possibly, Jay-Z will roc the house at a theatre near you.

JAY-Z Production Designer/Creative Director

Gary Westcott

Art and Production Assistant

Peter Aquinde

Tour Director

Randy Buzzelli

Show Director

John Meneilly

Production Manager/FOH sound engineer

Bryon “Hot Dog” Tate

Production Assistant

Becky Mendoza

M-Box Programmer

Drew Findley

Content Developer & Editor

Vello Virkhaus

Camera Director

Pat Paulsen

Stage Manager

Stu Weissman

Crew Chief

Robert Cooper

Dimming and interface

Glenn Felton

Tech

Drew Sanchez

Tech

Paul Costa

Tech

Albert Gullion

Tech

Jeffery Neil Arnason

grandMA Programmer

Steve Lieberman

Prelite WYSIWYG Previsualization Services

Tom Thompson Rodd McLaughlin

Lighting Supplier

Light & Sound Design/Fourth Phase

Staging & Set Supplier

Spectrum Production Services

Rigging Supplier

Branam Rigging

Video Supplier

PSL Concert Touring

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