

MAGNETIC

Industry Focus: Stephen Lieberman, Production Designer

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This is Magnetic's [Industry Focus](#), a series where we highlight the major players working behind the scenes of the EDM biz. These are the folks running the record labels, representing the artists, promoting the shows and just getting it done.

They may not get the shine of a deadmau5 or Skrillex, but they work just as hard making sure the parties are packed, the music is perfect, and that the artists are where they need to be. We've decided to shine the light on the behind the scenes movers and shakers that are helping you making you move and shake.

Today, we highlight production designer Stephen Lieberman of SJ Lighting. He has done the lighting, video design and programming for a lot of the major players out there. From Marquee to Electric Daisy Carnival, odds are you have seen Stephen's work.

Here are his words...

How did you start your career in the electronic music business?

I've been working in nightclubs since 1987. I started as a bar back at a club in the Hamptons and was quickly "bitten by the bug". Since then, I've never left the business. I worked in the rave scene when it first hit the United States in the early 90's. New York nightclubs and raves were the beginning of my career. That evolved into owning a production company in the late 90's in Arizona, doing several raves a week in Arizona and Southern California for about 3 years... Eventually moving to CA in 2001 and I haven't left since.

What is the best part of the business?

This industry is so dynamic; it's really difficult to identify one thing that is "the best". Being a part of a family of industry professionals is probably the most rewarding. I've been given the great privilege of handling some of the largest EDM festivals and nightclubs in the United States, as well as abroad. Doing design work in such a dominant marketplace and having the ability to showcase my artwork and designs has been very rewarding.

What are the biggest challenges?

Every project is unique; each presenting itself with its own unique set of challenges, obstacles, and objectives, spanning from personnel issues, to site conditions changing, etc. The term “project management” doesn’t really detail the extent and workload involved in producing a design from concept, to construction documentation; then to install, programming, and finally turning it over to the client as a finished product. There is so much work involved in producing a design. It’s so much more than doing a drawing. I’ve worked on projects that have taken 2+ years to complete. I think that is something that most people, whether in the industry or an observer doesn’t truly understand unless they are involved in the process.

What career advice would you recommend to someone just starting off?

Take any job offered to you. Learn every part of the business possible. Make mistakes and LEARN from them. Watch seasoned professionals; they all have their own way of doing things. Never ask anyone to do something that you wouldn’t be willing to do yourself. Be humble. Ask questions. Expect to be rejected over and over again. Never quit.

As the EDM industry continues to grow, what do you think the secrets to longevity in this business will be?

I’ve watched this industry evolve from the mid 80’s. It’s been a very interesting progression, regression and general evolution. For me, I’ve involved myself in this industry because it’s something that I’ve always loved to be a part of. I think the real players in this business have had similar paths throughout their careers. EDM was a subculture for so long and now it’s part of the mainstream popular music, infiltrating day to day culture. I’m not sure there is a “secret” to longevity.... Short of loving what you do, perpetuating your happiness and your interests... and that’s what this industry was based on. I don’t see that going away. Whether or not we continue to see 100,000 people shows forever, or they turn back into 25,000 person shows. The core group of us that were here in the beginning and are still here now... We are NOT going anywhere.

Did you start off as a fan of electronic music and then became involved on the business side, or did business bring you into the electronic music world?

I’ve always been an electronic music fan... I’ve also worked in nightclubs since I was 15 years old... So, the two have happened concurrently to me. I’ve joked over the years that I was able to capitalize on a lifetime of bad decisions. I say that because until about 5 years ago, anyone else in the design world, the production world, stage and lighting design, had always told me that I had the worst clients in the world. They would ask me why I would ever work in nightclubs or raves (which we now call EDM festivals). My answer was always the same- because I love doing it. I’ve invested a lifetime into this community. This is where I belong.

What does electronic music mean to you?

I’ve been an electronic music fan as long as I can remember. When I’m running a show, designing a system, or just socializing in these environments, the music just makes sense. I feel like a robot sometimes... I know every drop, every break, every moment in the music that going to happen. I can see it, hear it, and feel it, before it happens. That’s been one of the critical components to my success.

What cities/regions do you think electronic dance music is best thriving?

“A” markets are clearly the most popular areas, New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Chicago, Miami, etc. What’s been great is that we are now seeing huge growth in “B” and “C” markets around the world. Music culture is blending everywhere, and EDM is a part of that.

If you weren’t in the music biz, what would you be doing?

I’ve been doing this since I was 15 – I can’t answer that... I’m in the biz... always have been, always will be.

Where do you see the most innovation in the EDM industry?

This is a question I’ve been asked for the last 20 years, and my answer is always the same: What is innovative to the industry is not the technologies, the products, the music, and the people. It’s all about application and execution of ideas, concepts, philosophies... its all of these things... it’s not one item, one person, one genre of music... it’s the sum of all these things together... it’s the grand plan... the master architecture of the entire industry. That’s the innovation – that’s the “X” factor.