

## Spotlight On SJ Lighting's Steve Lieberman

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With Miami's [Ultra Music Festival](#) coming up March 27-29 we thought it would be perfect timing to take a look behind the scenes by talking to SJ Lighting founder Steve Lieberman.

In addition to being the lighting designer and coordinator for Ultra's Main Stage, SJ Lighting is the full designer for the Carl Cox & Friends stage and Mid Park. Of course, the festival is just one of many events on the production design company's calendar.

Lieberman, who's been involved in the business for the past 20 years, has worked with just about every major festival operator in the U.S. including Ultra, Insomniac, Live Nation and Goldenvoice. He's also done installations for many of the top nightclubs in the U.S. including Marquee, Tao and Liv. SJ Lighting takes on about 40 festivals per year and is currently doing installations, remodels or updates for 20 clubs.

Lieberman tells Pollstar that what he does isn't just about adding a visual aspect to the experience of a live show. For Lieberman, it's using spectacular lighting and innovative design structures to create a tangible emotional response as well as a physical reaction.



**Electric Daisy  
Carnival Las Vegas  
2014**

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*How long have you been working in sound/visuals and how did you get your start in the business?*

There's two different answers to that question. Professionally, I've been doing this since 1995 but my first job in a nightclub was 1987. I don't consider a 15-year-old a professional. ... There's an age minimum, I've always thought in my head. So when people tell me, "My dad was a lighting designer and I've been working with him since I was a 10." If I see a 10-year-old on a job, we've got an issue. So I don't count that. That's the long and short answer. ... I've been involved and enamored by and intrigued by this industry since I was old enough to participate.

*So how did you get that opportunity to be involved as a teen?*

My friend's uncle owned a nightclub in the Hamptons. ... On teen night I stood behind the bar and served soda and water. And on regular nights I was a bar-back. ... And then I would hang out with the DJ. I got to see all different perspectives of that environment back then. And that was long before the days of festivals and raves and techno. We were listening to freestyle.

Pretty much since the day I got out of college I started my professional career. And throughout college I would freelance. So that was kind of my entrée into the community. And around 1990 was my exposure into the rave scene, when that kind of first hit New York. That was my first experience with hardcore electronic music in underground environments and that kind of just kept piquing my interest.



**Steve Lieberman**

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*Obviously you work on a lot of EDM events. Is the music what attracted you to this business in the first place?*

One hundred percent. I [was] obviously a house music fan first. Back when I started listening to this music I didn't even know what [EDM] meant.. ... Obviously there's different musical genres and cultures and things that have turned into this broader spectrum that's developed into what it is now. But I've always been a fan. I'm a fan of just about every kind of music. There's very little that I don't enjoy. But the first preset in my car is [Sirius XM] Studio 54. ... So yeah, we listen to it all the time. It's on in the background while we're designing stuff. It's just part of my persona.

*It seems like if you weren't a fan of EDM it might be a little difficult to come up with designs that fit the music.*

Absolutely. When we're doing these kinds of production environments ... nightclub designs ... festival and stage designs for EDM shows, it's a huge bonus to actually be a fan of the music, to understand the culture of the audience that comes to participate in these shows. And just [to] understand what the sociology of it is. So being a fan of the music I understand what they're expecting to hear, what they're expecting to see, and how it all ties together. It's kind of a critical part of the puzzle, putting these things forth.

*Definitely. Lighting and visuals are such a huge component of going to one of these shows.*

Well, for me, we're always trying to create tangible emotional responses. So it's more than just the lighting, it's more than just the music. It's all of these things combined which create, like, when you hear a song and then the lights happen at the right time, that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. I think you need both of those things to create the perfect chemistry, to create those reactions.



Ultra 2014

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*Ultra is coming up this month. You're designing the Carl Cox & Friends Stage and the Main Stage installations.*

And Mid Park. ... We're the full designer of Carl Cox, we're the full designer of Mid Park [and] the lighting designer and coordinator for Main Stage. So, Main Stage has a bigger team involved in the design. It's not just me but I'm the coordinating factor and the lighting designer and director.

*Hoping you could work us through the process of working on a design. Did Carl Cox give you input about his stage?*

Carl is a friend of mine and we've also been working together for so long. A lot of my clients ... and Carl isn't the client here but it is the Carl Cox Arena, so his opinion does matter 100 percent in this environment. The nice part is that I've been doing this for so long and there's a trust factor there that what I'm going to put forth, makes sense. It's going to be appropriate for that environment, the environment being the Carl Cox Arena. So I do share it with Carl Cox after the fact but Carl doesn't say, "Hey, I want to see 20 of fixture type A and 20 of fixture type B, and make the video screen look like this." He doesn't give me any input like that. What's important to Carl is the vibe. And obviously operation is a critical part of that. So when Carl is playing music, or any of the DJs are playing music, it's important to him that the lighting reflects the vibe of what the music is.

And that ties in to how the audience responds to all of this as well. So those are the critical components that all react off of each other. It's a very organic, fluid kind of environment and the design needs to be such that it supports that. So you have the latitude to manipulate it and move it around, based on changes that could happen in a millisecond.

The past couple of years [designs] have been very monolithic, like big geometry ... the past three years we've taken the same design and just kind of manipulated it because we're trying to create something iconic. So for me, we always called it "the beehive" because we did these hexagons in a beehive formation with the moving structure and all that. But we want something that's monolithic, iconic but at the same time can be

manipulated into giving diverse looks and kind of just roll through. You know, we have three days of events, 10 hours a day, multiple DJs. I don't want every single look to look the same, obviously you come in there and the environment is what it is. But it needs to be able to change and flow and move and be organic. At the same time complement everything else that's going on in there.

A few years ago we designed a DJ booth for Carl that was probably 10 feet off the ground and it was a spaceship and it had these sloping video screens and it looked like a very '50s style spaceship, what you'd imagine in one of those old terrible movies, where you could tell it was fake and like, some dude is holding a little spaceship on a screen and floating it in front of a set, it kind of looked like that, but much cleaner.

And Carl was concerned when he first saw the drawings. He's like, "Oh, I'm too high away from the crowd." And I remember walking him through and bringing him up on to the stage and saying, "Look, we gave this a lot of thought. Here's our design study with the perspective, with the way it slopes down, you can actually see the kid that's standing right in front of the first piece of barricade and there's a visual connection between you guys, if you want it. And he stood up and he was like, "Oh, this is fucking amazing. This is great." And I think [that] was one of the first times that Carl and I really understood each another from a design perspective of what the needs are of the bigger picture. And after that there's just been a trust factor between the two of us where we know that this thing is going to get done and it's going to be, I hate using the word, but epic is really like in this environment. It's a pretty epic environment. Like you go in there and even standing at the front of House Console and running lights in there and I've run lights in front of a 100,000 people, it's electric in there. It's really an amazing energy.



**Coachella's  
Discoball Shark**

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)



*When you're starting out on a brand new installation, does it start out with brainstorming and sketches?*

The first thing that we consider. There are multiple levels to consider. From a creative standpoint, you consider the environment it's getting put in. then you have to consider, and that environment is broken down into subcategories as well – geographically, musically, demographically – all of these things need to be considered. Then the [number] of people going in there, and then whether it's an indoor structure, an outdoor structure or an outdoor structure that is covered. There's all these environments that you need to think about. And then we just start making sketches. For us that makes sense, we look for inspirational images. As a designer, unfortunately it's not like solving math problems where you go, "I have some work to do today and you look at your worksheet and you have, like when you were in elementary school and you think, " OK, I have 24 math problems, I've got to solve these math problems and then I'm done for the day." As a designer coming up with creative documentation, there's a whole other level there, sometimes you can totally get blocked. So [you] go for a walk, go for a bike ride. Just go do something else and take your mind off of it. And typically for me, at least, when I do something like that, I'll find inspiration somewhere else. I remember when I was in Rome and I spent a day and a half literally taking pictures of manhole covers, doorknobs and small little details of old buildings. And a lot of that, I grabbed a lot of inspiration and concepts just from these little details. I was like, "Wow, if I took that and did a repeat pattern on this and things like that," just to get some inspiration to take that to a stage design.

*It sounds like inspiration can be everywhere if you're paying attention.*

You have to have a wide perspective. And especially for us. I mean, right now we're working on 20 nightclubs, whether it's a full installation, a remodel, an update, but we have 20 clubs on board and then we do approximately 40 festivals a year. So between those 40 festivals we're designing anywhere from one to seven stages per show ... that usually equates to 60 to 70 stage designs a year. So when you have to come up with that many unique concepts ... we just like to be inspired by multiple things. So you have to have a really wide perspective, you have to really be observant of your environment and just take all of that into consideration when you're coming up with these design processes.



(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*Do you always attend the festivals to see your ideas come to life?*

I'm usually operating the main stage. If I'm not directing the main stage. The only Ultra where I'm not on the main stage is Miami, where the past several years ... literally every artist brings a LD, so it's turned a lighting director job into a lighting director's babysitting job. I now hire one of my friends to stand up there and babysit. He gets to run lights until about 3 p.m., so he might get from noon to 3 p.m. to run lights and then literally the guys who are performing at 3, 4 o' clock in the afternoon are bringing lighting directors with them to hit buttons. It's frustrating for me to stand up there and watch that, so I got into the Carl Cox Arena where I can actually take the Ferrari that I built around the track myself.

*Do individual artists ever contact you to work with them?*

They do, yes. We pick and choose what we want to do when it comes to that kind of stuff. ... We designed the Yuma Tent for Coachella, so that by itself is kind of keeps us busy but we're probably going to pick up one artist in the Sahara Tent. We've designed Wolfgang Gartner's tours, the one he went out by himself and the one he did with Tommy Trash. Years ago we did MSTRKRFT. But we don't do too much touring design just because our schedule is so full with festival and stage design. And we don't go out on tour. So a lot of that work goes out to touring LDs. And we're not interested in that stuff.

*Is there a particular installation that you've done that you're most proud of or you had the most fun working on?*

I'm going to respond to that the same way I've been responding for years. You're asking me which one of my children I love the most. It's hard to pick. However, some of the ones that are going to stand out to audiences the most – and most recently – I would say there's probably three or four in Las Vegas right now. Drai's [Beach Club] at the Cromwell is probably one of the most visible. And highly visible in regard to technology, location, interior design. It's a fantastic venue. It's an overwhelming place. And working with Victor Drai was an experience, I mean the man is involved in the design work forensically. I mean, he gets down to every last little detail, which was a very unique perspective working with a club owner on that level. We designed the original marque and we just put in a new installation into it to update it. That was a really special environment as well. We put in 1,100 new LED strips and then pixel mapped the entire club so when you go in there, that's a completely new unique visual esthetic to the venue.

Excess at the Encore just did a \$10 million technology renovation and we were privileged to be given the design detail for that as well. ... The venue's always been beautiful just as a standalone but the place is magnificent. We literally pixel-mapped the entire ceiling. We put a whole new installation out at the pool. The place is fantastic, just an overwhelming venue.

We also just did Life at the SLS, which, I would say those four night clubs right now, Vegas-wise, they're all standout properties visually.



**EDC Las Vegas  
2014**

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*Are there any upcoming events in 2015 that you're especially excited about?*

You know we're always excited about doing Ultra. Not only is Ultra a fantastic show to be a part of, it's also a time where 90 percent of my friends and colleagues that are in the industry are all there. So it's great just from the social part of it where I get to see all my buddies and we all get to hang out at the same show and every major artist in the world is there. I see all my friends that are either agents or managers or DJs or lighting directors or video directors – everybody's there. ... Typically you don't see

your friends in the business because if you're working on a job, chances are it's a weekend and they're working on a job. There are a couple guys I see five, six times a year at a festival but I see them for two hours, they come in, run their artists and then they get on a plane and go to the next city and I get on a plane and go to another city. This is the one week where everybody's there for a week so I do love that show.

Electric Daisy Carnival in Las Vegas, same rules apply – everybody comes out to Vegas, all the club owners, all the festival people. Those are the two big standouts in the United States and then traveling abroad, we have a lot of great shows as well, like Ultra Japan, Ultra Korea, Ultra Croatia. ... It's just really cool to hang out with your friends in different cities around the world.

[With] Coachella it's a broader demographic because of the rock 'n' roll element so you see all your buddies who are not in electronic dance music but are converging down there. I have a lot of friends in the rock 'n' roll industry that might be doing some crossover work. Like last year Chris Kuroda, who's the LD for Phish, just happened to be doing Martin Garrix, so it was good to hang out with him at the festival because normally Phish is not going to perform at one of my shows.

*Is there anything you'd like to tell readers that they may not know about everything that goes into designing lights and visuals for one of these events?*

You know, one of the things that we get asked a lot is, "What's the latest and greatest technology? What are you using nowadays?" And I usually come back with the same answer, which is, the technology is really a secondary, kind of peripheral element to design work. Really what it is, and I use this example – when you walk down the street and you see a new building go up, let's say it's like a Frank Gehry, something really creative, even back in the day, like a John Lautner design, and you go, "Wow, that's an amazing building. That's an amazing design! What kind of materials, what kind of tools did you use to build that?" You'd never ask that question. So, the same rules apply to the design of these stages.

It's design philosophies, it's the application and execution of the design, not so much the tools. Obviously there's going to be new technology that we're going to use to make things more efficient. There's lights that are brighter, more effects, there's higher resolution video and every once in a while there's a light that's super creative that you didn't have before. But at the end of the day, it's how you put all these things together and what your bigger picture is and what your vision is. Nobody leaves a show and goes, "Wow. Can you believe that gobo that I saw come out of that fixture? That was pretty fantastic. And the color mixing ... Wow, that red was really red." Nobody says that. ... Carl Cox [Stage], for instance, they look at it and they go, "That was a big fucking beehive. They was amazing." They remember when that 180-foot long structure came down to within 10 feet of our heads and was strobing like crazy. People will remember that kind of stuff, big, monolithic overwhelming elements. So design is all about the bigger picture, the vision of what you're trying to execute out into the field. Not about the technology.



EDC Las Vegas  
2014

(Courtesy of SJ Lighting, Inc.)

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*That reminds me of what you mentioned earlier about creating emotional connections.*

I want to create a physical response from the audience. Sometimes I'll specify an inefficient fixture, like blinders, for instance, which traditionally have always been incandescent lamps. Now incandescent lamps are probably the most inefficient product in the world. It puts out more heat than it does light. However, when I have two 48-weight demo racks and I push those things up at full and you feel the heat come out of the lights, and the whole audience gets lit up and it gets a little hot in there, you feel that lamp burn your face? I want that. I want you to feel the heat come out of those things. I want that physical reaction to the environment as well as just the emotional part of like listening to the beat and stomping to the music. I want you to feel it. And I want you to feel it through the visual elements as well.

*There's a big difference between listening to music at home versus going to experience it live.*

For me, listening to the music at home, where there's a track that grabs me and I might binge on it, there's moments in that song where I can literally close my eyes

and visualize exactly what I want to see. It doesn't need to be a specific rig but I know how things are supposed to hit, what's supposed to happen. And it could still make my heart race a little bit, the hair on the back of my neck stand up a little bit. It can create that reaction for me, just knowing, me as a lighting designer and a production designer, knowing what's going to happen, if I hear that song on a stage, it can still create that reaction for me. So I even get those reactions as well. So I'm participating with the crowd, I just happen to be in the driver seat.

*For more information please visit [SJLighting.net](http://SJLighting.net).*

*--Sarah Marie Pittman*