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Diamond Chance for Robe and Black Pumas

Lighting designer Marc Janowitz from E26 Design loves creative challenges and collaborations, so the current "Chronicles of a Diamond" world tour by Black Pumas energised his imagination and united the talents of an excellent FOH lighting team as programmer Meagan Metcalf and lighting director Alyssa Milione worked closely with him to create a great look for the band.

The lighting kit had to fit into one truck, a galvanising resource boundary that provokes invention and thinking out of the box, so Marc crafted a brilliant aesthetic for the band utilising the smart integration of lighting and a multi-dimensional scenic backdrop to produce truly stunning results with Robe moving lights right at the heart of the visual magic.

This evocative presentation is helping set the tone for Black Pumas as they light up the world and captivate an ever-expanding global fanbase with their distinctive psychedelic soul and rock music.

Marc wanted Robe fixtures on the rig for several good reasons - brightness, the small size, light weight - which meant he could squeeze a few more onto the rig, together with the wide range of features offered by a lively combination of ESPRITES, Spiider wash beams, MegaPointes, Spikie+s and Tetra2s.

Marc's first design for Black Pumas was in 2021 when they played five incendiary nights at Stubb's, a legendary music venue in their hometown of Austin, Texas. The design for those shows evolved into a tour design that launched in August 2021. There have been several other high-profile shows since then, and in December 2023, this new world tour launched.

Wanting to formulate a fresh look, Marc's ideas involved dovetailing Black Pumas developing brand identity and album art, and as part of this process, having a link to previous successful live show styling.

He describes it as "a kind of a shapeshifting through-line" permeating the work.

Not exactly reinventing the proverbial wheel but harvesting some of the existing programming finesse and adding new threads and energies.

The striking Puma-based logo was a major visual starting point, transformed for this tour into a practical 3D dimensional curtain & lightbox.

The show's narrative arc is loosely related to the journey of a diamond, starting as rough, untouched raw beauty that can become sculpted into an elegant gem.

Marc knew early in the design process that plenty of split beam lighting effects would be required to produce abstract physical manifestations of diamonds with beams shooting through faceted glass, so 3 x 24-inch mirror balls were added to the overhead rig, paired with 3 x 24-inch half mirror balls on the deck.

He wanted the capacity to emulate some of the colour bleed-through effects of the album cover artwork, so lighting the backdrop from behind became integral to the plan, and in turn, the puma eyes and teeth of the backdrop are made from transparent material.

To assist with this part of the design, he turned to the fabric and stage 'softs' experts at Rose Brand.

Ten Robe Tetra2 fixtures light the negative space behind in the backdrop, combined with pixel dot fixtures built into custom light boxes positioned behind the teeth and eyes, all working together beautifully to optimise a theatrical lighting trickery that gives the backdrop a truly 3D quality.

When Marc was considering beam-factors he didn't think twice about which fixtures were needed - Robe MegaPointes - which continue to be among THE most popular moving lights worldwide for this task.

Four MegaPointes are rigged on the upstage lighting truss, which is in front of the rear scenic truss, with four of the other 12 MegaPointes deployed one each on top of four onstage vertical truss towers, and the other eight scattered around the stage floor.

The 16 x Spikie+'s are rigged in four 'whisker' positions, two above and two on the deck.

The two overhead whisker bars are in the upstage corners, each rigged with 4 x Spikie+'s and are secured at 45-degree angles via drop bars from the truss, and these are matched on the floor by two customised truss stands giving the same angles in the mirror positions below, both also with four Spikie+'s each. These are effectively 'surrounding' the backdrop.

Three Spiiders on each of the four side / floor towers light the band and the downstage area, with two additional Spiiders further downstage on the floor covering lead singer, Eric Burton.

As well as providing wash coverage, these Spiiders are also eye-candy and well positioned to throw colour and illumination wherever it is needed.

The 7 x ESPRITES are on the upstage truss and function as workhorse back lights. Marc comments that they are “perfect for the size, weight and features with a nice flat beam, great shuttering, and excellent value”. Lighting vendor for the US legs of the tour was Gateway Studios & Production Services, which has large quantities of ESPRITES and other Robe products.

The design is very dynamic for an expedient, diligently picked, and well-placed number of fixtures, which, programmed judiciously, have plenty of scope to make all 25 or so numbers in the set look individual.

The challenge of integrating lighting and scenic elements was a good one for Marc, Meagan and Alyssa, and Marc underscores the importance of building a ‘dream team’ to produce a show like this.

“Meagan is a talented designer in her own right and brings meticulous programming skills to the table, she’s great at dissecting the music and weaving together sequences, and Alyssa’s programming skills and lighting instincts are also invaluable as well as her ‘road-smarts’ and practical eye when touring the design internationally.

Melanie Devlin was also essential to the creative process, providing her scenic art talents in integrating the painted elements with the crystals creating the backdrop’s diamond eyes and teeth effects.

Marc praises the “commitment and attention to detail” of Gateway who “fully embraced” the project as a service provider, co-ordinated from their side by account manager David Haskell and project manager Adam Ellis. By popular request, Joel Muir returned to Black Pumas as lighting crew chief from the previous run of shows, and he worked alongside technician Blake Miller.

Keeping everything rolling smoothly on the road is Black Puma’s tour director Mitchell Kenne, production manager Chris Worley, and tour manager Joel Pryor. The world tour continues through 2024.

Photo Credit: Derek Smith





