

Johnny Hallyday: Tour 66

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When the 'French Elvis' announced his final tour, it was an occasion that TPI could not miss. Mark Cunningham took the Eurostar to Paris and met with some familiar names...



The bubble that is the French live production industry can be a curious phenomenon in the eyes of foreign counterparts who regard the likes of Madonna, The Rolling Stones, Take That and U2 as being amongst the greatest arbiters of tour design excellence.

With its strong background of film noir, what the French mass market appreciates as high entertainment may be seen by the 'less sophisticated' Brits as dull. And whilst the French will shamelessly celebrate sentimentality, the British default is to over-analyse and prioritise coolness above simple appreciation.

Perhaps the fault partly lies with UK/US artists who may not be as honest as the French about giving audiences what they want.

Johnny Hallyday is a prime example of a performer who appears to have always put his audience first.

The 'French Elvis', as he is known, came to prominence at the end of the 1950s as the first — some would say only — true Gallic rock star. A veteran of 47 studio albums and no less than 26 live collections, Hallyday has earned a sizeable reputation over recent years for his spectacular live shows which at times have rivalled the biggest in the world.

Along with production director Roger Abriol of Camus Productions and show director Bernard Schmitt, some of the credit for this must go to Mark Fisher, the master of the spectacle, who has worked on Hallyday's last four tour designs.

When I met Fisher at one of Hallyday's three sold-out Stade de France stadium dates in late May, he had recently delivered Mylène Farmer's latest touring set whilst finalising the U2 360° project. Demand, as ever, remains high in Stufishland.

Referring to the star's current age, Tour 66 is intended to be Hallyday's farewell tour, although time will tell if this is indeed the case. Designed for both French, Belgian and Swiss stadiums and arenas — with a flexible design to cater for each — Tour 66 will have played 75 dates by the time it finally loads out next February.

Featuring the work of such companies as Stageco, Artefact, TAV, Stacco and Perry Scenic, the set is dominated by an enormous eagle figurehead, with wings outstretched across the performance area. Beneath it are two pairs of giant caryatid sculptures that are moved into position by robots on tracks that also serve as video wall support during the show.

Designing a set for a veteran rocker who has seen and done everything in his 50 year career surely poses a few questions. Said Fisher: "The trouble is, there's no dialogue like you would have with a band like U2; Johnny just wants ideas but even though he's a rocker he doesn't want to do the obvious Harley thing.

"Bernard, Roger and I would meet in Paris to develop sketches, and the Eagle came out of this process as a kind of figurehead statement, as did the big, curving truss for the roofette. This was my way of dealing with having a large video screen and still provide weather cover without being limited by a conventional roof."

Several people, including Jacqui Pyle and Stufish's Ray Winkler, came up with sketches for the

caryatid sculptures but it was Laura Léonard who hit the spot.

“Artefact had built all of our sets for Johnny in the past but they were already against the wall with Mylène Farmer’s project,” continued Fisher, “so we gave the caryatid sculpture contract to Jonathan Perry at Perry Scenic. This was the first time that any UK supplier has had a hand in building any aspect of a Johnny show — it says a lot about the current relationship between the euro and the pound.”

At 8900mm high and weighing 750kg, each sculpture breaks down into 12 sections to allow for transportation in purpose-built set carts. Carved from polystyrene with a GRP finish, the sculptures were each designed to accommodate a 2000W High End Showgun luminaire.

Stageco used its renowned in-house design, engineering and fabrication expertise to create a made-to-measure stage (72m wide at the Stade de France) which could easily be installed, demounted and transported, in spite of its technical complexity.

The company provided three touring stage bases and two upper stage sets, allowing the system to leapfrog venues. The bespoke elements include the elegant band roof, the robot frames and robot lifting structure, tracks for positioning the robots on stage, base frames, and the connectors between the standard Stageco trusses and tower elements supporting the eagle.

Stageco’s project manager Dirk de Decker was instrumental in the development and fabrication of the stage, while technical supervisors Antonio Duarte da Cruz and Patrick Vonckx are responsible for the logistics and stage installation on tour.

Said Roger Abriol: “Their tower-based system gave us the flexibility to create different and adventurous designs, offering a huge advantage in economy and strength. Tour 66 was an opportunity to create something totally different and that’s why we chose to work with Stageco.”

OLDIES AND GOLDIES

A stroll down memory lane for his loyal fans, Hallyday’s set list is notable for its ‘B-stage’ cameo that sees two halves of his band (MD’d by guitarist Robin Le Mesurier) travel from the main stage around a runway on battery-powered carriages (from Stacco), and finally meet to essentially form one stage in between a mosh pit and the remainder of the standing crowd.

It’s here that they play a short rock’n’roll oldies set that’s both musically and visually inspired by Elvis Presley’s famous ‘68 Special.

This highlight was the brainchild of Roger Abriol, whose links with Hallyday go back to 1974 when he was mixing the star’s sound at FOH. Before entering into production management, Abriol’s work as sound director on Jean Michel Jarre’s *Rendezvous Houston* ‘80s extravaganza introduced him to Clair Brothers — a relationship that’s as hot as ever.

“I had no hesitation in hiring Clair and [its Swiss base] Audio Rent to supply Johnny’s sound again for Tour 66, as I’ve done since 1987,” said Abriol.

Clair is supplying its flagship i-5 line array system for Tour 66 with Mike Keating — better known outside France for his work with The Police and Sting — at FOH, mixing on his regular choice of a Yamaha PM5000 desk.

Monitor mix duties are divided between Rémy Blanchet and Xavier Gendron. While the former is driving 48 outputs from his Yamaha PM1D, Gendron is outputting 18 channels from his current choice of console, the Studer Vista 5.

“I’m still into analogue sound and it still beats digital in every A-B test,” said Gendron. “But on Johnny’s last tour, I was asked to run more inputs and more mixes. To carry four analogue desks for monitoring when we went to arenas would not have been practical, so I compromised and used a Digidesign Venue.

“A monitor engineer friend of mine, Jean-Charles Ethier, told me how great the Vista 5 had

performed for him on the Céline Dion [Taking Chances] tour and I respect his views, so I went to Audio Rent in Switzerland to get a feel for it. The first time I plugged a mic into it, I was very impressed.

“It beat all the other digital consoles in terms of sound quality, and my mind was made up to use it for this tour after Johnny mentioned the difference in sound quality when we tried it out on a TV show.”

Gendron eschews plug-ins in favour of a fully-loaded outboard rack with PCM90s, TC M4000s and a D2 delay. Previous Hallyday tours have seen over 100 wedges and sidefills clutter the stage — today, Gendron recreates this “loud, pure rock’n’roll stage sound” with in-ear monitoring and just a pair of Clair ML18 subs for drumfill and Martin bins in the wings.

“We’re using 30 sets of IEM with Future Sonics ear monitors and a modified version of the Sennheiser 3000 Series system,” explained Gendron.

“Sennheiser are very good listeners. I told them that whilst I liked their wireless technology, there was something about the sound that could be improved. So I went to their factory and they spent a lot of time making alterations until I was very happy. I’ve heard the G2 and G3 systems and I think this is better.”

Microphone choices include Mike Keating’s favoured models from the Audio-Technica range, for example, whilst Sennheiser’s SKM 5200 wireless mics are deployed for all vocals... with a modified dynamic capsule for Hallyday.

Jean-Claude Thobois of Sennheiser France has worked with the star for 17 years and is on the tour to assist with the overall wireless transmission over 80 frequencies within the 600-868MHz spectrum — using 17 antennae on and around the stage — and an induction loop system for the hard of hearing amongst the audience.

LIGHTING

Camelon, one of France’s leading lighting rental firms, is supplying Jacques Rouveyrollis — Hallyday’s LD since 1975 — with his equipment and crew requirements.

Working alongside lighting director Nicolas Gilli and programmer Nicolas Gautier, Rouveyrollis specified a rig that includes Vari*Lite VL3500s, VL3000s and VL500s, Martin MAC IIIs, 2000 washes and 700s, Zap Technologies’ Big and Little Big Lites, Atomic strobes, Varyled LEDs and High End Showguns.

Run on 24 DMX universes, the fixtures are controlled by a pair of grandMA full-size consoles.

Despite 34 years of service to Hallyday, Rouveyrollis believes that his job is more enjoyable today than it has ever been. “It’s so much fun to rise to the challenge of creating such a spectacle,” he said.

“I think the Showgun was a good, powerful choice to create the big stadium looks, although I am not usually concerned with the choice of equipment. It’s the look and continuity that are most important. I like to create a sense of theatrical drama with the light show that builds throughout the performance.”

Adding further pizzazz is pyrotechnics specialist Groupe F. Founded in 1992 by Christophe Berthonneau, the company is providing around 2,000 individual effects — many of which, such as gerbs, were sourced from Le Maitre’s range.

The pyro design features a raging fire sequence with 80 flame sources and a big finale with fireworks and many stage effects that highlight the set architecture. “There’s a lot of set to compete with in the stadiums, so our effects have to be on a big scale!” commented Berthonneau.

VIDEO

Guido Ruyschaert set up XL Video France two years ago as a subsidiary of XL Belgium and sees Tour 66 as a very important project for the company. “We’re able to support the French market with the full back-up of the international XL group, and Johnny’s tour is a great example of what we are able to offer,” he said.

For its first major tour contract, XL France has supplied two incarnations of its PIX LED F-30 transparent modular video wall — a 162m² indoor backdrop and a much larger 456m² version for the outdoor shows that is formed from 14 pieces.

The company dovetails with both Xavier Barred of TAV on the operation of the four robot video screens and **Wlcreations'** Hans Willems who provided two sets of 40m track to move them.

Also very much 'in the loop' from the start was Paris-based video content creation company Artrack, founded in 1998 by Youri Zeliviansky, Gwen Vinson and Jérôme Ledoux.

With Ledoux's help, show director Bernard Schmitt was able to translate his visions into 26 pieces of commissioned video content — ranging from abstract and animated to narrative.

For this purpose, Artrack chose a wide range of video artists and Pieter Laleman integrates the material into the 3D playback system, UVA's d3 — as detailed in last month's U2 360° feature.

Said Ruyschaert: "I think the content is great and it synchronises brilliant with Johnny's songs — this is one of the applications that the d3 is perfectly suited to."

Starting indoors at the Zenith in St. Etienne on May 8, the outdoor leg of Tour 66 climaxed with a huge spectacular in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris on Bastille Day (July 14) before returning to arenas for the remainder of the itinerary.

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