

Reprinted from **Lighting&Sound America** January 2005
www.lightingandsoundamerica.com



AROUND THE SUN,

R.E.M. goes globetrotting with a unique-looking and sounding tour

By David Barbour

Sasic has blended a number of unusual elements for her design, including iColor Accent LED units from Color Kinetics and Pentaglas Blue Polygal panels which, placed at the back of the back act as refractors of light.

It was, as Michael Stipe was to say later on, a “very strange Thursday night.” Two days earlier, George W. Bush had been re-elected, sending New York City into a blue state of shock. As the audience filed into Madison Square Garden for an R.E.M. concert, the mood was muted, disoriented, impossible to read. After all, the band had been at the forefront of a concert-industry movement to achieve regime change in the White House, taking part in the Vote for Change tour, along with Bonnie Raitt, Bruce Springsteen, Dave Matthews, and the Dixie Chicks, among others. But, despite reports of near-record registration of younger voters,

the revolution did not take place and John Kerry’s hoped-for victory had been lost somewhere in Ohio.

As a result, the tension in the auditorium was palpable. The crowd was polite to opening-act Angela McCluskey, but clearly everyone was waiting to see what would happen when R.E.M. took the stage. What could they possibly say about the events of the week?

The band entered and, without further ado, launched into free-association rant (“That’s great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane/Lenny Bruce is not afraid”) that opens one of its signature songs: “It’s the

End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine).” A wave of laughter and applause swept through the room, a moment of communion attained. As Stipe later put it, “This is R.E.M. and this is what we do.”

In fact, it was the beginning of an evening-long exorcism. Later, introducing the number “Cuyahoga,” Stipe said, “This song takes place in Ohio,” to a chorus of boos for that most divided of swing states. In a moment of candor, he mused out loud, “Frankly, I have no idea what to say tonight,” adding that the band had chosen to let the music speak for itself.

R.E.M. has developed into the most cosmopolitan of bands—guitarist Peter Buck recently noted that most of the group’s album sales come from outside the US, and certainly their anti-war, anti-Bush stance is likely to prove less contro-

versial outside this country. Thus, it’s only too appropriate that their current tour, in support of the new album *Around the Sun*, is a global affair. Stretching from November to July, it played a relatively small number of dates in the US, followed by dates all around the world.

Never the most cheerful purveyors of wary romanticism and worldly cynicism across every track of its new album *Around the Sun*. That, combined with the unwelcome election news, should lend a weary, jaded air to its current performances—or so you might think. But the current tour is an electric event, enlivened by distinctive lighting and sound. Susanne Sasic’s production design, in its use of LED units and unusual refraction techniques, is arrestingly innovative. The

sound, courtesy of FOH engineer Brett Eliason, is notable for his clarity and crispness—even an audience member with only a passing familiarity with the group’s work can understand the lyrics. How many concert tours can you say that about?

Landscapes of light

Sasic’s design does contain a typical combination of your favorite moving lights, located in all the usual places. However, a number of units are hung behind upstage translucent panels that distort the light they reflect. Down front, the stage is dominated 51 Color Kinetics iColor Accent fix-

The combination of regular stage lighting, diffused backlighting, and color-changing LEDs creates a series of surreal looks that make an ideal setting for the band’s enigmatic, oddly suggestive songs.

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tures in 4' and 8' lengths, hanging like so many eerily glowing stalactites. These three elements—regular stage lighting, diffused backlighting, and color-changing LEDs, create a series of surreal looks that make an ideal setting for the band's often enigmatic, yet oddly suggestive, songs. It's a moonscape of light, alternately desolate, enchanted, and melancholy.

During "End of the World," a strobe chase behind the panels creates a star shower of light beams streaking on a horizontal pathway, as the LEDs glow in yellow and white, the colors chasing upwards. The result is a dazzling cross-hatch of lighting effects. In "So Fast So Numb" the LEDs, in red and blue, provide most of the stage wash, creating melancholy streaks of blue across the rear panels; the effect is pure film noir. In "Outsiders," the LEDs perform chases in the dark, while a set of floor units wash the back panels. At other times, as in "Welcome to the Occupation," the rear units and the LEDs drop out, while a series of floor units wash the stage from low positions, creating, an eerie, haunted-house look.

Sasic, who has a substantial resume as both a designer and a lighting director, worked with R.E.M. in the latter capacity during its years with the famed Willie Williams. She has now inherited the group and says that her current design, especially the use of the diffusion panels, is an extension of certain ideas that she has explored before: "I did a low-budget version of it on a Beck tour a few years ago," she says. "I used 30 shower curtains that were sewn together, with a fiber-optic star drop behind it, to get the refracting effect. It was cool, but it was kind of limited. This is a quantum leap forward."

The idea came to Sasic, she says, "when I saw a photo of a Rem Koolhaas-designed lecture hall in Rotterdam, with translucent panels. I showed it to Michael Stipe—my original idea was to use that wavy, corrugated fiberglass stuff that you see on greenhouses. It's usually green or brown." She adds, laughing, "Michael thought that was kind of a 'cornpone idea', as he put it. He said, 'Come to my house, and see these panels that I have over my patio. They do really cool things with light.'"

Thus, the Pentaglas Blue Polygal panels found in Stipe's backyard made their way onstage. "They're corrugated with a honeycomb structure, which causes the refraction," says Sasic. "They're about 8mm thick and can be cut into whatever length you need. We have them in 2' x 6' pieces. We had them shipped to Bandit Lites; they hired a construction company to assemble them." Behind the panels are 250 American DJ strobes, hanging in vertical lines, to provide the main diffusion light. Also behind the panels are High End Systems Studio Colors and 61 two-light Mole DWE units.

As for the LEDs, Sasic says she was drawn to the Color Kinetics units after becoming interested in the work of New York-based artist Leo Villareal, who uses LEDs as his medium, creating walls of light. Following a demonstration by Color Kinetics, she says, "I ended up using what I had seen at Leo's show, which is the iColor Accent; they come in 4' and 8' lengths."

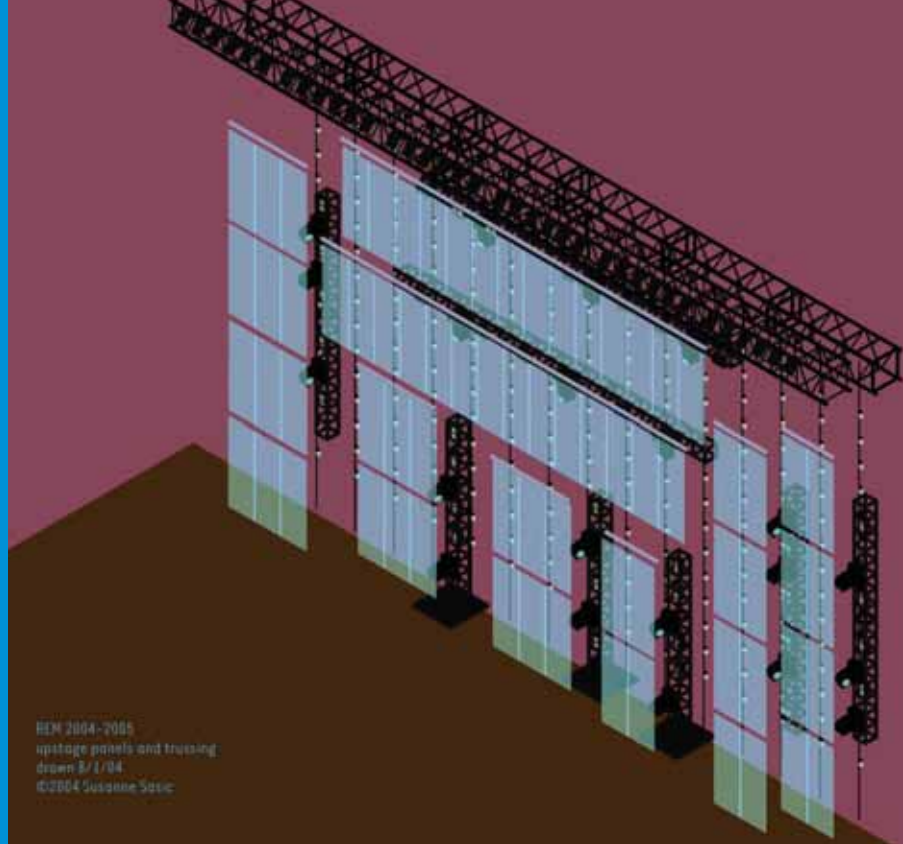
Speaking of the rest of her light package, Sasic notes that she uses 45 High End Systems Studio Colors. "They're a good workhorse unit," she says, adding, "I find myself using wash lights more and more, instead of hard-edge fixtures and gobos and things like that," which helps explain the clean, bold strokes of each stage picture. A late addition to the rig was a set of eight Vari*Lite Series 3000 units; she is very impressed by the unit's beam spread, but adds, "I love them, but they're big and bulky," which is why they're relegated here to floor positions. "The Studio Colors have a nice, compact size; I couldn't think of

In the course of a single concert, Michael Stipe's voice ranges from a reedy, wounded innocence to a Dylanesque growl; this vocal variation keeps FOH engineer Brett Eliason on his toes. "When he switches to the low, raspy voice, I have to tweak the vocal accordingly," Eliason says.



Sasic : “I kept worrying, have I created a monster? Are there too many DMX channels?”

Eliason : “I’m still an analog person. For the bands I work with, digital technology isn’t there yet.”



anything better to hang on the upstage panels.”

Overhead, the rig is relatively sparse, with 12 Strand 5K Bambino Fresnels, some more Studio Colors, two Martin Professional Mac 2000s, and 13 ETC Source Four 19° units. At stage right and left there are six PAR cans on each side with Wybron scrollers, and, at upstage right, a tower containing 24 PAR cans that shoot upstage.

All in all, it’s not a huge package but, with the LED units and the refraction panels, it was anyone’s guess how the gear would work as a unit. “I had so many sleepless nights,” says Sasic. “There were so many unknown elements.”

Speaking of the panel concept, she says, “It was a leap of faith. As far as the Studio Colors and the Moles went, I was guessing how they’d look. In fact, they do different things from what I had imagined, probably because they’re set closer together than I had originally planned. Anyway, it doesn’t look at all like the photo I showed to Michael. But I also discovered a million things that I could do.” She adds, “I was really worried that I wouldn’t be able to control the reflectiveness of the panels, that there would be light bouncing everywhere. I was relieved

to discover that it can get pretty dark up there.” Other gambles paid off, too: “I was hoping that the Color Kinetics units would reflect on the panels, and create a halo effect, which they did.”

For preparation, Sasic says, “we had four days of production rehearsals in Philadelphia. I went to Bandit Lites, in Nashville, for two days beforehand and programmed in most of the Color Kinetics stuff there. I made color palettes, then went on to program, with everything up and running at the production rehearsal. I did devote a couple of days to playing with the LEDs,” putting them through their paces, seeing what they could add to the overall design.

Speaking of the Color Kinetics units, her comments are generally favorable, although she expresses a bit of disappointment at the units’ rendition of the color white: “Their version of white is a little pink and a little green. Other than that, I love the colors I was able to get from them—and it was fun programming all their looks.”

The concert is controlled by a High End Systems Wholehog II. “I’ve been an Icon person for a very long time,” says Sasic. “But because we’re going to be skipping through Asia and South Africa, working

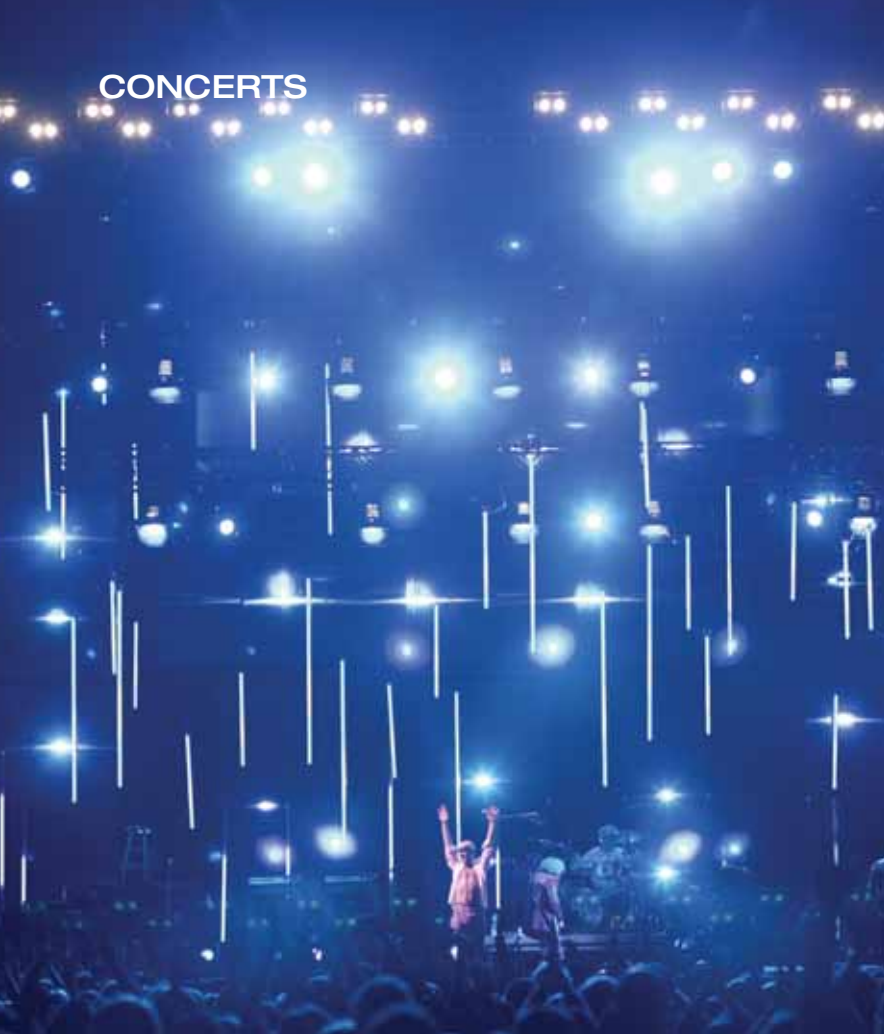
This computer drawing shows the crucial role played by the Pentaglas Blue Polygal panels in Sasic’s design. The panels are similar to those found over Michael Stipe’s patio.

with local production companies, I felt I needed a console I could find absolutely everywhere. Also I wanted to be sure I had the capabilities of the Hog’s effects engines, to drive the Color Kinetics units.” Among her control challenges, she notes that the LEDs use up more than 400 channels of DMX: “I have a Wing, but I could probably live without it,” she says. “I kept worrying: Have I created a monster? Are there too many DMX channels? But we got it figured out.”

Speaking of the console and the LEDs, she adds, “The folks at Bandit Lites did a spectacular job. They customized the CPU boxes for the Color Kinetics fixtures and replaced all the cabling and connectors, then wrote a fixture library for the Hog so I could control them.” Such adaptations were necessary, she says, because, “the fixtures are hearty and durable, but they’re not made for touring; the connectors are really flimsy.”

Nevertheless, what is most attention-getting about Sasic’s design is its up-to-the-minute approach to concert lighting.

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Sasic's design moves from startling color combinations to boldly monochromatic looks. What can't be captured in photos is the kinetic quality of her design.

Unlike most US concert tours that use big lights and standard theatrical techniques to glorify the lead performer, along with plenty of bumps and chases to goad the audience into responding, she takes a whole-stage approach, using a background of stunning effects and, in the case of the LEDs, turning lighting into a scenic element. To be sure, it's not hard to pick out Michael Stipe on-stage, performing in his distinctive nervous-marionette style, but the show is more about meticulously designed stage pictures. It's a highly suitable approach for a band like R.E.M.

Controlling the dynamics

Many groups claim it, but few really have it; in R.E.M.'s case, the songs feature lyrics so dense with allusion and meaning, they could stand alone as poetry. If you're running sound for a group like that, you'd better make sure the lyrics can be heard—which is just what Brett Eliason does. "It matters a lot to me," he says. "Rock or pop—the words are just as important as the music. I strive to get the vocals out front; if you can get vocal clarity, everything else falls into place."

This is Eliason's first tour with R.E.M., after more than a dozen years with Pearl Jam. "I started in a recording-studio environment," he says, "and I've continued to work there. I tend to go

out on tour every couple of years, but even now I mostly do records."

Eliason notes that the tour is scheduled to play a varied range of venues, from places that seat a few thousand to open arenas, to European arenas that can seat 80,000. Taking an intimate act, such as R.E.M., into the arena environment, can be a challenge, he says. In them, "the mid-mid range is always a fight," he says. "The low mid-range builds up in these buildings; if you suck it out, you lose a lot of the 'thump', especially with rock bands, and you'll miss that—it starts sounding more hi-fi. Another thing that people will do—and I'm as guilty of this as anybody—is, when you're driving a lot of sub energy, you've got to brighten things up or push up the volume, and it starts getting painful." Getting it right "is a balancing act, every day."

To make sure the set-up is correct, Eliason says, "I typically tend to pink-noise a room, using a [Klark Teknik] DN6000 analyzer to get a look at what the room is doing. I work with my processors, playing a couple different cuts of music. I also run around the building, play with the PA's trim heights a bit."

The basis of Eliason's speaker system is the EAW 760 line array. "It's a combination of the 760 and 761 boxes," he says, "which varies from day to day, depending on the size of the room. The 761s have a little bit of a wider throw, while the 760s have a slightly longer throw. I'm also using EAW SB1000 subs." He's aware that the line array isn't everyone's first choice, but, he says, "I took it out with Pearl Jam last year, and it worked great. No PA is perfect, but I absolutely like line arrays. It depends on what works for you. I've used [L-Acoustics] V-DOSC and [JBL] VerTec, and the Meyer array, and they've all worked just fine. But I've particularly enjoyed the EAW."

He's similarly certain about his choice of console, which is the Midas XL-4. "I'm still an analog person," he says. "My own home mixing facility is digitally based. I know a lot about digital audio; I've seen a lot of people work on digital boards, including Bowie, and it makes sense for them. But for the bands I work with, the digital technology is not there. We'll all be on it in a couple of years, but, right now the converters aren't as nice in live boards. They're just starting to be able to interface from the console to the amps all the way in the digital spectrum."

It's different in the recording studio, he stresses. "There are mastering guys using \$50,000 converters in mastering labs, but we're not in that environment. We're trying to capture the high end of a snare drum, the bite of a vocal. The more you go into conversion, the more two-dimensional it gets; you lose the transient information. Digital just isn't quite there for me yet." He adds, "In a couple of years, I'll make the big switch. One thing about digital—it's certainly nice to work on a smaller board."


Eliason's equipment package includes a fair amount of effects units, including, he says, "a lot of distressors for the vocals and bass guitars; there's the Manley Stereo Variable MU Limiter Compressor, which is mostly for the acoustic instruments, along with the Summit Audio DCL200 compressor/limiter. Also, your standard dbx 160s, and a slew of BSS 404 four-channel compressors units to control the dynamics

on the keyboards. For effects, there's the T.C. Electronic 2290 dynamic digital delay, the Roland SDE 3000, the Eventide ultra-harmonizer, the Lexicon PCM60 drum reverb, and another T. C. Electronic multi-effects unit, the M2000."

The effects gear is especially important in dealing with the ever-changing dynamics of Stipe's voice, which moves from the reedy, wounded innocence of "Losing My Religion" to the Dylanesque growl of more recent numbers. "I love the distressor, because it tends to control his variable dynamic without being super-audible," says Eliason. "I'm playing with his EQ a lot. When he switches to the low, raspy voice, I have to tweak the vocal accordingly, to keep clarity. I'm chasing his vocal that way, all night long."

Perhaps for the same reason, Eliason prefers to "mix and match" his microphone choices. "I've got an Audix OM7 on Michael for his wired mic, but he will switch to a Shure Beta 58 and a Shure wireless system. We chose a Neumann condenser for Mike Mills, which helps, because he's playing an instrument and tends to move around a lot; the Neumann has a wider pattern, to keep him centered. Otherwise, we have a slew of Shure, Sennheiser, Audio-Technica, and Audix mics. We have the [Audio-Technica] AT4050s overhead, for the drums, with an AKG 460 on the hat and Audix D6 and Shure Beta 91 on the kick and Shure Beta 98s on the toms.

"The biggest challenge," he says, "is dealing with musicians who keep switching off—we have three people playing bass. You've got songs where Mike sitting at the piano and Peter Buck will be playing the bass. Each guy's touch is a little different, so the sound is a little different. You have to be constantly aware of the blend, so you have a good starting point—and it's not a jumbled mess when they start the song. Michael is dynamic, but he's actually quite consistent, with solid intonation. Right now, everyone has colds, but I expect he'll be fine tonight."

The R.E.M. tour is now spending several weeks in Europe. Later this spring, it plays South Africa and Asia, winding up in Scandinavia and the UK this summer. 

R.E.M. : 2004 World Tour

Lighting and set design, programming and board operation:

Susanne Sasic

FOH Sound Engineer: Brett Eliason

Production Manager: Dick Adams

Stage Manager: Steve Gordon

Bandit Lites Crew Chief: Jimmy Hatten

Bandit Lites Crew:

Will Anglin

David Butzler

Bobby Dominguez

Jason Workman

Rigger: Dano Rowley

Carpenter: Leffert Carroll

Lighting Equipment

- (51) Color Kinetics I-Color® Accent
- (45) High End Systems Studio Color®
- (8) Vari*Lite VL3000™ Wash
- (8) Martin Atomic strobe, four with Atomic Color
- (61) Two-lite Mole DWE
- (60) PAR MED
- (13) ETC Source Four 19° with iris
- (12) Strand 5K Bambino Fresnel
- (12) Wybron Ram 5K scrollers
- (8) Wybron PAR scrollers
- (2) Martin Mac 2000 Profile
- (2) Lycian M2 truss spot
- (1) High End Systems Wholehog® II
- (1) High End Systems Wholehog® Wing
- (1) DMX overdrive unit
- (2) Avolites 72-way 2.4K analog dimmer rack
- (2) Six-way 5K dimmer
- (28) 10' A-type truss
- (4) 4' A-type truss
- (4) A-type truss corner
- (15) 8' minibeam truss
- (3) 4 minibeam truss
- (82) Custom 2' x 6' Pentaglas Blue Polygal panels with custom hanging hardware
- (250) American DJ strobes
- Custom hanging and mounting hardware for Color Kinetics fixtures

Main Sound System Package

Speakers-Front Hang:

- (16) EAW KF-760—long throw
- (8) EAW KF-761—short throw
- (16) EAW SB1000 sub
- (6) EAW JF200 near fill

Amplifiers-Front Hang:

- (6) QSC Powerlight 3.4 (highs)
- (6) QSC Powerlight 6.0(mids)
- (12) QSC Powerlight 6.0 (lows)
- (6) QSC Powerlight 6.0 (subs)

System Control:

- (2) Klark Teknik DN3600 stereo EQ
- (1) Aphex Dominator
- (3) BSS FDS-366t Omni Drive
- (1) Klark Teknik DN 6000 RTA

FOH Console:

- (1) Midas XL4/56
- (2) Midas XL490 PSU

Dynamics:

- (2) dbx® 160X
- (2) dbx® 160A
- (4) BSS 404
- (1) Summit Audio DCL-200
- (9) Empirical Labs distressor
- (2) Manley Variable MU
- (1) Alan Smart stereo compressor

Gates:

- (1) Aphex 622

Effects:

- (1) Roland SDE3000
- (1) TC Electronics 2290
- (1) Lexicon PCM-60
- (1) Eventide H3000
- (1) TC Electronic M2000

Playback/Record:

- (1) Panasonic SV3700
- (1) HHB Burnit CDR
- (1) Apple I-Pod

Microphones:

- (1) Shure Beta 91, (1) Audix D-6, (3) Shure Sm-57, (2) Shure Sm-81, (1) AKG 460, (3) Shure Beta 98, (2) Audio Technica AT 4050, (1) Beyer M-88, (1) Sennheiser MD-609, (2) Sennheiser MD-421, (1) Audio Technica 104, (5) Avalon U5 D.I., (2) Pro Co DB4 D.I., (6) Countrymen D.I.