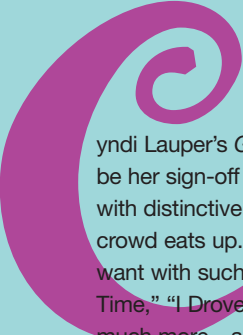


# Still Having Fun



Cyndi Lauper  
bids farewell to touring  
with a splashy career  
retrospective

Photos & Text by Steve Jennings



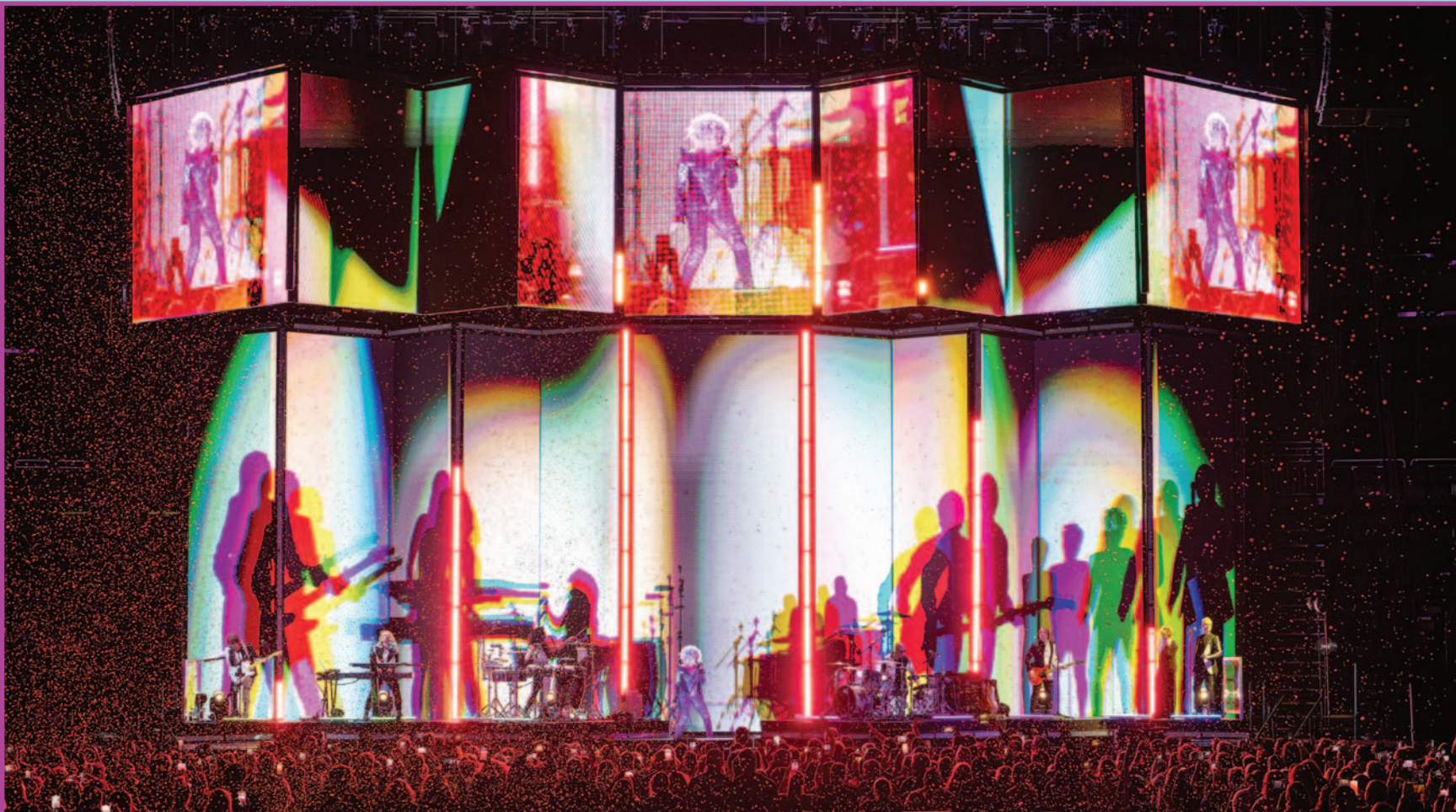
Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Farewell Tour* may be her sign-off from the road, but she commands the stage with distinctive vocal chops and a quirky charm that the crowd eats up. She gives the audience exactly what they want with such iconic songs as "True Colors," "Time After Time," "I Drove All Night," "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," and much more—along with fun costumes and hair to match.

The show is designed to give her a visually arresting showcase. According to Melissa Ruggieri in *USA Today*, it "includes panels of video screens behind and above the stage arranged like a procession of folded picture frames, sometimes rolling scrolls of MTV-era videos, other times blasting layers of colors. Even when Lauper was chatting, a peacock palette of hues swirled in a psychedelic blob behind her." In the *Dallas Voice*, Rich Lopez adds, "The display of screens was spread across like an accordion photo album displaying both pictures from her career and livestreams played all in colorful vibrancy." In *Creative Loafing Tampa Bay*, Gabe Echazabal notes, "Her take on the theme song from the 1985 kid flick *The Goonies*, 'The Goonies 'R' Good Enough' included clips from the film that were beamed on the screens and made to look like

long strips of film. In a clever nod, Lauper included her cover of Prince's 'When You Were Mine' into the mix, as purple neon shone brightly around the entire stage and the borders of all the video screens."

**Brian Burke, creative director,  
show director, producer**

Burke, whose credits include Las Vegas residencies for Luke Bryan and Lionel Richie plus the Formula 1 opening ceremony in Vegas, was referred to Lauper's team. "Ryan Amstad, of Pophouse, who had just acquired Cyndi's catalog, was one of the generous referrals," he says. "I met with Cyndi and her manager, Lisa Barbaris, and felt there was potential for a good collaboration. They wanted a true partner to put a team together and a director to collaborate on creating a show that could marry performance art and music while honoring her entire life and career. One of the biggest challenges was Cyndi's desire to play entirely live but transition the show to time code so the technology facilitating the performance artwork could be synched. Our band rehearsals in NYC [during the] summer of '24 were hard work, but the music and audio team built the foundation for success."



Burke says the design was ultimately based on a paper canvas, seen in a gallery and preserved from 1913, used for combining hand painting and poetry. It was, he notes, "a perfect canvas for Cyndi's iconic lyrics featuring various famous artworks."

## TOUR TALK

Lauper had not toured as a solo act in arenas since the 1980s and the show was going on sale with Live Nation in a week. He adds, "I was given a theatre budget for an arena tour, so I called my friend Harry Forster at Solotech and my longtime collaborator Tom Sutherland for lighting and production design; they brought the concept to life beautifully for the budget as they always do."

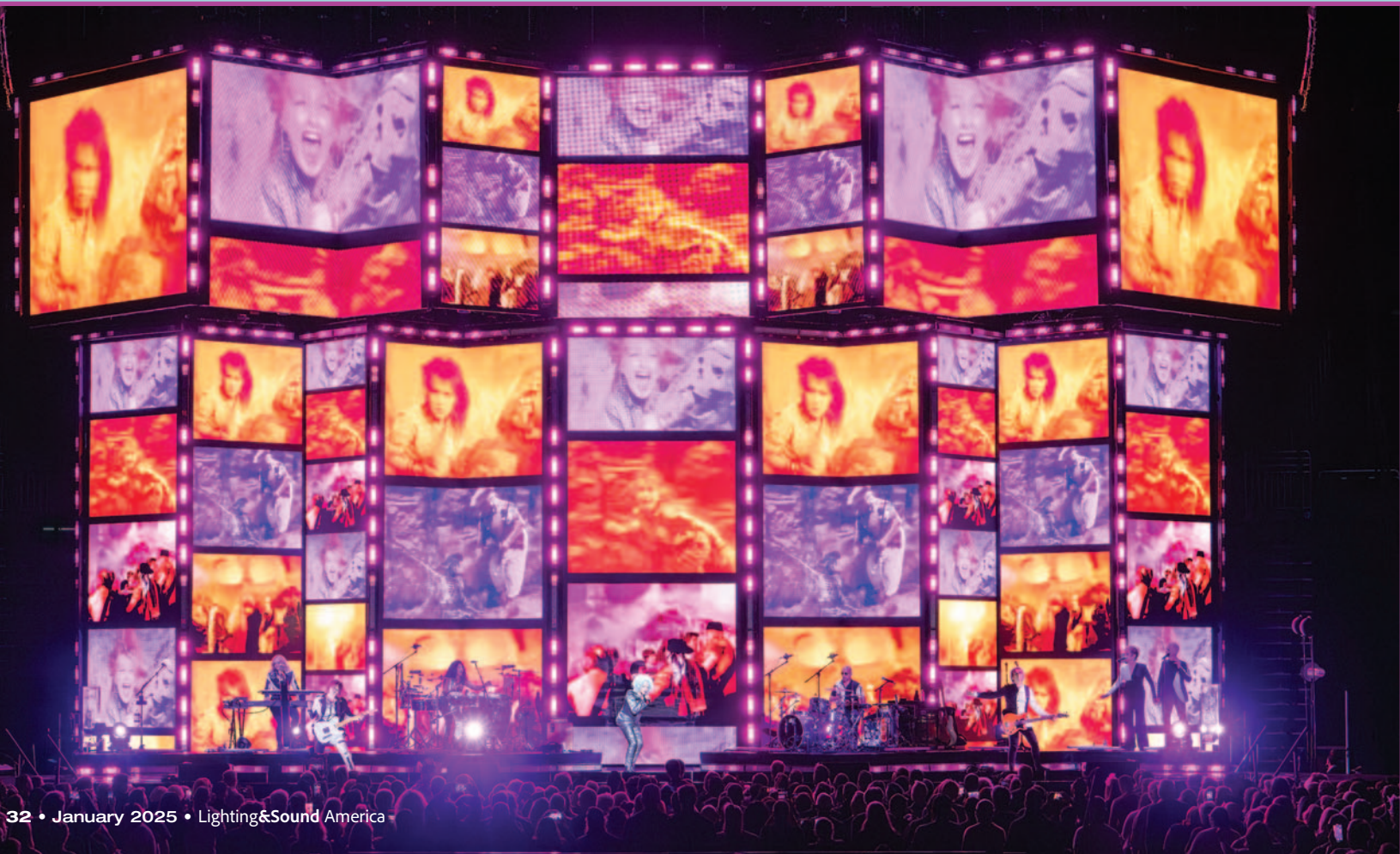
In May, Lauper invited Burke to art exhibitions in New York, seeking inspiration. "I had just spent a few weeks in Italy exploring galleries, so we visited museums and exhibitions and got to know each other. I use video in most shows to create versatile worlds, so I knew a video approach was right. We needed an original canvas, inspired by artwork, to facilitate various artworks coming to life and bring iconic visual moments from her career to life in a new way. Cyndi and I were intimately involved in every step, creating the show from the set list, costumes, styling, visuals, performance elements, scripting, and staging. It was a true creative partnership."

Burke says the design was ultimately based on a paper canvas, seen in a gallery and preserved from 1913, that was used for combining hand painting and poetry. It was, he notes, "a perfect canvas for Cyndi's iconic lyrics featuring various famous artworks. I pitched to her how we could adapt this to a stage, and she loved it." Lauper wanted the band to be integrated into the artwork; Burke

wanted a screen the audience could experience from all angles. "The zig-zag-folded 'living artwork' on the LED wall was a perfect approach; I rendered some examples on it, and it really worked. Tom Sutherland wanted to add depth, so we included the downstage floating header instead of the traditional IMAG. We could finally tell one continual creative story on this canvas. It took a lot of convincing a lot of people because it was challenging, but I knew it was going to work."

Burke's creative team included Jenn Rapp, Liam Lunniss, and Sagiv Karpel. "We've worked together for many years on tours, Vegas residencies, and TV events including *America's Got Talent*. Jenn is an extraordinary stage director and TV producer who can do anything, ultimately becoming Cyndi's stand-in. Liam is a brilliant movement director for musicians, singers, and stars, making everything look natural. Sagiv is my right hand on video content visuals."

The music director Kris Pooley, who worked with Burke for seven years on *American Idol* and Formula 1, helped Burke assemble audio and musical teams. "My company, World of Wearable Art [based in New Zealand] connected me to Yayoi Kusama to film her artwork. [The internationally recognized Kusama, who specializes in sculpture and installations, is the subject of the 2018 documentary *Infinity*.] Reza Dolatabadi, a truly unique animation artist





Above and opposite: The LED walls, consisting of ROE Visual Carbon CB5 panels, were designed by Lauper and Burke. The sizes and angles they made were ideal for flexing the tools that the Green Hippo media server provides, Chmielewski says.

friend, hand-painted all the artwork we needed. Noah Shulman compiled 40 years of Cyndi's incredible life and career into the one-minute opening video, based on my brief. Gravity designed the remaining video content based on our direction. Brian Jenkins and Scott Chmielewski are genius lighting and video directors and programmers who truly collaborate, and I love working with them. Anything is possible with this team, and I am thrilled through all this collaboration we were able to give Cyndi Lauper the farewell tour she deserves."

Staging was provided by All Access, Inc. Robert Achlimbari, All Access vice president, says, "The tour had a house stage, and we provided the onstage band risers and ego risers at left and right." Of the latter, he says, "One has a lift built into it for a dress change and the other has a trap door where [Lauper] appears magically. There's a set of stairs into the audience, which is how she gets to the B stage. That's the most intriguing part because of the silk gag. We built a bunch of custom decks with vents and attachments for bands underneath." The vents, he adds, are for "16 fans, all pointed toward stage center, off-axis by 4°," creating the flying fabric look that makes "True Colors," an effective climax.

### Tom Sutherland, lighting designer

Sutherland, of DX7 Design, says, "We've crossed paths with Cyndi's management team before on other projects, so there was already an established rapport. They reached out to us knowing we could deliver a bold, creative design to honor her incredible legacy. Cyndi was very hands-on and had a clear vision. She's an artist through and through; she brought an emotional perspective to the table which helped guide the design from the beginning. Our role was to translate her ideas into something visually spectacular while maintaining her authenticity and storytelling. It's been an honor to be part of this iconic farewell tour."

From the start, Sutherland says, it was clear the tour had to be an immersive experience, a true celebration of Lauper's career. "The concept evolved but certain elements, like the heavy use of video, were part of the DNA from the beginning. Cyndi wanted the visuals to complement the music and tell her story, bringing her iconic style and energy to life. We went through several iterations to refine the balance between lighting and video, ensuring they worked in harmony to highlight both the intimate and larger-than-life moments of the show. The result is a design that feels cinematic, yet deeply personal, just like Cyndi."



Above: "There is no content house that works the way Gravity does," Chmielewski says. "The quantity and quality of content they produce is one of the ways we can be so creative while working with an artist. Everything we do I build from smaller pieces that are stacked and layered to create a song or look."

Speaking about his team Sutherland says, "Hunter Selby, our senior associate designer, is an anchor in every sense of the word. He oversees the big-picture coordination, ensures every detail is locked in, and keeps us all on track. Jasmine Lesane and Erik Alkire bring incredible creativity and technical expertise. Jasmine has a natural flair for translating ideas into practical designs, and Erik is meticulous when it comes to detail work. Hunter handles coordination and quality control, while Jasmine and Erik dive into the specifics of the lighting design. Collaboration is at the core of everything we do, and the result is a cohesive, well-rounded design that we're all proud of."

"Lighting directors Keith Hoagland and Donte Mercado are incredible talents and consummate professionals. I've had the privilege of working with Keith on several projects over the years; he's steady, experienced, and always brings his A-game. Donte is a newer addition to the team but has already proven to be indispensable." Hoagland focuses on maintaining the overall vision and consistency of the design, ensuring every cue and transition is executed correctly. Mercado was present for the first few shows to oversee brand standards and execution from DX7. "The show is run on grandMA3s, which give us the flexibility and power to manage such a dynamic and intricate design," Sutherland says.

Solotech was a natural choice for this tour, notes Sutherland. "Their ability to handle lighting, video, and audio under one roof provided a level of integration that made the process smoother from day one. It wasn't just a matter of convenience; it was about ensuring every department worked seamlessly together, which is critical on a show like this where lighting and video are so intertwined."

"Working with [associate lighting designer/programmer] Brian Jenkins is always a pleasure. He brings a sharp eye and incredible precision to every design. On this show, his expertise in programming was invaluable. Cyndi's music demands a certain level of nuance, and Brian has the ability to make the lighting feel like an extension of the performance. His ability to adapt quickly and elevate ideas made the creative process seamless."

### **Brian Jenkins, associate lighting designer, programmer**

Jenkins, noting his work with Sutherland over the years, says there's an unspoken language between them. "He'll say something like, 'I want it to feel like a Tokyo nightlife sequence here,' and I'll know exactly what he means and how to approach it in the programming. As a team, we were all involved in the process from start to finish, collaborating

with Tom, Brian Burke, and Cyndi on the creative vision, handling technical prep, managing fixture choices, and translating the design into a fully programmed show. There's a lot of back-and-forth in the process, refining, adjusting, and adding layers of detail. The fun part is that we all bring ideas to the table, building off each other's creativity."

Jenkins programmed the show on MA Lighting's grandMA3 console with the newer MA3 software. Once he got through the initial adjustments, he says, the system showed its strength. "The new ways of organizing and managing data make a lot of sense once you've had time to dig in; those extra tools definitely helped us push things further."

The lighting rig includes 30 Vari-Lite VL3600 Profiles, 16 Vari-Lite VL3600 LT Profiles, two Robe BMFL WashBeams, six Claypaky Sharpy Wash 330s, 23 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, one GLP impression X4 Bar 10, eight Solaris Flare Half LR Q+ units, 150 Solaris Flare Q LRs, 32 Elation SixBar 1000s, 12 Astera Titan Tubes, four Astera FP6 Hydra panels, 14 Robert Juliat Dalis 860s, three Robe BMFL Followspots, and three Robe iFORTE Followspot LTX units.

Regarding the lighting rig, Jenkins says, "The Solaris Flare LRs are a favorite for their versatility. They're more than just strobes; they offer a lot of creative options with pixel mapping and color control. The Vari-Lite VL3600s are

another go-to for me; they've got a solid color palette and excellent output without feeling overly bulky in the rig. I also have to give a nod to the [GLP impression X4 Bars], which are flexible enough to cover a range of looks in the crowd and treat the fabric moments at the B stage. At the end of the day, it's about balancing creative vision with reliability, and this rig gave us a lot of tools to play with."

### **Scott Chmielewski, screens producer/video director**

Chmielewski has worked with Burke and video director and content producer Karpel before. "We have a creative shorthand in taking an idea or concept and developing it into a look for a song. Sagiv has a great eye for texture, color, and a unique way of seeing a song. I enjoy that we have such a collaborative process of art and technology."

The content is produced by the Germany-based firm Gravity. "We collaborate to build a look or concept and, using the tools of the media servers, our collective creative experience brings life to the vision of Cyndi and Brian Burke," Chmielewski says. "No content house that works the way Gravity does. The quantity and quality of content they produce is one of the ways we can be so creative while working with an artist. Everything we do I build from smaller pieces stacked and layered to create a song or look. Gravity is exceptional at providing the assets and building blocks to work through options and ideas."

Chmielewski says the main powerhouse for this tour, indeed most of the projects, is the Green Hippo Tierra+MK2 media server (two servers and two backups). "The tools and flexibility of the software are essential for developing ideas quickly. The way the software is built gives us countless tools to build with and explore ideas without being locked to a singular piece of time code content. This show is also very IMAG-heavy as part of the creative video. These same tools provide us with amazing ways to integrate live video with our content and make it feel cohesive."

The LED walls, consisting of ROE Visual Carbon CB5 panels, were designed by Lauper and Burke. The sizes and angles made were ideal for flexing the tools the Hippo server provides, Chmielewski adds. "The main wall is made up of 12 individual panels separated by lighting strips. The total resolution for that is 4,056 by 1,248. The header element is made up of nine smaller sections also separated by lighting strips; that area is 4,056 by 624. We also have high-powered projectors to map imagery directly on Cyndi and the band for specific songs. Lastly, we also drive all the standard IMAG screens which we also use to create a more integrated visual experience."

### **Michelle Sabolchick, FOH engineer**

This is Sabolchick's first tour with Lauper, although for more than 30 years she has been at the front of house for such artists as Elvis Costello, Kesha, Melissa Etheridge,



Styx, Gwen Stefani, The Goo Goo Dolls, Thievery Corporation and many more. The creator/owner of MixingMusicLive.com, she is also the co-founder of Soundgirls.org, a global support group for women in audio.

**“Cyndi knows exactly what she wants, so it’s pretty straightforward. I take my cues from the artist. The show is very much a live band, not exactly like the records. It’s important that the audience hears everything going on onstage with Cyndi sitting on top.”**— Sabolchick

Sabolchick mixes the tour using a Yamaha RIVAGE PM7. Alongside her at the front of house is systems engineer Niki Skotidakis. “Niki is fantastic and did an excellent job of getting the system up and running quickly as well as sounding great for me every day,” Sabolchick says. “I hope to work with him again. We’ve got 47 inputs coming from the stage with another 11 or so inputs for talkback mics, audience mics, etc. As far as outputs, my stereo bus feeds four matrix outputs for left, right, sub, and front fill. Everything goes into Niki’s PRODIDGY.MP [multifunction audio processor from DirectOut] for system control. From there, the main, flown subs, and side hangs are fed from the left and right. The ground subs are fed from subs and front fill and the B stage fill are fed from the front fill.”

Sabolchick likes to start with the artist’s material, learning the studio album versions first. “Once we start rehearsals, I take my cues from the artist,” she says. “Cyndi knows exactly what she wants, so it’s pretty straightforward. The show is very much a live band, not exactly like the records. We spent time in band rehearsals dialing in keyboard patches, solos, etc. A lot goes on onstage with drums, bass, guitar, keys, and percussion; at times, a melodica and recorder are featured. There are also two amazing background vocalists and everyone in the band, except the drummer, sings background. It’s important that the audience hears everything going on onstage with Cyndi sitting on top.”

Sabolchick describes herself as a less-is-more engineer. “I like a clean signal path and rely on mic choice, placement, and good signal gain and EQ for most of what I need. I don’t have any outboard gear on this show. I tend not to add anything unnecessary unless a problem can’t be fixed with what’s onboard. I’m using a variety of effects from the console including Eventide and Bricasti reverbs on drums and vocals. I use Dynamic EQ [DynEQ4] on Cyndi’s vocal as well as the Portico 5043 comp. Then I use the 5043 on the two background vocalists and bass

guitars with DynEQ6 side-chained to the kick drum. Everything else is pretty straightforward—Channel EQ and dynamics with the exception of the [Yamaha] DaNSe [noise-suppression] plug-in.”

The latter is especially useful. Toward the end of the show, Lauper sings “True Colors” on the B stage as an air fountain blows a large piece of fabric around her. “The fan noise is considerable and, as you can imagine, it’s all going into her vocal mic,” Sabolchick says. “The DaNSe plug-in has been crucial in getting rid of the fan noise and making this work. I’ve also been using it on the back-ground vocals to get rid of cymbal noise and on the floor tom to remove noise from the cymbals, which are very close to it.”

The PA consists of L-Acoustics gear: 16 K1s per side for the main hangs, 18 K2s per side for the side hangs, eight KS28 flown/side hangs per side and eight KS28s on the floor. Also featured are 12 L-Acoustic KARA IIs per side for the side rear hangs, and eight KARA II front fills. The B stage has four X8s. “I like the K1 and KS28 system for the clarity and the power,” she says. “It’s a great-sounding system with enough punch and everything you need to get the vocals clear and loud. It also goes up very fast which was crucial on this tour.”

### **Jon Schimke, monitor engineer**

Schimke has mixed on the Yamaha RIVAGE PM7 for five-plus years. “It is my favorite digital mixing platform as Yamaha has improved the head amps and EQ sections. Everything on board [effects] is light years ahead, better than any other digital console.” This is Schimke’s first tour with Cyndi Lauper. “Our first show in South America [at Rock in Rio] was on all locally provided gear. What could go wrong? Luckily it went well.”

Schimke uses a Summit DCL-200 dual-channel compressor/limiter on Lauper’s vocal, having had one in his rack since 2006. “Everything else is onboard the console. I use a Bricasti reverb for Cyndi’s vocal, with a handful of the SPX onboard stuff to cover the drum, acoustic, and BGV reverbs. I have the [Rupert Neve 5045] Primary Source Enhancer on Cyndi’s vocal to help filter out a small amount of background noise. Her vocal range is so dynamic that I barely touch it in fear of it changing her mix drastically.

“Cyndi is a consummate professional. She understands that we are in a different building every single show. The only real difference is that I have to push her click up a bit if she gets out of time on the B stage. Cyndi sings on a [Shure] Beta 58A capsule on a Shure Axient stick with her own Beta 57A windscreen. She knows what she likes, and she sticks with it. I have always been a Shure 58 or Beta 58A guy.”

Prior to his arrival, Schimke says Lauper “had Future Sonics or Sensaphonics with an external microphone (and



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pack) that gave her control of a couple of mics in her ears. It turned into an extra pack (failure point) and no chance for the monitor engineer to hear what she was hearing. Also, she had wedges and side fills. I can only imagine that it was a bit confusing. We switched her IEMs to JH Audio Laylas on this tour. She seems to like them thus far. I think that getting rid of the external stuff has made it a bit easier for her to hear more of what's going on. We also use Shure PSM 1000s for packs and transmitters.”

#### **Barry Foy, band monitor engineer**

Foy also mixes on a Yamaha RIVAGE PM7. A longtime DiGiCo user, he decided to give the Yamaha a go for this tour. “It’s a great platform; there’s so much under the hood and it sounds amazing,” he says. “The SILK pre-amps have a great analog quality to them. You can drive them hard, and they don’t crap out on themselves. And I do drive them hard. If it ain’t in the red, it ain’t on! The console’s onboard EQ reacts exactly like you want it to. Small

subtle changes are easily heard. I don’t have to whack the EQ gains to get anything out of them unless I want to.”

Foy says Schimke was instrumental in all members of the team choosing the PM7. “He’s a longtime user and Michelle wanted to take one out at the front of house, so it made sense to keep a cohesive system. I mean, starting a new tour with an artist you’ve never worked with on a desk you’ve never mixed on, what could possibly go wrong? Michelle and I went to the Yamaha demo lab at Soundcheck in Nashville before rehearsals to get some hands-on training. [The producer/engineer] Russ Long was very helpful. He’s got about half a dozen versions of RIVAGE set up there to play around with. There’s a lot that’s similar to the layout and style of the PM1D and PM5D, so it felt familiar. It didn’t take long to get comfortable on the desk.”

Foy mixes everything inside the box. “The internal console effects are great. I’m using the Bricasti M7 for most of my reverbs. I love having the Eventide H3000 layered shift





Lauper sings “True Colors” on the B stage as an air fountain blows a large piece of fabric around her. “The fan noise is considerable and, as you can imagine, it’s all going into her vocal mic,” Sabolchick says. “The DaNSe plug-in has been crucial in getting rid of the fan noise and making this work.”

algorithm available for my background vocals. That particular sonic color has been on my mixing palette since the ‘80s. Plus all the SPX stuff we’ve known and loved for decades.” He uses the Neve 5045 Primary Source Enhancer on some of his background vocals to clean up the ambient noise in the musicians’ ears. “The crowds have been surprisingly loud and enthusiastic. The PSE is great for controlling that without being abrupt like a ducker

or gate.” He uses the Teletronix LA-2A leveling amplifier on background vocals and the Universal Audio 1176 compressor on Lauper’s vocal. “She has an impressive vocal range and can go from a whisper to a roar within the same phrase. ‘I Drove All Night’ is a perfect example. I have no outboard rack gear. Less to go wrong, less to depend upon.”

Foy also uses the DaNSe plug-in on “True Colors,” not-



## *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Farewell Tour*

### Production Crew:

Creative Director/Show Director/Producer: Brian Burke  
 Production Director: Harold Jones  
 Production/Lighting Designer: Tom Sutherland (DX7 Design Inc)  
 Associate Lighting Designer/Programmer: Brian Jenkins  
 Lighting Director: James Coldicott  
 Associate Designers: Hunter Selby, Jasmine Lesane, Erik Alkire  
 Lighting Directors: Keith Hoagland, Dione Mercado  
 Assistant Show Directors: Jenn Rapp, Liam Lunniss  
 Screens Producer/Video Director: Scott Chmielewski  
 Video Direction/Content Producer: Sagiv Karpel  
 Video Director Live Cameras: Mike Lane  
 FOH Engineer: Michelle Sabolchick  
 Systems Engineer: Nikiforos Skotidakis  
 Monitor Engineer (Cyndi Lauper): Jon Schimke  
 Monitor Engineer (Band): Barry Foy  
 Production Manager: David "5-1" Norman  
 Tour Manager (Cyndi Lauper): Pamela Harris  
 Tour Manager (Band): John Dubuque  
 Production Companies:  
 Lighting/Video: Solotech  
 Staging: All Access  
 Audio: Solotech  
 Video Content Creation: Gravity  
 Speciality Content and Artwork: Reza Dolatabadi, Noah Shulman  
 Kusama Artwork: Courtesy of Yayoi Kusama  
 SFX: IMAGE SFX

bass are both running Kemper amps and the keys are all direct. Foy's only live mics are vocals, drums, and percussion. Crash cymbals and crowd noise are his big concerns, plus different patch input levels. "All band members have specifics in their mix! Subtle changes always occur that cannot be effectively automated or preprogrammed within some songs. Count-offs, intros, and outs, solos. There's a lot of movement in some of the tunes. You learn your show just like a musical score. I've always endeavored to put myself in the players' position: What would I need to hear in the second chorus going into that solo if it was me playing drums or keyboards, and mix accordingly?"

Foy says the band members use a variety of IEMs, including JH16s, JH16 Pro V2s, a couple of UE models, and Future Sonics MG6 HX. "I think IEMs are a personal preference; there's no one size fits all. Not everyone needs or wants the bass response of the Roxannes or the smoothness of the MG6. I've also got a few tech and production mixes using their own molds or the Shure generics. My job is to make sense of all of it and adapt."

The Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Tour heads overseas in February for dates in Europe, Australia, and Japan before wrapping up in Tokyo on April 5. 📶

ing it is amazing at taming the wind noise from 16 high-velocity fans at the B stage. "Essentially we've got our main vocal in the middle of a wind tunnel out in front of the PA on a tender, anthemic ballad." Foy's cue mix is a matrix of the cue bus and a mix of the ten talkback mics he has coming to him. "I insert a dynamic EQ across the cue bus as a bandpass ducker and key it from the talkback bus. Works like a dream, dropping the cue level while leaving the talkbacks up."

Stage volume isn't an issue, Foy adds. The guitar and