

## News

### ZZ Top's XXX Tour Spreads Their Heat Worldwide

ZZ Top likes it hot. The story is, they once had so many PAR cans, that they couldn't move the drum riser until a half hour after the show because it sizzled so much.



Though their "XXX" world tour is using a full rig of cooler automated High End Systems lights, That Little Ol' Band from Texas still likes to feel the heat. So along with the 32 Studio Color(R), 30 Cyberlight(R) and 25 Studio Spot(R) automated luminaires, run by a Wholehog(R) II console, LD Chris Stuba has also specified 180 conventionals to keep them hot and happy.

The tour started in September and is running throughout the world through most of 2000. Lynyrd Skynyrd was the co-bill on the portion that ran from September through March. From here on out, it's ZZ's gig.

Houston, Texas-based lighting contractor LD Systems has been handling the North American portion, with local contractors assisting in Europe, Africa and Australia.

We spoke with LD Chris Stuba about designing for the Texas trio of Billy Gibbons, Frank Beard and Dusty Hill.



**This is your first year as lighting designer and lighting director on ZZ Top's tour. How different is this from your role on their past tours?**

It's a little different. The first time I worked with ZZ was

in '94 for the "Antenna Tour." Larry Sizemore was the lighting director, and I took care of the automation and the Autopilot system. But it was really Larry's baby, and almost all of my band interaction was through Larry.

The next tour was "Rythmeen" in '96-'97. This time Larry ran the conventionals and I ran the automated lights. I learned a lot from working with Larry -- he is the calmest person I have ever known. Larry was ZZ's LD for about 17 years so he gave me insight into what the band was really used to seeing. I also learned how to call spotlights from him. I can't tell you how excited I was to be chosen to design this tour.

### **How did you approach the design for this year's co-billed tour with Lynyrd Skynyrd?**

It really was a challenge to design a rig that was versatile and functional for both bands.

Our first meeting was May '99 in Austin. The main thing we all agreed upon was to have two different looking sets and stages.

ZZ's sets spread over 48 feet wide and 30 feet deep and consists of geometrical shapes made of stretch fabric (from Transformit). You really can paint some beautiful scenes on these pieces, but you really have to be mindful that the set can upstage what you are trying to say.

The Lynyrd Skynyrd footprint is a little wider. It has aluminum risers that rotate and ramps the band can run up to. The main concern was having adequate washes for both bands. Lynyrd Skynyrd has nine players in the band and they use every bit of the stage, while ZZ is a little bit more intimate. So it was agreed upon to move the trusses during set change from Lynyrd to ZZ. The rig is basically flat for Skynyrd and it takes an inward move for ZZ, which brings it in tighter. It really does do what it was intended to do: offer two completely different looks.

One of the reasons I thought Transformit was well suited to our needs was, early on we were told we would be selling tickets for a show in-the-round. When this happens we do not hang the big sail pieces. My experiences with selling in-the-round is, distractions from exit signs and people moving around behind the band confuse what you are trying to present. I needed a way to isolate the band from the distractions but also leave enough sight lines available to those seats behind the stage.

### **What are ZZ Top's preferences concerning lighting?**

The band has a history of using image and visuals, so they give a lot of input into what they want to see in their

show. Billy and I meet every night before the show to talk about that night's performance. We also meet afterward to discuss what worked and what didn't. It really is great working with Billy like this; there are no pretensions. He really is a great one to work for. We



both communicate what each other feels and sees and yes, you can still find Billy once in a while out at the front-of-house working out timings and cues with me.

The band has been around longer than automated luminaires were available, so they really like the heat that a PAR can radiates. I too am a big fan of the color temperature of quartz lights. Because the band has literally grown up with conventional lights, they tell me they play better when they "feel the heat." They like a really hot stage. The story is they had so many PARS they couldn't move the drum riser until a half hour after the show because it was so hot. They like it that way, and as more conventional lighting goes away and more automated lighting comes into play, a lot of newer bands have no idea what it's like to play under a 150-degree stage. It's an observation we've made about the whole thing, from Billy's point of view.

The way we discovered this was, I was running moving light cues and Billy was saying there was something missing and he couldn't put his finger on it. And it came to turn out that it was just the heat factor. He missed the heat. I was pretty shocked hearing that and didn't give it much thought myself until he pointed that out.

Our cues now have more PARs in them just for that reason. If they're happy with the heat and they don't think about it and it's the norm, then in turn they probably DO play better.

As you know, Billy look at things in a different way from most people. Here's another example: During rehearsals in Austin, I was writing cues for a blues song called "I Love the Woman" by Freddie King. It's been a standard for these guys for a long time. Because it's a blues song, I wrote the cues as blues, greens and dark colors. Billy said, "This is wrong. You have to erase everything you can possibly think about that song and do the opposite." So now it's done in yellows, ambers and reds and it works fabulously. I would have never gone that way and those are the kinds of things Billy points out.

Billy also likes to see the show the way the audience sees it, so he videotapes the show every night from a different location to look at the show from every angle. One day we set him up with a Spot Cam. We had truss spots in the rig and we attached a digital camera and it videotaped as a spot operator ran his show, so you could see the angle from a spot operator. Billy has been collecting a ton of digital video. We were talking about doing a web broadcast but I haven't heard any more

on that.



Billy Gibbons' onstage "lapdog" is an amp on a stand with a dog head and Expandora effect pedals connected to it. Billy claims it brings good luck. It even has its own Cyberlight!

**Describe where the H.E.S. fixtures are in the rig and why you chose to specify those units on tour.**

There are 26 Studio Colors in the air mainly on a truss we call the matrix -- a collection of 12-foot truss and corners that is one of the trusses that articulates during the band set change. They really provide a great big punch along the microphone line and help cover our set. There are also six Studio Colors on the floor to help fill in set spaces.

There are 23 Cyberlights in the air, all outfitted with custom lithos. I also use three Cyberlights as kind of a Leko. There are a couple of things Billy carries with him on tour: one is called the

Lapdog -- a curious amp on a stand with a dog head and Expandora effect pedals connected to them -- and the other is a really old amplifier. I light them with Cyberlights and they do nothing else during the show. Because of the intense white light Billy was looking for, Cyberlights do the trick. There is another Cyberlight for a set piece we call The Cuckaboro -- it's a Transformit piece that sits stage right. There are also four Cyberlights I use on the floor to put slashes of light on the set.

I chose Cyberlights because of its color mixing and pattern projection capabilities. We also have 23 Studio Spots in the air -- I cannot say enough about how wonderful the optics are in these lights. Plus for a relatively new light, they are workhorses.

The Wholehog II is new to me on this tour and I was a hard sell on it, but I am so glad I have it. There literally isn't anything I can come up with that this board doesn't do easily. I really am hooked.

My reality is, I need as much time as I can get behind the lighting board. Because when it all comes down to it, I have an 85-minute show to say as much as I can with the lights. High End products have time and time again proved so reliable that when the rig gets up it stays up and stays working -- which gives me all the time to make things look good, which in turn makes me look good.

**What's the touring schedule for the rest of 2000?**

The tour keeps getting extended. We were supposed to be finished New Year's Eve, then it got extended to March in the States. Now I have been working on updating plots for Australia and Africa in April and Europe in May. We will be doing these shows by ourselves so I will



be able to make the rig more specialized for ZZ Top only shows. But there still are ongoing talks about more shows in the States this summer, so it looks like we will be busy throughout 2000.

If it were not for my lighting crew, none of this could be possible. Jeff Archibeque (lighting crew chief) and I have been working together since '96. He is a great friend and I could not have done this without him. Bobby "D" Dominguez has been working with this band as long as I have; he really is a staple with the organization. Peter "Creep" Feher and I have been working on and off since we did Van Halen together in '95 -- he is also one of a kind. Steve "Precious" Duarte (in 2000) and John Dickson (in 1999) have been techs on our rig -- both of them worked well on the gear but as you know High End techs are like Maytag repair men -- not too much to do. I could not ask for a better crew and I love them dearly.

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