

## Production Profile

### Rob Thomas: LD Ben Richards pioneers use of video



Since his solo release *Something to Be* last year, Rob Thomas has been touring various parts of the world—including North America and Europe. The next stop is Australia before returning to Canada and the U.S. in March, and then wrapping up with a summer shed tour in June and July. We spoke with visual designer/director Ben Richards, who has worked with Thomas and Matchbox Twenty before taking the helm of the solo tour.

“Working with Rob Thomas again, you get to know an artist very well after a few years on the road. We’ve always maintained a very high level of class and professionalism in the Matchbox Twenty camp, so it was only natural to keep that vibe going on Rob’s first solo tour. Rob is such a great artist to work for because he really lets his production staff do what they do best. He does have some input regarding the color treatment of each song, but in the end, he trusts me and his manager to produce his visual show.” Richards is a pioneer in the creative use of lighting and video. As the lighting designer for Dream Theater, he designed a rig that made extensive use of video, and the lighting/ video interface was custom-designed to give him ultimate control from the lighting console. He continues his experimentation with the Thomas tour.

“I went to LDI in 2004 and three products caught my attention at the time. First was the ESP Vision visualizer software, which I had to buy for my own business. The second was the Element Labs LED panels, and third was the Main Light Industries SoftLED curtain. By the time I walked out of that trade show, I had most of my design concept figured out on a napkin!”

The design is a mixture of automated lighting and low-resolution video display elements. “We’re using 28 High End Systems Studio Beam wash lights, 18 Martin MAC 2000 Profiles, 10 Martin Atomic Strobes with color changers, four eight-light Moles with color changers and two truss spots. For video display, we’re using 29 Versa tile 1-meter panels and 12 quarter-meter panels. We also have three medium resolution SoftLED Panels, which gives us a backdrop size of 48 feet wide by 33 feet high,” Richards says.

The result is a colorful rig that is both punchy and visually stimulating. “There’s definitely something very modern about the Versa tiles. The content looks so pixelated, but at the same time, you can really see some great detail and fluid motion. They’re also very bright with rich, saturated colors. I also enjoyed blending the SoftLED curtain with the Versatiles to create more depth on stage,” he adds.

Though it was his first time using much of the technology, Richards found getting up the learning curve was not difficult: “I learned everything about each product well ahead of time, and through the use of my own ESP Vision system, I was able to choose and scale all the video clips for each song, mostly from stock Catalyst content, and program them in my lighting cues on the Wholehog 3. I would say about 90% of my previsualization work was approved by Rob and his

#### Crew

**Visual Designer/Director:** Benoit “Ben” Richards, Millennium Lighting Design LLC

**Lighting Company:** Ed & Ted’s Excellent Lighting, Kevin Forster, account manager

**Visual Department Techs:** Ritchie Steffa, Blake Rogers, Steve Richards

**Video Company:** Show Distribution, Jacques Tanguay, account rep (VersaTiles); Ed & Ted’s Excellent Lighting (SoftLED)

**Production Manager:** Andy Omlanowski

**Tour Manager:** Dave Licursi

#### Lighting Gear

28 High End Systems Studio Beams

18 Martin MAC 2000 Profiles

10 Martin Atomic Strobes with Color Changers

4 Eight-Light Moles with Color Changers

2 Lycian 1.2K Truss Spots

2 Whole Hog 3 Consoles (with Data Lynx DMX A/B Switch Box)

6 Martin QF-150 fixtures (for the Fiber Optic portion of the Soft LED curtain)

#### Video Gear

29 Element Labs 1-meter Versa Tile Panels

12 Element Labs ¼-meter Versa Tile Panels

3 Main Light Industries 16’W x 33’H Medium Resolution SoftLED drapes

3 High End Systems Catalyst Media Servers (2 active and 1 spare)

manager. During the show, all lighting and video cues are triggered by the Hog 3 and I also call six followspots.”

As for the controller, Richards is happy with the current version. “The Hog 3 has come a long way in the past few years. I’m very proud to be a part of the beta software development team,” he says.



Besides being a beta tester for the Wholehog 3, Richards enjoys pushing the limits of technology and being a pioneer in the convergence of lighting and video. “There’s no doubt in my mind that the advent of the media server controlled by a lighting console has helped lighting designers like myself to become ‘visualists’ in every the complete emotion of each song is totally at the end of my fingertips. I also believe that using ESP Vision software helped everyone in the Rob Thomas organization believe in my design concept even before we set it up for the first time in the real world. And the best part for me was that I didn’t have to stay up all night during rehearsals because most of my show was already programmed,” he says.

Richards, who grew up in Canada and currently lives with his wife in Austin and Los Angeles, spent several years working for High End Systems as a programmer before striking out on his own. Although Nils Thorjussen, one of the owners of Element Labs, spent time working for High End Systems, the two were there at different times. They do, however, know each other through industry ties. “It’s great to work with Nils Thorjussen at Element Labs s because we’ve known each other for many years. For the U.S. fall tour, we got the Versa tiles from Show Distribution in Québec City. Our good friend Jacques Tanguay, who has supplied VarioLift Motors on the Matchbox Twenty tours, was able to broker a deal with Westbury National Show Systems in Toronto for the rental of the Versa tiles. The Soft LED drapes and the Catalyst Media Servers were provided by Main Light through our tour vendor, Ed & Ted’s. It’s always a pleasure to work with our account manager, Kevin Forster,” Richards says.

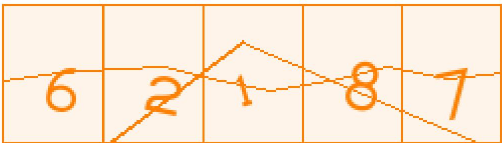
“Unfortunately, since we are mostly playing old theatres on this tour, motion control was too heavy, so we’re keeping that part of my concept for the big finale in 2006.”



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