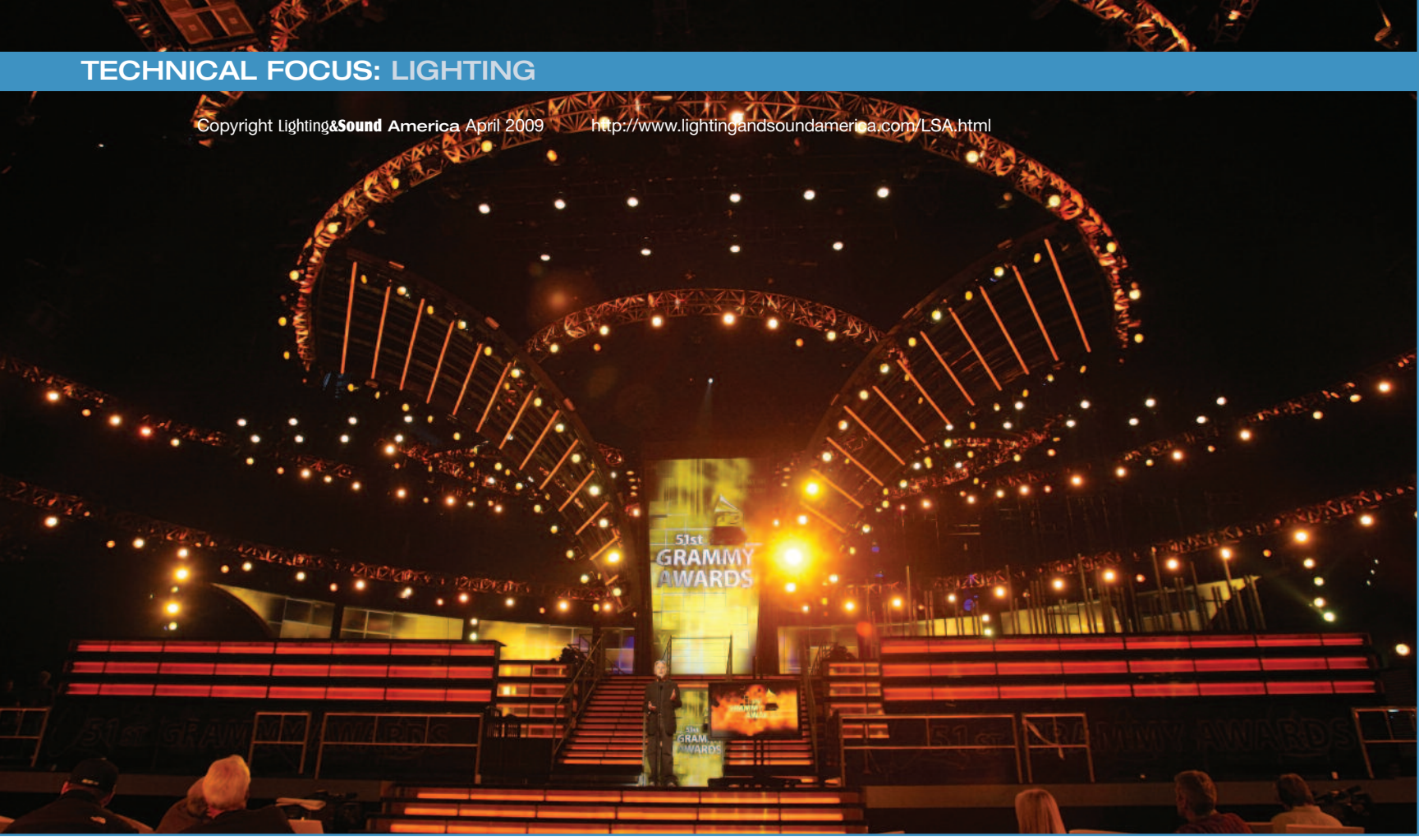

Lighting Music's Big Night

By: Mel Lambert

If you're lighting the Grammy Awards, you've got to be ready for anything

The Recording Academy's annual Grammy Awards, held in early February at the cavernous Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles, poses a number of logistical problems. With two dozen acts from a variety of music genres to be covered during the 210-minute live TV broadcast, the task of developing a cohesive lighting scheme for such a diverse production is not for the fainthearted. Bob Dickinson, of the firm Full Flood, has been handling the event since 1992—as well as lighting the Academy Awards, Olympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies, Emmy Awards, and Tony Awards, plus many other large-scale TV specials.

"We started the planning process for this year's awards back in May 2008," Dickinson recalls, "when the producers started to develop an overall look for the stage designs and sets, and created scale models. We met every four to six weeks during the late spring and early summer; the final scenic designs were finalized in late November, costed, and send for bids. During that time, I started to plan my truss and lighting plots, expecting that these would go through several changes until the broadcast." The 51st Grammy Awards was produced by John Cossette Productions, in association with AEG Ehrlich Ventures for The Recording Academy; Ken Ehrlich and John Cossette served as executive producers, with Walter C. Miller as producer/director and Tisha Fein as coordinating producer.

"Through mid-December into early January, we had a series of meetings with Ken Ehrlich and John Cossette," Dickinson continues, "plus the screen-content designers and production designers, making some intelligent guesses about which acts might be nominated for awards" and hence appropriate for show performances. "That way, we were able to develop an 'act look' with plans for key artists. We needed to wait until the Grammy nominations were officially announced [in early December] before contacting the artists and their management about specific staging and lighting requirements, but it meant that could do some advance 'what-if' planning ahead of the event."

At which stage, the producers started to map out a three-hour show

Photo: John Shearer | Courtesy of The Recording Academy®/Wireimage.com

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based on the nominees, and decided what overall shape and creative flow the show might take with the available resources. "We were involved at every stage of that planning," Dickinson says, "since we needed to have a good idea of the look that each artist needed during their performances, and what we might need to develop for some of the ensemble pieces. In many ways, the Grammy Awards is a unique production; while it needs to look like a traditional awards show, with all of the anticipation of who will secure a Grammy—a serious, celebratory environment—that has to be balanced with the unique music statements of each of the two-dozen performers."

The lighting plot comprised an inner and outer ring of trusses over center stage to cover the main pair of performance areas, plus a quadrant to cover the front audience area. Lateral trusses, angled between the two overstage rings, helped augment lighting positions, while a 180° ring encircled the stage-rear area and extended back above the seating areas, with long trusses either side above the inner-audience margin, and a center truss across the main seating areas through to the central camera platform. A total of four PRG Virtuoso VX consoles handled automated and LED fixture control via fiber-optic and Cat-5 Ethernet cabling, augmented with a pair of Virtuoso DX2 consoles for media server control and a pair of Obsession II 1500s for conventional lighting and strobes. Automated, LED, and strobe fixtures included 290 Vari*Lite VL5 Washes, 190 VL5 Arcs, 175 Martin Mac 2000 Washes with dowser wheels, 60 VL6C+s, 94 VL3000s, 10 VL3500s, 10 PRG Bad Boys, six VL3500 Wash FX units, 110 Martin Atomic 300 strobes, 232 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast LED units, and 145 Coemar Parlites. Augmentations included 110 Martin Stagebar 54s, and 1,350 1m and eighty-five .5m Versa Tubes from Element Labs. Conventional fixtures included 180 ETC Source Four Ellipsoidals, 81 ETC Source Four PARs, 95 six-circuit ParBars, 48 PAR 20s, and 16 Arri 300 and ten 650 Fresnels. Followspots included five Lycian 1293 3K Xenons, four Strong Super Troupers, and six truss-mounted Lycian M2 2.5K short-throw units. Providing atmospheric effects were six Reel EFX DF-50 Hazers, two Jem ZR33 foggers, and four Le Maitre G300 MK IIs.

Working closely with Dickinson were lighting director Jon Kusner; associate lighting directors Noah Mitz, Travis Hagenbuch, and Dave Thibodeau; production designers Steve Bass and Brian Stonestreet; and lighting director/programmers Andy O' Reilly and Matt Firestone. Eli McKinney served as media server programmer, while Patrick Boozer handled conventional programming. The majority of the gear was supplied by PRG Lighting, with chief technicians Jason Trowbridge and Darren Barrows supervising the installation; other instruments were supplied by ShowPro and A&O Technology. Specialists John McGuire and Juan Ramero, from ShowPro, served as Versa Tube technicians, while Stefan Elsner and Tim Obermann, from A&O, were on hand as Falcon technicians. Tony Ward, PRG Lighting's VP TV and special events, and Travis Snyder coordinated the on-site equipment needs for PRG; the lighting system installation was handled by Local 33 stage technicians, and lead by the gaffer Dennis Rudge. The lighting crew comprised 50-plus directors, technicians, and operators.

Trusting the show's creative resources

Over the years, Dickinson has observed several changes in the production of the Grammy Awards. "In the past," he reflects, "music acts would bring in a virtual army of creative resources for the show, including art directors, scenic directors, choreographers, and so on. For the past several shows—maybe it's the new order or a changing music economy—these acts now trust the show's creative resources. That really puts the pressure on us to come up with suitable lighting for a number of different genres, sometimes for an act with whom we are not necessarily fully intimate. This year, we met with almost universal approval for what we had creatively offered to them. It was not only reassuring and refreshing to have no dissatisfaction from the artists, but the creative group felt endorsed by that positive feedback to our creative take on their music."

Certain artists had very specific ideas about their Grammy performances, he notes. "After Katy Perry was nominated," the designer recalls, "her management threw out a number of ideas about her TV appearance for 'I Kissed a Girl,' including flying her onto the set inside a large, jewel-encrusted

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banana and landing inside a large bowl of fruit. The complex dance number needed careful lighting design to ensure that the set, dancers, and Perry were lit correctly for the TV audience.

"A number of acts and/or their management were actively involved in the lighting-design process," Dickinson continues, "including U2, Coldplay, and Radiohead, who are not seen very often on live-TV broadcasts, but who are willing to appear on the Grammy Awards, which is the most respected award show for the music industry. The show has a reputation for taking care of each artist's performance, yet we only have, basically, two-and-a-half days in which to rehearse these two dozen acts. So any advance planning for the lighting makes a lot of sense.

"Radiohead wanted to perform [the song "15 Step"] with some drummers, so we decided to take an unorthodox approach to the lighting of that number. Their creative director had come up with the concept of creating shapes of a small group of drummers—something like the opening of [the Disney animated film] *Fantasia* with its silhouetted orchestra members. But Radiohead decided that it wanted not just a few drummers but the USC Trojan Marching Band on stage! So we ended up building a riser for the marching band but needed to develop a look that was appropriate for the band, and not just another pop performance. Fortunately, we had the new, very powerful Vari*Lite VL3500 Wash FX luminaire with built-in pattern wheel—it's like a mini-xenon. It is a brand-new tool for lighting designers—this was the first time the 3500s had been used on a show; we had six of the first ones in operation, which we put on the stage floor.

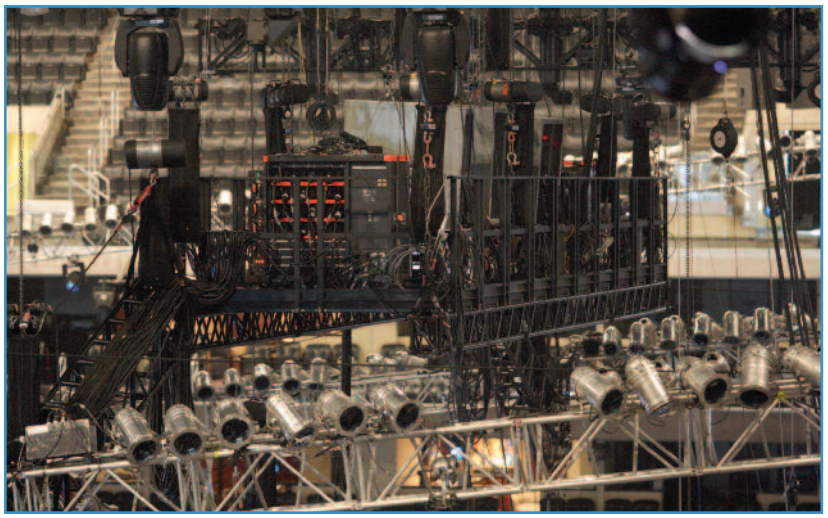
"For Radiohead, by really pounding these VL3500s through the platform of risers that the marching band was located on, we were almost able not to have to light the band, but just let the powerful Vari-Lites provide enough illumination to silhouette the marching band—a very high contrast.

"Unfortunately, the Vari-Lites really starred in two of our most distinctive effects for the show—Rihanna's 'Live Your Life' and Chris Brown's 'Forever'—which were shelved, because these artists were unable to attend the performance. For Chris Brown, we also created an array of vertical Versa Tubes as stalactites and stalagmites—they were floor units or flew in. Chris and his dancers were able to move among these scenic elements during the number. The idea came for collaboration between ourselves and the art directors, during which we suggested the use of lights instead of conventional scenery."

The show's opening act, U2, also offered unique challenges. "The band's lighting director, Willie Williams, really understands the needs of his acts," Dickinson says. "U2 had asked for an LED screen upstage center that would be used just for them, to replay a film that they had just made. So we got a WinVision 1875 screen—a low-resolution system—because we had weight restrictions, and it had to hang for the entire show. The LED screen is very lightweight and assembles incredibly quickly, so it fitted into our load-in schedule needs very nicely. Below the screen, I had put a series of A&O Falcon 6Ks— a new, powerful xenon light that is very flexible. The 6K light has a brand-new 4K bulb that Osram developed for A&O, with the output of a 6K xenon. It weighs about 225lbs. and has trimetric color mixing—it's a very viable tool for productions like this.

"The 6Ks looked pretty good but when [U2's lead singer] Bono came in, he said that he wanted to stand in front of the LED screen in silhouette at the very top of the number. Unfortunately, that meant that we had to strike all of the xenons and move them off to the side and out of Bono's position centerstage. But it was an easy sacrifice, because it was really a dynamic look for the number, 'Get On Your Boots.' On this show, we were constantly having to be creative on our feet."

Dickinson also developed a straightahead look for the Jonas Brothers collaboration with Steve Wonder during the song "Burnin' Up/Superstition." "The band wanted to come across as a real rock-'n'-roll ensemble," the designer explains, "rather than just another boy band, so we came up with a traditional look for them. Kenny Chesney also likes a very simple, straightforward approach—I have worked with the county artist many,



An ETC 96-way dimmer rack with a mod rack for use with PRG VL5Arcs. Fixtures are VL5Arcs in the foreground and VL3000 Spots to the rear.

many times—and so we started with him standing in a single shaft of light for his number, 'Better as a Memory.' I used a single xenon hitting him from overhead upper stage left. That was the only light in the entire arena, which produced a very powerful look."

In terms of choreographing the light fixtures for such a music-intensive show, by working from the in-progress scripts and running orders Dickinson developed a series of cues that marked key aspects of each song, including opening, chorus, bridge, turn-around, and so on. "During pre-production we listened to the music over and over, to break it down for our cues. At rehearsals, we could see where each fixture was supposed to be," and refine positioning and cue sequencing while discussing changes with band members and their music arrangers. "We only had around 90 minutes per performance to finalize the hundreds of cues before the final dress rehearsal. Of that period, 30-40 minutes might be spent by the artist running down the number plus any dance sequences, and then we had 40-50 minutes for the sound and visuals. It was a very tight schedule—anything we could program ahead of time was a major advantage."

As Andy O' Reilly, a lighting director/programmer, recalls: "We had a conceptual plan or production approach for about 75% of the performances before we came on site [prior to the live broadcast]. We began the week on site with basically an empty board. With such a fast-paced show, the broadcast passed in a blur, but three performances stood out for me. U2's opening song with the LED screen with reduced lighting was memorable, as was the high energy and dramatic lighting for Katy Perry's number. And the strong visuals we achieved for Coldplay with Chris Martin [the group's lead singer] playing piano under a single spot way out in the audience [on the dish] and then on stage meant that, in long shot, the TV audience saw more of the lighting rig. It's all about what's on the TV screen for the home audience."

PRG Lighting's Tony Ward reflects that an event like the Grammy broadcast, coming as it did in the middle of a busy winter/spring season that included the Super Bowl halftime show and the Academy Awards, placed a lot of pressure on his crew to truck in and supervise the installation of so much lighting in such a short period of time. "Fortunately, we can bring in systems from our various offices around the country," he says, "where we hold large stocks of automated and conventional fixtures. Our Las Vegas office, for example, shipped us luminares for the Grammy Awards, while for the Super Bowl we brought in stock from our New Jersey location."

Of new technologies introduced during the Grammy Awards, Dickinson recalls that the new PRG Bad Boy proved particularly useful. "The Bad Boy combines the qualities of a traditional automated light with a large venue fixture; it's the ideal choice whenever a big-beam look is required—for example, when playing in front of high-brightness LED screens like the Grammys. During the Coldplay number ["Lost," with Jay-Z] on the forward dish stage and passarelle, the Bad Boy let us hit Chris Martin dead center and follow him to the center-stage for the main number ["Viva La Vida"]." The unit produces 48,000 lumens from a Philips MSR Gold 1,200W lamp with 40% optical efficiency. It has an 8:1 zoom range, from a narrow 7° spot to a wide 56° flood.

Reflecting on the months of planning that went into the Grammy Awards broadcast, Dickinson notes that each show offers unique challenges—including, in this case, the last-minute loss of two key performers hours before the live transmission—but the team was prepared to make the event a success. "If I changed anything," he says, "it might have been to add more followspots on the side of the arena. We had four [Super Trouper] spots—two per side—but next year I'd like to have maybe four per side. Heavy side light is not so frowned upon as it was in the past, and has major dramatic potential in such a large auditorium as the Staples Center."

Mel Lambert has been intimately involved with production industries on both sides of the Atlantic for more years than he cares to remember. He is now principal of Media&Marketing, a Los Angeles-based consulting service for the professional audio industry, and can be reached at mel.lambert@MEDIAandMARKETING.com; +1/818.753-9510.