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ILLENIUM

Ascend Tour

PHOTOS BY DAVID HO NGUYEN, EMPEDIA AND CHUCK WILLIAMS

Brown Note Supports EDM Artist's Biggest Tour to Date

By Mike Wharton

Illenium, the symbolic name EDM artist and performer Nick Miller operates under to paint his sonic stories, continues to evolve with the release of his third album in three years and a 30-city tour last fall that included sold out shows in Madison Square Garden, Staples Center and three nights at Red Rocks Amphitheatre.

The artist's worldwide appeal springs from the burgeoning EDM market that dominates the Denver live entertainment scene. Its presence in the environs of the Colorado Rockies has made the city of Denver a practical Mecca for the festivals and the lifestyle that goes with it. Local promoter and founder of Triad Dragons entertainment Ha Hau has been the establishing element in that growth through producing what is billed as "America's Largest New Year's Eve party — Decadence", and the prominent Global Dance Festival at Mile High Stadium each year. Supporting and advancing that growth is just one of the many contributing factors to the phenomenal growth and widespread reputation Brown Note Productions has enjoyed since opening its doors in 2004. Brown Note founder and president Ryan Knutson states, "Our relationship with Ha and the creative team, plus our ability to offer a 360 Audio, Video, and Lighting systems out of Denver was the key factor that brought the project to us."

The promoter once again turned to the full production house when mounting what would be the biggest touring production his artist Illenium, had ever proposed. The show, in support of Illenium's mid-August 2019 release of his third album, *Ascend*, would represent his story of challenges and successes he has overcome to arrive where he is today.

"Ha approached me and asked if we could help him and his team design a new show for Illenium's *Ascend* tour based on a staging concept they had, one of the elements being a setup of MIDI drum pads that Illenium's team wanted to raise when he played them and then lower when not in use," recalls Knutson.

The Brown Note team used this as the base of the design for the full touring concept and performance, knowing it would eventually scale to fit a variety of sized venues they based the design on parameters that would fill the larger arena shows yet still fit inside more intimate venues such as Red Rocks.

"While we worked on the design, we also worked with Gallagher Staging to produce the set for the tour," which also featured supporting acts including Dabin, William Black and others on select dates. "Tye Trussell and Camille Baz really helped bring this element to life," Knutson continues. "Their team was incredible — they did a fantastic job keeping costs down while producing the gags."

"The stage design consisted of an upstage runway for an elevated performance area," Knutson adds. "This set the stage for furthering the lighting design layout. Illenium [Nick, with Dabin on guitars] would be in different locations throughout the night. We needed the overhead and ground system to be robust to be able to light these positions throughout the show."

» Lighting

Lighting designer Chuck Williams is well versed in the EDM environment on stage as

well as off. He performed as a DJ during the early DIY DJ movement in Denver, and in fact appeared as an opening act on various shows Ha Hau promoted over the years. Williams is the owner of Nexus Productions, a lighting production and design company formed at first to fulfill the projection and stage needs for his own shows, then as a rental house for other local productions. One of the core members of Illenium's production team, he has been on board since the artist's initial headline solo show in 2015. "Hau had Nick [Illenium] in a 400-seat venue and needed me to provide production. We brought a massive amount of gear into this tiny venue and produced a great showcase for him," says Williams.

Williams and Brown Note lead designer Saxton Waller collaborated closely on fixture selection "Usually, EDM clients have a large video look, so the rig has to be designed around that, first and foremost," says Waller. In that respect, this show was no different. The show had a lot of different "home" positions that needed to be lit throughout the night.

Along with the guitar runway and DJ booth, there were another 12 different positions for artists to stand or sit performing. "We knew we wanted to use spots or profiles for

these key lights, so they were going to have to be spread out all over the rig," Waller says. "I made these fixture placements a priority and then designed the rig around them."

Martin Viper Profile and Viper Air FX doubled as specials for the key lighting positions and aerial spot looks. "By using both types of fixtures, we were able to get all of this accomplished with a uniform color temperature throughout the rig," Waller adds, "Due to the fact video is such a big part of this show, every fixture in the design needed the color mix option so we could always color match the fixtures to a specific color being generated on the LED screens." Being able to abuse the audience is a must in the EDM world, but having the option of tilting the GLP JDC1 down to wash and strobe the stage is a wonderful option that makes it "my favorite color mixing strobe right now," Waller says.

Structure became the next area of concern as the rig would need to morph easily between an A, B, and C scaled system. The architecture of the rig includes a midstage diamond, two midstage wings straddling the diamond, an upstage truss just above the video wall, and a three-piece downstage truss that follows the same lines as the mid stage wings with the outside pieces. The idea was that any single group of fixture types could stand as their own look. "This concept really helps when building a time coded show," notes Waller. "It allows the use of only 30 to 60 percent of the rig during most points of the show, which gives me the opportunity to mark the rest of the rig in black preparing for the next big look."

» Video

Sandy Meidinger, VJ for Illenium, has been developing visual content for the last 18 months for the tour. It is the backbone of the show. Using looks from the artist Illenium works with, Stuart Lippencott, for his album cover art as a canvas, Meidinger created her palette of imagery and color. "Everything was to be in a kind of 3D world that Stuart had drawn," she says. "I tried to



Pyrotecnico supplied all pyro, lasers, SFX, low fog, cryo, confetti and flames.



22W RGB lasers highlight performers.



The design layered stand-alone looks.

recreate his work or meld it into the visuals I brought to the screens." She took the sounds created by Miller as her cue for visuals, not necessarily the lyrics.

As the creative director, Meidinger oversaw the entire process, and by layering looks, she made a distinct effort to make sure each of the visual elements could stand on its own. Initially she, Hau and Illenium brought in an animation company from the U.K. to help streamline the mechanics.

Along with Nick and his managers, Meidinger had worked out a story arc that represents Miller's struggles — what he has gone through in his life's journey so far, in a visual form. About half of the show was completed when Meidinger and a few friends who are animators had to step in to finish the final product. "We'd worked successfully with 23RDC on an earlier project, but as I watched, this did not fully get developed to where I hoped it would be. But we did meet one of our goals, which was to tell a story."

Knutson spoke of the selection of ROE Visual CB8 for the video tiles, citing the "size of the screen designed and the need for a fast install and strike. As the centerpiece for the set, it was a natural choice to use. The ROE CB8 is using Brompton Processing," he adds. "We feel it is the best-looking 8mm LED product on the market."

The floor LED that covered the façade of the three risers was based on the need for a .5 meter tile size, so Knutson chose INFILED ER5 tiles for this application. "We needed this product to be non-blow through and have a higher pixel depth, as it would be closer to the audience," he says.

» The Core Production Team

The Nick Miller/Illenium core production team consists of Hau, Williams, Meidinger and production manager Michael "Curly" Jobson, a well known and respected touring veteran. "Nick and his management team were actively involved with the designer from Brown Note, well before I arrived on the scene," Jobson says. "I just came in and sorted the size of the show, the finances, and didn't really see any point in changing what wasn't broken. I was very pleased with the service they provided across the board. Packaging and safety is everything from the service vendor, in my experience, and Brown Note hit all the high marks."

Jobson and Illenium's tour manager, Peter Witting, had worked together previously on Swedish House Mafia. "At that time, I was the TM and Peter designed and shot pyro. He was a big help with the Pyrotecnico programmers on Illenium as the show is very intricately interwoven rather than just an exclamation point to a section of the performance."

Jobson, "having been around for a few years," has a pretty full address book, with people that he can call on for every situation. In this instance, since he came to the party late, "I went with the existing setup," only adding "a couple of great guys into the team as carpenters. They made my life easy. I had a top notch lead driver from Janco who was a huge asset to me. Last but certainly not least, the tour's rigger, Royal Jenson, and I go back to Lollapalooza in its inception, so we know each other very well. He was a major asset, even though we bicker like an old married couple."

» Lasers and SFX

To say lasers were a key component is an understatement. Pyrotecnico supplied all lasers, pyrotechnics, and SFX. That included cryo, confetti, low fog, streamers and flames. Rocco Vitale, creative director for Pyrotecnico, has worked with Curly Jobson on many projects over the years and has been the FX support for Illenium on their festival dates the last couple of years. As noted above, his initial conversations were with Peter Witting, the tour manager for Illenium. "Peter has a strong background in pyro with an innate sense of how to place them most effectively in the flow of a show," says Vitale. "His direction in cueing was invaluable."

"Will Kent, as our laser programmer and operator out there, did a lot of final design assignments during rehearsal," continues Vitale. Lasers were run on Beyond Advanced by Pangolin. Pyro crew chief Mia Vitale also shot the show using Pyrodigital and grandMA dot2 for flames and special FX. Matt Wood did the pyro design for Pyrotecnico, and Keith Hellebrand was the project manager during rehearsals and tour start-up. Pyrotecnico's proprietary audience scanning lasers were used on this tour.

The song, "Crashing" was the driving force for this "giant burst of laser beams assaulting the audience from seemingly everywhere," says laser programmer Kent, who also credits the cohesiveness of the Brown Note camp. "They were a very tight-knit family. I was a one-man laser team out there with 15 lasers to handle on my own. Sure, there were hands available for the routine mechanics of the load in and out, but the lighting crew would step up every day and help me if they were running ahead of schedule or faster than I could keep up. A team of really friendly, all-around good people to begin with, they were great professionals to boot."

Rehearsals "were a really productive time for the band and the production," says Meidinger. As creative director, she had input concerning overall color palette and pyro "moments." The real challenge was cutting

back on production to fit the wide scale of venues played. Though the production was designed to stand out in Madison Square Garden, for the artist's big debut there, the creative team did so with scaling back in mind for ease and efficiency without affecting the integrity of the product. "The show is absolutely beautiful in its full form, so it was the missing elements or scale of moments that was hard to watch. Our whole team handled the logistics of scaling with seamless aplomb," says Meidinger.

Preprogramming time and space was made available at Brown Note before the 10 days of rehearsals. Even so, "there just didn't seem to be enough time," says Meidinger. "Chuck and I spent 12-hours a days at Brown

Note for three weeks." The intricacies of the image-intensive story arc, the minutiae of all the details, and the fact the show was time-coded all led to, as expected, protracted programming sessions.

» The Brown Note Factor

The show was designed explicitly for the fourth date into the tour at Madison Square Garden, knowing full well the size of venues would range vastly. More challenges arose daily, but were "met in a really calm professional manner. Our core four worked well together of course," says Meidinger, "but the Brown Note Crew was extraordinary in their effort to routinely give us a 100-percent show." **PLSN**

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