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Dream Theater
Forty Years On

The progressive metal band celebrates an anniversary with trippy visuals and pristine sound

By: David Barbour





The long-running band Dream Theater is on the road again, celebrating its 40th anniversary with a tour that is also a reunion: Mike Portnoy, the group's original drummer, has returned following his participation in the new album *Parasomnia*, which, in February, landed at the top of *Billboard*"s hard rock chart. Formed in Boston in 1985, Dream Theater isn't slowing down.

The tour has a production design by Steve Baird that combines trippy video imagery with classic rock lighting, creating complex visuals that live up to the group's name. This is a dream theatre for the eyeballs as much as the ears. Baird, who characterizes the group's style as "Rush meets Metallica meets Pink Floyd and Genesis, with a little Frank Zappa tossed in for good measure," notes he has been part of the band's family since 1995. His clients include luminaries like Norah Jones, YES, and Steely Dan.

For the 40th anniversary tour, Baird devised a layout that includes three vertical ROE Visual Carbon CB video screens hung upstage in T4 touring frames; the bandstand's fascia is also covered in video tiles. Lighting is delivered by three banks of units on each side, plus a substantial overhead component. "I wanted to have more of a rock rig," he says. "That's why it has a lot of shape and dimension. We wanted to break up the screens, and then we put lasers between them. It was a way of filling space and creating a sense of dimension. I also decided to break up the fixtures this time, using a group of washes coming from the side, creating big groups of light rather than just having spot-wash-beam."

Baird says, "John Petrucci [the band's front man] has a big role [in realizing the design]. I'll draw something and will send it to him. When he saw this design, he said, 'Hey, man, can we put video in front of the risers?' So we came up with this simple look. The rig went up in two hours at [gear supplier] Christie Lites last year." The layout, he notes, is flexible enough to play in different types of venues. "We've played Radio City Music Hall and small arenas, and it's worked everywhere. We're quite happy with it."

The combination of lighting and video imagery works for both the up-tempo numbers and the ballads. Talking about the frequently kinetic lighting cueing, Baird says, "I'm a drummer myself, so I follow the band. There's no timecode in the shows; it's all me, working old-school. I trigger the videos, too." With so much busking, a busy evening is all but guaranteed. "I'll have 100 cues in a cue list," he notes. "On top of that, I'll do a lot of punting, including a lot of strobe and blinder hits. I'll also build chases that I'll trigger at certain moments." In terms of keeping light on each band member, he adds, "We do not use followspots, so I create a big front wash, with Martin MAC Encores, and everything's zoned in the areas."

Baird can work this way, he says, because "I know every little moment of their songs. You have to dissect

Photo: Steve Jennings



Above and previous spread: Baird devised a layout that includes three vertical video screens hung upstage; the bandstand's fascia is also covered in video tiles. Lighting is delivered by three banks of units on each side, plus a substantial overhead component.

each of them. You have to be a musician to follow this path. I suppose you could do it if you time-coded the show, spending hours and hours per song, but I love to run it live, although it's exhausting. The 40th Anniversary Tour is a three-hour show! We've all been doing it for so long that we're used to it."

Not that Baird is against timecode: "The former drummer had playback, so we were able to time-code the show, so if I had to go off and deal with Norah Jones' show or whatever, they still had my show because I had programmed it that way. But Mike Portnoy plays live. It's real life, old-school." And he prefers to busk it that way, too.

Discussing his gear choices and the rig's layout, Baird notes that the side units are Martin Aura PXL wash lights. "They're really nice," he says. "I love the colors, and they have some cool effects; I take advantage of them periodically in the show." Overhead, the video truss also has a set of GLP JDC1 strobes. "Also overhead are [Robe] MegaPointes plus a couple of PXLs. On the floor, upstage, are more PXLS, and downstage are more wash lights." The show's laser complement is provided by Meganne Money, aka "The Beam Queen." It includes six 24W Kvant Lasers. Control is Pangolin Beyond, triggered by an Akai Professional APC40 mkii MIDI controller. The tour was supported in North America by Christie Lites; Baird worked closely for many years with Denis Richard, a key account handler for Christie, who died unexpectedly in March. "He was my best friend for 30 years," the designer says, noting that Richard's son, Matthew, is carrying on the family tradition as a member of Christie's staff.

Overall, Baird says, "We've got three stacks of truss with 18 lights to create some nice looks." The layout, he adds, "is really powerful and the video doesn't get blown away. Sometimes you get blown away by the content, so I wanted to have some wash light on the sides," thus creating a better balance of lighting and imagery. The result is an amalgamation of old and new: strongly articulated lighting looks that evoke the big PAR-can looks of the 1980s, with video adding a contemporary twist. It's a smart choice for a band that has its roots in the classic rock era yet continues to produce new work. Video gear was supplied by Christie, subcontracting through NEP Screenworks.

Photo: Steve Jennings

Interestingly, the video is delivered using the ArKaos MediaMaster media server. “I’ve been using it for years,” Baird says. “I like it for its connectivity to the grandMA console; today, a lot of people are using the Resolume media server, but then you have to use Art-Net, which I find can be finicky. I like to have everything running on sACN; I feel more comfortable with it. I have a grandMA3, but I’m still using MA2 software. And basically, all the video is triggered from the grandMA.”

At this point, Baird is part of a shrinking group of grandMA users who have yet to cross over to the 3 software. His reasons echo those of other lighting professionals. MA3 software, which operates differently from the 2, requires time to learn and adjust to before taking on a major gig. “I was going to take all last summer and learn MA3, but I ended up taking the Elvis Costello show, so, for this show, I decided to go back to 2. I had half the show, all the old songs, roughed in, which made it much easier.”

He adds, “I was at a festival in Sweden last week and Michael Adenau [MA’s founder] was there. I asked him, ‘Do you work for MA?’ He said, ‘I am MA!’ We talked about the 3 software, and he said, ‘Just take your time’.” He notes that many other LDs he has met on the summer festival circuit have yet to make the leap to MA3.

Other issues had to be factored into the design. Although most of the staging is owned by the band, Portnoy’s return mandated the addition of an enormous drum riser that proved difficult to tour. “It’s giant and it was taking the guys hours to set,” Baird says. “So, it was rebuilt by ARS [Atlanta Rigging Systems]. They decided they could split it in half, with a little divide in the middle. The drums stay on it, it just rolls into the truck with a tarp over it, and away it goes.”

Of course, a band with such a lengthy history will have plenty of material. Baird notes that the song list remains fairly steady, however. “Maybe two or three numbers shift each day,” he says, “because the fans will come to repeat shows. If we’re playing Philadelphia and the next stop is New York, they’ll do a somewhat different show.” He has 60 songs in the console, which is quite a lot given the nature of the group’s music: “The shortest Dream Theater song is probably five to seven minutes long. Some of them can go in 20 minutes! That’s what I love about this show: the dynamics. I just follow the music.”

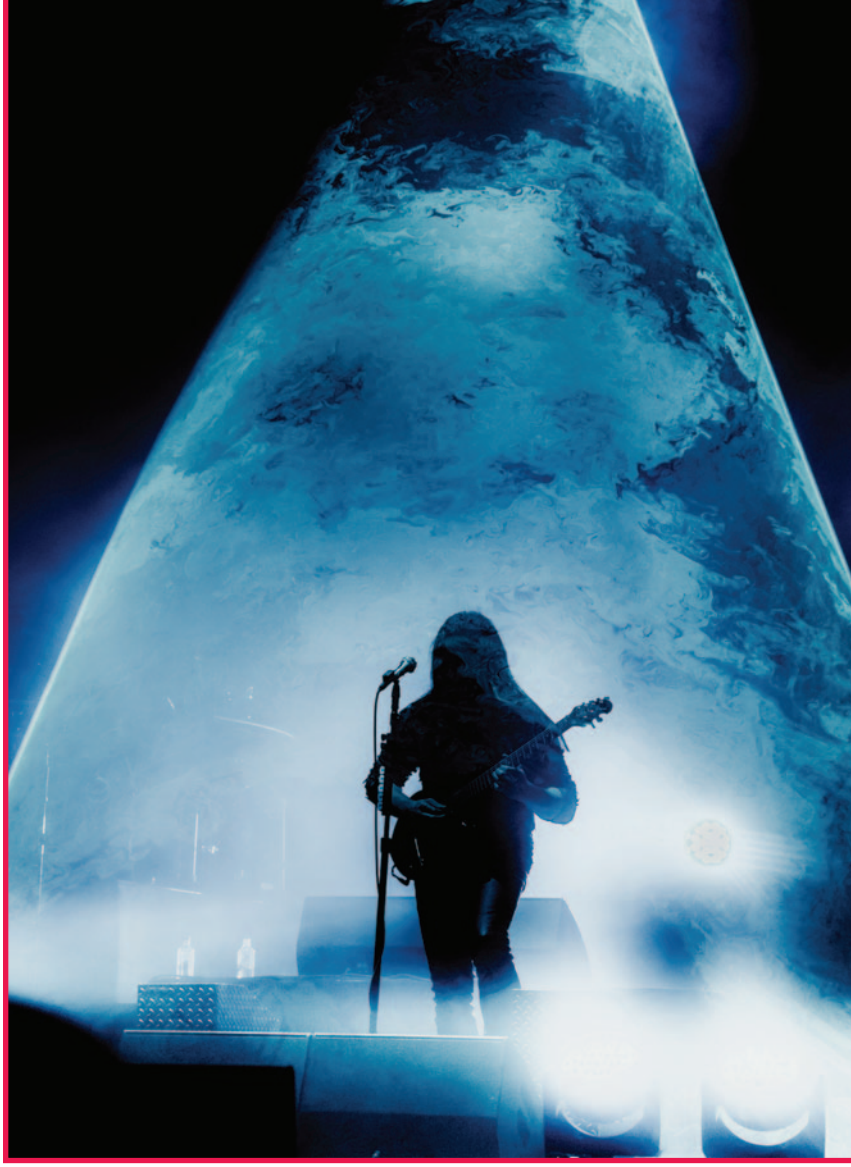
Sound

Front-of-house engineer Michael “Ace” Baker has been with Dream Theater since 2018, having met Petrucci and former band member Mike Mangini while running one of the *G3 Tours* organized by guitarist Joe Satriani.

Dream Theater isn’t consistently carrying a PA on this tour, although the band carries d&b audiotechnik Y10 front fills. Baker’s speaker preferences are pretty eclectic, nonetheless: “My first choice for Dream Theater is always d&b. Dream Theater has a great track record with their boxes. I also really like Adamson,” he notes. “I always enjoy mixing on a JBL rig. We took out the L-Acoustics L Series a couple of summers ago. It is an awesome box. In each venue, it felt like it was exactly the right system for that room, and you didn’t have to wait until halfway through a show to realize that.” Still, he notes, given the band’s wide-ranging tour schedule, flexibility is everything. “We go to 80,000-seat festivals, and we’ll go to a 1,000-seat theatre in Dayton, Ohio. I’m happy to mix on most pro boxes that are tuned properly and in working order.”

For control, Baker has a DiGiCo Quantum338 console, a standard choice for him. “I think DiGiCo is awesome when you’re on a tour, because you design the whole thing exactly the way you want. I like DiGiCo’s workflow. It’s great to get it locked in the way you want.”

Regarding processing gear, Baker, an inveterate collector of processing products, adds, amusingly, “I have a bunch of [API] 500 Series fancy stuff. You know, I used to buy guitars until my wife told me if I brought one more



The show’s laser complement is provided by Meganne Money, aka “The Beam Queen.” It includes six 24W Kvant Lasers. Control is via Pangolin Beyond, triggered by an Akai Professional APC40 mkii MIDI controller.

Photo: Wolfe Eliot Media

home, she was going to 'El Kabong' me." He adds, chuckling, "The 500 Series pieces I can sneak in a lot easier; they're small."

In the 500 Series, Baker says, "You can put anywhere up to ten of them. I started with the old dbx 160. Jimmy T., the monitor guy, who also records the band, is a big gearhead. When we were doing the John Petrucci solo show a couple of years ago, I was in a separate room, doing my front-of-house thing on a couple of speakers; Portnoy was playing drums, and it sounded better than what I was doing with it. It might have been the small room they were in or how I was monitoring it. But Jimmy said, 'Let me get you some of these pieces to try.' And that became the addiction. I have a lot of stuff, and it's all fun to play with. I have all the tools to make it sound as good as possible every night."

Baker also uses Nembrini Audio Black for the distortion on Mike Portnoy's vocals on "The Dark Eternal Night." He says Hendyamps/Maor Appelbaum Mastering "The Oven" smooths everything out on the keys, "and makes them sound absolutely gorgeous." For the rest of his rack, he has a dbx 160 on the bass; dbx 160 on Petrucci's vocals; a dbx 160 and a Neve 545 (to remove excess drum bleed) on Portnoy's vocals; and a Trident 80B EQ, an API SV12 comp, and a dbx 520 on James LaBrie's vocals. Also in his toolbox are the Hendyamps/Maor Appelbaum Mastering "The Cooker" and the Smart Research C1LA compressor/limiter.

Baker singles out "The Cooker," which he describes as "badass." He adds, "I didn't ever think I needed or wanted one until the Joe Satriani tour last spring. And it was one of those things: Once I played with it for a couple of days, I said, 'Wow, I can't mix without this thing'." Continuing the culinary theme, "The Cooker" offers such features such as Fry and Sear (tonal conditioners said to affect the sound in a unique way); Crisper, for a warm air sound; Steam, for extra gain push; Pressure, to adjust the output level and saturated harmonics, and Pre-Heat, for an extra energy push. He also relies on the SPL De-Esser. "A lot of times, a de-esser just uses a compressor to pull the 's' sound down. With this, the technology takes the sound, flips it out of phase, and shoots it at itself. So, you're actually making it disappear, more than squashing it, and it's great."

Baker also makes use of the Fourier Audio transform.engine, which comes with the Quantum338 console; it gives him access to even more gear, including Valhalla Plate reverb, Valhalla Space Modulator, and Valhalla delay, plus Sound Toys SuperPlate and Sound Toys MicroShift, which uses a special recipe of pitch shifting and delay that varies over time, to create rich stereo width.

Asked about working with Dream Theater, Baker, echo-



Photo: Wolfe Eliot Media

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ing Baird’s assessment, says, “The big thing with this gig is pre-production. You have to learn the songs…really learn the songs. The songs are long, and a lot goes on during them. Sound-wise, in terms of what they’re putting out and giving me, that part is easy. When I heard the new album, I instantly knew how it would sound when they played it live: It sounds like a guitar, a keyboard, a bass, a drum set, and a vocalist. It doesn’t have a shitload of overdubs. But it’s not like you’re getting verse, chorus, verse, chorus, sax solo, chorus. They play songs that are 25 minutes long; a short one will be ten minutes.” To cope, he studies each number intensively. Fortunately, he adds, “I love the band and the songs, so I enjoy listening to a song 200 times. If I didn’t, it would be very sad.”

Monitor engineer James Meslin, aka Jimmy T., came to touring from his studio work with Dream Theater. He also co-designed the band’s recording studio on Long Island. “In 2016,” he adds, “they needed to go out with a pretty complex playback rig. So, I ended up building and overseeing that,” and soon he was part of the tour staff.

Running monitors on the road, he says, “is an extension of what’s in my wheelhouse. One thing that runs true in the studio and on the road is you’re living for your gig. In the studio, there have been times when I didn’t leave my chair for 36 hours. Touring is the same thing: You’re out here on the job every day.” He adds, “In terms of the work, I use to my advantage some studio techniques: time efficiency, critical thinking, making judgments on the fly. Also, some of the ways I communicate with the artists: I’m very in with what each of those guys likes.”

On the road, Meslin uses a DiGiCo Quantum 326 console. Asked about using the same brand as Baker, he replies, “There are things you can do when you both live on the same console ecosystem. But it’s not all about how it sounds. In touring, you have to consider things like how much space you’re going to take up on the truck and how much it will cost to freight around this stuff. When you’re on two different console formats and they can’t talk to each other digitally, you’ll need an analog split that adds a ton of weight and doubles the amount of patching to get it to the monitors and the front of house. Ace and I are on a fiber loop, so we have access to everything coming into the rack. We have a system that hasn’t changed much in six years, and there are never any complications. And we also talk the same language; if something goes wrong, we’re using the same terminology.”

Photo: Steve Jennings



The entire band sports sE Electronics mics. “We’ve been flirting with that for a while,” Meslin says. “This is the first tour where, top to bottom, there’s not a single other microphone brand onstage.”

The entire band sports sE Electronics mics. “We’ve been flirting with that for a while,” Meslin says. “This is the first tour where, top to bottom, there’s not a single other microphone brand onstage. I’ve had a relationship with sE since 2013, when I started using a lot of their mics in the studio. They’ve also got great accessories, like reflection filters, to remove the room from the microphone’s sound. The band wants to have a studio sound with them everywhere. So, the more we started to use sE mics in the studio, the more they started to creep in onstage.”

One suspects that sticking with one microphone brand is helpful, given the scale of the tour. For example, Meslin notes that Portnoy’s massive drum kit alone requires 43 inputs. “I knew it was going to be a big undertaking,” he says about the break-apart drum riser design. “Could we get every mic up and off safely every night, without something being lost, without holding up a load-in or load-out? How do we reduce the time we need to spend on that kit? We ended up internally mounting a lot of mics; all the toms have internal mounts.” The units are held in place by a combination of Kelly SHU mounts and MAY Internal Miking Systems. “His drum tech, Jose Baraquio, is really in tune with detail, the way I am, so everything that’s not internally mounted—a hi-hat, an overhead—is bar-mounted with TAMA Drums hardware, custom-cut to fit flush. The kit is captured via sE V7xs, V7s, RN17s on overhead, sE8s for spots, V Kicks, and VBeats. The whole B kit is amazing, with the addition of custom chrome microphones so you can’t tell where the drum hardware ends, and the microphone starts.”

He adds, “Petrucci’s guitar rig is a stereo rig. We use VR2s right on the speaker cap. I love that mic because it’s an active ribbon. You get a kind of two-for-one special: the woof and warmth of a ribbon and the extended range of a condenser because it’s taking phantom power. All the vocal mics are V7s. James LaBrie is on a V7 capsule with a Shure stick. The keyboards and bass are all direct DI. John Myung, the bass player, is on a lot of Rupert Neve gear.”

As for in-ears, Meslin says, “Most of us are on [JH Audio] Roxannes: James, John [Petrucci], and the keyboard player Jordan Rudess. Mike Portnoy is on JH16s. It’s really important to me that the monitor engineer and the band hear the same thing. This is the first tour where I’ve got the majority of the band on the same brand. John Myung is still on

Photo: Wolfe Eliot Media



Photo: Steve Jennings

Dream Theater *40th Anniversary Tour*
Production/Lighting Designer: Steve Baird
Production Manager/Guitar Tech: Matthew Schieferstein
Tour Manager: Rikk Feulner
Stage Manager: Albert Bermudez
Production Assistant: Gary Notley
Lighting Crew Chief: Todd Stokes
System Tech: Korey Chenault
Laser Specialist: Meganne Money
Video LED Tech: Jake Fery
Main Content Creator: Wayne Joyner
Psychedelic Content UON visuals
FOH Engineer: Michael "Ace" Baker
Monitor/Playback Engineer: James "Jimmy T." Meslin
Audio Stage Tech: Barny Peplow
Bass Tech: Jerry Pratt
Drum Tech: Jose Baraquio
Keyboard Tech: Philip Martin
Suppliers:
Lighting: Christie Lites
Video: Christie Lites/NEP Screenworks
Audio: Entec Sound and Light
Lasers: Laser Design, Inc.

Sensaphonics, and that comes down to the fit's comfort. I was on a couple of different sets of in-ears, and when I went to a Roxanne, it was like a wedge was in my ear; there's something very unprocessed about it. It feels full-range and I can manipulate it however I want." Wireless vocals and instruments are handled by Shure Axient wireless systems, and IEM mixes via PSM 1000s.

For vocal processing, Meslin says, "We have an eight-channel rack of preamps with the Rupert Neve RMP-DP. The lead vocal is on that, and elements of the drum kit, including the snare and drumheads. I also have a Waves Superrack, an SSL channel strip, a de-Esser, plus effects like page delay and a Waves reverb.

"We run a front-end preamp," Meslin says, "We have an eight-channel rack of preamps with the Rupert Neve Designs RMP-D8. The lead vocal is on that, elements of the drum kit, and guitar mics. I also have a Waves Superrack, providing additional processing I can't achieve on the desk—harmonic exciters, comps, verbs, and delays."

Even as the *40th Anniversary Tour* winds down, everyone is busy planning a new tour built around the *Parasomnia* album. "They're hitting it hard," Meslin says. "We started with the 40th anniversary last October, and we've gotten three legs out of it: Europe, South America, and the US. Now we're into a festival run through August; we get home, and we go right into the *Parasomnia Tour*." The show includes a new setlist, drawn from the album, and a new design format. Clearly, more anniversaries are in store.