

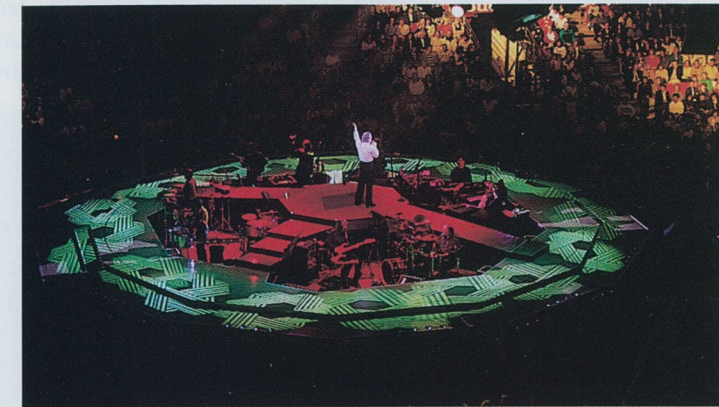


BEAUTIFUL NOISE

Marilyn Lowey puts Neil Diamond in the center of a kaleidoscope for his Tennessee Moon tour.

Night after night of packed arenas, Neil Diamond has the crowd on its feet, cheering, clapping, dancing, and singing along with songs they have collectively known by heart for more than 25 years. The 1996 Tennessee Moon tour, only the second Diamond has performed "in the round," is not only more accessible to the thousands of adoring fans, but also provides lighting designer Marilyn Lowey with a unique opportunity to present this legendary performer in a flattering and creative light.

The concept that Lowey uses when lighting Diamond is that of a big kaleidoscope. Since the venue is in the round, she needed the stage floor to act as a middle gray, as on television, so that color and patterns could be easily taken. "My feeling is that the lighting should provide an environment for him to perform," she said. "It's not about me; it's got to be right for him. None of the lighting is overpowering for Neil; it shows restraint when needed and it also has



(above) Perfect examples of Lowey's "kaleidoscope in the round" concept. Hard-end fixtures create a variety of moving patterns and colors to help set the mood for each number in Diamond's impressive repertoire. (opposite) Diamond is bathed in color for one of his many show-stoppers.

flash and power when needed."

In order to capture the kaleidoscope concept, Lowey washes the stage with 160 VL5 follow spots and uses hard-end fixtures that can create textures and moving patterns. These fixtures are comprised of two different types of mirrored moving instruments, NATs and HPEs. According to Lowey, this technology allows for a great deal of flexibility, with the NATs being able to rotate every pattern, add and delete textures, focus on some patterns and then go back to other patterns. The NATs, follow spots, and the rest of the lighting package were put together by The Obie Company in Torrance, CA.

Diamond is not the only focus of his concerts; his audience also gets into the act. "Every night it's another party," Lowey said. "Neil is one of those performers who really connects with his audience and it's important for him to see the audience. It's pretty amazing how he gets the audience up and moving and it's extremely



Cooler colors are used for Diamond's slower, romantic songs, as well as tunes from his country-flavored *Tennessee Moon* album.

ing the need for truss spot operators, but eight big spotlights are used throughout the arena.

The Autopilot, manufactured by Wybron Inc., consists of a DMX-compatible system controller, four belt-packs, and eight ceiling receivers. The system controller is connected between the lighting console and the

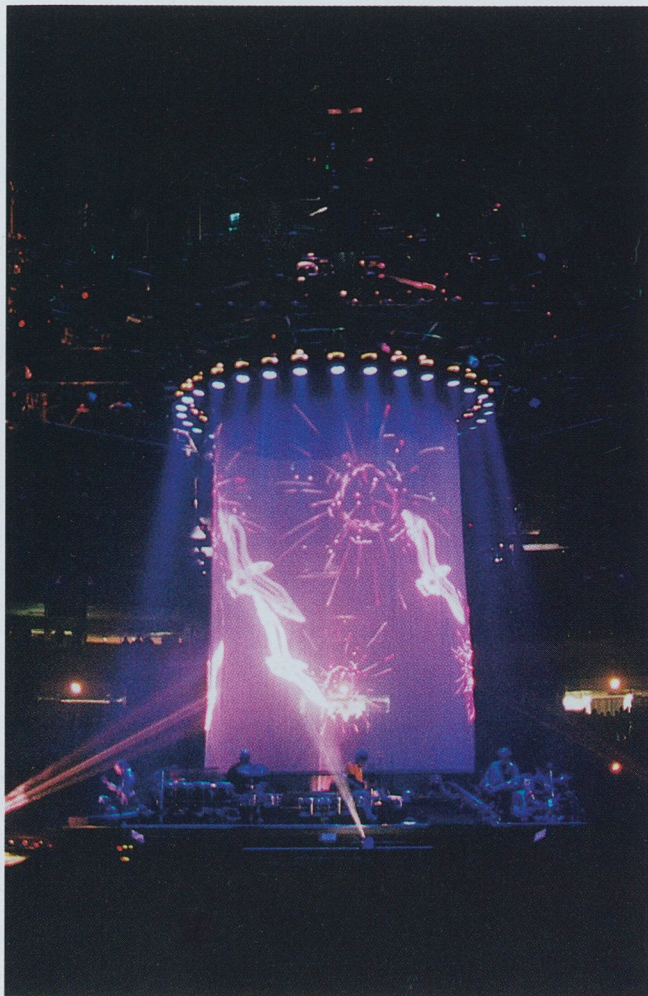
exciting." Therefore, the lighting extends from Diamond's area at the center out into the audience.

It is also easier for the audience to be included in the show when Diamond performs in the round rather than in a traditional proscenium setting. Not many artists perform in the round because of the extra amount of work that goes into putting it all together but according to Lowey, it's worth it. "It takes more lights, it takes more cues, it's more work, but I think the look of it is so much more exciting," she said. "When a performer plays in the round, it suddenly becomes a spectacle."

As integral as the audience is to a concert's success, Lowey's first objective is to light the star himself. To help her achieve that goal she uses a new device called the Autopilot that enables her to keep Diamond in the proper light. The Autopilot consists of sensors sewn into Diamond's costume that communicate to sensors located in the lighting truss suspended above the stage. In lieu of truss spots, 2500 W NATs follow Diamond on stage throughout his performance. The Autopilot is entirely controlled at the console thus eliminat-



(right, top) Because Diamond likes to see his fans, spotlights help get the audience into the act. (right, bottom) The crowd is on its feet clapping, dancing, and singing along to one of the many classics Diamond performs in concert. While the audience is well lit, the focus is still on the star through the use of the Autopilot which controls 2500 W NATs through sensors in Diamond's costume.



A seagull soars through the sky, courtesy of a laser show at the concert's prelude.

automated lights and allows almost all prescribed lighting parameters from the lighting console to pass through it as DMX 512 data.

Lowey worked closely with costume designer Bill Witten in placing the Autopilot sensors in Diamond's costume. It was important for the sensors to be placed where the signal could be detected, and where they would be comfortable for Diamond, who spends a considerable amount of time swaggering around the stage for a performance that lasts about 3 hours almost every night. The use of the Autopilot frees him from the confines of traditional, pre-programmed lighting cues.

Another new addition to the tour is a mini light show at the concert's outset. During an instrumental overture of several of Diamond's songs, a circular curtain is lowered and designs dance upon the fabric synchronized with the music. The patterns change into different shapes representative of the music. For example, when the band performs "Dear Father" from the soundtrack of the movie *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the design becomes a bird flying through the clouds.

These dancing lights are courtesy of laser animation. According to Lowey, the designs are formed by a single dot of light which moves so rapidly that it appears to be a total picture to the naked eye.

After three decades of hits, Neil Diamond is definitely not

a flash in the pan and after more than 15 years with Diamond's tour, Lowey knows Diamond's repertoire almost as well as he does, yet she tries to bring something new and exciting each time he hits the road. For every Neil Diamond song, rest assured that there is a lighting scheme to match.

"How many times can you re-light "Song Sung Blue" and make it look different?" Lowey joked. "Fortunately, technology helps us out every single tour because it's always changing and always improving." Lowey added that lighting "Song Sung Blue" is very basic because now there are many different colors of blue and all the lights can move, a dramatic innovation even over the last 10 years.

Another of Diamond's big hits, "Hello Again," stands out thanks to Lowey's design. Lowey created a gentle and warm effect through the use of patterns. During this number, Diamond strolls around the stage as lavender light falls upon him in a dappled effect, giving the illusion of dusk sunlight streaming through tree branches. This effect in itself gives another example of how the proper lighting can make the most of a single song.

Each of the songs in Diamond's performance roster has its own set of cues, which are on a cue sheet as well as pre-programmed in the lighting equipment's memory. Lowey sets the cues for all the songs that she thinks Diamond will perform over the course of a tour, but this tour was a little different because it was promoting "Tennessee Moon," Diamond's first album of original music in five years.

"Tennessee Moon" is unique in that it has a decidedly Nashville touch to it rather than Diamond's traditional rock and pop approach. During the concert, Diamond performs a set of songs from the new album in the middle of his show. The rest of the concert is filled with familiar songs accompanied by Lowey's massive library of cues.

"The new music is more acoustic and not as flashy," Lowey said. "That creates a challenge: How do I differentiate these songs as compared to the other songs?" To add an aura of distinction to the "Tennessee Moon" tunes, Lowey uses specific colors and textures that are not used at any other point in the show.

The Neil Diamond-Marilyn Lowey relationship has been long-lasting; she first began lighting the singer in 1981 for the tour promoting his just-released movie, *The Jazz Singer*. "Neil Diamond is a wonderful man to work with," she said. "When you get a client like that, you bend over backward to please him."



The designer: Marilyn Lowey is president of Lowey & Company Inc. Lighting & Design in Aspen, CO, and Los Angeles, and has been touring with Neil Diamond for 16 years. In addition to Diamond, Lowey has worked with Bette Midler, Cyndi Lauper, Michael Feinstein, Siegfried & Roy, Olympic and world figure skating, and many others. Aside from live shows, she has also worked on movies, commercials, music videos, television shows, industrials, press events, and has consulted on numerous architectural projects. In 1986 she received an Emmy Award for lighting Diamond's "Hello Again" television special.