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December Issue



Robb Jibson

Written by Rob Ludwig



Panic at the Disco

From Junkyard Theft to Living the Dream

Petty theft doesn't pay, but it *can* lead to a dream job in the entertainment lighting industry. In this month's PLSN interview, we speak with Robb Jibson, who explains how his deviant behavior led him to the lighting industry and why he's living the dream.

PLSN: How did you get interested in lighting?

Robb Jibson: I grew up in Muskegon, Mich. The plan was that I was going to be this big famous rock star. I had a guitar rig, some ripped up Levis 501s and a band with a couple of friends. It was at the tail end of the glam-rock era. I thought if we were going to be famous rock stars, we needed to emphasize the show rather than learn how to play our instruments. Band rehearsals would result in tinkering around with Christmas tree strings and lamps. I built a light box out of some headlights I was stealing out of a junkyard by our house, but it kept blowing up. I had a lamp cord I cut off something and I would just wrap the two wires around the post and plug it in, and the 12-volt lamp would ex-plode. After blowing up a whole bunch of headlamps, I got caught stealing them and I had to do community service. One of the options was to work at the Frauenthal Theatre. I saw the guys on stage hanging actual stage lights and I asked them, "What's the difference between headlights and those fixtures?" He said, "Well, that's a 120-volt lamp, and you're connecting a 12-volt lamp so you need to wire 10 of them in series." I stole 10 more and did just that.

Bill Bodell at the Frauenthal Theatre said, "If you continue to work here, we'll let you get involved in lighting." So I started in community theatre, then high school theatre and on and on. In high school I started working at Odyssey Lighting, in Grand Rapids, Mich., and with Local 26 and came up through the ranks there. After college, I went to Chicago and started looking for a job. I ended up at Pete's Lights and worked there for a while and then freelanced around the Chicago market between ILC, Pete's, Vari-Lite, Upstaging, Windy City Music and Sound Investments.

In 2003, a friend's band, The Alkaline Trio, said they had \$1,000 a week and wanted to take me out on the road. Throughout college and during my upbringing, I never really saw myself as a lighting designer because there was always this line between the artistic and the technical, and I always favored the technical side of things. I don't really know what happened but I always saw my niche in the guys that that I looked up to — Arnold Serame, Nook Schoenfeld, Andy O'Reily, and Patrick Dierson — great designers in their own right, but also a great programmers. When I got a chance to sit in the designer's seat, something else took over; I don't really know what happened but it has gone from there.

But you're still very multi-disciplined; you're a lighting designer, scenic designer, programmer, you do renderings and build video content.

Absolutely. Anything for a dollar, really. I even occasionally perform with a C-wrench too.

What made you go that route, building content and doing renderings, for example, instead of having someone else do it for you?

Necessity is the mother of invention. While I was working with the Alkaline Trio, I was introduced to the band My Chemical Romance. They were just coming off the Taste of Chaos tour and they were ready to do a headline tour of their own. The Alkaline Trio was their support. So when we got out there and met with those guys, they said they were proposing to do a cathedral-like arch thing that they wanted to shoot video into. When Catalyst and the DL.1 had come out, I saw the writing on the wall and the technical side of me said that I needed to learn the technology, or at the very least, to be the guy that someone could call if they had problems. I spent a lot of time learning about compression schemes, codec and the art of cutting video. I was going to Final Cut classes and Final Cut Pro users groups and learning about it. Then, when this opportunity presented itself in 2005, I was like, "Okay, I'm ready to create content."

Working with those guys was such a great experience. We used a lot of stuff that was stock in the Catalyst and manipulated it to look custom, and we shot some stuff and created content that way. As far as renderings go, drawing is a big part of being a designer. I had been positioning myself to provide lighting design support services between programming, rendering, drawing and visualization. I was drawing and rendering for other lighting designers who were either too busy or had no interest in doing it, and I was making money doing it. When it came to Panic at the Disco, our initial talks were more about scenic elements more than anything, so I kind of got thrown into the scenic design position. It was not too tough and working with people over at Atomic Design and Tait Towers was amazing. You can take a napkin sketch or a remedial drawing and it turns into a beautiful set.

Do you consider yourself a right-brained artist or a left-brained technician?

To be honest, I used to pride myself on my technical knowledge — how many amps this is, what lamp that is, or how to patch a 60k symmetrical truss in seconds. But now that I've landed squarely in the designer chair, I find that I'm forgetting a lot of what I used to know. I've been fortunate that I've been able to work with some great crews like Jonny Tossarello, Ron Schilling, Storm Sollars, Kevin Parsley and Chris Barclay. I had to tech some moving lights in Asia a few months ago and I felt like a complete moron. And I used to pride myself on being a moving light tech.

Does your technical background help you implement some of your designs?



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The number one thing I try to do when I'm hired by a new band — and I know this from hanging around bands that are friends of mine and being close to the process — is to realize that they spend a lot of time working on artwork for their albums and merchandise designs. So I try to look at the current flavor in relation to that artwork to get a good idea of where we're going. What I find interesting is that there is a delicate balance between the picture we're creating for the audience and the feeling we're creating on the stage for the artist. With the artists that I've worked with, a lot of times I have to walk on stage to see how it feels. That delicate balance is something that I always take into account before I shove a single-cell cyc light up somebody's nose.

What have you been working on these days?

We're just wrapping up the MTV Rock Band tour with Panic at The Disco. Butch Allen did the production design, and before any of the bands were signed to the bill they designed the lighting and video rig to emulate the video game. So this was kind of a unique process because I was provided with some plots and Butch called and asked what I needed to augment it. It's pretty generic; you know, wash, profile every two feet. The two bands, Dashboard Confessional and Panic at The Disco, couldn't look more different. It's been a fun and interesting chal-lenge to create that out of the same lighting rig. It's the first time I ever had to do anything like that. Usually when I design, I build the system from the ground up.

So your job was to make them look completely different using the same rig?

Absolutely. Panic at The Disco is one of the bands that I rely a lot on what I learned in the theatrical community. It's less about big movements and big graphic aerals with moving lights, and it's more about intensity and color changes from static positions to create deep layered looks. That's one of the things that sets this apart from other designs. A lot of other shows that I see are relying on spots for front light while I try to find a different and unique system for key light. On this tour, we added Martin MAC TW1s so I could have that warm, soft, side light system, and that's one of the things that really makes the show look different and keeps it theatrical and bright, as opposed to the other shows that are more flashy and strobe.

I'm also working with Rise Against. It's interesting because a pal of mine, Chad Peters, was going to come out and be my lighting tech but they called at the last minute and said their lighting designer resigned. So I kind of helped him put that together, and it marks the second time I've designed something and then had an operator out on it. I know it's a position a lot of lighting designers like to be in, but it's not something I've had a lot of success with. Finding operators with good attitudes is super difficult and I find I'm tinkering with my show until the last date. I don't know how, without months and months of rehearsals, you could do one show and walk away from it.

Now that you've been involved in so many different aspects of the industry, what's your dream job?

As corny as it sounds, I'm living the dream, right now. I would like to get to a position, someday, where I could help impart knowledge to people who are up-and-coming, ei-ther through a university or training environment, or just meeting that kid scraping gum off chairs asking about 12-volt headlights.



Robb Jibson



Jibson went beyond the simple use of a spotlight to keylight Panic at the Disco band members.



Jibson's lighting design for Incubus relies on haze for beam effects.

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