

TALES FROM THE CRYPT

Paul Dexter Gives a Gothic Spin to the Heaven and Hell Tour

By: David Barbour

After Black Sabbath comes Heaven and Hell. This is not a theological comment, but a statement of fact, revealing how a certain heavy metal band lives on and on. We're talking, of course, about Black Sabbath, the touring sensation led by Ozzy Osbourne. With a history that reaches back to the 1960s, it is still very much with us; however, as Osbourne and drummer Bill Ward are currently pursuing other projects, their colleagues, Toni Iommi and Geezer Butler, teamed up with two former band members, Ronnie James Dio and Vinny Appice, to create a kind of spin-off band named after a Black Sabbath album from 1980.

"By calling it Heaven and Hell, you know exactly what you're getting and it doesn't interfere with anything," Iommi said to the music industry publication *Billboard*. "There's no 'Is it really Black Sabbath?' and all that rubbish. Of course, we have been out as Black Sabbath with this lineup, so we could do it. But I think it's best to go as Heaven and Hell."

In any event, Black Sabbath by any other name still guarantees a hard-rocking good time. To design the tour's stage set and lighting, the Heaven and Hell crew turned to Paul Dexter, of Masterworks Lighting. A multi-tasking designer whose resume includes special events, corporate exhibits, film, and much more, Dexter has a deep experience in concert touring. His relevant experience includes a past Black Sabbath outing in 1992, as well a lighting design gig with Ozzy Osbourne in 1981; he's done Dio's self-named act since 1983. As production designer for Heaven and Hell, Dexter has provided plenty of amusingly subversive imagery.

The tour's logo features a trio of fallen angels enjoying a smoke somewhere outside the gates of heaven; Dexter has picked up on this mildly blasphemous idea, coming up with a Gothic church crypt setting that is the ideal surroundings for such numbers as "Lady Evil," "Voodoo," and "The Devil Cried." The basic look is a faux-stone church surround with pillars, arches, and curved windows, complete with the signature Sabbath crosses. The upstage wall features three arched windows and stone circular steps leading to the drum kit podium. There's room upstage left and right for ground-stacked guitar speakers, which are placed behind iron gates. It's the kind of place that if, wandering into it at night, you ran into Quasimodo, or perhaps one of Anne Rice's vampires, you wouldn't be entirely surprised.

These elements, Dexter says, are key Heaven and Hell concepts. "They've always been known for using this kind of imagery—medieval castles and churches, and Celtic crosses," says the designer. Interestingly, he adds, the crucial



PHOTO: GENE KIRKLAND



COURTESY OF: PAUL DEXTER

The crypt-like setting for the Heaven and Hell tour features faux brickwork, created by The Nature Factory and Superior Backings.

inspirational event came under unusual circumstances. "I took a trip up to Stanford University," he says, "because our family was out college hunting. That trip proved to be a good piece of visual research." The campus' church-influenced architecture, with lots of thick wood ceiling beams, curved arched windows, and classical pillars all lent themselves to his concept for the Heaven and Hell set.

Because Dexter wanted a realistic stone look for the scenery, he turned to The Nature Factory, based in Clinton Township, Michigan and, to duplicate the exact stone in a backdrop, Superior Backings of Los Angeles. The Nature Factory, as befits its name, specializes in creating scenery for exhibits, displays, themed events, and corporate presentations that require realistic-looking elements suggesting wood, plants, aged timbers, rocks, and mountains. Here, it provides the remarkably authentic church walls.

The three arched windows on the upstage wall are, in fact, projection screens. Dexter specified three High End Systems DL.2 digital lighting units to provide a fairly constant stream of

images through the show. Working with programmer Joseph Denham from CWP, which, in addition to the DL.2s, supplied a Hog iPC console and D-Tek video switcher, Dexter pulled together images from various sources. “We had 14 images from past album artwork made to work together on the three arch screens, and I layered in stock footage,” he says, adding images that include rotating crosses, manic skull movements, and an overdose of hellfire.

“The DL.2s are so versatile that, for a nearly two-hour show, new images and stock footage continues to alter those three arch projection windows and the set,” Dexter says. Also, he says, “For about half of the time, the projection windows fly out and the DL.2s converge to make an image that projects across the 55’ wide castle stone backdrop. In song after song, there is a transformation that occurs, with music and other lighting effects, but adding the DL2s into the mix creates another extraordinary layer.”

The lighting package for the tour, provided by PRG, includes a 21 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Profiles and 10 Mac 2000 Wash units. Six 8’ lengths of Kino Flo blue fluorescent lighting is used as an element on a moving truss effect. In addition, there are five 8-lite Molefays, 130 PAR cans, and eight ETC Source Fours, along with eight Color Kinetics ColorBlasts and several Pixelrange PixelLines to add splashes of color on the set.

The show is run off of a High End Wholehog III console, a board that remains somewhat controversial. Mark Scrimshaw, the tour’s lighting director, says it “seems to be coming into its own. I worked with it on some of my recent projects and it was certainly good enough for them. For us, with a number of festivals coming up this summer, the fixture transfer function will be very useful.” Scrimshaw adds that he enjoys working on the tour because the songs are cued “very dramatically; there are quite a few cues in each song.”

“There are hundreds of cues,” says Dexter—an interesting statement for a designer who, quite famously, has criticized much modern concert lighting design for its excessive glitz. However, he adds, nothing is done without a reason; he analyzed the structure of each number, looking for where and when to effectively deploy his effects. “I dissected every step of every song, so each one is like a little opera, regardless of the heavy metal tag,” he says. “There’s no flashing on every drumbeat, which I hate. A lot of people know how to run lights and a console, but they don’t know how to design lighting—it’s all in enhancing music and lyrics with lights and projection to achieve the best dramatic effect, but never to overshadow it.” Unsurprisingly, the palette relies heavily on very saturated colors. “You will never see pink in this show,” he says.

As appears to be the case in every concert tour these days, prep time was at a premium. Dexter, Denham, and Scrimshaw had three days of production rehearsals at Showbiz Studios in Van Nuys, California, plus one day prior to the show in Vancouver. More tweaking took place before each show for the next ten days. They worked together

intensively to get the lighting into shape quickly. Still, whatever limitations were involved, Dexter was clearly in his element. Better known for his lighting work than his set design, he has, in fact, done both since the beginning of his career. “When I was 19, I built my own flats, because I needed a scenic element to light,” he says. “I’ve designed sets for Elton John, Tangerine Dream and consulted on Mötley Crüe’s *Girls Girls Girls* tour, along with most all of [Ronnie James] Dio’s tours.”

Then again, this project is a kind of homecoming for Dexter. “People ask me to name my favorite band and I always say it’s Dio,” he says. “It’s because he gets involved, takes the time to articulate what he wants, and we develop an incredible, cohesive outcome together. He always has great ideas, and that stimulates me.” Indeed, with this gig, as well as a tour with REO Speedwagon, Dexter finds himself unexpectedly back on the road. He has plenty of other irons in the fire, including exhibits and product development ideas, but seems jazzed to be returning to the rock ‘n roll arena. “You know,” he adds, “I started touring early and, after a while, I got sick of it. But I’ve now come full circle, except this time with a new appreciation and mature perception of my craft. This is my first love.” Clearly, this project is, for him, more heaven than hell. 🎸



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Top: Kino Flo fluorescent units act as a moving truss light element.
Below: The DL.2s in action, sending images to the window units.