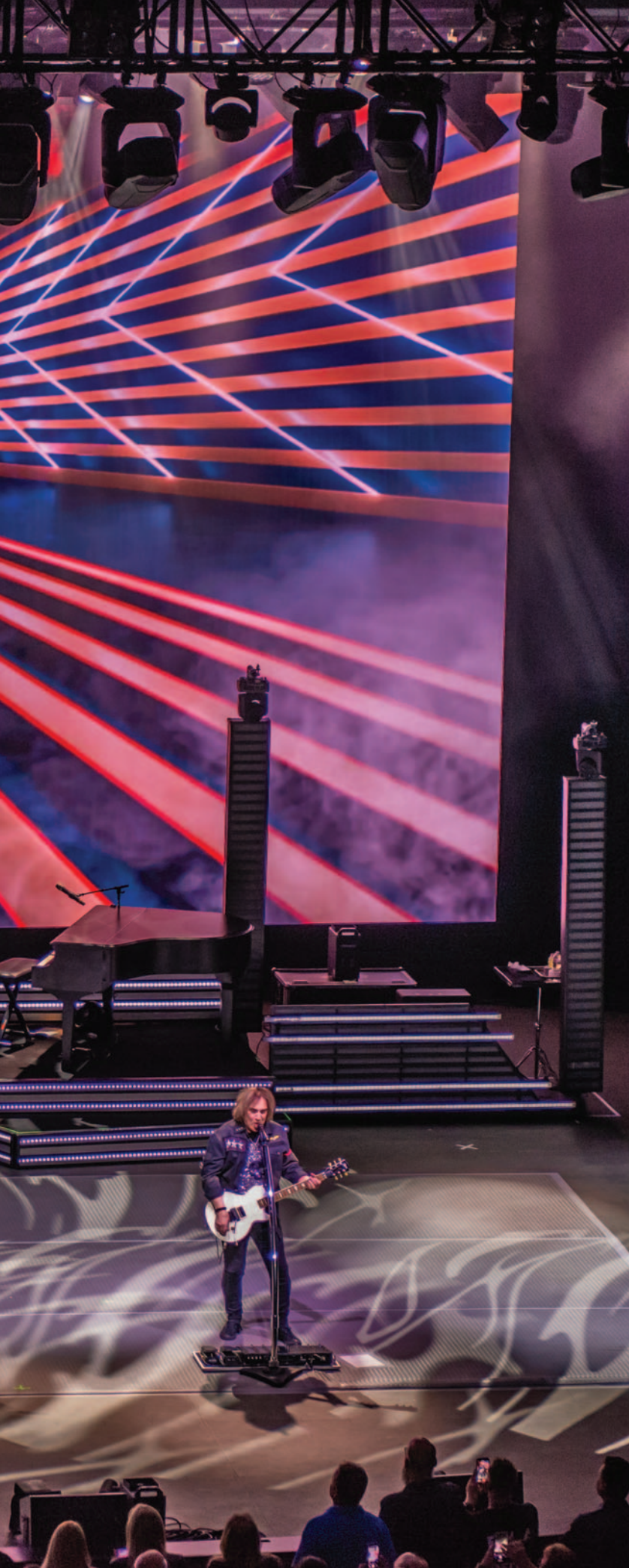


# REO

SPEEDWAGON





# BACK TO THE EIGHTIES

REO Speedwagon's  
Vegas residency celebrates  
a career pinnacle

By: David Barbour

**T**he verdict is in: REO Speedwagon just keeps speeding along. The legendary rock band opened a short residency at the Venetian Theatre in Las Vegas last November, selling out immediately and mandating another run in May of this year. As we go to press the band has announced another run of dates in October. “We had so much fun, the audience response was mind-blowing, and all the love and hard work we put into this production more than paid off,” says lead vocalist Kevin Cronin in a statement. “We are very proud of this special production and look forward to returning to the Venetian Theatre in 2024.”

Titled *An Evening of Hi Infidelity...and More*, the show is constructed around the set list of the milestone album that spawned a multitude of hits, including “Keep On Loving You,” “Don’t Let Him Go,” “In Your Letter,” and “Take It on the Run.” Other key features include a documentary tracing the band’s history and a collection of fan-favorite tunes. It’s a deluxe, multidimensional look at one of the era’s defining groups.

One of the show’s key drivers is Paul Dexter, production and lighting designer and video content and art director; he also co-produced that documentary. A longtime associate of the band, he has also worked with Elton John, Mötley Crüe, and Ozzy Osbourne, among others. He also co-authored *Concert Lighting: The Art and Business of Entertainment Lighting*, with the late James Moody. Given his experience, he knows a thing or two about putting on a retrospective show that feels thoroughly up to the minute.

To celebrate *Hi Infidelity*, Dexter says, the band “wanted



Above and previous spread: The upstage video screen, consisting of Absen panels, is 44' wide. The stage set comprises risers with LED fascias and six vertical towers decked out with LEDs.

to transport the audience back to that time.” The time-travel experience begins as audiences enter the auditorium. “We produced a 23-minute video that visually matches with a monologue from the [Southern California rock station] KLOS DJ Bob Coburn playing music and sharing news from 1981, just like a radio show, while teasing the audience that REO Speedwagon would be coming into the studio to talk about their new album, *Hi Infidelity*. The video includes images of 1981 world events, music charts, TV shows, and movies culminating in Mr. Coburn’s long-awaited introduction to REO, [at which point] the curtain raises to reveal the band.”

The show breaks down into three parts. The band, Dexter says, “wanted to play the entire record in the same order as the original vinyl. That’s Act I. Act II describes the band’s early years, starting with a four-minute mini-documentary followed by an acoustic set. Act III has the post-*Hi Infidelity* hits, most famously 1985’s ‘Can’t Fight This

Feeling.’ Creating this three-act structure took four months of planning. We integrated musical and physical elements to maximum theatrical effect. The major challenges were producing the documentary, designing a new UV backdrop that was our vision of the Chicago skyline (made by TRIO Entertainment), and involving our road crew to organize a quick-change setup and strike for a new band configuration that plays in front of the backdrop in Act II. Additionally, we focused on creating new video content.”

In its co-headliner tours with Styx, Def Leppard, and Pat Benatar, Dexter says, “We have used custom content on 40’ to 48’ wide video walls, most of it developed primarily using royalty-free graphics, archival films and photographs, and band brandings, like logos and album art. These elements were seamlessly tied together by working with a good video editor and for us that is Haydon Lane,” who has extensive experience as both a cinematographer and editor of documentaries and TV awards shows.



“The hard-edge VLZ Profiles and Sharpys leave beautiful light rays in geometric shapes in the air before arriving to project break-up patterns on the floor and set pieces,” Dexter says.

However, Dexter says. “This time, we’ve utilized AI to create custom content stills.” As he points out, times have changed: “Video content has become an extension of lighting. These days, video often replaces physical set pieces!” He sees video as an important tool for “complementing the colors onstage and graphically accentuating the music in gentle or explosive ways,” in addition to the all-important need for IMAG.

This time, however, he has taken a different approach, “For me, AI imagery has given me the tools to tell a story rather than to simply augment live music with lighting and graphic video effects.” Noting that he derives inspiration from the songs’ lyrics, he says that AI offers access to “hundreds of styles, from noir to comic book art, and no end to what you can do. Every song can be different. Sometimes, a song doesn’t need anything but a little background. It took some practice, but the results far exceed what has been previously available to us.”

To generate AI imagery, Dexter says, “I use Pixlr Image Generator, Photo Editor, and MidJourney through the Discord platform. It depends on the desired outcome to determine which one. It takes some trial and error to figure it out, but I am having fun with it.”

Drawing on the vast Envato Elements library, the designer gets a wide variety of image options, incorporating royalty-free loops and still content with custom AI. For example, “Keep on Lovin’ You” is backed by a glamorous New York City skyline. “It was the biggest-selling single from *Hi-Fidelity*,” he says. “The album art shows an apartment interior with Kevin Cronin putting a vinyl album on a turntable and, in the background, a nighttime cityscape; the content loop was a way to depict that original art.” The previously mentioned Chicago skyline is featured in “In Your Letter.”

Boomers in the audience will be amused by images from the 1930s-era *Little Rascals* film series, including a

## CONCERTS

close-up of Carl “Alfalfa” Switzer. “The band paid King World Productions [distributor of the *Little Rascals* films] for the rights to use a 1937 audio clip that precedes the song ‘Tough Guys’ on the album,” Dexter says. “To this day, that audio is played before the band performs ‘Tough Guys’ in concert. Alfalfa was on the front page of REO’s 1980 tour itinerary, which Kevin showed me when I was preparing the mini-documentary. I took a picture of Alfalfa with my phone, then Haydon and I separated the image and placed it in front of an AI-generated *Little Rascals* clubhouse; it’s the image that starts the song.”

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Other intriguing art-derived content includes a steam-punk version of a 1930s European city, which, Dexter says, “was strangely fitting as a backdrop” for “I Wish You Were There” and an autumnal New England town that morphs into a Midwestern plain bisected by a fence, for “Golden Country.” The latter images, he says “were made from photos I found on Shutterstock. We animated them with Adobe effects, including moving clouds and blowing

grass. The REO Speedwagon logo is placed on a wooden goalpost as if it is claiming the land.” Absen video panels are used throughout the show.

The stage set comprises risers with LED fascias and six vertical towers decked out with LEDs displaying plenty of color and graphic content. Interestingly, Dexter says, “Apart from production tours, the band’s itinerary is so venue-diverse that it isn’t cost-effective to carry a lighting rig. The stage set is an evolutionary solution to address different venues with a modular riser system while keeping visual consistency. I designed the set, Gallagher Staging in California built it, and the LED lighting was engineered by Kelly Sticksel and Peter Roberts. [The latter is also the band’s monitor engineer.] The idea is partly based on logistics—to transport well, set up quickly, and fit into the truck. The LEDs were provided by SIRS-E in Houston; it’s a powerful, dependable RGBW tape. We fire a Madrix software library of more than 100 files through 60 universes of DMX—the stage set is basically another lighting fixture! The towers-and-fascia configuration is pixel-mapped and, although there is a distance between the LED surfaces, our eyes forgive the negative space and we see a complete picture. Sometimes it looks like the band is playing inside a video screen.”

The house rig at the Venetian includes Vari-Lite VLZ Profiles and VLZ Wash units, Martin MAC Auras, and Claypaky Sharpys plus a substantial array of ETC Source





Above and left: The house rig at the Venetian includes Vari-Lite VLZ Profile and VLZ Wash units, Martin MAC Auras, and Claypaky Sharpys plus a substantial array of ETC Source Four Lekos and PARs in addition to TMB ProCan 4 Lite blinders. Dexter says he relies on the Auras for their colors, the Sharpys for their beam looks, and the VLZ Profiles for their break-ups.

Four Lekos and PARs plus TMB ProCan 4 Lite blinders. Dexter says he relies on the Auras for their colors, the Sharpys for their beam looks, and the VLZ Profiles for their break-ups: “Used together, a variety of fixtures adds dimension and provides numerous air graphic texture options.” He adds that he is a big fan of haze as a delivery system for his lighting effects. “I typically use the Auras, or any comparable LED wash fixture, as performer specials, because color-temperature consistency seems easier to achieve with them when using a different system daily on the road. I’ve stuck with the concept at the Venetian.” Also, he says, “The hard-edge VLZ Profiles and Sharpys leave beautiful light rays in geometric shapes in the air before arriving to project break-up patterns on the floor and set pieces. At the right time in a song, the VLZs are an effective audience blast; rotating and breakup effects can be a dynamic intrusion without blinding the crowd.”

For control, he says, “I bring an Avolites Tiger Touch II everywhere I go. It is small and lifting it myself is no problem, but it is powerful thanks to its 52-universe capability. It’s intuitive to use and Avo continues to improve the soft-

ware.” Indeed, he is a lifetime fan of the company’s productions. “I started with one of the first Avo prototype QM500 models on an Ozzy Osbourne tour in 1982. I liked them then and I still do.”

Interestingly, he says, “The cueing changes for the residency performance because it is a well-equipped, traditional theatre and I like to use its resources. It definitely adds to a sense of drama that we typically don’t have on the road. For example, our normal upstage backdrop is located on the downstage line set, where it is used as a band reveal. The Chicago backdrop is cued to come in for Act II, after the mini-documentary plays on the side screens, and is then used as a reveal. For Act III, two black legs located upstage reveal two vertical towers that flank the 44’-wide video wall with 16 Sharpys, revealing another lighting layer. The show continually grows and changes, and the show continually grows and changes throughout the night.”

Altogether, the project has been an adventure, allowing Dexter to try new products and techniques. “During the November 2023 residency,” he says, “I cued the video



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content on intercom; it was fired through the house system, which was a challenge. For the May 2024 shows, I started using Resolume video software, firing it using the Avo console playback along with the Madrix system and lighting scenes. There was a real-time learning curve and we had some unexpected anomalies with the video because I was new to Resolume. Audio was also linked to the video; a hard-to-conceal oops moment came when the audio and video began the content again, from the start. It was a rookie move but that problem has since been discovered and corrected. I never thought the day would come when a lighting fader would control the house PA!"

### Sound

Front-of-house mixer Joe Walsh has been with REO Speedwagon since 2018. After he stints working in nightclubs, one-off concerts, and special effects, he joined Sound Image in 2001, subsequently mixing acts like Pat Benatar, Billy Idol, Lindsey Buckingham, Boz Scaggs, Michael McDonald, The Dukes of September, and Julia Michaels.

He is used to working with house rigs, he notes: "With REO, all of the dates we do involve house rigs or rigs brought in by a sound company well in advance."

Still, one imagines that he is pleased by the house rig at the Venetian, which includes a main left and right PA consisting of Meyer Sound gear: 24 LYON boxes plus a center cluster of nine 1100-LFCs, eight UPJuniors for front fill, two UPA-1Ps for outfill, and ten UPM-1Ps for under-balcony coverage. The surround system is from d&b audiotechnik, including 32 E0s, four E12s, and 12 D12 amplifiers. Indeed, he says, "It's the quality of gear that I try to spec when I can."

In terms of the band's preferences when it comes to mics and in-ears, Walsh he prefers to stick with tried-and-true items, in part for the sake of continuity: "If we're going to do a gig away from our normal gear, we try to keep it as consistent as possible. Cronin, for example, opts to use a Heil microphone although from time to time he will go with a Telefunken model. For monitoring, the entire band uses Shure Axient wireless with personalized in-ear molds."

The Venetian comes equipped with a full set of Meyer

stage monitoring gear, which is available on request. But, Walsh says, “We’ve done away with cabinets onstage. Also, the drum set is digital, so when [drummer Bryan Hitt] plays, you don’t hear anything but the drums that are being triggered, which cuts down on onstage volume. It gives me the ability to mix without interference. He triggers a sample, which the drum unit sends to me.” The result, he adds, “is perfect every day.” If this sounds a tad unusual, he notes, “This is the only band I’ve ever worked with that does, but we’re in our second year of doing it. It allows me to get a really clean mix.”

Hitt uses the Pearl Mimic Pro, which, the company says, comes with the Steven Slate 5 drum library, which features multi-channel drum samples recorded in various studios. “Instead of substituting digital effects to create ambiance, these instruments use the actual ambient recordings with separate adjustments of close, overhead, and room mics,” the company says. It is also billed as the first drum module to implement a 7" IPS touch screen and the first to offer two mixers for independent headphone and front house outputs.

Walsh adds that both front of house and monitors are mixed on DiGiCo SD12 consoles. “They sound great,” he says. “They’ve got a nice warm sound and they’re really easy to work with. They make sense as far as where to find things in different categories.” When it comes to plug-ins, he says, “A lot of guys use that stuff but I don’t feel I

need it. This is a straightforward rock band; all I need are a couple of reverbs and a delay and I’m good. The onboard compression and gates are all fine. There’s nothing wrong with them at all.”

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Walsh estimates that the band plays roughly 80 to 90 dates a year. This year, in addition to the Venetian residency, the band is out with Train on the 44-date *Summer Road Trip 2024 Tour*. Thanks to his familiarity with the band, he is comfortable mixing in any sized venue, indoors and out. Cronin, he notes, takes care of his voice—a regimen that includes a daily vocal lesson—which is a clue to how youthful and strong he continues to sound after decades of performing.

REO Speedwagon returns to the Venetian for another brief residence October 2 – 5. Thanks to everyone involved, the band takes its fans back to the ‘80s in high style. 📶

Photo: Courtesy of Hayden Lane



This UV backdrop, depicting the Chicago skyline, is one of the production’s new elements.