

Case Study: Sholight, LLC

Tyler E. Littman: A Lighting Dream Realized





An excellent example of the "killer looks" created by John LaBriola for the Jonas Brothers 2010 Summer Tour. Courtesy of Calvin Engel - JBE

Using CAD with 3D modeling, Tyler E. Littman of Sholight, LLC designs lighting sets that amp up the star power of many well-known entertainers.

Baptized by Fire

Tyler E. Littman grew up in the entertainment business. When he was young, his neighbor sparked a lifelong love of the industry. This was no ordinary neighbor—this was the technical director for the legendary 1969 Woodstock Music Festival, and Littman was immediately hooked. After gaining some experience of his own, he started his firm, Sholight LLC, in 2005. Based in Philadelphia but working primarily in New York City, Sholight specializes in entertainment lighting design for concert tours and events. They also provide lighting and production design services for television and film, special events, installations, environmental design, and video projection and convergence. Littman's work has been featured in magazines like *PLSN* and *Live Design*.

Littman studied video and film production at the Savannah College of Art and Design. In his work as the principal designer of Sholight, he integrates this formal schooling with skills he's learned on the job. Littman and Sean Tori, his business manager, form the core team, partnering with other designers as specific projects call for them. Over the years, Sholight has attracted a long list of high-profile clients. "It is a combination of our strong work ethic, attention to detail, budget flexibility, and list of services that helps distinguish Sholight from many other firms in the business," explains Littman.

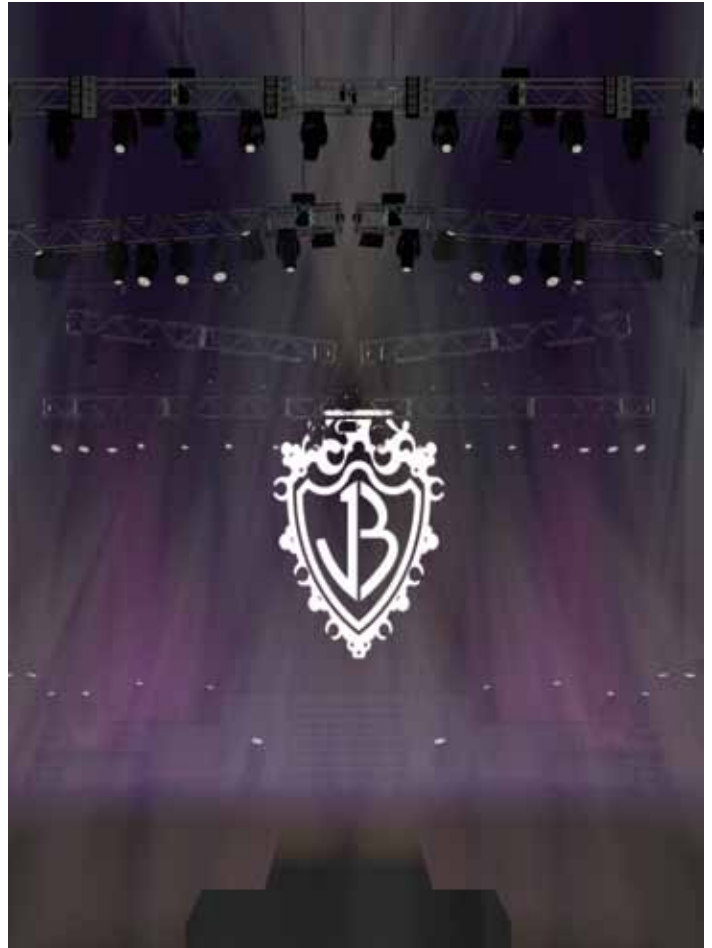
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"I grew up around the men who, in the 1970s, helped shape this industry into what it is today. I worked for lighting shops, roadhouses, and even the union, absorbing as much information as I could. I started at the bottom and did my best to learn everyone's job along the way. . . I learned an appreciation for, and understanding of, each person's role in the big picture.

It is on this foundation that I have built the philosophy for my business—that consideration should be taken as to how each element of the design fits into the bigger picture. My designs must not only be creative and visually pleasing, but practical; and they must take into account limitations such as venue design, crew size, schedule, and budget."

*— Tyler E. Littman, Principal Designer and Owner,
Sholight, LLC, Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Lighting designers Tom Kenny and Michael Stiller have had a tremendous effect on Littman's work. Before he started Sholight, Littman worked as a programmer for Kenny on a number of projects in the New York area, including shows for David Bowie. While working together, Kenny helped Littman to understand texture and layering—and the way in which both translate to fixture placement. Stiller, who lectures graduate students at Pratt University and the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York, taught Littman how to put all of the various lighting design pieces together to form a unified design. "He is like a puzzle master," says Littman. Citing the combined influence of both men, Littman created a successful show as a designer and programmer for a special Barry Manilow concert on PBS, which he counts as a highlight of his career.



An on-the-fly rendering of the lighting and set design for the Jonas Brothers South American Tour.



Seeing Past the Rain

Sholight designed the high-profile Super Bowl Saturday Night Concert that the NFL commissioned for Super Bowl XLIV in Fort Lauderdale, FL through Live Nation Special Events. The stage was just feet from the ocean, and featured star performers Robert Randolph, The Barenaked Ladies, and O.A.R. and drew approximately 20,000 people. With over two months to design the show, the event had what Littman considers to be a long timeframe; typical timeframes can be as short as a couple of days.

"I was pretty freaked out, because there was really no time at that point; after the storm was the show. It was like 'well, if I don't have the right tools in place and can't get this file together quickly, we're really going to lose a lot of time.' It could have been a real disaster. The first time we would see what we had programmed would not be until the show actually happened."

—Tyler E. Littman, Sholight, LLC, Philadelphia, PA, USA

"It went off perfectly," Littman says. This was no small feat, since he didn't even get to do a dry run. On the day before the concert was slated to start, Littman awoke to a windy, rainy mess. The crew couldn't do any work onstage, so they quickly adopted Plan B. Crew Chief Russ Felton and his team broke down their front-of-house setup while Gaffer Gerard McCarthy and Littman looked for a dry spot to house the controls. They used a trailer that had previously served as vendors' offices to set up Sholight's mobile visualizer and virtually program the show. "I was pretty freaked out, because there was really no time at that point; after the storm was the show. It was like 'well, if I don't have the right tools in place and can't get this file together quickly, we're really going to lose a lot of time.' It could have been a real disaster. The first time we would see what we had programmed would not be until the show actually happened." His team hung the rig exactly to spec, showing that "the ESP Vision file was spot on." Littman continues, "In the end, had we not had the Vision rig and had not been easily able to export the files from the Vectorworks® program to Vision, we might not have been able to pull off the show as well as we did."

Since the outdoor beach location required a modular roof system, it posed other hurdles for the team, including limited weight loads and hanging points. Littman had to use very specific weight loading so as not to compromise the system's stability. Striving to achieve Sholight's trademarks of depth and layering also presented weight issues. Littman needed to factor in truss trims, fixture placement, and the use of T-bars that tailed fixtures down to specific heights. Additionally, since they were outside and needed high-power fixtures to create high impact, the substantial weight limited the number of fixtures that they could hang.

Using the Vectorworks Designer software, Littman and the team overcame many obstacles. Importing in 3D from the staging vendor's design software, they pinpointed the available hanging locations. Then they moved trusses into their positions. Using a third-party chain hoist plugin, they could view the exact locations from which the trusses could hang. They placed fixtures on the plot, factoring in everything from trim height and fixture size, to offset. Working first in plan view and then in front and side views, the team ensured that they achieved the correct depth and layering of the beams. Once everything was in place, Littman exported the file to AutoCAD® so that Stageco's engineers could sign off on the weight loads.

Littman credits the Create Plot and Model View command and the 3D environment with getting this show off without a hitch. "The Create Plot and Model View command, which allows me to actually move the trusses with all of the fixtures on it, made working out the trims and the depths and the placement a lot easier, because I didn't have to worry about things not moving correctly with all the parts; it made it much more seamless," he notes. In addition to helping the team visualize the show, he says that the software application probably saved the client time and money. "The biggest thing is being able to really see the finished product before it gets set up and being able to present an idea that we know works both visually and from an engineering standpoint walking in the door. That's something that's not so easy to do by hand."



A perfect example of Sholight's trademarks of depth and layering. Courtesy of Sholight, LLC.

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A final rendering of the stage for the Super Bowl Saturday Night Concert. Courtesy of Sholight, LLC.



(Above) The interior of a Pittsburgh steakhouse used for the 2010 NFL Season Kick Off.



(Right) Use of the surroundings to help accent the event. Courtesy of Sholight, LLC.

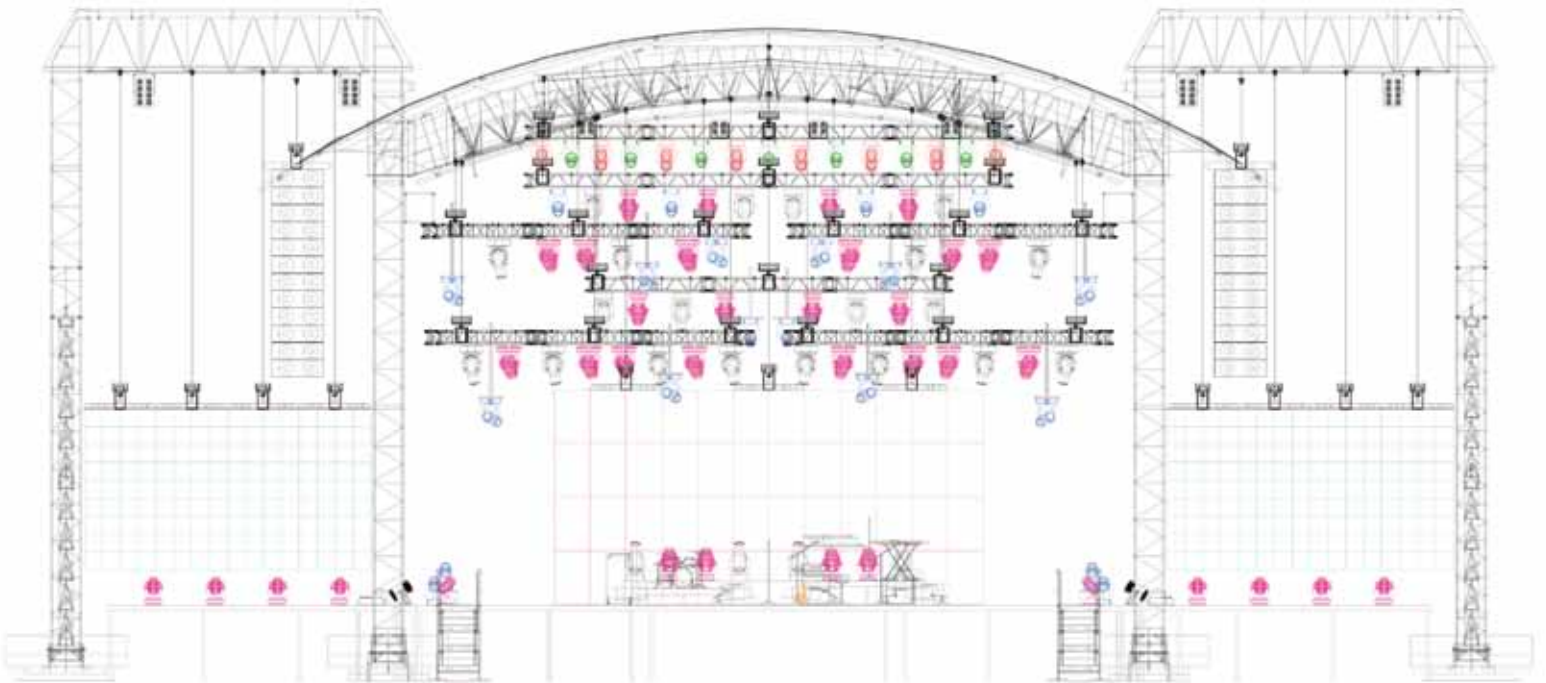


Courtesy of Calvin Engel - JBE

Translating the Jonas Brothers for South America

In the summer of 2010, Littman got the opportunity to work with the wildly popular Jonas Brothers. His friend and colleague John LaBriola had been designing and operating the lighting for the group, but due to a growing client roster, LaBriola was not able to continue touring. Littman says that his transition was smooth, “Like myself, John drafts in Vectorworks, which made our collaboration on the project nice and easy.” For this summer tour, the band performed in a variety of different venues. Usually, they played in large sheds, amphitheatres, or arenas, but occasionally they needed to “shoehorn” their equipment into a much smaller venue. For these tighter spaces, Littman used a 3D model of the rig to cut sections of the lighting trusses, shift rigging points, or scale back scenic elements, like the three runways that extended into the audience. The 3D views also helped him visualize how the changes would affect the path of the concert’s focal point, a large LED display with six separate panels that moved along rotating trolleys on an oval truss track.

After the summer tour, the Jonas Brothers asked Littman to continue with them to South America. Since they would not take their full rig, Littman needed to create new designs for the shows. “The number one priority I set for myself was trying to maintain the look that John LaBriola had established with the band. His overall concepts worked really well and he was able to achieve some killer looks. I knew I had a big pair of shoes to fill,” he says. For the summer tour, Littman had run the show off of series 1 GrandMA consoles. For the South American run, he upgraded to the newer GrandMA2, and took the month between shows to preprogram the show using a visualizer at his studio. Littman used the Vectorworks Designer software to export models directly into MA Lighting’s GrandMA 3D, saving the time it would have taken to rebuild all the truss and scenic elements in MA 3D, allowing more time to focus on the design. “The end result was a show that very closely resembled what John had done for the summer tour. I was happy to have kept to my original goal of honoring the awesome look John worked so hard to create,” Littman says.



The 3D build model showing the amount of detail which went into planning the Super Bowl Beach Party. Courtesy of Sholight, LLC.

From Vision to Reality

Littman uses the Vectorworks Designer software for all of his projects. "Whether the job calls for simple 2D ground plans, complex 3D models, or photorealistic renderings, Vectorworks is always our first choice for a number of reasons. First, it is affordable. Unlike the competition you get a lot for your money, which is important to a small firm like ours. Next, would have to be ease of use. Having used both CAD and graphic design applications, I found the Vectorworks user interface to be highly intuitive and easily customizable. Most importantly, it is widely used by my colleagues and has emerged as a new industry standard," he explains.

"The vision that I had really translated from paper to reality. Standing in front of the house when O.A.R. went on and seeing what was in my brain translated to reality was really awesome. It's not often that it happens that well."

-Tyler E. Littman, Sholight, LLC, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Littman has helped to illuminate a number of bright stars. With his ability to work through a storm and recreate a successful show on a new continent, his future looks very bright too.

Acknowledgements

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Founded in 2005, Sholight, LLC is a New York City focused lighting and scenic design company that has set the stage for show-stopping performances by David Bowie, Barry Manilow, Robert Randolph, The Barenaked Ladies, O.A.R., and the Jonas Brothers.

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