

PHOTOS GREG HOFF AND KENNY WILLIAMSON



In The Trenches

On the Road With REO Speedwagon

By Paul Dexter

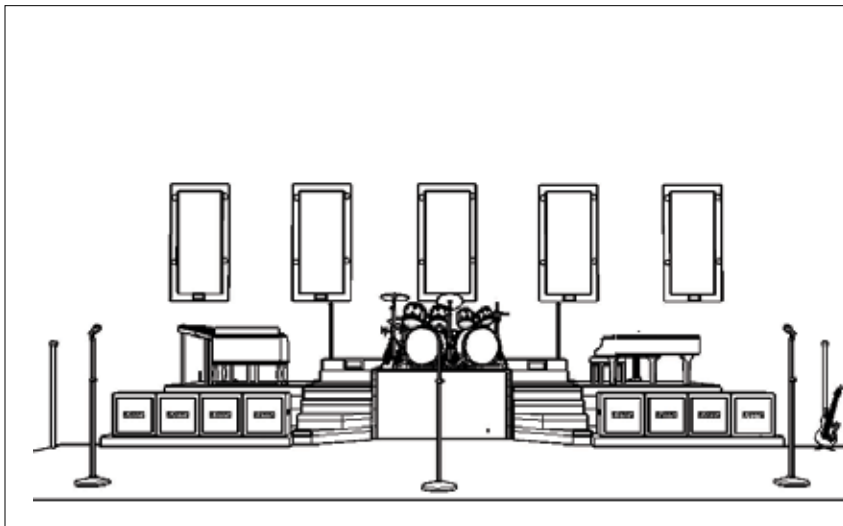
It all started with the April 2007 release of the first studio album from REO Speedwagon in 12 years and planning the band's subsequent promotional tour. It took three years to craft the recordings, put them on CD, and market it for worldwide distribution. Up until then, REO Speedwagon's 40 million records sold primarily in the '70s and '80s, with hits "Take it on the Run," "Time for Me to Fly," "Roll with the Changes,"

and "Keep on Loving You." In the following years, they had a rough time, as music shifted through its numerous phases. During these passing pop culture trends, though, the band never stopped working.

During the last few years, there has been a classic rock resurgence of several of the genre's early icons. Concert promoters filling seats on classic rock demands book more and more bands like

REO Speedwagon as ticket sales exceed expectations. The release of the new REO Speedwagon CD was planned in conjunction with the pairing of another classic rock group of mammoth popularity during the 70s and 80s, Boston. The two bands made preparations for a 2007 summer and fall tour in major US arenas and amphitheatres.

Sadly, on Friday, March 9, 2007, the 55-year-old lead singer and guitarist of Boston, Brad Delp,



Dexter's set renderings for the tour.

committed suicide in his home in Atkinson, NH. This unfortunate and surprising event created a nationwide ripple effect through the individual lives and relative businesses that were associated with the Boston and REO camps, as the plug was pulled on the REO/Boston tour, which was a year in the making. Planning soon began for another REO tour.

It was commendable that booking agents acted so quickly to book the calendar. While promoters tried their best to make up for lost time, the eleventh hour tour from April to November was the epitome of dartboard mapping. The band and crew were jumping all over the country with two separate rigs in order to be able to travel by air to some of the shows, while tour bus trips often con-

sisted of 700-mile overnight drives.

In between the long drives was a combination of gigs that would test the most seasoned tour professionals. First of all, most shows seemed to be outdoors. Considering that outside performances bring professional entertainment to the nation's state and county fair crowds—the Arkansas River Fest, Milwaukee's Summerfest, and the like—I applaud them. But for the band's stage to look theatrical, sound great, and even provide basic facilities for the touring group (things like food and restrooms!), there are too many variables on outdoor stage shows that, more times than not, make it a lot harder than in a controlled indoor environment. Working outdoors can mean hours of relentless winds, exceedingly hot temperatures

of 90° and above with matching humidity, or beating wind with cold fronts that bring rain and mean significant amounts of time spent covering equipment with rolls upon rolls of Visqueen and tarps.

Sitting on long bus rides gives ample time for crew banter. One day, with the movie *My Cousin Vinny* playing in the background, the REO crew had seen all possible types of gigs in the stretch of a week, and the conversation turned sarcastic. We determined that this tour had developed three categories: primary markets, i.e., major cities, such as Dallas or New York with good facilities; secondary markets, which are, for the most part, good venues but in places like South Bend, IN or Oklahoma City, OK; and then the third category, dairy markets! Upon stepping off the bus to greet the new day, dairy markets greet you with longhorns, the smell of pigs, and stages on horse tracks.

Greeley Stampede, CO

The Greeley Stampede stage wasn't exactly on the horse track when we arrived but rather on a dirt field off the rodeo stadium. Pulling the stage to the track was planned at 3pm, once the horse show was finished, using enormous tractors with 10' diameter tires.

Bear in mind that horse stadiums are frequently plowed during the day to keep dirt soft for the horses' hooves. However, the down side to that was the soft dirt quickly turned to mud once it started to pour continuously for about an hour. Little did we know, the rain was only the warm up act for the hailstorm that followed, attacking the mud puddles and us, with hailstones equal in size to small meteors.

This was all taking place while the audience began filing into seats. There was no room to move



on stage, but the crew was inching through it, fighting with rolls of tarp to cover up equipment while stage hands frantically swept water puddles—threatening to soak amplifiers and dimmers—off the stage.

Just to recap, every one of the reasons cited earlier for not having an outdoor concert all happened in one day here in a dairy market where we all cooked in the heat and sweated like a chain gang in the humid afternoon sun and then practically froze that night while slogging through knee deep mud. Now, “Go forth and make theatre!”

Nonetheless, it stopped raining for the show, and 5,000 people showed up that night.

What Production Rehearsals?

Because of the new CD and the band’s ardent commitment to promoting it, it was decided while we were on a European Tour in May to green-light a proposed set that I designed, giving REO a new, compact, theatrical-looking touring stage to match the promotional theme. The drawings were finished, the vendors were essentially on standby, and it seemed simple enough with breaks in the schedule to accommodate the build.

It would have been that easy, had we included production rehearsals—you know, that invaluable

time to correct physical kinks and rethink bits that aren’t working as expected.

However, all of the “tweaking” took place in—yes, you guessed it—outdoor venues on truck-bed stages and under vinyl hay barn roofs. With production rehearsals, it would have taken about three days. As it happened, I wasn’t popular among my crewmates for about eight weeks, subjecting them to my work-in-progress changes and streamlining a setup routine on the road, all while trying to get ready for the business of each night’s show. Phew!

Twist Of Fate

It’s remarkable how one man’s decision to commit suicide changed the course of other lives and the REO tour. However, a surprisingly wide spectrum of gigs followed, from sharing the stage with Def Leppard in front of 20,000 people a night, to recording a DVD (airing on A&E and PBS in 2008) and a radio promotion that led to the band playing on a boat while drifting down the Chicago River. Go figure.

As always, with a little perseverance and staying the course, it turned out just fine. With all my bellyaching about weather and conditions, all I got



The April to November tour was the epitome of dart-board mapping.

for it was sunburn, a cold, and dirty shoes. More importantly, invaluable experiences continually evolved and only because of these sets of extraordinary circumstances and vast challenges.

Ultimately, being in the trenches kept this old guy sharp. For that, I am extremely grateful. Usually, the best lessons don’t come easy. R.I.P., Brad. **LD**

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