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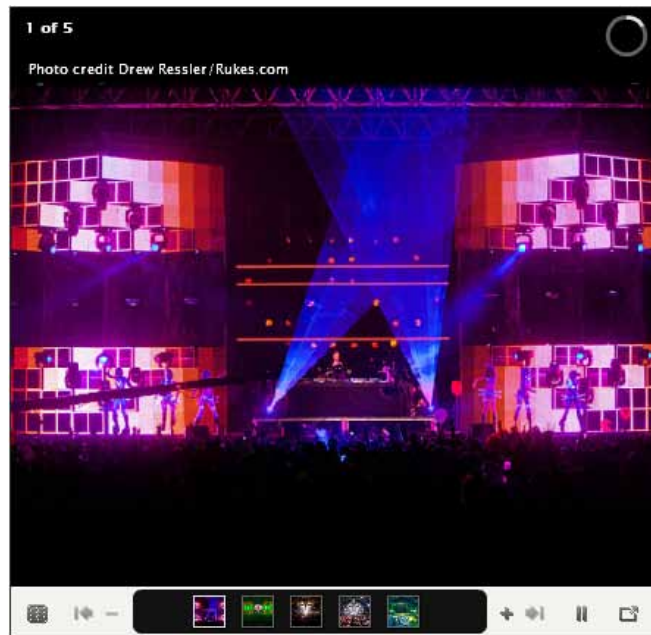
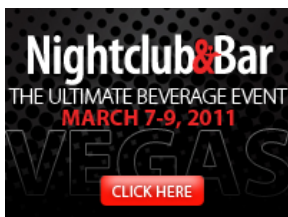
Bars



## Stephen Lieberman's Designs Light Up Festivals and Clubs

By: Leigh W. O'Quinn  
September 30, 2010

**Stephen Lieberman.** His name — and company, **SJ Lighting** — are synonymous with award-winning nightclub design, earning nods for **Crobar** in New York and Chicago, Miami's **Nocturnal** and **Rok Vegas**, plus multiple nominations including **Playhouse** in LA, **Liv** at the **Fontainebleau** in Miami and more. But Lieberman also brings his 20-plus years of experience to major electronic music festivals around the country. And last weekend, he raised the bar for design once again for **Insomniac's** 16th annual **Nocturnal Festival** in San Bernadino, Calif. It's just one more connection joining together nightclubs and music festivals.



"I've been working in the electronic dance music community since my first job in a nightclub 23 years ago," says Lieberman who designed around 60 different stages for more than 12 festivals last year alone, including **Ultra** in Miami and **Electric Daisy Carnival** and **Monster Massive** in LA. So just how does designing for the two spaces differ? "In a club you can stretch boundaries because you can design something that's custom for the space." But for a festival? "You have to use what's available in a rental market. I try to approach it from that aspect and work backward," he says, though that's not necessarily a disadvantage.

In nightclubs, Lieberman might spend \$200,000 on equipment for a permanent installation; but a festival allows freedom to play, in a sense, because specific equipment is less important for festivals. "A lot of the stuff there is pretty out of the box as far as design concepts," Lieberman says of festivals. "What I spend on a rental, you might spend to purchase equipment. I'm getting 10 times the amount of product or more."

"When you design festivals, you have to consider the commodities of the industry," he says. Often he may determine the amount of lights he will require, such as 100 spots or washes, focusing less on brand and model. "There's basics that you have to start with, and as much creativity that goes into it, there's a lot of science. You need to consider power, circuits, trusses and motors."

Working with **Andrew Gumper** and **AG Light & Sound Inc.**, they reportedly created the largest truss structure ever seen on the West Coast: 78,000 square feet of space, 400 feet long, 150 feet

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wide, 56-foot-high ceilings and a second level of 300-foot-long balconies with VIP cabanas on each side. On stage, Lieberman used custom LED installations inspired by the video game Q\*bert, coordinated with additional video both behind the DJ booth and LED screens running the length of the structure. Lieberman even manned the light board himself and **Vello Virkhaus** handled the VJing. "Just to build that mega structure I had 17 semi trucks worth of equipment for that main stage."

At Nocturnal, picture the entire **National Orange Show Events Center** grounds in San Bernardino transformed into a virtual wonderland. Trees adorned in Chinese lanterns around a lake, art sculptures come alive as light plays off the features. And then there were the six separate stages, each creating a unique experience for the 43,000 attendees. "On a job like Nocturnal, I pretty much cleaned out Southern California," he says of rental gear. "Just on the main [Alice's House] stage, I probably had \$10 million of equipment."

Lieberman believes festivals help nightclubs by heightening the relevance of talent and DJs more than any night in a club could do. "There's a big difference between playing at **Tao** versus Electric Daisy Carnival, Nocturnal or Ultra. ... You want to find out what's important and say, 'Where are your DJs playing right now? What events are putting these guys on the map?' It's not a place that does 800 people a night; it's a festival that does 50,000."

The load-in for all six stages plus the Orange Show grounds took a week, then another two-and-a-half days to strike. But is it sad for Lieberman and his team to see months of work last for only a day? "Of course," he says. "But that's the nice part about what I do: I get the best of both worlds. With nightclubs, you get to build some sort of legacy so your work lives on for a while," Lieberman says. "Then you do these festivals, spend months developing, and not one minute after the show is over, that sucker starts getting pulled apart — so you hope you took some good pictures."

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