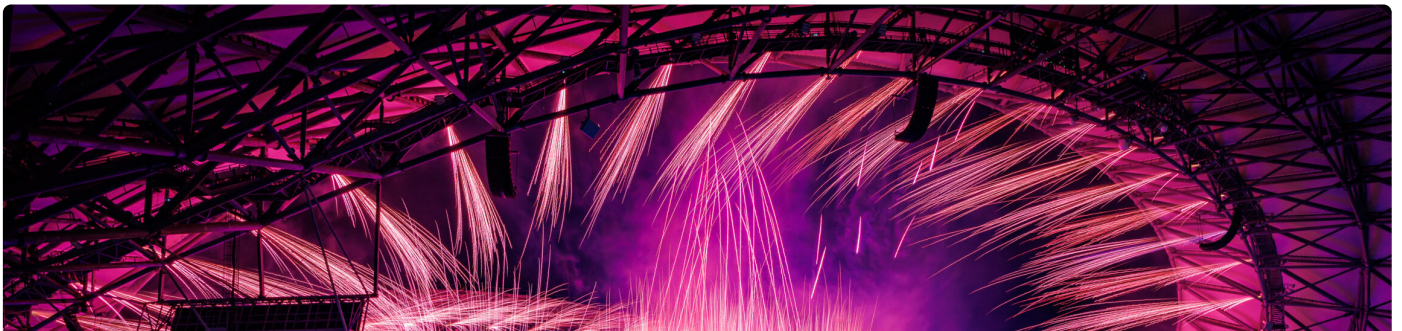


SOLDIERS OF STEEL

Lisa Henderson dons her hard hat to catch up with the robust folk responsible for building the stages for pop acts and rock stars to perform on

FEATURE By Lisa Henderson | 15 October 2025



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Lisa Henderson dons a hard hat and high-vis vest in order to speak to some of the hardy individuals who provide stage infrastructure and scenery for the concerts and festivals we organise – come hell, high water, or mud – about the challenges facing the sector... and the successes. ~ ↑

On 16 July 2025, Stageco Belgium COO Wouter Van Mierloo received a call: the stage his company had supplied to Tomorrowland was on fire. With just days until the electronic music festival was due to kick off, the future of the 2025 edition was suddenly in jeopardy.

Acting swiftly, Stageco joined forces with other vendors and Tomorrowland's creative team to build a brand-new stage, pulling in staff and resources from across the region.

In just 36 hours, the team completed a 300 x 30ft replacement for the Orbyz stage – making what seemed impossible, possible – and allowing the 70,000-capacity event, which takes place in Boom, Belgium, to proceed as planned.

"We have a lot of people who are used to acting in difficult situations," Van Mierloo told */Q*. "That's the world we work and live in. It's a big, chaotic sector, and Stageco is trying to find some efficiency in this chaos – that's how we've worked for 40 years."

The emergency response may have been extraordinary, but for seasoned staging professionals, the flexibility, collaboration, and creative problem-solving were business as usual – skills honed further during what's turning out to be one of the busiest years ever.

Stadium show boom

Despite reports that the post-Covid touring boom has cooled off a little, the staging business is busier than ever thanks to a barrage of stadium shows in 2025.

ES Global, Europe's oldest rock & roll staging company, is enjoying the busiest year in its 50-year history with 154 show days in 2025.

According to Mark Hornbuckle, head of staging, 75–80% of their business in 2024 and 2025 is stadium-based.

"Stadium business has been building and building, so we made a conscious decision to invest in it – and that's paying off," he says. "Since 2022, we've increased the number of stages we own by three or four times. This year alone, we've invested millions."

Over the past 12 months, ES Global has supported shows for Beyoncé, Post Malone, Imagine Dragons, Lana Del Rey, Robbie Williams, Dua Lipa, 50 Cent, BLACKPINK, Catfish and the Bottlemen, and Black Sabbath's farewell gig – "Everyone but Taylor Swift," jokes Hornbuckle.

Staging companies largely welcome an uptick in this area of the business. Weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of staging a stadium show versus a festival, Megaforce Germany CEO Michael Brombacher explains:

"Stadium shows are much more attractive because the infrastructure is better than the open field. Logistically, it's much more comfortable to work inside. But stadiums are rented out in hard timing slots. So, you have a maximum of three days for setup – that's a really big time pressure."

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A more recent development is the growing popularity of “long stands,” where one stage stays in place for several weeks, hosting multiple acts. This approach saves on trucking and setup costs but requires crews to adapt to new working models.

“In the past, our full crew would build a stage, take it down, and move it to the next venue,” says Van Mierloo. “Now, we might have 15 people build the stage, and just four stay for six weeks, making minor transformations between shows.

“Promoters want to reduce costs, which is normal. Is it less interesting for us? We saw this coming, and we will have to adapt to it. We are happy when we can fill up the Stade de France for eight weeks during high season.”

ES Global deployed a long stand at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London this summer, which was used by Beyoncé and Chris Brown, among other artists. “Obviously, it keeps the trucking and touring costs down,” says Hornbuckle. “It also keeps the build times down. So, it’s a money saver for everybody.”

Still, long stands put more pressure on engineers to anticipate needs early on – especially when production plans evolve.

“Production doesn’t always plan far ahead for things like rigging,” Van Mierloo explains. “Luckily, our stages are robust – we can take a lot of weight in the roof, which gives us flexibility.”

Innovation under pressure

With artists vying for increasingly ambitious live productions, staging engineers are under more pressure than ever to deliver spectacular designs in short timeframes. And yet, these designers have met the challenge with pioneering innovations that are taking concerts and festivals to new heights.

TAIT’s VP of global projects, Aaron Siebert, references a new LED product, developed for American country singer Morgan Wallen’s recent North American tour, which he says is more economically and logistically efficient than its predecessors.

“It was a ground-up development of a deck system with an LED tile that is twice as efficient to package, faster to build, and allows a video stage to be far more easily deployable and [more] economically tourable,” he explains.

“And if you look back at previous shows that had video stages, it was taking an existing tile, putting it on top of a structure, and then packaging that. It was inefficient from a weight standpoint and too time-consuming for traditional touring.”

Hornbuckle adds: “This year, we’ve used the biggest screens ever used. The weight of Beyoncé’s screen was mental. She had two screens: the main screen across the front and then the screen behind it. So, when things moved, it was shadowing all the time. We had the same with Arijit Singh.

“That’s where some of the companies have not got the equipment to be able to take the weight, but our roofs are very high. When you go high, you then get the screen company deciding to put a bigger screen in than normal, but when they go to the next venue, with another stage in situ, they might not have the capability to do it.”

Megaforce, meanwhile, has noticed a new trend for standard rock & roll stages combined with the kind of scaffolding decoration that’s favoured by EDM productions.

“That’s getting more and more interesting in this market,” says Brombacher. We are supplying two or three stages for the GLÜCKSGEFÜHLE festival at Hockenheimring in Germany, which use that hybrid style.” ↑

Innovative Staging Isn’t Just For The Sake Of Aesthetics

But innovative staging isn’t just for the sake of aesthetics; it can also allow for a more varied ticketing offering that has benefits for both artist and fan.

Siebert highlights Usher’s Past Present Future tour, where a B-stage offered VIP table service.

“It’s a better fan experience – and a financial win for artists and promoters,” he says.

Drake’s \$ome \$pecial \$hows 4 UK/EU tour, meanwhile, used an elevated runway around the arena floor, transforming the entire space into a “moving pit” that brought him closer to fans throughout the venue.

While Stageco helped French rapper Jul break the stadium attendance record in France with a circular stage – drawing over 100,000 fans in both Paris and Marseille.

“It was a 360-degree stage, so it was possible to gather a lot of people into the Stade de France in Paris and Orange Vélodrome in Marseille,” says Van Mierloo. “It went above the 100,000 mark for each show, and the scenery was quite impressive.”

Logistical challenges

Short timelines are among the biggest challenges facing staging companies – impacting not only design but safety and logistics.

TAIT’s Siebert says Justin Timberlake, who has been a client since his NSYNC years, is a perfect example of what’s possible when an artist team comes to a staging company early in the process.

“They come to us early enough with a challenge and allow us to collaborate back and forth on what the show is going to be,” says Siebert. “You can achieve a lot grander things when you take the time to design bespoke solutions, rather than being stuck on a short timeline.”

Brombacher adds that last-minute decisions often overlook the complexities of outdoor events.

“Artist teams usually start with sound and lighting – often thinking indoors. Only later do they consider what it means outdoors, where risks multiply,” he says. “We’d like to be involved earlier.”

To ease logistical pressure, companies are positioning gear closer to key markets.

“We’re spreading our equipment across different countries to reduce transport time and our carbon footprint,” Brombacher explains.

Siebert agrees, adding that it’s the norm to be overprepared and oversupplied in order to react during busy periods.

“It’s part of the reason TAIT is the size it is, to be able to react during the busy periods and support clients,” he explains. “We have to make choices before we even know what tours are going about, what equipment to build and hold on the shelf, specifically around automation equipment, just so that we’re prepared for the phone to ring and to scramble and deliver a solution. And I think that when you look at the steel vendors,

they are probably even more challenged with that because of the timelines and because they need crews to move their systems and all of that.”



The cost of keeping up

As demand for staging rapidly increases, so does the need for educated and trained staff, which, since the Covid-induced talent drain, has become a major cost for staging companies.

“If you compare it pre-Covid and post-Covid, I would say there has been a minimum 30–40% increase,” says Brombacher. “Back in the day, it used to be 1/3 shipping, 1/3 labour, and 1/3 gear. Now it’s like 70% labour.”

And as Alexander Strizhak, MD of Latvia-based JSA Stage Company, points out, hiring is easy – training, less so.

“Our Work Demands Not Just Skill But Team-Work, Resilience, Adaptability, And Stamina”

“Our work demands not just skill but team-work, resilience, adaptability, and stamina,” he says. “That takes time to build.”

According to Brombacher, very few people in his home market are willing to do such an arduous job anymore – especially the younger generations.

“I think you need to be very passionate about the live entertainment business to do this,” he says. “It’s a physical, hard job. Typically, we are the first people on site, with no infrastructure, sometimes no toilets, no catering. Maybe we have all the bad weather conditions. We have the dirt, the mud, etc. The younger generation values work-life balance – and rightly so. But we still need people willing to do the job.”

On the other hand, steel prices have stabilised post-Covid, but fuel and transport costs remain a challenge.

Strizhak, who relocated JSA after the war began in Ukraine, says: “The war certainly impacted fuel prices, and transportation costs increased accordingly. Equipment purchase costs are currently affordable; prices rose during the first year of the war but have not increased since. Overhead costs are gradually increasing, but for now, everything is within reasonable limits.”

Health and safety costs are rising, too, though the staging sector has welcomed increased vigilance about the safety of crews.

“There’s a lot more paperwork now,” admits Hornbuckle, though safety standards vary by region.

“North America is ahead, Europe follows, the Middle East is catching up, and Latin America is further behind,” says Brombacher.

Environmental conditions also play a role. “In the Middle East, for instance, you need to factor in earthquakes and sandstorms. Wind bracing becomes critical,” adds Van Mierloo.

Sustainability: A practical approach

Fortunately for the staging sector, pivoting to more sustainable practices in most cases makes sense both

logistically and economically. Gone are the days of building one-off stages that sit unused post-tour. Companies have now switched to Lego-style assets that are both reconfigurable and reusable.



TAIT, a partner of Music Sustainability Alliance and LIVE Green, has created a database of reconfigurable assets to help clients design with circularity in mind.

“Clients can use 80% standard components and just 20% bespoke,” Siebert explains. “That helps smaller tours and budgets while keeping things fresh.”

The transportation of assets is also a major challenge when it comes to greening the sector, but as staging companies have increased staff and warehouses, the movement of equipment has decreased.

“Fifteen years ago, we air-freighted everything,” says Siebert. “Now we build duplicate sets in the UK, North America, and Asia, reducing transport and emissions.”

But not every green idea is viable yet. According to Stageco’s Van Mierloo, the sector is not yet ready to embrace electric trucks.

“It is too expensive, and I think it’s not [reliable] enough to get your gear [somewhere] on time,” he tells IQ. “We only have one rule: the show must go on. For that to happen, we need all the trucks to arrive on time. We cannot wait for two or three hours to get a full battery again. Battery capacity is going up, but not enough yet, and there are not enough locations to refuel your batteries. We don’t have any time to lose.”

Hornbuckle says ES Global has trialled gas and hydrogen trucks to relative success but concedes that the costs are higher and there’s a limit to their use.

“Yes, they do cost a little bit more money, but it’s helping the environment. And obviously, they don’t work everywhere because of the distance,” he says.

What’s next?

Looking ahead, 2026 is set to be even busier for the staging sector, driven by growth in both established and emerging markets.

“There’s extra demand across the board,” says Hornbuckle. “If you look at some of the South American markets, they’ve been mega busy. America has been off the scale.”

JSA’s Strizhak also sees growth across global markets, noting the presence of players at all levels of the industry.

“I think countries like Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan could become promising for the growth of live concerts in the near future,” he says. “But much will depend on geopolitical developments.”

Stageco’s Van Mierloo highlights similar trends, citing rising demand in India, Asia, and the Middle East, as well as from outside the traditional entertainment sphere.

“Golf, for example, is not just golf anymore,” he explains. “It’s a big festival now, and the organisers often aren’t used to handling events of that scale. So, there are new opportunities – and we’ll see how we cope with them moving forward.”

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