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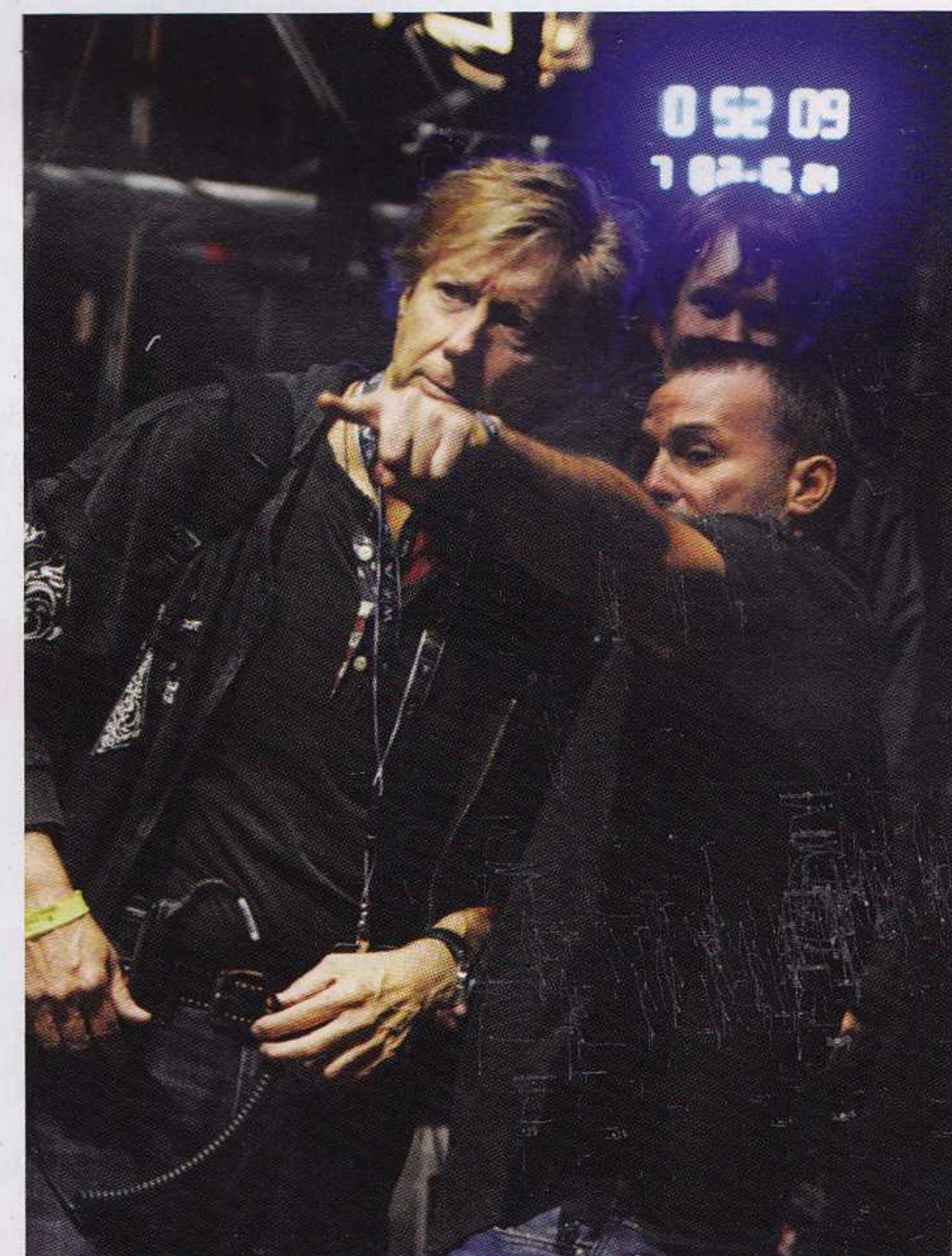
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TOURING LIVE AFTER DEATH

Dio Hologram tour plans to revolutionize metal experience

by GIL KAUFMAN



Digital rendering of the Ronnie Dio hologram taken from the performance that was shown at Wacken and Pollstar Awards; Eyellusion CEO Jeff Pezzuti points out a production detail to Lighting Designer Paul Dexter.

Ronnie James Dio rocked stages across the globe for more than five decades, thrilling millions with his towering, opera-inspired vocals and heavy metal thunder. Sadly, his operatic wail was muted in 2010 when the hard rock icon succumbed to stomach cancer at age 67.

It was the end of an era for the former singer for the groups Elf, Rainbow, Black Sabbath, Dio and Heaven & Hell. But not the end of his performing career. In one of the

most ambitious live hologram efforts to date, Jeff Pezzuti and his team at Eyellusion plan to take an incredibly lifelike, interactive Dio on tour around the world.

“We took our time with it,” Pezzuti said of the care taken in building the resurrected Dio. The hologram’s debut last summer at Germany’s Wacken festival, and a command performance at the Pollstar Awards in January 2017, impressed audiences who got to see the singer move across the stage and interact with them in a way no holographic image had before.

“Him waving the Wacken banner was my idea,” Pezzuti said of the iconic moment when Dio — who collected banners throughout his life — waved the German event’s official flag to a roar from the crowd of faithful. “When we were creating the content, Wendy [Dio, the singer’s widow] and I were talking about how to bring it home, and we thought that made sense. That was one way Wendy thought we could make it feel like this is happening now. When he waved it and said ‘Wacken, you rock!’ people were like ‘holy f—k!’”

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Longtime agent Andrew Goodfriend said he got involved in the upcoming tour at the urging of Wendy Dio and Pezzuti because he was a longtime Dio fan, but also because of the unique challenge of the technological feat. “They talked about touring the hologram for the world and there have been touring hologram’s before, but never of a person like this,” he said of the dynamic digital Dio.

Reviews for Wacken were so good, because, Goodfriend said, instead of previous events featuring animated characters – like the cameo from rapper Tupac Shakur at Coachella in 2012 and Michael Jackson at the 2014 Billboard Awards — this is a real person that moves and sounds like Dio.

As he was in his debut, the reconfigured touring Dio will be backed by his live band, Dio Disciples, plus some backup singers. “We’re bringing the experience of someone who is no longer with us and putting his real band members up there. People couldn’t believe what they were seeing. There were people crying... excited because they never got to see Ronnie before,” Goodfriend said.

When he was with the Agency Group, Goodfriend had worked with Dio, and when he saw the performance at the Pollstar event, he was sold. “I was amazed,” he said. “It made the hair on my arms stand up. It is very much the live experience.”

Because the metal community is so fiercely loyal, Pezzuti and Wendy Dio were determined to make the experience feel very authentic. The visual trick is, like Tupac and Jackson, what’s called a Pepper’s Ghost, a classic illusion in which an image is reflected off a 45-degree sheet of clear material. “What’s different with this is — what I call Ronnie 2.0 — unlike those one-offs, this is a dynamic performance like he gave in his heyday, complete with lights and pyro.”

Pezzuti said his team is focused on creating content for the tour that will allow the Dio image to use the whole stage, though he said he could not divulge all the tricks used to make the movement as seamless as possible. “We will set the bar for touring and bringing back a legacy artist to be part of the current discussion,” he promised.

While Pezzuti declined to discuss the cost of creating the image or licensing the music, he said one advantage his team has is that they have access to all the audio ever recorded by Dio thanks to Wendy’s deep archives. “We can use anything he’s said in the past, the actual

audio and take isolated vocal tracks and live tracks and interactions with the audience,” he said. Cue “Hello Cleveland!”

That means the Dio hologram can sing or say anything the deceased singer uttered over the course of his whole career, cut together, reconfigured and spliced into a seamless soundtrack that will feel like a real live concert, with no pre-recorded musical tracks. Because Wendy Dio handles the singer’s estate and is a partner in the tour, rights clearances were relatively easy. But Pezzuti thinks the sales pitch to other managers and labels is a pretty simple one: “People know that live music is the only way to make money these days, so the minute an artist stops touring, they stop generating significant revenue. This is why we have full support.”

With tickets and routing not yet announced, Goodfriend said prices will be “like any normal touring veteran metal package,” likely starting around \$45 up to \$100 or more. The difference, he said, is that the singer can never get sick or miss a show and that the entire production fits into a box truck and requires nothing more than standard stage power and a 40 x 40 stage. “So it has to be theaters, standing room or seated, 1,500-4,000 or so,” he said. The tour doesn’t require any special audio or digital set up and the box truck holds all the necessary gear.

At press time, Goodfriend wasn’t sure how many shows the tour will encompass, but it will definitely hit theaters in the U.S. for about five weeks in 2017 before heading overseas, as well as appearances at a few festivals, with no promotion partners determined as yet. “The [gross potential] is limitless right now on this, and I think Eyellusion is at the forefront of a movement. We’re proud to have Ronnie as part of that,” he said, noting that he’s open to working with any and every promotions partner who is interested.

The 90-100 minute hit-packed show with songs from throughout Dio’s career is being marketed as “Dio Returns” and Goodfriend said the target audience is typical metal fans, as well as music lovers who never got to see the singer live during his years on the road. Goodfriend said his main focus right now is on the Dio show, but he’s open to exploring the concept with other artists as well. “I think this can definitely be a new revenue stream and it could be something that changes our industry,” he said.

While there is no cookie-cutter approach to licensing the rights for this kind of tour,

Pezzuti said his team works with management and estate representatives, who, so far, appear to understand the “great financial opportunity” inherent in continuing to tour a legacy artist at a time when traditional radio play is uncertain and album sales are on the decline. “We show them [management] the demo — built by music industry experts on our team from the live and recorded world — and we bring them in the studio and show them how we take it to the next level,” he said.

As for the cost of creating the illusion, Pezzuti said “it’s a lot less than you’d expect,” though he would not give specifics other than to say it’s in the moderate “six-figure range.” The upside is that it is a one-time investment and there is no dollar-for-dollar or per-second cost to run the hologram once it’s on the road. “The most important cost is the asset creation, which is the hardest part to do,” he said. “After the investment to build the asset from a revenue perspective, you can tour it for as many shows as you can and make money hand over fist.”

Another bonus is that the set up of the hologram is relatively quick and only takes two or three people to complete, with Pezzuti saying that Dio essentially “lives on a hard drive.” While a raft of other promised holographic tours from the likes of Billie Holiday, Notorious B.I.G., Whitney Houston and Selena have yet to fully materialize, Pezzuti promised “we’ll be doing a bunch of different ones... there are a lot in the works.”

Longtime close Dio friend and veteran promoter Danny Zelisko said he’d book the show if it’s even half as good as what he’s seen so far. “I haven’t seen this live in action yet... I’ve only seen video of it, but it looks really amazing,” he said. “If people are going to go out and spend money and time to see a tribute act, why not see a real live band — in this case Dio’s band — and they’re using state-of-the-art vocals that he himself sang, and you get to see his image? I think that beats a tribute group by far, not by a little.”

Given how far the technology has come and his enduring affection for his friend, Zelisko said he’d love to see the metal icon on stage again. And, as Pezzuti and Goodfriend noted, it’s also a chance for younger fans who never got a chance to experience Dio in the flesh to get another shot. “It’s not the same as him being there, but it’s the next best thing,” he said, noting that his fellow board members on Dio’s Stand Up and Shout Cancer charity are all excited as well because it’s another chance to raise money for the cause. 