

# KENNY CHESNEY'S PLACE IN THE SUN

THE COUNTRY STAR ENJOYS HIS BIGGEST TOUR

YET, AS WELL AS A MAJOR TELEVISION SPECIAL

By Sharon Stancavage







PHOTO BY TODD KAPLAN

Vasquez: "I like the PM5D, because there wasn't a big learning curve, coming off an analog console. It's laid out really well, which makes getting around on it a lot easier."

**This page and opposite: For this tour, Swinford went with a heavy Vari-Lite rig, with additional High End Systems units.**



It's good to be Kenny Chesney—onstage, at least. Last year, he was named Entertainer of the Year by the Country Music

Association and Academy of Country Music. With 3.1 million units sold, *When the Sun Goes Down* was the top country album of the year in 2004. Thanks to sales of more than 1,000,000 concert tickets last year, *Pollstar* named him the top-grossing, top-drawing country act. If the rapid breakup of his marriage to Renée Zellweger has brought him a certain amount of tabloid notoriety—well, that's the price of stardom.

None of this has put a damper on Chesney's travel schedule, however. This year's 60-date *Somewhere in the Sun* tour has taken him around the US, ending in mid-September with a performance at Farm Aid at the Tweeter Center in Tinley Park, Illinois—a perfect venue for the singer of the hit "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy."

Mike Swinford of UpLate Design of Nashville, Tennessee, has been providing production and lighting design for Chesney since 2001. Swinford is something of an expert at

spectacle, as Chesney's shows rival those of any mainstream rock band for scale and totals of gear deployed. Each summer, Chesney's productions become larger and more theatrical. Last year's *Margaritas, Senoritas, and A Whole Lotta Love* tour was a country-rock extravaganza that featured Chesney flying out onto the stage from behind video walls that were split in the center.

This year's production was typically expansive, a stadium/shed tour that was notable for its clean lines and big looks; Swinford's designs are dominated by architectural arrangements of truss and large-scale IMAG, as well as bold-stroke lighting effects. And, once again, there were more upgrades: for the first time, Chesney traveled with his own stage, fabricated by All Access Staging of Torrance, California. The set was 42' wide x 23' 4" deep, and featured a theatrically inspired thrust called "the sandbar," a reference to Chesney's love of the islands. It was "a T-shaped thrust that went out about 20'—at the end, it was 60' wide," Swinford says; this allowed the star to get up close and personal with fans in the front rows.

Audience contact was important,

says Swinford: "The show was specifically designed to get every bit of 270°-plus sight lines. The whole back wall was angled in at the end, and we figured that they netted about 500 extra seats per show this way." Also, he says, "It allowed everyone to see Gretchen Wilson, the opening act, much better."

The stage design featured steps, a couple of performance levels, and a pieces of *faux* music gear. "A few years ago, we had an array of Mesa amps on stage," Swinford says; "this year, Kenny wanted more of the same, so I said, 'Let's make them bigger than life. So we made 13'-high [and 5' 6" wide] mock-ups of Marshall Vintage Series amps, as well as Fender Twins that are about 300% scale [they are 5' wide by 4' tall]." All pieces were notable for their attention to detail, from the pilot lights to the grilles, knobs, and logos.

Last year, Chesney used a fly gag devised by ShowRig of Los Angeles. This year, "he wanted a much longer area to fly in," says Swinford. The star was pushed into the audience inside a road case; he then waited for his entrance in a special room located under the camera platform. "At the right time, Kenny stepped out



## CONCERTS



onto this seat, and then flew up, just over the audience's reach, all the way to the stage." A spectacular effect, yes, but one easily achieved, the designer notes: "It's really easy rigging it—it's just a straight truss that goes out with a carriage. It's the exact rig we used last year, but 90-100' longer."

Completing the onstage look was a Kabuki, which was used to hide a set change. "We did a four-color digital print of the tour's logo on three sides of the Kabuki," Swinford says; artwork was done by Richards and Southern Inc. of Nashville Tennessee.

### When the lights come up

As in the past, Swinford's lighting used an extensive lineup of moving units for big effects. The rig consisted primarily of automated gear, including 72 Vari\*Lite VL2000 Spots, 24 VL2000 Wash units,

and 32 VL3000 Spots. "I used a lot fewer High End lights this year, because I prefer Vari-Lites," he admits. However, he says, "we used 36 [High End] Studio Colors for lighting under the set, for a downlight stage wash, and also for illuminating the amplifiers. We didn't do many band looks with them. I also had eight High End x.Spots as floor lights—we had four on either side of the ego ramps—that basically just did aerial graphic effects."

Upstage, Swinford installed a modified wall of lights that he called "the chandeliers." "I took an 8' circle truss and cut it in half, so the pieces arc downstage, one under the other," Swinford notes. The half-circles of truss were configured into towers, creating a strongly architectural look. The chandeliers were filled with Vari\*Lite VL2000 Spots.

# REIMAGINING THE TOUR FOR TELEVISION



PHOTO BY TODD KAPLAN

**Above: Swinford's design used towers of curved truss to create a sense of spectacle. Below: The center video wall was 24' x 16'.**

The tour used a total of eight spotlights—six FOH and two truss spots—a particular point of interest for the star. "Kenny doesn't like bad spot ops, and he gets distracted when a spot cue is off, so we decided to carry two dedicated FOH spots for him, run by the touring crew. We hung two trusses on either side of the flying rig out by the mix; they lower down right after Gretchen Wilson plays. So even if the communication died, those guys knew the cues and would be right on Kenny."

Chesney can be particular about color choices; for example, he has an aversion to magenta, so Swinford does without it in his palette. However, "we introduced turquoise this year, for some of the island theme songs," says programmer Mark

**f**or those who missed Chesney on his coast-to-coast opus, there is another chance to see him—this time on broadcast television. ABC is currently slated to air *Kenny Chesney: Somewhere in the Sun* on November 23. The special, produced by Arnie Barn Inc, in association with Dog & Pony Show, Inc. and Wendell Productions, was taped in Pittsburgh.

The look of the television shoot was similar to the stadium version of the tour. "When we played stadiums and sheds, Kenny started the show back behind the Kabuki, with the band, and was revealed in silhouette," Swinford notes. The opening of the broadcast is a spin on that concept. "The producers and the director wanted the Kabuki revealing not Kenny and the band, but, instead, the stadium and the crowd. They wanted the television audience to have the point of view of the band. In the special, we did additional lighting so we could indeed see him onstage, getting ready for the show."

Working with Swinford on the special was television lighting designer Bob Peterson; the two have collaborated before. They had several goals for the broadcast: "We had to assure Kenny's portrait was dramatic and interesting, we wanted to make the band presentable, we had to fill all the black holes that television sees into, and, finally, [we had to] make sure the range of levels from the stage, beam graphics, followspots, video screens, and audience all played into the contrast ratios required for the HD cameras," explains Peterson.

"To make this production work, we added a quantity of quality followspots, footlights, and, finally, an array of Vari-Lites and Syncrolites to do the pretty work," says Peterson. "For added audience light and effects, we brought in an extra five followspots, making eight at front-of-house and three truss spots," adds Swinford. Syncrolites included 28 7K units from the stadium show, plus an additional eight 7Ks and twenty 3K units.

Much of the new gear was from Vari-Lite, says Swinford, and there was plenty of it. The numbers reveal the difference between for live performance and for broadcast. "We added 24 VL3000s up in the stands and under the video

screen, we added another 24 VL2416s up by the Syncrolites in the arena proper, and, finally, we put 48 VL5s along the screamer on the thrust. We also added four finger trusses with VL5s to fill the hole on the sides for the camera cross shots. The final additions to the package were 16 VL1000 Arcs, 41 mini-strips, and a huge crew to put it together."

Swinford likes the VL1000 Arc for television applications. "We used them to light up the 50 x 30 scrims with the tour logo on them that were located on either side of the stage. We also used the VL1000 Arcs for key light for the band. They're wonderful for that," he says.

For the spotlights, he adds, "I created [positions] out in the house using two 70' tall Stageco spot towers. I had three concentric rings that were graduated in size—24', 20', and 16', with 10' between them—filled with [Martin] MAC 2000 Washes for truss-toning and a lot of audience effects for the reverse shots from the camera." The Stageco towers had another purpose as well: "We used the bottom followspots to get up under Kenny's hat, to get rid of the shadow from his hat," Swinford explains. Part of the hat/shadow solution was also the addition of 240' of footlights downstage.

When taking a show from the road to the small screen, there can be issues with cueing. "When I was programming the show, I was careful not to do things that weren't friendly to television. As a result, we did very few modifications of the tour programming," Swinford says. Of course, cues were added. "Mark Butts alone added 260 cues in six hours for just the Syncrolites and the VL5s," he says. Butts and Ken Hudson, another programmer, worked on two Virtuoso consoles controlling all additional television units.

For Swinford, the most exciting moment came in the television production truck "when the Kabuki fell, the show kicked off and I saw everyone's jaw dropping, including my own. The combination of a perfect night, sold-out crowd, fantastic performance, and the beautiful pictures in HD created an excitement I have not felt from a live show in a long, long time," he concludes.



COURTESY OF MIKE SWINFORD

Above: One of Swinford's drawings for the television version of the concert.

Butts. "The artist prefers big, simple looks, so we never use more than two colors at once. While this seems fairly limiting, we are able to make this interesting by creating a ton of big graphic looks. This rig is huge, and offers plenty of possibilities for interesting focuses, chases, and movement."

Another new color was introduced. "We did get Kenny to use some medium lavender," says Swinford. "I didn't think he'd like the lav, but I said to Mark, 'Leave it in, I'll take the heat for it when we show it to Kenny.'" Much to everyone's surprise, Chesney approved the color choice, but, adds the designer, "He said 'Just don't use it a lot.'"

At times, the show's lighting was heavily programmed (using the grandMA console from MA Lighting). "The first and last songs of the show both have over 150 cues," says Butts. "The last song, 'She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy,' uses three dozen different effects, 12 external chases in addition to all those cues. In contrast, a few of the ballads are one cue. 'Blue Chair' uses only four lights in a static look for the entire song."

For video, Swinford and production manager Ed Wannebo had a Sony LED wall measuring 24' high by 16' wide at center. "Basically, when they did the close-ups of Kenny, he was 24' feet high," says the designer. There were also two 12' x 9' Toshiba screens placed left and right onstage. Screenworks NEP of Corona, California provided all the video.

### Going for digital sound

Bryan Vasquez, another Chesney alumni, handled the front-of-house audio. "We used the EV X-Line system," he says, adding "we have the ability to go up to 16 mains and 16 subs in the main PA. We also carried 80 EV XLC cabs to

use in various configurations for side wraps and front fills. We also had 16 single 18" floor subs. The total number of cabinets that Vasquez and his team flew was dependent on the venue.

Morris Leasing of Nashville supplied the PA as well as the lighting. "The EV system has been working very well for us this year. The coverage is amazing and it sounds great every day, thanks to a very talented team of guys," remarks Vasquez. Powering the PA were 125 EV-P3000RL amplifiers.

Vasquez made a different console choice this time. "We went digital this year at front of house and monitor. Phil Robinson—our monitor engineer—and I both used the Yamaha PM5D. I like it, because there wasn't a big learning curve, coming off of an analog console. It's laid out really well, which makes getting around on it easier."

For this tour, Vasquez says, "I didn't use any outboard gear at all. I used nothing but the internal processing on the PM5. The compressors and gates work really well, and the effects section is phenomenal. But I would like to add some outboard gear in the future."

Onstage, Vasquez used a variety of DIs from manufacturers Countryman, Whirlwind, and Klark Teknik. As for his microphones, he had a variety as well. "There was no workhorse mic," he says. We used a little bit of everything—Shure, Audio-Technica, Sennheiser. We used what works best for a particular situation. For Kenny's vocal mic, we are using an Audio-Technica Artist Elite wireless system. Audio-Technica has been great in their support. Wireless issues are never a problem, and dropouts are almost non-existent."

For the audio department, teamwork was crucial. "All of the guys who were out here with us really gave their all every day. I couldn't have done any of this without each and every one of them, and I am proud to be surrounded by such great people," Vasquez says.

Although Chesney's tour concluded in September, there's still a chance to see him (see the sidebar). In the meantime, the question is, can his tours keep getting bigger? "Next year, the production is going up a lot," Swinford confides. He won't give many details, but he does have one hint: "Next year we're going to light the audience to make them feel like they are more part of the show rather than just viewing it from a distance." ☺

## KENNY CHESNEY 2005 CREW AND GEAR

**Production/Lighting Designer:** Mike Swinford  
**Lighting Programmer:** Mark Butts  
**Production Manager:** Ed Wannebo  
**Lighting Director:** David Convertino  
**Crew Chief:** J D White  
**Master Electric:** Jason Barbour  
**Vari-Lite Tech:** Jackson Beck  
**Tech/Spots:** Paige Turner  
**Tech/Spots:** Dwayne Gibson  
**High end Tech:** Joel Harrison  
**Tech:** Allen Gibson

**FOH Engineer:** Bryan Vasquez  
**Monitor Engineer:** Phil Robinson  
**Systems Tech:** Ryan Nelson  
**Systems Tech:** Matt Naylor  
**SR Fly:** Mark Steinwachs  
**SL Fly:** Jamison Beck  
**Wire Guy:** Brian Baxley

**Lighting and Sound Provided by:** Morris Leasing  
**Set by:** All Access Staging  
**Video Provided by:** Screenworks NEP  
**Rigging by:** ShowRig

### Lighting Gear:

- (72) Vari\*Lite VL 2000 Spot
- (24) Vari\*Lite VL 2000 Wash
- (32) Vari-Lite VL 3000 Spot
- (24) High End Studio Color w/clear lens
- (12) High End Studio Color w/standard lens
- (6) Eight-light Mole
- (8) High End x.Spot

### Sound Gear:

- (2) Yamaha PM5D console
- (32) EV X-Line main cabinet
- (32) EV X-Line sub
- (80) EV XLC cabinet
- (16) EV single 18" ground sub
- (125) EV P3000RL amplifier
- (6) KT 9848 processor
- (1) Midas XL-88 matrix mixer
- (1) Yamaha O1v
- (8) Sennheiser IEM 300 in-ear monitor
- Westone ear molds
- Audio-Technica, Shure, Sennheiser, AKG, and Audix mics
- Countryman, Whirlwind, and Klark Teknik DIs
- 9340 Klark Teknik Helix EQ system
- with one master and three slave units