

Hometown Heroes



The Academy of Country Music Awards comes home to Nashville for a creative solution to production in a pandemic

By: David Barbour



Opposite: Taylor Swift's performance of "betty" was marked by a simple, stunning backlight look. Above: The scenic design for the Opry used video panels to imitate and extend the venue's basic onstage look.

The fall awards show season has been upended by the pandemic, forcing everyone to think fast and creatively if shows are to go on. A good example is the Academy of Country Music Awards, held on September 16. It's typically a splashy event, produced in recent years at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. One exception was 2015, when it moved to the AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas; with 70,252 on hand, it was cited by *Guinness* as the most-attended award show ever. Whatever the venue, its production team likes to go big.

But that was then and this is 2020, the year of the coronavirus. With zero prospect of a large-scale ceremony bolstered by thousands in the audience, the ACM creative team came up with a new approach, taking the show to Nashville, and spreading the action across three very different venues. As readers may recall, a similar approach was taken at this year's MTV Video Music Awards. Just as the VMAs were designed to celebrate New York City, the ACM Awards were reconceived as a tribute to the town that country music calls home.

The venues chosen were among Nashville's most celebrated: The Grand Ole Opry House, home of the long-running weekly radio broadcast; Ryman Auditorium, the storied home of the Opry between 1925 and 1972; and The Bluebird Café, the 90-seat venue for acoustic music, where up-and-comers hope to get noticed and established stars try out new material. Even with three locations, however, Raj Kapoor, co-executive producer, says, "We wanted the show to feel super-cohesive."

One way of creating cohesion was to capitalize on the look of each location. Noting that the overall approach

involved "celebrating the architecture," Kapoor says that production designer Brian J. Stonestreet "really captured that concept, reflecting the venues we were in." Also, perhaps in part because this has been such a fraught and emotionally bruising year, Kapoor adds, "We wanted to make the show feel simpler. It was about celebrating the artists and their music; we wanted to make them feel comfortable and at home." And, he says, "We wanted the television audience to feel that comforting vibe, to be able to enjoy the experience with the artists."

Of course, detailed COVID-19 safety protocols were implemented, which went a long way toward making performers feel at ease. Acts were assigned venues based on practical considerations, for example, the size of their band setups. All of this resulted in an awards show that had a distinctly different vibe—simple, direct, and aimed at the viewers' hearts.

Grand Ole Opry House

The ACM Awards were held on a Sunday night, an important fact because the Grand Ole Opry's Saturday night broadcasts are as fixed a ritual as church on Sunday, and, Kapoor says, "They weren't willing to sacrifice one of their show days. They also wanted the audience tuning in [to the ACMs] to feel that they were in the same space [as the Opry]." This provided the impetus for a design that paid tribute to the performance space, Kapoor notes. "They provided us with detailed photos of their physical set. We recreated it in Cinema 4D, building our own model and lighting like the Opry does."

The basic Grand Ole Opry set features an upstage sce-



Carrie Underwood seen in front of a different iteration of the upstage video look. Opposite: Ryman Auditorium: The “windows” onstage were video panels.

nic wall designed to look like a barn interior constructed out of vertical wood planks. The ACM Awards set replaced this with an enormous ROE Visual CB3 video screen that, in its default look, replicated this, adding the ACM logo and the name of the broadcast; Stonestreet extended the design downstage right and left with additional wing walls (replacing the little barndoor units used for regular Opry shows) also made up of video panels, creating a kind of wraparound effect.” Most of the video gear was supplied by Norm Levin and Company, with media servers provided by Michael Zinman, the event’s screens content manager.

“The set was video-driven, but it followed the roofline angle of the barn,” Stonestreet says. “It paid homage to the architecture of the stage; it had the organic feeling of the Opry. We could mimic the look of the barn set but change it for different songs.” The overall structure was lined with LED lighting to capture the peaked look of a barn. In addition, he says, for the show’s extended stage, “We photographed the Opry’s teak wood floor, then had a graphic artist print the floor for the downstage area: I chose a diagonal design intermixed with a matte laminate, to get a new energy as we moved offstage into our world.

“We did black masking around the LED panels to mimic the angle of the Opry set,” Stonestreet says, adding, “we opened and closed the show” with the barn imagery. “It showed the energy and history of the Opry. I like to merge

built scenery with LED content and make it feel like there’s no barrier.”

Faced with the abyss of the Opry’s enormous audience seating area, Kapoor came up with a clever solution, attaching Glow Motion LED wristbands to the backs of seats for thousand-points-of-light effects that did much to warm up the room. “We’ve worked with Glow Motion for years,” Kapoor says, “but this was the perfect scenario. Most of the time, Glow Motion looks amazing in rehearsal, but when you have people [in the audience], not everyone is seated in the same way and it doesn’t have the same impact.” This approach “gave some of the energy of a live audience; on TV, it felt alive, not like a dead space.” Again, he says, “We didn’t want to do something that wasn’t real. That sense of authenticity was a huge win for the show.”

Kapoor was in charge of developing the video content at the Opry and Ryman Auditorium. “I’ve done all of it for the past three years,” he says. “We work with individual acts, making formal pitches to them and their managers. If they want input, we work with them. There was less video this year because we were working in such tight spaces. There were many months of meetings with COVID officers and the city of Nashville. The number one concern was safety. We wanted to have some live numbers, but we were limited to what could be changed over with stagehands. Also, there were zones to adhere to. [Each zone

required a different level of safety procedure; people working in Zone A, for example were required to take daily tests. Others were tested several times a week.] Artists could have only so many band members. There were no set pieces. This was a lighting and video show." Imagery here and in Ryman Auditorium was delivered using PRG Mbox media servers controlled by PRG V676 consoles.

Also, Stonestreet says, "The Opry had two livestreamed concerts in the middle of our load-in. Our set had to load in and out in 12 hours, so we couldn't be so large. For example, I designed a much bigger header at the front of the stage, using LEDs, but getting it out would have been impossible. We got our set in and made sure that the side LED walls could roll away; the Opry allowed us to keep the stage extension downstage and the LED wing walls at left and right. We gave them the content so they could recreate the barn look for their show. They were very obliging, or we would not have been able to do what we did."

Michael Berger, who along with Ted Wells, served as lighting director for lighting designers Robert Dickinson and Travis Hagenbuch of Full Flood, Inc, adds, "LED tape has been a big part of the process for the last couple years,

and lately we've been moving into pixel tape in more 'direct view applications'." Hagenbuch adds, "This allowed us to add depth and motion in the set in a more bespoke manner than with off-the-shelf pixel products that are limited in size and application."

This year, Berger says, "We faced the added challenge of not having an audience in any of the venues. Normally the audience makes up a large portion of our 'stage picture.' While we didn't have to light them, we now needed to pay more attention to the environment they usually inhabit. Each venue took a different approach to the lack of an audience—the goal was to provide a variety of visuals for the viewer to experience throughout the night."

Dickinson says, "Award shows are highly dependent on an audience full of celebrities and their reaction to the awards and performances. This energy is key to the TV viewing audiences' perception of a sense of 'event.' Without this key element, we attempted to mimic that energy with lighting and the Glow Motion technology. When programmed in concert with the music and lighting cues, it extended the energy of the performance and moments when the audience is reactive, like an award announce-





Kelsea Ballerini performing "Hole in the Bottle" at Ryman Auditorium; note the Robe PATT 2017s in the background.

ment. Glenn Weiss, the director, had anticipated he would not be using the big wide shots that give a sense of scale and excitement. We also placed lighting instrumentation in the audience seating to add dimension and energy. It turned out that wide shots were key to the visual statement, which was that we are carrying on with life and celebration even during these difficult times."

Hagenbuch adds, "Bob and I start with big-picture conversations about the set with Brian and Raj, then start to lay in lighting positions to service the show and complement the set and the venue. At that point, I bring those ideas to Mike [Berger], and Kristen [Merlino, art director], getting into the details of which light goes where and how it mounts."

Thus, in addition to the Glow Motion bands, the Full Flood team also installed in the audience seating PRG Icon Edges, Vari-Lite VL5s, Robe Pointes, and TMB Solaris Flares, all of which added energy and pace to the numbers. The overall fixture package for the room included 61 Vari-Lite VL2600s, 116 Icon Edges, 138 VL5 Tungstens, 36

Points, 60 Color Kinetics ColorBlast TRX units, 34 Solaris Flares, and 25 Solaris Flare Rayzrs. Followspots (PRG Best Boys and Bad Boys) were run using PRG's GroundControl system; three Strong Super Troupers were also used. Control was via PRG 676 and ETC Eos Ti consoles; the latter handled LED tape and the Solaris units. Lighting gear was supplied by PRG.

As always, working with a variety of acts makes up the fun and challenge of the lighting the show. "There is a great amount of planning that goes into the video content, and what normally would be an added act look, for each of these performances," Berger says. "Throughout the process, we do our best to develop a lighting concept and color palette that supports these ideas. While each performance is unique and should stand on its own, we are also cognizant of how they slot into the show as a whole." Dickinson adds, "The three-hour broadcast should have an ebb and flow of color and mood."

"We also wanted to deliver a separate visual signature for each of the venues," Dickinson says, citing "the heavy

smoke [from Reel EFX DF-50s], 'in-your-face' lighting of the Bluebird, the lighting-dependent pillars in Ryman Auditorium, and the more sophisticated image-dependent Opryland. This helped remind the home viewer that this event was from multiple iconic Nashville venues. This was a COVID-driven approach that gave the broadcast a larger scale and tangibility than most music award shows. It also gave time for stage turnarounds between performances, which took longer due to pandemic safety protocols."

The design team certainly delivered on this promise at the Opry. Carrie Underwood's tribute to the great ladies of country music featured vivid large-scale images of Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Barbara Mandrell, Dolly Parton, Reba McEntire, and Martina McBride. Kane Brown's "Worldwide Beautiful" put a chorus of socially distanced singers in the audience seating area; this gave the nearby lighting units a full workout supplemented by color chases from the Glow Motion wristbands. Morgan Wallen's "Whisky Glasses" feature images of honky-tonk signs and shots of liquor.

Some of the most effective looks were the simplest: Taylor Swift, seated on a stool, performed "betty" to stunning white backlight, with only a harmonica player, caught in a single shaft of white light, located upstage right. "[Swift] is very personally involved in all aspects of her performance and brought some reference images to the table," Berger says. "That look was developed in partnership with her management and creative team." The same powerful simplicity influenced Dan + Shay's "I Should Probably Go to Bed," staged in a single starkly lit 360° camera shot, backed by a chasing sequence of red beams from Icon Edges, and of Mickey Guyton's stirring rendition of "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?" with host Keith Urban at the piano, backed by an image of pulsing lavender concentric circles, with similarly toned light coming in low and from behind. Arguably the most dynamic number—and the favorite of the entire design team—was Eric Church's furious "Stick That in Your Country Song," which began against the image of a tattered, waving American flag and gained in intensity from fields of acid orange on the video screens, stabs of white backlight, and blinder bursts from Solaris Rayzrs and Solaris Flares.

The most whimsical number of the evening was Luke Bryan's "One Margarita," staged in front of an enormous animation of topic palms, ocean waves, and sun and moonshine. For a song that namechecks Jimmy Buffett, Kenny Chesney, and Bob Marley—the three bards of Caribbean pleasures—what could be more appropriate?

Ryman Auditorium

Kapoor notes that the design for Ryman Auditorium was also cued off its architecture, which has a markedly ecclesiastical feeling complete with pews for audience seating. (It was built as the Union Gospel Tabernacle in 1892, becoming a house of entertainment in 1904.) One feature

of the building's façade is a series of peaked church windows, some with stained-glass panes in a variety of hues. The onstage look for the ACMs included a series of comparable scenic windows, their panes consisting of Roe video panels. Separating these units were arrangements of vertical truss holding a variety of lighting units.

"For the Ryman," Stonestreet says, "we played with an all-lighting look, using the distinctive-looking Robe PATT 2017s." However, he adds, this approach "didn't have the historic flavor. Instead, we did the double Gothic windows with 3mm video panels and a big, curved wall of lighting." He adds that the molding around the windows was sub-



Maren Morris performed "To Hell & Back" at the Ryman with appropriate imagery in the window video panels.



Gabby Barrett's performance of "I Hope" was backed by images of boarded up windows.

jected to aging techniques, with LEDs inserted for a backlit glow. The overall approach was highly flexible, he says, noting that, depending on the number, "we could do all-lighting looks or add in video." The stage, he says, "is wide but extremely shallow and [because of social distancing protocols] we could only have four to six musicians. Because we were so limited in terms of density of bodies, the stage looked more open than it normally does." The addition of black temporary flooring completed the overall effect, in which lighting units and church windows seemed to be carved out of darkness. Scenery for

was built by Los Angeles-based Scenic Express.

Berger says that the Full Flood team made use of the house rig at the Ryman, adding a wall and floor rig consisting of GLP JDC-1s, impression X4Ls, and impression X4 Bars; Robe Patt 2017s; PRG Icon Edges, and Chroma-Q Color Force IIs.

The overall light package included 17 Ayrton Ghiblis, 17 Ayrton Diablos, and 37 Ayrton Mistrals; eight Color Force II 12s and four Color Force II 72s; 18 Color Kinetics ColorBlast TRX units; 24 SGM P1s; 28 JDC-1s, 48 GLP impression X4Ls, 20 impression X4 S units; 28 PATT 2017s and 20 Robe Pointes; 45 Icon Edges; 48 Chauvet Professional Rogue R3 Washes, and four Vari-Lite VL2600s. Again, GroundControl was used to run followspots. Overall control was handled by an MA Lighting grandMA2 full-size.

The numbers in Ryman Auditorium were distinguished by close collaboration between lighting and video. Maren Morris's number featured pulsing red and yellow looks from the onstage light trees matched by images of skies blazing an infernal red—an ideal approach for the song "To Hell & Back." Some overt rock looks were found here, for example a medley by Old Dominion that made use of a full vocabulary of sweeps, pulses, and chases. Then again, there was a pleasing delicacy about Tenille Townes' "Somebody's Daughter," rendered in lavender light and backed by pink color blocks in the church windows.

The Bluebird Café, being the smallest of the venues by far, had no video component, with the exception of Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani, who performed "Happy Anywhere," remotely, in a digital mockup of the café's interior. (See sidebar below.) Otherwise, the numbers were defined by lighting. The rig included 16 GLP impression X4 S units, 28 FR-1s, three impression X4 Bar 20s, and one impression X4 Bar 10; one Ayrton Diablo, 24 ETC Source



Riley Green's "I Wish Grandpas Never Died" featured a collage of family photos.

Four Mini LEDs, two Litepanels Astra 1 x 1 LED light panels, and 14 Martin by Harman Rush PAR 2s, controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA light. The Source Four units were used to highlight posters on the walls. The rest of the rig, with many units arranged on vertical trusses along the perimeter of the stage, created an intimate atmosphere combining key light with color washes. This was especially true of Luke Combs' "Better Together," informed by a rich, moody atmosphere of orange and yellow light.

Everyone involved expresses a sense of satisfaction with this most unusual of ACM Awards. "Personally, I love Vegas, because of the scale of what we can achieve," Stonestreet says. "But this year we took a thoughtful step back. It felt more human to me and more emotional. The fact that we were able to do something in a pandemic was really nice. A lot of shows haven't been able to do that, but Dick Clark Productions was willing to take that leap."

Hagenbuch adds, "Both the local and traveling crews

took it in stride and were the utmost professionals in adjusting to the new realities of working in masks, arriving early for testing. Everyone was glad to be back to work and thankful for DCP's efforts in making it happen safely." Kapoor says, "I'm super-proud of everything we accomplished. It was a beautiful-looking show that celebrated Nashville and its artists, and made people feel really good. I have a huge sense of accomplishment having done one of the first [pandemic] shows in a physical location. It had a sense of normalcy; we wanted people to feel that."

Dickinson says, "There was an enormous sense of accomplishment being able to create environments that reflected the energy, excitement and importance of a music award broadcast. The working circumstance was far more difficult than almost any production I have been involved with. The creative collaboration while maintaining a safe working environment speaks volumes for all involved. This project felt really good! 📶"

The Virtual Bluebird Café

Because Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani were unable to be in Nashville for the ACM Awards, it was arranged for them to perform their number, "Happy Anywhere," in a virtual recreation of the Bluebird Café in a California studio.

Jason Newman, a business executive at Creative Technology, the company that made it happen, says, "The shoot was supposed to be at Center Staging in Burbank, but the directive changed a bit, which meant Glenn [Weiss], the director, had to pivot the entire design and how we were doing it, with four days to shoot. We ended up at Apache in Hollywood. It wasn't the change in venue but the change in technology that was the challenge."

The original plan was to use LED screens to reproduce the Bluebird Café environment. But when Weiss chose to shoot the number with a 360° revolving steadicam shot, Newman says, "The challenge became the fourth wall. In Unreal Engine-based environments [like this], you can create limitless virtual set extensions, but to capture a 360° camera move you need a green screen to key against. So we went instead with a 360° green screen environment for the camera." The number began with a shot of Shelton and Stefani sitting in a green-screen studio; Shelton snapped his fingers and the Bluebird Café magically appeared.

The Bluebird Café imagery was scanned and built in Unreal Engine by Cincinnati-based content creators

Lightborne Communications. Newman says he worked with the Lightborne team on "nuances like the lighting fixtures onstage. Even the details not seen in the camera, like the salt and pepper shakers on the table" were given due consideration. The image had remarkable depth and dimensionality; he notes that Unreal Engine "lets us do camera perspective to get that hyperrealism. It helps to sell the psychology of [the performance] to the person watching and the person onstage feeling it."

Also key to delivering the remarkably naturalistic virtual scenery was Pixotope, the open software-based solution for rapidly creating virtual studios, augmented reality, and on-air graphics, manufactured by the Oslo-based firm Future Group. "Pixotope has many advantages," Newman says. "The director was seeing composited images in real time as the camera tracked through the space. Pixotope is built on Unreal Engine; we use Unreal for content playback and Pixotope for additional horsepower in processing images for the green screen."

The entire process took about four weeks, Newman says. "We got the approval from Raj [Kapoor], then did the scans of the interior, which took about four hours. It took the team about two weeks to rebuild the interior and get a first pass. That's when we really looked at details, subtle things like the posters in the background. During the final week, I was driving up to Nashville [from Atlanta, where he



Gwen Stefani and Blake Shelton in the virtual Bluebird Café.

is based] when I was told we needed to switch formats.” His team accomplished this in two days. “We were working in the latest version of Unreal and had to go back to the previous one to be able to work in green screen, so we had to rebuild everything.”

While this sort of technology isn’t really new, it has acquired an enormous relevance during the pandemic, especially in the production of television award shows and fantasy dramas like *The Mandalorian*. LSA first covered it in depth in a July feature on virtual production design, including Katy Perry’s now-famous appearance on *American Idol*; it has subsequently turned up in several more stories. “I’ve been doing this work for ten years now, working in film and other applications,” Newman says. Regarding its new popularity, he marvels at “the speed at which technology is evolving: We were expecting a five-to-ten-year timeline to get to the acceptance that we’re having. Now every single show is like this. We’ve done over 250 demos at our LED stage in Nashville, many of them remotely. There’s not one specific vertical trying to take

advantage, either; we’re seeing it across the board.”

The key, he says, is “education, bringing in the directors, DPs, and concert teams.” A sense of collaboration is important, too. “We worked with Full Flood on lighting the Bluebird Café scene, starting with the house lights and working in a subtle cue that brought in the blue lighting wash. Because we were working in Unreal, we could change the time of day. We started with it looking a little brighter outside, then changed the position of the sun to make it a little darker.”

Newman himself worked remotely on the project, as the change in the schedule meant he couldn’t get a COVID-19 test in time to be on-site in California. But, as he notes, one of the key features of this way of working is its extreme connectivity. “I’ve done projects with camera operators in the UK and on the West Coast for a show in Miami. The director is in LA and the support staff is in New York. You need very few people on-site to do a full multi-camera show.” Going forward, this may be the best way to keep production alive until the pandemic ends. 📶