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Eric Church

*The Double
Down Tour*

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DOUBLE OR NOTHING

Eric Church's
design team takes
new chances on
the *Double Down*
Tour

By: Sharon Stancavage





"This time, we added a substantial video and automation element," Allen says, noting the presence of three angled chevrons, used for IMAG, over the stage.

Things are different on the road with Eric Church's *Double Down Tour*. "It's a big show, but the vibe is really calm and quiet; you never hear a raised voice on a load-in or out. From the head of the snake to the tail, they are a hands-down competent, calm, and committed team, who are a pleasure to be around. These folks have passion." So says production designer Butch Allen, of MODE Studios, who has designed the last four Eric Church tours. "I met them when they were finishing up in clubs," Allen notes. "They never had a challenge thrown at them they could not conquer. They went from two trucks, in small arenas, to 16. Now they're doing stadiums."

The routing of the current *Double Down Tour* is unconventional. "They're in every city for two days, Friday and Saturday," Allen says, adding that this schedule is "way harder than five days a week. You are home Sunday through Thursday, which is a million times more stressful

than being on the road. You have to change your gears, which is really hard to do."

Church's custom stage, fabricated by TAIT "is 60' 6" wide and 41' deep," Allen says. "The overall depth, from front to back, is 82', and that includes the U-shaped thrust and ramps." The area inside the thrust is filled with fans. "The number of people changes on a day-to-day basis, depending on the fire marshal in every city," he comments. In general, approximately 300 fans can get up close and personal with Church.

"This time, we added a substantial video and automation element," Allen says, noting the presence of three angled chevrons, used for IMAG, over the stage. "Each side [of the chevrons] is about 30' wide by 10' high; they can travel almost the full 80' of stage depth in the arena and they can get right down to stage level. There are three massive automation tracks with trollies that contain [Tait] Nav Hoists." The chevrons consist of ROE Carbon CB8 LED tiles, provided by NEP Screenworks.



Allen says that the chevrons were inspired by the image of a hawk on the cover of Church's latest album.

"This concept was born from Eric's album art, which has a hawk on the cover," Allen says. "This image has a lot of meaning to Eric. We went through 28 different versions of this show; we saw this artwork, and that's how the chevrons were born. They loosely represent the birds."

The video system is a departure from what Church has done in the past. "This is the first Eric Church tour I've been a part of that has utilized a media server," notes lighting director and programmer Gavin Lake. "Eric's standard is black-and-white IMAG for the whole show. It's never been about video content; it's always been about seeing Eric and the band. We didn't want to depart from that, but we wanted more options for video effects and processing, so we utilized a disguise [formerly d3 Technologies] system with three gx 2 servers running with [the real-time graphics workflow] Notch; all video is routed through them to two side screens and three giant automated overhead screens."

The video and lighting programmer, Scott Chmielewski says, "While the number and size of the screens on this tour may be a little less than other tours of this size, the

technical elements and the complexity of Butch's concept on this are where the power is. The LED chevrons have two planes of movement as well as rotation. The show is built on the use of cameras, all using Notch for IMAG effects. Each song has a different treatment and use of IMAG, routing, and use of cameras. The first bit of programming was focused on the 24 cameras, but the need to keep it interesting and unique for up to four hours each night was a major creative and technical undertaking. There is a fine line between making a show like this interesting with Notch effects while allowing the audience to see Eric and the band." Florian Mosleh provided disguise support in addition to designing the show's Notch elements.

The chevrons are controlled via a Tait Navigator automation system and MA Lighting grandMA2 console. "Eric's fluid set list presents a unique challenge on this tour," Lake says. "The overhead screens are automated, with control provided by Tait and motion events triggered by the MA2. Each of the chevrons being close to 3,500lb, moving them is not trivial, and they don't move fast; given



"Given that we are using different lights on different performers song-to-song," Lake says, "the relationship of screen positions to lighting fixtures is delicate."

that we are using different lights on different performers song-to-song, the relationship of screen positions to the lighting fixtures is delicate. For example, moving them from Position 1 to Position 5 isn't always easy to do on the fly. Mike Rock, our automation operator, and I quickly learned how each song looked in all of the screen positions. As soon as the proposed set list for the evening comes out, we figure out how to keep the show lit! It's pretty exciting actually." Allen adds, "It's a complicated process that Gavin and Mike go through and they do it elegantly. Some songs have specific [video] looks, but other parts are really open. Depending on the screen positions, certain songs can be blocked, so it gets really complicated."

The team spent considerable time in previz. "We built the previz file and integrated the automation, motion tracking, and consoles to create a system where all elements know and react to each other," Chmielewski says. "This included the [AC Lighting] Follow-Me system; working with lighting designers/programmers Rob Koenig, Gavin Lake, and Andrew Giffin, we were able to use just about any fixture as tracking spotlights while the lighting rig moves

and/or reacts to video elements."

The IMAG screens, also Roe CB8, for the upper bowl seating, "are located upstage right and left, in the middle of the PA clusters that get audio to those people," Allen says. "Everyone else in the arena gets a great view of the video chevrons, and that's primarily where the IMAG is; we don't need to put [Church's] picture up in a lot of places. Our director and camera operators have to look at what we programmed in Notch and the media server, so all their framing has to be specific to the needs of what we're doing in the chevrons. At the same time, they have one eye looking at the bigger picture to make sure they are sending a framed IMAG shot for the side screens. This is a super-hard show from an engineering, direction, and camera-operating viewpoint. It's never the same show twice; there are always a ton of songs you've never heard Eric do before."

Speaking of the programming by Mark Butts, Koenig, Giffin, Chmielewski, and Lake, Allen says, "It's a disservice to simply call them programmers because they really are designers. Programmers have this special gift; they help

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you produce segments or entire shows. They work on TV as well, so they are super-fast; they know what they're doing and have unbelievable eyes. I never would have managed to have survived this without being surrounded by so much talent." Each of them has added his own touch to the production, he notes. "The coolest thing about this show is how varied the visual elements became because of our constantly changing cast of characters. As an example: Rob Koenig and Andrew Giffin are talented designers, but they have completely different viewpoints and life experiences. When you're putting a song that Rob worked on next to a song that Andrew did, they're completely different and it's so refreshing."

Speaking of the rig, Allen says, "Lights are physically attached to the grid and video wings and there is a minimal floor package. Then we have a big trussing structure [The Krab] at the front of house for audience lighting." Ten upstage pods "were manufactured by DAS Design Works, a scenic company in Santa Fe Springs. They are squares; ten pods turn into five columns that are rectangular." The pods contain a considerable number of Elation Professional ACL 360i units. "There so many of them in such a little space, it's just such a massive look," notes Allen. The pods appear during the number "That's Damn Rock and Roll."

Allen has several workhorses, including 27 Robe Robin BMFL Wash Beams, 154 Martin by Harman MAC Axiom Hybrids, 72 GLP JDC1 strobes, and the 360i units. "The four types of lighting fixtures I have on this show are all so reliable," he says. "We're not spending a lot of time repairing fixtures or losing lights during the show." He adds, chuckling, "As the crews will tell you, I tend to break stuff." Lake says, "Audience light for Eric Church is very important as well, so Butch specced the brightest and most impactful tilting LED strobe available, the GLP JDC-1. Rob Koenig had assisted in the profile development of the JDC-1, so he fully utilized every possible bit of the fixture, including the signature 'aggressive mode,' which is appropriate if you've ever seen an Eric Church show!" The lighting rig, provided by Robert Roth at Christie Lites, includes 62 GLP impression X4 Bar 10s.

Lake adds, "Automated followspot systems are the future of our industry, so we looked at just about everything available. Tracker-based systems were quickly ruled out, as having to wear a tracking device would've been inhibitive and awkward for Eric. He often performs in just jeans and a T-shirt, so hiding a tracking device on him wouldn't have worked. This left us to consider operator-based systems. Butch wanted to have the opportunity to use any fixture in the rig at any time for a spotlight, so Follow-Me quickly became the best choice for us. Follow-Me has performed wonderfully. We are using Follow-Me strictly as a PSN [PosiStageNet] server, to send positional information to the MA2.



"Butch knew that we needed beautiful key and back-light fixtures, given that we were looking at remote followspot systems for this tour," Lake says. "After considering different options, we decided on the Follow-Me remote



To cover Church, Allen chose the Follow-Me remote followspot system with Robe BMFL WashBeams for key and backlight.

followspot system with Robe BMFL WashBeams for key and back light. They've performed wonderfully and have delivered exactly what we were looking for." Follow-Me had another advantage as well: "Since I had the ability to

run the entire lighting system through it, we have a wide variety of different key light options," Allen says, adding, "The integration of Follow-Me took a village to get it the way I wanted; when push comes to shove, we can have a



Approximately 300 fans can fit in the area inside the thrust stage.

good chunk of the system in there. And it's been working magnificently."

"With a performer like Eric Church and his profound catalog of music, we have to be prepared for anything during his show," Chmielewski says. "It's an ever-evolving show with zero time code or Pro Tools." Lake adds, "Eric could throw out an audible at any time. My busk page is very, very simple. I get a static look up in a color, I get key light up, and I get some black-and-white IMAG on the screens in any of a few preset video mappings. After that, once the song is rolling, I may do a few shutter bumps or color bumps, but for the most part I let it be about the music."

Audio

Billy Moore, front-of-house engineer and winner of a 2016 CMA Touring Award, notes that he is using a Clair Global Cohesion CO-12 PA. "I like its clarity and fidelity," he says. The main PA comprises 32 CO-12 cabinets: a side hang

features 28 CO-12s. Fill is provided by "two Clair CO-10s, split center, and two Clair CO-8s on the outer lips of the stage," says system engineer Jared Lawrie. "Six Clair CP-218 flown subs are aimed straight ahead, with nine Clair CP-218s in an electronically steered cardioid array on center and under the stage."

Lawrie's work on the PA continues through the show. Moore notes, "Once the show starts, after three or four songs, Jared will take the tablet and walk the building, wherever there is audio, making tweaks that I don't necessarily hear on the side hangs and front fills."

Although Moore has worked on the Avid VENUE Profile in the past, he prefers the analog format: "With it, I can work on two inputs at a time. Analog is all laid out in front of you and behind you, so I can see how the signal is flowing and make a move without having to select anything." He adds, "I was on the [Midas] Heritage for three or four years and it was time to take a step up. I thought about the XL4; Jared and I talked, and he said 'Yeah, that



Church's sound system includes a Clair Global Cohesion PA and Midas XL4 console.

would be a good move.' The next thing you know, there they are."

Thus, there are two Midas XL4s the front of house. "My footprint there is 16' x 16', and that's rather large. But this is what my application calls for and that's what I have," he says. So far, the XL4 has been a good choice: "We have 50-plus shows under our belt and it's great. If something goes wrong, it's easy to fix it, right there at the console."

When asked about outboard gear, Moore says. "The Midas preamps are always top-notch in my book; to me, they have about the best-sounding preamps out there." He adds, "I have a lot of Drawmer gates on the drums and an API [527 compressor/limiter] for the guitars. As far as effects, I have a couple of [TC Electronic] D-Two delays; Eric has a lot of delay on the new album. I also have Bricasti [M7] and [Yamaha] SPX 90 reverbs."

The mic lineup includes "eight microphones for Eric: four Telefunken M80 RFs, and four Telefunken M80 wired

mics with Optogate PB-05 gate. Each of these has a little gate on the end of the microphone so that, when he gets in front of it, a light activates so he can sing into it. The mic doesn't work unless he's standing in front of it, getting ready to sing."

Throughout the show, Moore states: "I pretty much keep one hand on Eric's vocal mic—whichever one he goes to. I bring the unused mics down and go with the flow. If you leave the mics up, it's just extra noise you don't need going in there." The microphone package includes products from Shure, Heil, and others.

Moore adds, "I have always been the kind of guy that gives 110% every time. To this day, I still have sweaty palms before the show. It's like going into a ball game; I'm ready to go. But after the first note hits and Eric starts singing, I take a deep breath, settle in, and do what I've been doing for years." The *Double Down Tour* is in the US through November. 📶