

A Grand Ole Centennial

By: Dan Daley



The live performances for the anniversary show—Keith Urban, Garth Brooks, Post Malone (the rapper had two CMA nominations for collaborations), Alan Jackson, Clint Black (above), and Ricky Skaggs, among them—were interspersed with taped appearances done at the Ryman specifically for this show.

Country music's flagship goes big for its 100th anniversary broadcast

The Grand Ole Opry, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, is country music's media flagship, a Saturday-night live broadcast of established and up-and-coming music stars performing classic and contemporary songs. What is also the longest-running radio program in history is televised from either its relatively recent secular base at

the Opry House on Nashville's east side, where most shows have been done since 1974, or its hallowed and seasonal home since 1943 at the Ryman Auditorium in the city's boisterous downtown. Starting with its first show, on November 28, 1925, through a succession of venues before landing at its now-permanent locations, the Opry is likely America's

first true multimedia property, a live concert blasted into the ether by station WSM's 50,000W transmitter from its very first performance, becoming to Calvin Coolidge's era what the internet was to Bill Clinton's: a media-technology inflection that would impact the entire culture nationally.

Membership in the Opry remains one of the genre's crowning achievements; just over 225 acts have attained that status out of the thousands who have warbled across the decades, with a roster today of about 75 performers who schedule their tour-

Photos: Jason Kempin/Getty Images

ing to be available for an Opry show when asked. It was televised live for the first time in 1978, as part of a PBS fundraising special, and began regular television broadcasts in 1985 on various commercial networks. Not surprisingly, then, the Opry's golden anniversary, which, on March 19, was highlighted by a three-hour, prime-time broadcast special on NBC, featuring more than 20 performances and nearly 50 Grand Ole Opry members, was a rather complex affair.

Cultural sensitivities

Country music and Nashville itself (in its Music City role) have historically been sensitive to how they're portrayed on a broader scale. The genre's resurgent mainstream popularity in recent years, with breakthrough artists like Jelly Roll, Morgan Wallen, and Lainey Wilson, has helped its recent relevance, creating a rapid and lucrative hick-to-hip transformation, with heightened audience experience expectations for their live shows—big sound, big production. But the Opry remains apart, the Sunday church experience after a week of temptations on the road. Thus, the lighting, production design, and audio designers corralled for *Opry 100: A Live Celebration* by producer Silent House Productions approached the show looking for a balance of tradition and modern, not unlike country music itself, as it increasingly lays a pedal steel guitar over a hip-hop beat.

"It's definitely a blend of those two things," says production designer Matt Steinbrenner, speaking before the event. "It is going to be familiar and nostalgic for people that know the Grand Ole Opry, and it's also going to be elevated and progressive in the sense that we're adding production elements that feel forward-looking at the future of the Opry as well as looking at its past." Adds Baz Halpin, Silent House CEO, "The Opry is an iconic venue steeped in history and culture. We want to lean into that and



Luke Combs (above) used the Shure KSM11 cardioid condenser vocal microphone capsule, the same mic he has been using on tour.

celebrate not only the incredible artistry and legacy of great music and musicians but also the look and feel of the Opry in its various forms over the decades. Through a blend of traditional and modern scenic design choices, we aim to capture that essence on camera."

Production design

Steinbrenner is a veteran of music-focused awards shows like the CMA, ACM, and MTV broadcasts, plus more mainstream event productions like the Emmy Awards. He's also done time in

Nashville, working on a Miley Cyrus television special for Peacock taped at the Ryman. For a century-old institution that nonetheless reinvents itself on a near-weekly basis, looking to find the line between Ken Burns and Mark Burnett in production values can be challenging. One approach involves flanking the Opry's existing stylized red LED "barn" stage set—a 52.49'-wide-by-27.89'-high, 2.9mm Ross/D3 LED wall—flanked by four additional video screens, either 23' wide by 2' high or 18' wide by 8' high, comprised of 2.6mm ROE Visual Graphite tiles.



Artists using the Shure SM58 included Vince Gill and Ricky Skaggs (above).

These were installed by Nashville's Fuse Technical Group and featured content managed by LA-based mDots, displaying historical and contemporary footage. (Imagery was delivered via a Disguise GX3c media server system.) The barn motif is iconic, a nod to the Opry's original name, *The WSM Barn Dance*, when it was done from the fifth-floor radio studio of the National Life and Accident Insurance Co. in downtown Nashville. (The station's call letters stand for "We Shield Millions.")

The live performances for the anniversary show—Keith Urban, Garth Brooks, Post Malone (the rapper had two CMA nominations for collaborations), Alan Jackson, Clint Black, and Ricky Skaggs, among them—were interspersed with taped appearances done at the Ryman specifically for this show.

"We're using additional canvases to create a little bit more of a textured environment that allows us to create scenic extensions in the screen, so we can show a deep, beautifully textured physical space, going to the back wall

of the theatre," Steinbrenner explains. "And then we use these side screens for packages, historical footage, and imagery. So, we have a good blend as we go through the telecast of textural scenic extensions that fit the more modern tone of the music being performed, as well as having a canvas that showcases more specific historical imagery."

Architecture influences scenic design

While Ryman Auditorium is represented by interwoven performances taped there, the 132-year-old building also influenced the production design for *Opry 100*. Steinbrenner cites architectural touches such as the Ryman's upstage stained-glass windows. "We created an interpretation of that onstage: scenic representations of the Ryman's balcony that extend on the stage left and connect back to a series of light-box windows that echo the stained-glass windows from the early 1900s. The thing with the Ryman is there's no other venue like it in the world. The history and the design of

that room are just unparalleled. We wanted to let that be present onstage."

Another traditional element should be kept in mind. When the Opry made its move to the Opry House in the 1970s, a circular portion was cut out of the original stage on which the broadcast's iconic microphone stand stood, with its emblematic WSM mic flag, and installed in the new venue, guaranteeing that featured Opry artists will always be standing on a piece of that historic stage. "That iconic piece of the Ryman auditorium floor at the Grand Ole Opry is like hallowed ground, and we wanted to reinforce that shape in our production design with the geometric linear motif of the barn backing," Steinbrenner says. "When we were looking at the set design, that was a big feature: blending the iconic, nostalgic circular shape of the Grand Ole Opry backdrop." Scenery was fabricated by Atlanta-based Concord Creative.

Lighting history

Lighting designer Eric Marchwinski is used to handling music performances

for television, with recurring stints as lighting director for the CMA Awards, the Billboard Music Awards, and the Emmy Awards, among other shows. *Opry 100* had similar challenges: lighting an event whose primary audience would be millions of viewers at home, but whose live audience's energy needed to be addressed in the venue. "The viewership of a prime-time slot on a major network certainly has many, many more eyes viewing it on a television than are seeing it in the room," he acknowledges. "And there are certainly ways to make the experience in the room not feel detached from being a live performance. But when we're on television, we need to do certain things for the camera to define the space. The camera tells the story on television; it tells us, as viewers, where to look. The goal, basically, as a lighting designer, is to make sure that wherever we're looking, the background is interesting. That includes reverse shots into the house and wide shots of the venue. We need to define that geography, so we end up adding a lot of lights in the back rows, lighting the architecture of the room, helping define that space so that, on camera, no matter where we're looking, we have the story in the frame and give the viewer an understanding of where they are in that particular moment."

The actual *Opry* set is, in keeping with its roots, fairly basic—a dozen musicians and backup singers onstage, backing all the performers in front of the barn façade; an announcer's desk; and stage workers doing their tasks in full view of the audience, a throwback to its radio days and its time as a television studio. Part of the design then was to use some of the lighting's tropes to emphasize its media roots. That included the placement of several non-working 10K Fresnels with their barn doors open to emphasize the theatrical environment. "We're using those classic television lights to honor the venue's past, paying homage to a hundred years of the

Opry," Marchwinski says. "We're going to hang them on pods at the front of house and treat them like scenery, along with an 'air-sign' to nod to the history of the *Opry*. We'll light them as scenery so that, in a wide shot, you get an interesting halo effect around the proscenium. We also designed a custom fixture that is a retrofit of a classic PAR and a modern-day Source Four PAR; we've built a plate that makes these PARs look like banks of R40 striplights like you would've found in the theatre 50 years ago. We put this between the screens as a nod to past lighting technology. It's not going to be a very smoky-beamy show, like a very modern-looking show. The *Opry* is not about big production numbers; it's about the performance."

Working with programmers Mark Humphrey and Ryan Tanker, Marchwinski used very little of the house rig, also bringing in MA Lighting grandMA3 consoles. In keeping with the theme of using the new to illuminate the old, he also deployed a Vari-Lite VL5LED high-output LED wash fixture. "It's a recreation of an old light, which kind of tracks for our theme here," he says. "It has a nice, wide aperture that gives us a nice paintbrush we can point at the camera. It's going to be our workhorse fixture, helping visually tie together the *Opry* design with the Ryman remotes."

The house system at the *Opry* includes 30 Martin MAC Ones, 25 ETC/High End Systems SolaFrames, 20 ADJ Focus Wash 400s, 20 CHAUVET Professional Maverick MK3 Spots, 12 Elation EL Cycs, and 10 CHAUVET Rogue R3 Spot 10s. Adders for the *Opry 100* broadcast included 84 Vari-Lite 3600Ps, 72 Scenex Scenic RGBW LEDs and 60 Scenic RGBA LEDs, 70 Vari-Lites VL5LEDs, 60 Robe ESPRITES and 60 Robe Spiiders, 48 Astera AX9 PowerPARs, 40 Robe LEDBeam 350s, 28 Robe MegaPointes, 24 Mole-Richardson Type 415 Fresnels, 12 Chroma-Q Color Force 72s and four Color Force 48s, 12 Elation Fuze Par

Z120IPs, 12 Astera Titan Tubes, ten Robe Pointes, eight ETC custom strips, three Robe iFORTE LTX followspots, two CHAUVET Rêve 3 IPs, two Astera 6x Bi Color LED panels, and two Ultratec Radiance hazers.

The Ryman's house system includes 40 CHAUVET Rogue R3s; 24 ADJ Focus Wash 400s; 17 CHAUVET COLORado Solo Bar 6s; from Ayrton, 18 Mistrals, 17 Ghiblis, 14 Eurys-S, and six Diablos; eight Martin MAC Auras, and eight GLP impression X4s. Added for the broadcast were 50 VL5LEDs, 38 LEDBeam 350s, 16 Spiiders, 14 ESPRITES, 12 MegaPointes, 10 ETC custom strips, four Rêve 3 IPs, two Bi-Color LED panels, and two Radiance hazers. Lighting gear was supplied by Solotech.

Sounds of the Opry

Viewers received the same sound system that the *Opry* audience typically hears minus a few of the front fills on the JBL VTX house system, removed, says audio producer Chip Matthews, to help achieve a cleaner look for the stage. The fifty-four A12 boxes comprising the four main PA clusters also played at what he calls a conservative volume level, in part to address the needs of the broadcast but also to let the vocals take center stage. He balanced both volume levels and cultural nuances in the process.

"If you look back years ago, television broadcasts, music mixes, and even the *Opry*, were very conservative but with a broad dynamic range—you almost had to turn the TV up too loud at times to catch the nuances," he explains. "Today, we've closed that dynamic range up a good bit for television, but we also know that these legacy artists are playing music that came up through history and weren't produced the way we make modern records; it's not overproduced musically in terms of being highly compressed. So, we've got a nice, warm, fat, traditional-sounding bed of music



Post Malone and Ashley McBryde.



McBryde and Terri Clark.

that's a bit more robust than it would've been back in the day—there's going to be a little more drums than they used to have and the drum-

mer will play with a bit more snap in his snare than we would've had back then. But we're going to focus on making sure you can hear every lip

smack and pop and breath."

Of all the processing available through a modern sound system, Matthews says the reverbs—the most basic of sonic effects—are perhaps the most important. "Traditionally, you'd have one big chamber or possibly a plate," he says. "They were heavy and very 'wet' throughout the performance. We don't work that way with reverbs today; we duck them a bit during the vocals and then bring them up as a finish. Some of the plug-ins have smoother decays and are more transparent, so they give you some space without as much color. We also roll off a lot of the low end to keep the overly boomy wash out of it. We've got some nice custom [re]verbs built for the space, but we're also spending a lot of time with the ambient mics to capture the room as the people have heard it for years. There's a lot of time being put into how we address each performance vocally with their instrument performances, with the nuance, with the detail."

Front-of-house mixer Brett "Scoop" Blanden managed the show's 120 channels of audio on a Studer Vista 5 M2 console, which the Opry installed in 2014. It could be considered "vintage" in digital terms, but that's fine with Blanden, who says the desk's automation features, though slightly dated, are well-suited to handle large input groups such as the choir. "I like that I can link the choir mics and can make adjustments to the entire set of those inputs all with a single fader turn or knob turn," he says. "I can select all 16 of those and adjust an EQ filter on one of those channels, and it will adjust that channel EQ on all the linked channels. For a broadcast show like this, where you have to get things to air quickly, it helps the workflow. And the mix bus is totally transparent; it's not coloring the sound at all."

That was especially important given the large number of acoustic instruments on the show. These present their challenges, as some artists requested studio-grade microphones

for them. For instance, Ricky Skaggs asked for a Neumann TLM103 for his mandolin, which was positioned downstage center, close to the audience, and presented the potential for increased gain before feedback. “There are a lot of considerations like that with microphone choices, especially for the downstage acoustic numbers—fiddles and upright basses and mandolins and acoustic guitars,” Blanden says. “We’re really trying to use more condenser-type microphones, as opposed to direct signals, to make it feel as Opry-esque out front as possible.”

Shure was the main microphone provider to the show. Artists using the SM58 vocal microphone capsule included Trisha Yearwood, Garth Brooks, Jamey Johnson, Trace Adkins, Lainey Wilson, Marty Stuart, Keith Urban, Ashley McBryde, Vince Gill, Sonya Isaacs, Ricky Skaggs, Steve Curtis Chapman, and The War and Treaty. Artists trusting the Shure Beta 58A vocal microphone capsule, another staple country mic, included Dierks Bentley, Terri Clark, Yolanda Adams, Alan Jackson, Brad Paisley, and Carly Pearce.

Travis Tritt used the Shure KSM8 Dualdyne dynamic vocal microphone, which has become increasingly popular with country artists for its ability to control proximity effect and presence peaks. Luke Combs used the Shure KSM11 cardioid condenser vocal microphone capsule, the same mic he has been using on tour. The new Shure Nexadyne instrument and vocal microphones also helped capture the house band’s background vocals as well as kick and tom drums. Reba McEntire and Alison Krauss sang into a Nexadyne 8/C capsule. Krauss’ backing vocalists also used Nexadyne microphones.

The Ryman’s house loudspeaker rig also relies on JBL VTX A12s for the left and right line arrays, VTX S28s for the center sub bass hang, and VerTec 4886 boxes for the side hangs and front fill. The arrays are powered by



Ketch Secor, Dierks Bentley, and Jamey Johnson.



Brett “Scoop” Blanden at his Studer Vista 5 M2 console.

Crown I-Tech 4x35 amps. The under-balcony area is covered by VerTec 4886, 4883, and 928 boxes. Yamaha RIVAGE PM7 consoles are used at the front of house and monitors.

The boys in the band

Country music’s emphasis on tradi-

tion extends to the Opry’s operational aspects. Most artists on the show use its house band, a regular cast of musicians for whom Opry work conveys a certain status within Nashville’s stratified, hierarchical culture. But they exist in a parallel universe alongside the town’s so-called

A-Team of studio players, who play on the artists' records. (And all of them are usually separate from artists' touring bands, though some overlap exists.) There is a pecking order here, and thus it was a sensitive issue when populating the bandstand for *Opry 100: A Live Celebration*. That fell to Derek Wells, the show's musical director. He came to the task with the right credentials, named the Academy of Country Music's Guitar Player of the Year twice and *MusicRow* magazine's Guitarist of the

Year in 2022, as well as credits on more than 100 number-one singles for Kelsea Ballerini, Kenny Chesney, Lady A, and others.

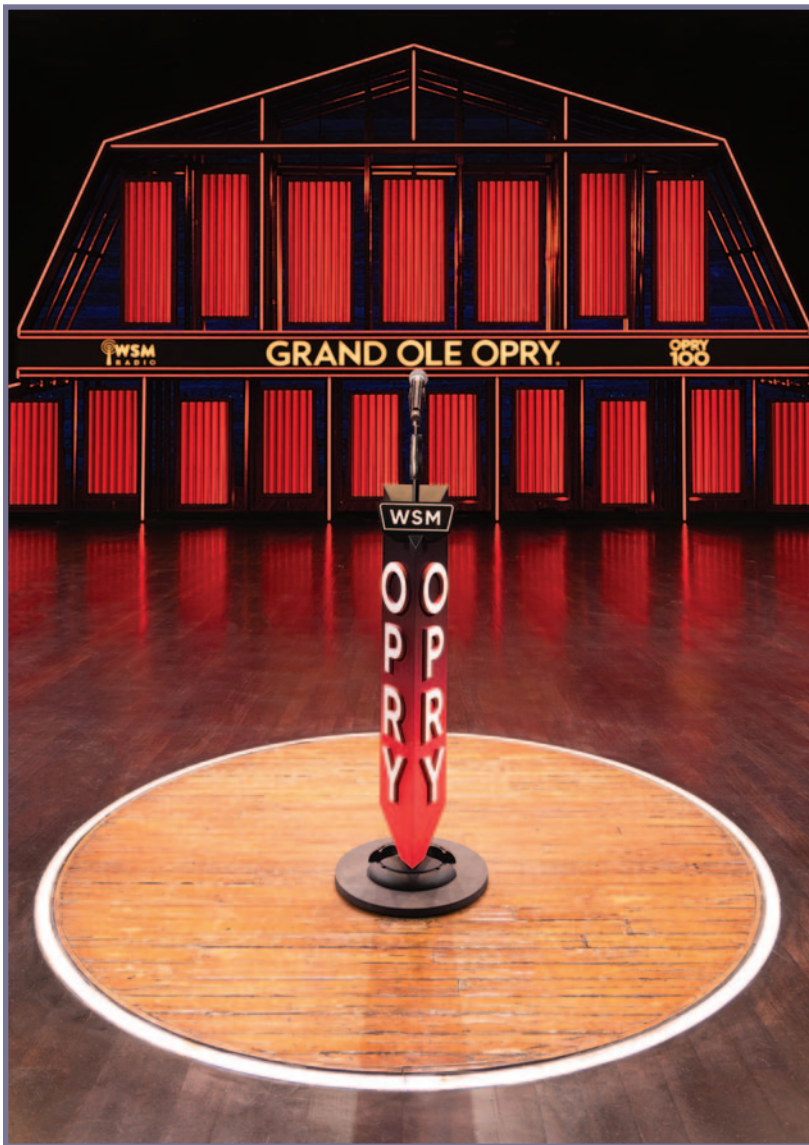
"Whenever you ask an artist to come in and do something without their band, there's always pushback," Wells says candidly. "The way the Opry operates traditionally is that you use the house band until you reach a certain stature to be able to say, like, Hey, no, we're bringing our guys to play the show. So, knowing that a lot of the artists performing this particular

show typically don't use that Opry House band, we thought it would be better to populate the band with people who play on a majority of these artists' records, so there would be familiar faces. In this band, we have a number of CMA and ACM award winners among them. So, when you have that conversation with Luke Combs, who doesn't usually use the Opry house band, that news tends to be accepted a little bit easier when it's like, hey, but you're going to have some of the same guys who play on your records. And he's like, oh yeah, cool—three of them played on my last record!"

What also changed was the music backbone: The Opry's standard complement of amplifiers and drums gave way to studio gear in flight racks for the nine-piece broadcast band. Wells also coordinated vocal microphone choices with each artist, some of whom wanted wireless, and he balanced that against the number of RF channels available for a show with nearly two dozen performers.

"We're already moving mountains here to get that many artists in one place, and for them to all agree to forego arguably their biggest creature comfort—their band—that's not lost on me," he says. "We just felt like this was the best way to achieve some level of comfort for everyone. And luckily, that's exactly how it's worked out."

Opry 100: A Live Celebration topped its night in total viewers, pulling in over 5.2 million on a Wednesday evening. But the show was never supposed to be about numbers. The production, like the Opry itself, was built around its emotional impact. As Eric Church told the audience that night, referring to the mass shooting at a Las Vegas country music festival in 2017, "It was the Opry that put...my heart back together." And as Steinbrenner noted, only half-jokingly, "It's only the hundredth year." 📶



When the Opry made its move to the Opry House in the 1970s, a circular portion was cut out of the original Ryman Auditorium stage on which the Opry's iconic microphone stand stood, with its emblematic WSM mic flag, and installed in the new venue, guaranteeing that featured Opry artists will always be standing on a piece of that historic stage.