

Cabin Fever

A single image dictates the unusually focused, flexible design of HARDY's *The Jim Bob Tour*

By: David Barbour





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he distinctive country music singer HARDY (né Michael Wilson Hardy) spent the summer on *The Jim Bob Tour*, a high-concept production that combined scenery, lighting, and video, often in head-spinning ways. In *Music Mayhem* Magazine, Andrew Wendowski wrote, "The tour production on this trek is next level, from the vibrant lighting and stunning 3D visuals that perfectly complemented each song, to the bursts of pyro that lit up the entire venue. The jaw-dropping production values kept fans mesmerized every single moment of the show. Throughout his electrifying set, HARDY received several thunderous ovations, with fans even chanting his name during a few standout moments."

The seminal visual element of the tour is the video image associated with the title character of HARDY's song "Jim Bob." Seen on a large screen at upstage center, it's a projection that feels surprisingly dimensional. Such a quality is only too appropriate for a production featuring real and virtual elements that are frequently hard to tell apart. "The original spark came from HARDY's team," says creative pro-

ducer/production and lighting designer (also lighting programmer and technical director) Trevor Drawdy. "They wanted to bring Jim Bob's cabin to life onstage, but I did not want to approach the cabin as just a static set piece. I saw this as a chance to create an immersive world that could evolve throughout the show. I pitched the idea of blending physical elements with virtual set extensions; that's when [the production design firm] Lüz Studio came in."

Lüz Studio is a Montréal-based visual design company offering video content and event production services. (It last appeared in these pages in January, with a story on Pentatonix's *Hallelujah! It's a Christmas Tour*, which also featured impressive video imagery. "Matt [Larivée, creative director] and I have known each other for years now," Drawdy continues, "and it was the perfect opportunity to get him and his team involved. They are masters of that craft. I came up with the idea of what Jim Bob's cabin was going to look like—its vibe and atmosphere. I described it to the team, and they were super receptive."



Above: The pods have a maximum trim height of about 40' and can be lowered to 8' above the deck. Throughout, Drawdy uses automation to help shift the scale and perspective of his show. Opposite: Each lighting pod features ACME Lighting Tornados and CHAUVET Professional Color STRIKE Ms

He adds, "We collaborated closely to define the look and feel of that environment." The physical elements include a wood fascia on the upper set and a "toe rail fascia" across the entire deck, connecting to the set's T-thrust; TAIT built the set, thrust, and scenic fascia. "I also drew a lot of inspiration from HARDY's country-to-rock sound," Drawdy says. "And I knew the production needed to support that range with dynamic contrast, not just in lighting, but in the way the stage feels from song to song." Larivée adds, "Trevor led the creative because he brought the vision of the cabin, and HARDY is his client; he has worked with him before. We came in and proposed things; he was super open-minded, and came up with great programming, making sure that everything worked with the [set's] automation. He did an awesome job." Atlanta Rigging Systems constructed a T-shaped overhead rig, using Kinesys motors for automation.

"The cabin is our entry point into the world of Jim Bob," Drawdy says, "and it returns later in the show as a callback. The mood shifts throughout the show, but the overarching vibe I wanted was something gritty, raw, and cinematic. The

cabin imagery and its world are tied to the Jim Bob character, so we leaned into textures that felt grounded—wood, fire, smoke, metal—but framed them in a way that could dissolve or evolve. We didn't want to lock the show into one look. Our goal was to tell a visual story that progressed through chapters."

The cabin is also the jumping-off point for the production's remarkable sleight-of-hand approach, in which lighting units are scenery, and physical and virtual elements are virtually identical. In realizing the cabin, Larivée notes, "I said to Trevor, 'I think we need to put a spell on it, because if we do it [as a large video image], we'll need trees and clouds, and it will look like a photograph. But this is a rock show, with strobes and effects. What if we have virtual [light] pods around the cabin, which can continue in real life, so that half of them are real and half are virtual?'"

Indeed, there are only seven physical pods; the five other apparent pods are images floating over the stage. Identifying the real units isn't easy, Larivée notes: "Sometimes virtual pods come down and create a wall of

light behind HARDY.” It’s lighting as video as scenery, a nifty trick that expands the designers’ creative opportunities.

Drawdy says the lighting pods recall a 2014 Nine Inch Nails tour that featured similar units filled with Ayrton MagicPanels: “That was part of the inspiration, that and Matt’s theory of bringing pods into the virtual space. It helped to eliminate the sense of a video screen, that the cabin isn’t real.”

The pods have a maximum trim height of about 40’ and can be lowered to 8’ above the deck. Throughout, Drawdy uses automation to help shift the scale and perspective of his show. “Some scenes need the pods to hang heavy and intimate; others need them flying high and wide open,” he says. “By arranging our mix of real and virtual pods in a circular pattern, we can use perspective to blend real versus virtual. It also gives us a strong identity and helps unify lighting and video into one architecture. Visually, this creates some strong symmetry and lets us shift the environment drastically without changing the physical setup.” By way of example, he says, “We do a cover of a 1975 song, ‘Love It If We Made It.’ I wanted it to have a bandshell vibe, so we have pods on the ground, going up, and overarching over HARDY. Later, when the pods come in for the acoustic set, they look like a Gravitron carnival ride. That helps to establish the environment.”

Larivée even matches the lighting units in the real pod. “I said to Trevor, ‘If we have all the same fixtures, rather than doing spot-wash, spot-wash, it’s going to create a graphic

element.’ Of course, he had other types of units in them, but the main pod is driven by seven [ACME Lighting Tornados]; the look of these units extends into the virtual space.”

Overall, Drawdy says, “I didn’t want to rely on a traditional approach, giving each song new content and basically relying on pre-recorded video. That was one of the reasons I was interested in working with Lüz. As I explained to management at the beginning, we’re treating it like chapters in a book, with backdrops that are more like physical drops than movies you could play on your iPhone.” Some content includes live capture treated with Notch blocks.

The screen consists of ROE V6ST panels, with images delivered by a Disguise GX 3 media server, aided by Brompton Technology Tessera processing. (The screen is equipped with a door through which HARDY can make an entrance.) Other elements include a Ross Carbonite switching system, Barco S3 multi-screen switcher, and Hitachi cameras. Video gear was supplied by Moo TV.

The visual deceptions never stop. See the photo on page 27, which looks like HARDY standing in front of a blank video screen. “It’s a video image of a blank video screen,” Drawdy says, “with two layers of blow-through LED that we later use in this act. We call this set extension look ‘Framework.’ We transition from the acoustic look during the song ‘Six Feet Under.’ The number, he adds, “starts stripped down, with him at the end of the thrust, and then it explodes. Everything is sparkling, and we’re doing moves with the pods and screens at the same time.”





The substantial pyro component, supplied by Pyrotek, includes Hydras and G-Flame units. Opposite: What looks like HARDY standing in front of a blank video screen “is a video image of a blank video screen,” Drawdy says, “with two layers of blow-through LED that we later use in this act.”

At the same time, Drawdy notes, “One difficult thing is the balance between lighting and video,” he says. “In the intro to the show, we tease the pods; the ACME Tornados have halo rings around their exteriors, and we make the same halos in the virtual space. Then we eliminate the pods. We don’t use them until later. It’s tempting to do more, but restraint is important.”

Lighting

Each lighting pod—the real ones—features the previously mentioned eight ACME Lighting Tornados, each of which has five 120W RGBL LEDs in its main source plus a complementary ring of one-hundred-twenty .05W RGB LEDs encircling the fixture. The pods also contain 48 CHAUVET Professional Color STRIKE Ms, in addition to 24 on the floor. “They are the workhorses for me,” Drawdy says. “I use them as strobes and wide floods, depending on the song. They give me scale and punch without having to bring in more truss.”

Another major element is a set of 106 CHAUVET COLORado PXL Bar 16s. “We have 72 on the floor, with 34 in the straight flown trusses,” Drawdy notes. “We can wrap the stage and thrust with PXL bars, creating a fun pixel dynamic. We do a lot of chasing guitar riffs and ani-

mations; they’re favorites of mine.” These units are rugged, he notes: “We’ve done a lot of shows in the rain over the years, and they’ve performed over and over again for me.”

The rig is notably eclectic, beginning with 59 Vari-Lite VL3600s. “That’s the workhorse profile in the rig,” Drawdy says. Twenty-five Claypaky Sharpy X Frames are also deployed; the unit is best known for its four-focal plane shutter system. “They do a lot of the blow-through work,” as well as effects, he notes. He calls the ETC/High End Systems SolaPix 37 “a great fixture; it was recommended by [the tour’s gear supplier] Bandit Lites. I was looking for a very large pancake wash unit with lots of output. I didn’t want a lot of wash fixtures on this show. They’re on the upstage stick that handles a lot of the backlight; they’re also used on the ground, three per side, for sidelight on the band.” For the band, “We have two Robe iForte FS units at left and right for followspots using RoboSpot control. They cover 75% of the show’s key light. We don’t use front spots, unless HARDY goes way out on the thrust. Then, we’ll break it in.”

Completing the rig is a set of Ayrton MagicPanel-602s. “They’re in 10° custom Tyler [Truss] carts, and they live right and left of the set,” Drawdy says. “They add some fun sparkle here and there. We also have nine VL3600s on

up-down sticks left and right of the deck. They help bring together that space in the air without having actual forms; they just put up beams, creating a little bit of eye candy.”

The lighting is controlled by a MA Lighting grandMA3 full-size console with MA3 processing units. “We have 52,000 parameters,” he says. “We’re spread across 150 universes—100 for lights and 50 for video. There are also 12,000 parameters of T3 control.” He adds that he is looking to make the transition to grandMA3 in the coming year. (Completing the lighting system are, from TMB’s ProPlex line, four EZ-LAN Unity 20 rackmount Ethernet switches, three GBS 28 port switches, three IQ Two 16-way Ethernet-DMX nodes, and three IQ Two 8-way Ethernet-DMX nodes.)

The grandMA2 also sends cues to the Disguise server. “It’s all real-time generative content,” Drawdy says. “Basically, the video screen operates like a lighting rig. We have multiple layers of lighting elements throughout, including in the cabin scene, that are individually controllable. With the STRIKE Ms in the virtual space, we can use them like real strobes. It’s not down to a pixel level, but we have different groups and changes to get the gags across. The Tornados are the same way. We have the fixtures and the rings on their exteriors; obviously, we can adjust the colors as well as the different layers of light in the cabin.”

HARDY – The Jim Bob Tour

Tour Manager: Taylor Watson
Production Manager: Morgan Burton
Creative Producer/Production Designer: Trevor Drawdy
Lighting Designer/Programmer: Trevor Drawdy
Technical Direction/Drafting: Trevor Drawdy
Scenic Design: Trevor Drawdy/Lüz Studio
Creative Director: Matthieu Larivée
Content Creative Director: Dave Pawsey
Content Direction: Notch Programming: Simon “Rusty” Rouhier
Disguise Programmer: Philippe Marquis
Content Production: Lüz Studio
Lighting Director: Trevor Drawdy
Road Manager: Jeff “Beaner” Griffin
Stage Manager: Mark Arnold
Lighting Crew Chief: Jemma Hutchens
Dimmer Tech: Samuel Morgan
Lighting Techs: Bailey Titter, Nino Monserrate
Video Director/Video Crew Chief: Jordan Karow, MooTV
Video Engineer: Andre Nolan
LED Tech/Camera Ops: Max Staples, Johann Madix
Head Rigger: Clay Christian
Automation Operator: Jason Adams
Automation Tech: Wayne Parmley
Set Carpenter: Darian Jones
Pyro Shooter/Crew Chief: Enrique LaFuente
Pyro Techs: Josh Phillips (Leg 1), Jim Eline (Leg 2)
Video: Moo TV
Lighting: Bandit Lites
Automation: Atlanta Rigging Systems
Pyro – Pyrotek Special Effects, Inc.





The system is flexible, he adds: “If we make a set list change, adding a song to a chapter of the show, it’s easy to make the edits in the server without having to re-enlist or have something reanimated.”

As the photos indicate, the show also has a substantial pyro element. “I called Reid Derne at Pyrotek and said, ‘Talk to me about the available flame options. I’d like to have something linear and cool, like the whole set is on fire.’ He said, ‘We have a unit, the Hydra, which is like a fire screen, except its five heads are articulating’.” Ten bars, placed downstage, create a most impressive effect. The pyro component includes two G-Flame units, located behind

the Hydras. He worked with programmer Terry Park “to get a lot of the dynamic looks I wanted, like running fireballs. I wanted fire to become a pixel element as well.”

He adds, “We didn’t have the privilege of previewing the show in a pre-viz suite. So, Terry’s ability to program things offline was really good. He has been the power programmer for us over the last three years, since we started in the arena tour world. He’s familiar with the music and the vibe that we’ve gone for in the past.” Providing atmosphere are four MDG theONE units and four Master FX Force 8s.

Drawdy stresses that such a unified design was the product of a team

effort. “I can’t say enough about Matthieu Larivée and the team at Lüz Studio—he, Dave Pawsey, Rusty Rouhier, and Philippe Marquis all helped bring the hybrid visual world to life. Also, big thanks to Hardy and his management team for trusting me to help shape this world. Troy ‘Tracker’ Johnson at Track Management has had my back on this design from the start. And credit as well to the touring crew—lighting, video, rigging, automation, audio, and pyro—who make this show happen every night.” Having been on the road since May, *The Jim Bob Tour* concludes at Madison Square Garden later this month. 🎵