

Patterns of Success

Kelsea Ballerini conquers the arena circuit on her new tour

Photos & Text by Steve Jennings





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On her first arena tour as headliner, singer-songwriter Kelsea Ballerini is earning rave reviews. Opening the show with dramatic lighting for "Patterns" from her 2024 album of the same name, she delivers fan favorites like "Love Me Like You Mean It," her breakout hit "Mountain with a View," and many more. The visuals elevate the songs' storytelling, making for a very moving experience and creating a special connection with the fans.

In the *Charlotte Observer*, Théoden Janes wrote, "From the get-go, she wowed in delightful, delectable fashion. She delivered a remarkably self-assured performance peppered with bits of self-deprecation, self-awareness, self-help, and self-empowerment, wrapped in a production that somehow felt big and small (i.e. intimate) at the same time." In the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Jon Bream noted,

"There was ample sass, energy, and conviction as Ballerini twirled, strutted, and even danced with a chair—bolstered by confetti, lasers, flame throwers, artful lighting, five flashy outfits, and smart visuals (including colorful lyrics on a giant video screen and a merry-go-round spinning on an LED screen). Jessie Fuentes noted in *Finding Connecticut*, "Fans lucky enough to catch this show are in for a night of stunning visuals, deeply personal storytelling, and a performance that solidifies Ballerini as one of country-pop's most compelling stars."

Nick Chang, production/lighting designer, programmer, and director

Chang has been working with Ballerini for three years, beginning as lighting director on the *Heartfirst Tour*. "Over

the course of the last few years,” he says, “I’ve been involved with various tours and projects which eventually led to my role in designing and programming Kelsea’s shows.”

For the current show, titled *Live on Tour*, the design process began in conversations with [production manager] Chris Diener and [creative director and content creator] Patrick Tracy to ensure that the result reflected Ballerini’s artistic vision. “When we met with Kelsea, she had a very clear idea of what she wanted her shows to feel like—personal, emotional, and engaging,” Chang notes. “The main focus was to create a space where the audience could connect and be immersed in the music and with Kelsea herself.”

The early talks also revealed a desire for the show to feel intimate yet grand in terms of production values. “We decided to go with a design that balanced these two aspects of emotionally driven visuals paired with high-energy production elements,” Chang says. “The stage setup evolved to include a lot of dynamics with lighting, captivating content on a 92’-wide video wall, stage lifts, pyro, lasers, and set pieces that all engage the audience in the storytelling nature of her music.”

Chang’s interest in lighting began at the age of eight, when he started working at his local church. “As I got older, my curiosity grew, and I was eager to learn more. The church I attended had a grandMA2 console, and I took every chance I could to operate it, program on it, and learn from those around me. One of my key mentors was

Alec Takahashi, a fellow designer and programmer. Alec taught me a great deal about navigating the console and working with fixtures. Over time, we became close friends, and he played a large role in helping me transition into the touring world. I began as a tech, progressed to lighting director, and then developed a passion for the creative side. I’ve been touring for about seven years now, working with various artists in a wide range of venues. I’m incredibly grateful for all the people I’ve met along the way and for the guidance they’ve offered me.”

Chang has collaborated many times with Tracy, and they have developed a strong workflow when building and executing ideas from scratch. “During our meetings and design process, we prioritize creativity and storytelling, ensuring that all production elements work together seamlessly,” Chang says. “We begin by understanding the artistic vision and then figure out how lighting and video can enhance the production. From there, I create various 3D renders, incorporating automation and special effects, to visualize how all the elements can come together. It takes time, but I’ve found that even exploring rough, quick ideas through renders helps us determine what works and what doesn’t. While many renders may get discarded, I find this process is essential for refining the design and getting to exactly where we want to be.”

Diener and Chang worked closely to find cost-effective solutions that didn’t compromise creativity. “Overall,” Chang says, “working with Patrick and Chris creates a great balance of creativity and precision.” Typically,





Above and opposite: "We have five video walls in total, but they get seamed together after everything is built, to create one massive LED wall that is, literally, wall-to-wall in some venues," Vanderford says. "We have 354 ROE Visual V8T Vanish panels active in our rig."

Chang's process for selecting vendors combines past experience, trusted relationships, and collaboration. "I've worked with [lighting/video/automation supplier] Upstaging and [special effects firm] Pyrotek on previous projects, and we already had an established relationship with them both on Kelsea. I know their capabilities and how they align with the creative and technical needs of a production. Upstaging, [staging company] TAIT, and Pyrotek all uniquely raised the bar of execution, more than we could have imagined. I work closely with Chris to ensure the overall vision of the tour, as well as the logistics and budget considerations. It's about finding the right balance between creativity, practicality, and what works best for everyone involved."

Chang had a specific vision regarding lighting fixtures, but it was a work in progress as the design evolved. He started with familiar gear but stayed open to new options that could enhance the show's look. "Upstaging was helpful in refining choices and suggesting fixtures that met both creative and practical needs," he says. "I also experiment-

ed with new fixtures I hadn't used before, such as the Glow Motion Spheres. I'm really happy with their performance and am looking forward to using them more in the future on other designs!" Chang is pleased with how ACME Lighting LEOs have performed as his beam fixtures behind the set's blow-through ROE Visual Vanish V8T video wall. "They added a fresh dynamic to the show and have quickly become some of my favorites for their versatility and visual impact."

Various fixture types were chosen. Robe FORTE FS units serve as followspots on the front-of-house truss. Ayrton Domino S units are Chang's main profile fixtures, positioned in the trusses and automation pods for sharp, reliable projections. GLP Impression X4s are the primary wash fixtures placed throughout the rig in trusses, automation pods, and on the floor. The ACME LEO, Chang notes, "also offers stunning looks when zoomed out with gobos. It cuts through the video wall beautifully and complements the set in a way the crowd doesn't see coming." The ACME SOLAR IMPULSE, a 1,000W white LED unit, is flown



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as a sidelight fixture. Elation DARTZ 360s are placed in the downstage truss. "These small but powerful fixtures allow me to fit two rows in a standard GT truss, providing dynamic looks," Chang says. "They're fast and beam-focused, with a built-in frost that also creates a soft wash effect." ACME PixelLine IPs line the bottoms of the upstage and downstage trusses. "In full pixel mode, they are perfect for sweeps and effects, and the built-in frost helps create a soft batten look," Chang continues. "I also used the strobe function for high-energy moments." Chroma-Q Color Forces line the thrust. "ETC Zeos were sent out by Upstaging at the last minute for us to demo," Chang says. "These incredibly bright fixtures are used under the downstage lift to illuminate Kelsea as she's revealed from beneath the stage. GlowMotion Spheres are a new addition for me, but I loved incorporating them. Flown 40' above the thrust, these fixtures create unique visuals as Kelsea descends the thrust, adding a surprising element to the show, whether static or in motion." "Kelsea brings so much energy and passion to every performance," Chang concludes. "The crew has been an absolute pleasure to work with as well. Such a talented and dedi-

cated team. Everyone in all the production departments is fully committed and it's seamless, making communication between us all run smoothly. Kelsea and the crew's professionalism, creativity, and passion have been key to making this tour such a success, and I feel very fortunate!"

Patrick Tracy, creative director/ content creator

Tracy has worked closely with Ballerini since 2022, having directed several music videos for her in previous years. "We've built a strong trust, which led her to seek a larger collaboration," he says. "As her creative director, my role involves overseeing and executing the entire visual aspect of her career, including album packaging, photography, TV and award show performances, merch, music videos, and live shows. It's my responsibility to ensure each visual impression or experience is a clear representation of the Kelsea Ballerini brand."

He adds, "Nick and I collaborated on Kelsea's Heartfirst Tour, with me as content director and Nick as lighting programmer. This time, we were given the opportunity to fully design the show from scratch. We felt a significant respon-

sibility and opportunity to showcase our capabilities. After about 50 all-nighters of brainstorming and programming, I am confident we delivered!”

Early on, Tracy recognized that content would be a key strength for this show, which immerses the crowd in various environments and emotions. “LED was a priority at the forefront, while Nick’s layers of lighting help to create impressive visuals: automated lighting pods, Pixellines framing everything overhead, blow-through LED on the upstage wall, and effective use of Glow Motion Spheres on the thrust. Once we understood these layers, Nick and I worked diligently to shape every beat of the show, creating a seamless ebb and flow. We ensured the layers did not compete by exercising restraint and allowing certain elements to shine at the right moments. Kelsea, Nick, and I also collaborated closely on designing a set list that included spaces between major production elements, pacing them effectively throughout the show to maintain audience engagement.”

Tracy says the true magic of this show stemmed from Ballerini’s complete trust in the team to collaborate on designing something extraordinary. “Our absence of ego facilitated a seamless and objective creative process, resulting in the show’s most memorable moments. This lack of friction allowed us to channel our passion for a grand and visually stunning production, which instills pride and confidence in Kelsea as she performs each night,

enveloped in visuals that beautifully narrate her music’s story.”

Nick Vanderford, media server programmer/operator

“Each day,” Vanderford says, “I get my area [at the front of house] set up and I go through the show to make sure everything looks smooth across all our screens. We have five video walls in total, but they get seamed together after everything is built, to create one massive LED wall that is, literally, wall-to-wall in some venues. One main reason I’m out here is to make sure all the walls are married together, so when content plays across the screens, all the content is seamless. Some days, because of how the screens are built and, depending on the rigging situation, I have to cut pixels on some walls to ensure that any overlap isn’t seen in the visuals. When showtime comes around, I am basically just babysitting the servers as they do their thing.”

Also featured is a mini widescreen LED wall called the “Halo.” “It comes down to the stage floor for certain parts of the show,” Vanderford says. “We have one song where the servers are taking in position information from our automation operator and that allows us to overlay what’s on our upstage center wall onto the Halo and have the servers track its position in real time and adjust the AOI [area of interest] of the Halo as it flies back up to the roof. The idea here is for the Halo to disappear into the content,



“For Kelsea’s vocal mic, we’re using a Sennheiser 6000 stick with a 9235 capsule,” Newson says. “We’ve been using this for several years. We have had them ‘blinged’ out by Rebel Mic Stands out of the UK.”



"The main focus was to create a space where the audience could connect and be immersed in the music and with Kelsea herself," Chang says.

so the fans don't even realize it's not even there anymore."

Aside from programming and operating the servers, Vanderford also owns them. The show is run off a main/backup configuration of Disguise Solo machines. They run independently of each other but are locked via time code. "Once the show starts, time code basically runs everything for me and I'm just fading IMAG in and out during talking points."

Vanderford and Chang started programming for this tour at Upstaging in Sycamore, Illinois, in early October 2024. "We first had a one-off at [Madison Square Garden] to kick off Kelsea's new album, *Patterns*, and most of

those songs were programmed for that show. We went into rehearsals at the top of January, and we added a few songs that weren't on the MSG setlist. There isn't a ton of programming for me to do, as Patrick does a good job on his end to add blackouts, bursts, and strobes where they are needed. Once we see it live on the wall, I can make changes based on what the creative team is looking to achieve, to fine-tune some things, if you will. I do get to be a little creative myself and add some fine details that not everyone will see, but if you do, it just adds to the experience the fans get each night."

He adds, "We have 354 ROE V8T Vanish panels active

in our rig. The massive LED screen wall is 33 panels wide and ten panels tall. Its resolution is 3,696 pixels wide by 1,120 pixels tall.” The smaller automated widescreen curved Halo wall is seven panels wide by two panels tall. Its resolution is 784 pixels wide by 224 pixels tall. “We have an LED band riser, which is six panels wide and one panel tall, that wraps the band risers on each side of the stage. They are 672 pixels wide by 112 pixels tall. Total pixel count for everything is 3,211,264 pixels, and it all fits into one 4K output. All Brompton processing is powering the V8Ts.”

Rob McLaughlin, video director

McLaughlin works with the creative team to maximize the potential of the vision and the unique challenges it presents for video. “I’m not just calling the cameras but utilizing creative framing, blocking, and camera positions to capture the dramatic lighting moments and atmospheric effects the way they are intended,” he says. “It is a delicate balance and a challenge I enjoy.”

On the tour, he says, “We are utilizing a Ross Carbonite Ultra [switcher] and a 3ME touch drive desk. The video head end alone is in three double-wide racks (directors, engineering, and transmit) that are almost 6' tall, so we generally have them live in the backstage area.” There are eight cameras in total. “We have two long lenses at the front of house, one handheld with a wide-angle lens in the SL1 pit, and a manned dolly cam that runs across the front of the SR1 pit and up parallel to thrust. We also have four robo cameras in play—primarily on drums, keys, BGV, and one for the principal at the tip of the thrust. The crew play a huge part in what we are able to achieve for the show, thanks to EIC and robo camera operator Anthony Morgan, handheld camera operator Aaron Walchli, dolly camera operator Keith Ainley, front-of-house camera 1 operator Zachary Boebel, and front-of-house camera 2 operator Andrew Wantuch.”

Chris Diener, front-of-house engineer/production manager

Diener is in his 20th year in the industry this year. “I was really lucky to start mixing at the very beginning of my career with Joe Nichols, a great country singer, and I’ve been mixing ever since. Production management came slightly later when that same singer parted ways with his PM. They asked if I was interested, and I was hesitant at first, so they just decided to move forward without one. I felt obligated to jump into the role shortly thereafter. I’m convinced it was a tactic to get me to do it all along,” he adds, laughing.

Diener has now been with Ballerini for going on eight years. “We have a core team that has stayed with her all that time. We started in clubs and small theatres; we’re so proud to have grown to where we’re playing arenas now.

Kelsea Ballerini Live On Tour

Production Crew:

Production/Lighting Designer, Programmer: Nick Chang

Creative Director/Content Creator: Patrick Tracy

FOH Engineer: Chris Diener

Systems Engineer: Jordan Baker

Monitor Engineer: Chris Newsom

Video Director: Rob McLaughlin

Video Media Server Programmer: Nick Vanderford

Lighting Lead: Kile McClure

SFX/Lasers: Brian Van Trigt

SFX/Pyro: Jim Eline

Tour Manager: Dustin De Rosier

Production Manager: Chris Diener

Stage Manager: Justin Sumrall

Choreography: Dani Vitale

Production Companies:

Lighting, Video, Automation: Upstaging Inc.

Staging: TAIT

SFX: Pyrotek

Audio: Spectrum Sound

We feel very lucky to have grown this operation with her. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else! We are so lucky to have an incredible group of people out here, and that Kelsea has trusted us to deliver this to the fans each night. Added to our great crew, we have some other indispensable members that work this operation: Justin Sumrall, our stage manager; Jordan Baker [systems engineer]; Marissa Creelman [patch]; and our PA fly guys Kean Grych, Gehrig Duncan, and Shane Linderman.”

Diener mixes on a DiGiCo Quantum338 Pulse console. “It’s been awesome for what we need it to do; it’s always so flexible. Right now, we are right around 150 inputs, between the stage, playback, video, audience mic, etc.” He uses Waves for things such as X-Feedback on acoustic instruments, some C6s for buss compression on playback, H-Delay, and Waves Real Time Tune, plus an outboard rack for buss processing and a master chain with a Live Professor rig for verbs and doublers with VSX for virtual playback; some things are on the console channel strips. “We have a DirectOut Prodigy.MP [multifunction audio processor] handling a ton of that routing and interfacing via MADi to the FOH console. That has been an invaluable centerpiece at FOH.”

His outboard gear consists of a master bus with a Sonic Farm Creamliner 3 into a Tube Tech SMC 2B. His drum bus has a Heritage Audio Successor into an Empirical Labs Fatso. “For my bass channel, I have an Empirical Labs Mike-E, and for Kelsea’s vocal, I use a Rupert Neve 5045. I have Live Professor where I use the FabFilter ProR2 for all reverbs, less a mono plate that I use SoundToys SuperPlate for. My doubler is the Eventide

H910. I sometimes use a FabFilter Pro MB or UAD Pultec on the master bus.”

Spectrum Sound is the tour’s audio provider. Systems engineer Jordan Baker and Diener note they have always loved d&b loudspeaker systems, especially the SL-Series, which is used on this tour. “This is a big reason we love Spectrum so much, and this product works great for us, especially the cardioid element,” Diener says. “Our PA rig consists of 20 [per side] KSL8 for mains, 16 [per side] KSL 12/8 for side hangs, 12 [per side] V8 220° hangs, six [per side] KSL-SUBs flown, 13 SL-SUBs spaced across the downstage edge, and six Y10P front fills.”

On the production side, Diener and the team knew roughly what their truck budget was going to be. They spent a few weeks bouncing ideas off each other and putting together a rough plan. “Then, one night, I had a dream about a giant video wall with IMAG built into the sides, and I immediately woke up and wrote it down on a napkin. I sent that drawing over to Nick [Chang], and it became the basis for where we are today. We originally wanted to do a big, curved wall with no hard edges, but once we saw what the rigging and transport would look like, we decided to pivot to the hard edges. It was great doing this design with Nick and Patrick [Tracy]. Bouncing ideas with them was so fast, and we could easily incorporate Kelsea at any time. We are very lucky to be able to do this in such a fashion that lets us tailor the design to the budget right from the start.”

Once the show build was completed, it was just a matter of truck packs and the normal DOS operations. “I’m very lucky, I know I keep saying that, but to have a team that is so air-tight, that allows me to both mix and production-manage, making it completely doable for me to do both, which I prefer. Mixing keeps me organically tied into the show performance; I feel like I have a physical part in it with mixing. I like being connected in that way.”

Diener says Upstaging, which was first used for a Ballerini homecoming show in Knoxville, has “such a fantastic operation, from the rep to the build side, that we knew we wanted them to be a part of this. They are such an integral part of this operation, especially doing lighting, video, and automation for us. Combining these under one roof made things so easy.” Pyrotek provided special effects for the Knoxville show, and so it was the same situation. “We had such a great team both in the office and on site that we wanted no one else. Going into these arenas, we saw most of them did not have a rolling stage in-house, so we felt carrying that was absolutely critical for the load-in. We had used a TAIT lift in the past for Kelsea’s *Patterns* album release show, and the way it integrated to

local stages was an absolute bear. It became clear very quickly we needed to do the whole TAIT stage for ease of integration. Our stage crew has again been phenomenal and are absolutely adored by our production. All our vendors work so well with us and are constantly delivering stellar product.”

Chris Newson, monitor engineer

Newson has mixed Ballerini’s tours on the DiGiCo Quantum 338 since June 2021. Effects-wise, he says the onboard console reverbs cover his needs. “The only out-board gear I use is two Rupert Neve 5045s on both of Kelsea’s vocals and our two background singers. For Kelsea’s vocal mic, we’re using a Sennheiser 6000 stick with a 9235 capsule. We’ve been using this for several years. We have had them ‘blinged’ out by Rebel Mic Stands out of the UK. For IEMs, we’ve just made the switch to FiR Audio for our in-ear needs. Kelsea is wearing the Xenon 6s, as well as most of the band members. The Xenons have given us a fuller range with the high end being nice and smooth.”

When Newsom joined the Ballerini team, he had been living in Texas for a couple of years, surviving the pandemic. “Chris [Diener] and I had been friends for several years. We hadn’t been on the same crews, but we had been on the same tours once or twice, and our paths had crossed at several festivals over the year. I believe it was May 2021, and I reached out to him one day just to say hi. He immediately hit me back with ‘I need a monitor guy right now.’ I said, ‘Hire me,’ and the rest of that is history. My joining the team was just bad circumstances turning good at the right time.

“These past four years with the Kelsea camp have been very refreshing. I try to keep monitor world as simple as possible so I can keep my attention focused on my artist during the show. Not too much has changed in my world over that time. I’m excited about the new IEM technologies being released by Shure and Sennheiser, though, and I hope they will be game changers in the future. For me, monitors are a point of reference for my musicians, not a reproduction of the album. We need to be able to hear if something isn’t right so we can fix the problem, not just cover it up, so the problem doesn’t grow into something major. A shoutout to our monitor tech, Marissa Creelman, who handles patching the stage during load-in and the show. She is my right hand if something on stage needs to be addressed, so she has been a tremendous help in unexpected emergencies.”

Ballerini’s tour ends this month. She also continues in her first season as a coach on *The Voice*. 🎵