

NOT HER FIRST RODEO





Left: The show's video component often exhibits a tongue-in-cheek wit, as seen in this image of a cinema marquee sign.

A new Vegas residency showcases Miranda Lambert at the top of her game

By: David Barbour

Country singer-songwriter Miranda Lambert is the latest star to discover the joys of Las Vegas. *Miranda Lambert: Velvet Rodeo, The Las Vegas Residency*, which opened in September at Planet Hollywood's Zappos Theater, is such a hit that it has added new dates through the end of 2023. It's easy to see why: Like Lambert, the show is glittery and gritty, spectacular and intimate, sophisticated and down-home. It showcases a star who has evolved into a major Nashville voice.

It goes without saying that *Velvet Rodeo* is a larger-than-life entertainment. "Because it's Vegas, everyone knows the show has to be extra," says production design-

er Tom Sutherland, who here delivers spectacle with a tongue-in-cheek wit. His scenic concept frames Lambert in a series of concentric ovals lined with lighting gear, ending upstage with a video screen that displays a panoply of imagery. Other amenities include a staircase for a star entrance and a runway extending to a B stage. Sutherland adds that Lambert "didn't want a world filled with automation and gags. That's not who she is. She wanted a big Vegas show with its heart in the honky-tonks. Our task was to build something that would embrace that message but also lend grace to the larger and smaller moments that Miranda showcases in her music."

"It is definitely Miranda's concept," agrees Raj Kapoor,



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Velvet Rodeo's director and co-designer. "The title is from a lyric in a song on her new album [*Palomino*]. It was about making a spectacle on the Zappos Theater @ Planet Hollywood stage, knowing that she doesn't really want dancers and she wants her musicians front and center. She was willing to be flashier this time and have certain things, like special effects and lasers, on time code. But for her the music is always front and center, and it is all performed live. That dictates a lot of the show."

Thus, Sutherland says, "We built three ovals with blue velvet facias, featuring different light fixtures, putting the ovals into forced perspective with the house video screen upstage." This layout, he adds, is a way of dealing with "a sense of depth on that stage that is hard to fill." The oval B stage, he notes, was originally reserved for the "acoustic songs and tearjerkers, but there's a such a vibe when she

appears on it that we brought it out more. It became an integral part of the show."

The set was built by SGPS/Showrig, the company having worked on Sutherland's design for Luke Bryan's residency at Resorts International in Vegas. The designer notes that the blue velvet cladding "gives the set a lounge feel—like when you go into a bar with velvet padding on the walls. And, of course, the show is called *Velvet Rodeo*." The stage is divided into levels, which, Sutherland says, "gives the musicians space to roam freely and for Miranda to jam with them. The stages were difficult to design, but they give her a respectful playground to showcase her songs." The design, Kapoor notes, "celebrates the city with a little bit of nostalgia. The blue velvet is a nod to Elvis and the LED modules are a tribute to classic Vegas," with its neon-drenched aura. "The rings are almost



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like lassos," he adds.

Placed on the rings are 66 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s and 144 impression X4 Bar 10s (all essentially lining the ovals) and 47 Robe MegaPointes, with 49 Claypaky Sharpy Washes 330s and 39 GLP JDC1 strobes on the upstage side of each fascia. They're part of an eclectic rig that includes 12 Sharpys (placed around the B stage), 12 impression X4 Atom RGBWs, a single Robe BMFL WashBeam, and 305 Environmental Lights RGB PixelPro LED dome modules. Speaking of the latter, Sutherland says, "We needed something small, similar to puck lights, that could be built into the set. They needed to be cost-effective for a large quantity, easy to install, and bright. We stumbled across the Environmental Lights gear and that was our solution."

Located mostly overhead is the house rig of 42 PRG

Best Boy 4040 Spots, 22 Vari-Lite VL3500 Wash FX units, and 32 Martin by Harman Mac Viper AirFX units; also featured in the house rig are 18 SGM XC-5 color LED strobes. The house followspot is a Lycian SuperArc 4K. The show is controlled with a MA Lighting's grandMA3 console, running MA2 software. As mentioned, time code is employed to coordinate with video and special effects. Lighting gear was supplied by Felix Lighting.

Using this gear, Sutherland enlivens each number with chases featuring the impression X4 Bars, pulsing Sharpy beams shooting up around the B Stage, and big beam looks that capture Lambert and her musicians while blasting shafts of color into the audience. Grand sweep effects are pulsed by blasts from the strobes and upward shots of flames. Some lighting moments flood the stage with saturated color; others are totally white. The designer also



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The latter effect, Sutherland says, "is featured in the song 'Tin Man,' and you can hear a pin drop in the room

when it happens. It's such an emotional moment, having this cage of light that opens out at the end. The artist does what she's incredible at; if you do it right, surrounding her with one beautiful production look, it really triggers emo-



tions. She leaves the stage after that song, comes back on the lift, and goes into the last four or five songs in the show. It's a nice transition to some of the power hits."

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us to design and light," Sutherland says. "With this rig, we had so much flexibility in the different looks we could create." It helps, he adds, that "we had a nice amount of time to work on it, including a couple of weeks in previz. We built it at the Orleans Arena in Vegas, and we had a few days of rehearsal before moving the show to the Zappos Theater @ Planet Hollywood, giving us time to finesse and tweak all those pretty moments."

The show also has a lively, highly amusing video component; see, for example, the cinema marquee advertising Lambert as the star of "Fastest Girl in Town" on page 46. At the top of the show, "Velvet Rodeo" is spelled out on the video screen in glittery letters not unlike the Hollywood sign; they appear to tip over in an explosion of sparks, which reconfigure into "Miranda" before dispersing to reveal a mountainous desert landscape, in front of which the star rises on a lift, launching into "Actin' Up." "During previews, we animated the bulbs on the sign," Sutherland says, "so they flicker on, like the sign is coming to life. As it smashes forward, the X4 Bars start to chase. It builds up energy before she makes her entrance." Other attention-getting images including a pile-up of neon bar signs, a series of light-up hearts, a Western town, and a carousel.

Kapoor, who developed the content with his team, says, "Miranda is an amazing songwriter, and the lyrics drive the visuals. We used artists from all over the world, working in all sorts of formats: matte, Unreal Engine, 3D Studio Max. Some of them worked with photos from Miranda's personal collection of Polaroids; every song was treated differently because of the story told by the lyrics." Interestingly, there is no IMAG, a conscious choice, he says. Noting that Lambert connects easily with fans in stadiums and arenas, it was decided that IMAG in the smaller Zappos Theater "would be more of a distraction for her."

Video programmer Nate Files says that imagery is delivered using PRG Mbox units. "Taylor Price, Miranda's touring LD, owns and operates the Mboxes that we use. Brian Jenkins, the lighting programmer, and I laid out the sequences of the cue structures" that link the lighting and video. The screen, he notes, is WinVision 9, a piece of house gear that was installed for Britney Spears' *Piece of Me* residency in 2013. Despite the screen's relative age, Files says, "Its brightness isn't bad."

Files notes that much of the content features matte-painting landscapes with animations layered on top them. "One example is a transition, a desert scene with stars coming out. There's also an image of a small town that comes to life as she mentions everything in it." Such dynamic effects keep things lively even between numbers.

Special effects

Adding to the fun and fizz of the show is a battery of special effects. "Miranda loves flame and pyro," Sutherland says, "but she's never had them on her road tours." He

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adds, laughing, “The effects are pretty punchy.”

“We’re very proud of this one,” says Lawrence Wright, of ER Productions, provider of the show’s special effects. “We’ve really enjoyed working with Miranda and the team, making a tightly timed pyro show; utilizing time code across all effects helps integrate it into the show.”

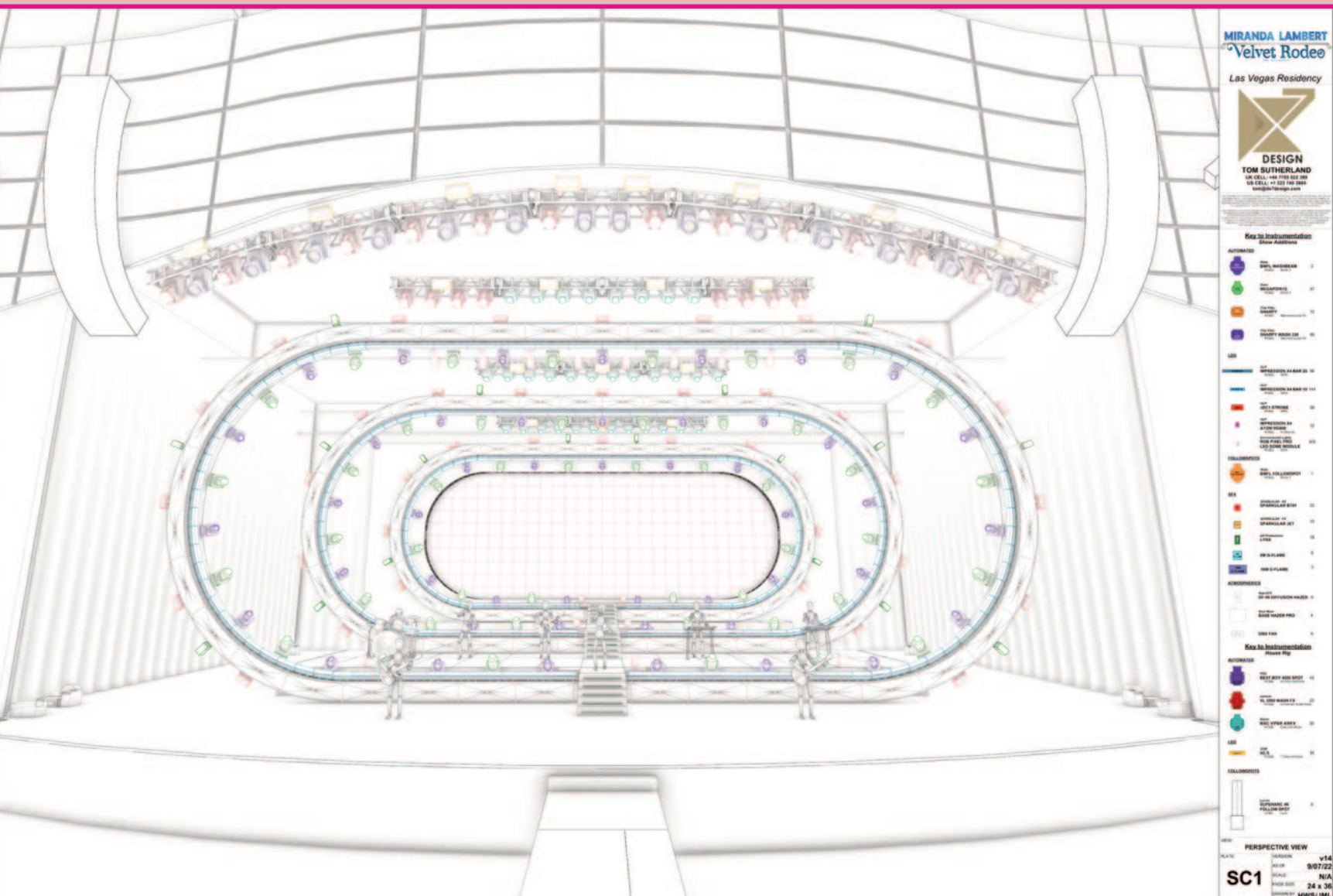
Wright notes that the flame effects are achieved using ER’s Galaxis G-Flames and L-Flames. The former units are propane-based, and the latter (hence the “L”) use a liquid fuel. “The G Flames give you wider, slower flames,” he says. “The L-Flames are poised at 45°, shooting across the stage; they produce a thinner, quicker burst.” The flames are driven by the company’s Galaxis control system.

Also pacing certain numbers are lasers, in this case, ER’s Lynx Diffraction units. “They’re RGB static beam products,” Wright says. “They’re full DMX and they can do

sudden diffractions safely across the audience.” Comets are fired during the number “Little Red Wagon.” “A lot of it is timed to the beat and has a specific meaning,” he says. “We have Sparkular Rainfall units instead of traditional waterfalls, which allow us to do multiple hits in the song. Also, with Sparkular, we don’t have to reload hundreds of pieces of products each day.”

The show ends in an impressive burst of confetti. “We have our Stadium Shots on the catwalks for one big compressed shot that flings masses of it down on the audience,” he says. “We’ve always found that people tend to like storms from confetti blowers, but they make a lot of noise. With the size of these Vegas auditoriums, the Stadium Shots work better; they’re more economical and they use up no CO².”

To coordinate the effects with the rest of the show,



The above drawing shows the distribution of lighting units on the ovals as well as the house gear hung overhead.

Wright says, “I sat down with Raj and Tom. Raj had a good idea of what he would like to see, and when and where. We programmed everything into the console, tested it with the console online, and had the luxury of good rehearsal time, working with Rita Bland, Raj’s associate director, getting all the timings and hits and beats.” He adds, “We’ve worked with Raj on many projects. He’s very detailed and knows what he likes. That makes it so much more pleasurable to do. It helped that Miranda is fantastic. She was super-excited about the effects. We didn’t do it, but she even has a sparkler jacket that she wears, spinning around onstage.” The jacket, from her own clothing line, “Idyllwind,” was the brainchild of her longtime stylist Tiffany Gifford and was made by Tom of Talmon Studio.

Sound

Front-of-house engineer Todd Wines has worked on Lambert’s tours for five years, a level of experience that gives him “an intimate understanding of the details of transforming her records into live performances. If I listen to any artist’s album a lot, I don’t want to be missing key elements of the record production in the live show. Unless it’s the intent of the artist, my goal is to recreate the magic of what made the record special for the concertgoer.” At the same time, he adds, the live experience must be unique.

Drawing on the theatre’s house rig of d&b audiotechnik gear, the main hang consists of fourteen J8s and two J12s per side. “It’s an unusual deployment,” he notes, “in that the J12s are deployed at the top of the array, due to the increasing width of the theatre.” Outfill is delivered by eight V8s per side. Sixteen J-Subs are flown, a center-spaced array four deep by four wide; for Lambert’s show, the two center positions are used and the outside positions are muted. Additionally, four J-Infra and four J-Subs are installed in the stage apron in an alternating array. Front fill is supplied by a Q10 on top of each ground sub. Downfill, usually provided by five V8s flown in the middle of the flown sub array, proved to be unusable because of the runway leading to the B stage.

Supplemental PA gear, supplied by Eighth Day Sound (a Clair company) includes four V8s located outside of the installed sub array for downfill, with six Y10Ps providing spot fill. Wines says, “It was determined during the site survey and early listening in the theatre that the installed front fill would not adequately suit the needs of the audience, considering that the space nearest the stage would be treated as a standing, general-admission area.”

Wines started carrying a DirectOut Prodigy.MP earlier this year to serve as the system front end processor, sitting between his front-of-house console and the PA system. For *Velvet Rodeo*, it handles multi-format distribution, timing, leveling, and equalizing for all of the installed and supplemental speaker zones while providing a rock-solid clock and redundancy.

In working with this rig, Wines says the overall goal is vocal clarity with musical support. “Being able to understand what Miranda is singing and speaking is paramount. If the audience misses out on the lyrics, they will be confused and frustrated.” He adds that the theatre staff “has done a good job of maintaining” the speaker rig. “They have been very accommodating about delivering quality for the benefit of the artist and the audience.”

Lambert uses an sE Electronics V7 MC2 capsule on a Shure Axient Digital transmitter. “We had been using other products until just before the pandemic,” Wines says. “Joshua Hughes, the monitor engineer, and I planned to try a couple of different capsules during a rehearsal. This model was the first. She sang one verse and chorus and paused to say with astonishment, ‘I like this!’ She never says anything about the gear, so that was a marker for us. The V7 has been pretty great for us. She is a super-consistent singer who rarely sings off-axis, which allows us to take advantage of the V7’s tighter pattern: With drums being pushed off center to create more distance to help us with cymbal bleed and snare drum cancellation, the benefits are multiplied by mic’s hyper-cardioid pattern (er, rejection).” He adds. “The V7 is affordable and readily available; we can even get it off Amazon if we need to.”

The show is mixed on the Yamaha Rivage PM10 console. “It’s part of our standard tour package,” Wines says, “to the point that if we go abroad and we’re not carrying it, we spec it. Sonically, you’d be hard-pressed to find something superior.” He adds, “Part of it, for me, also, is the support. I’ve used the platform for years and have a really tight relationship with the guys in the US who support this platform. It’s part of what continues the passion I have for it. It’s pretty cool to say, ‘I need this feature’ and find out that they’re actually listening when the feature is revealed in firmware updates.”

In terms of outboard processing gear, Wines says, “I’ve been using the [Universal Audio] UAD-2 Live Rack for the past few years. I’m a huge fan of Sonnox plug-ins, especially Inflator and Oxford Dynamic EQ. I am also using multiple instances of Distressor and Fatso. Many of us are frustrated that UA stopped supporting that platform; we’re hopeful that they will reintroduce something for professional, live users. Until then, basically, you have to park your system, and nurse it along as best you can.” There are also two beloved Bricasti M7 reverb processors for vocal verbs which are being recalled by QLab via Midi.

The monitor console is also a Yamaha PM10, chosen, says Hughes, “mainly because of its sound and all its onboard effects. I have only a few pieces of outboard gear on Miranda; the rest is on the console.” Among his choices are Rupert Neve’s Shelford Channel and 5045 Primary Source Enhancer, plus the API 2500 Stereo Compressor and Neve Master Bus Processor. Otherwise, Hughes says, “The quality of the inputs is such that she needs only a lit-



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tle bit of shaping.” Hughes adds that Lambert and her seven musicians are on JH Audio Roxanne in-ears and Shure PSM 1000 personal monitors. Band mics include a mix of Shure and DPA on the drums, with the guitars on Universal Audio OX Amp Top Boxes.

“It’s a really dynamic show,” Wines says. “I get to mix it like her albums, with all the featured parts, not a wall of sound, coming at you. There are all sorts of little voices that support her performance—a guitar or steel lick or an organ swell push between her breaths or phrases—then get out of her way. A lot of times, I’m mixing with my eyes half-open to focus more intently on what I’m hearing. Muscle memory plays a big part of it, knowing what faders

are under my fingers without needing to look at them. Her band is so good: We don’t get scripted licks. There will be variations, but it’s good every night!”

“Her music continues to evolve,” Kapoor says. “Sometimes it’s very soft and emotional, like in ‘Bluebird’ or ‘Carousel’ or ‘Tin Man.’ Others are just rocking and explosive and bursting with energy like ‘Little Red Wagon’ and ‘Geraldene.’ It’s really fun to see all her personalities in this show. She is one of the most grounded, most respected, and kind artists out there. She treats her crew and musicians like family and that’s why they’ve been with her so long. The audience feels that love and that’s why the show sounds so good.” 🎵

Photo: Courtesy of Tom Sutherland