

The British  
singing sensation  
tours the States  
with a classy  
design package

By: Sharon Stancavage

# Mr. Smith Comes to America

**He** may be a new face, but the British singer Sam Smith has recently made a big impression on this side of the Atlantic. His album, *In the Lonely Hour*, was the second-best seller of 2014 (behind only Taylor Swift) and, in December, he earned six Grammy nominations. He has just completed his first large US tour—playing venues ranging from theatres to arenas. He didn't win a televised singing competition and he's not dating a celebrity. His popularity is due to something very old-school: his talent.

Production designer Will Potts, who has been with the singer from virtually the beginning, says, "Sam has always exuded a strong sense of modern style and class. This has been carefully managed in the media and press these past few years. It was very important from the outset of the campaign to link the live show with the same sense of public image, personality, and intimacy." On the current tour, the singer performs several of his up-tempo songs, adding the word "fun" to the directives of "intimate" and "class."

For the tour, Potts created a setting for the singer's vocal stylings using layers of drapes and light beams. He explains, "I have a black Kabuki drop to mask up to the top of the show. This reveals my second drop—a printed gauze that really kick starts the Sam Smith style and brand. I use this initially as a flat effect piece, then I gradually reveal Sam right in center of it. Upstage of the band, I have a curved-and-cut cyc to create a silhouette and the illusion of depth. I use a black scenic gauze downstage of this to hide it when it's not in use for the more intimate looks." The soft goods were purchased and manufactured by Sew What?, of Rancho Dominguez, California.

On stage, Sam Smith is joined by 8 – 11 musicians. "I've been layering the band using risers in various formations since our first shows," say Potts. "I moved towards a symmetrical design for this run. It allows the band to really vibe off each other and gives the whole audience a great view of the musicians." There are six risers on stage, constructed by All Access Inc., of Torrance, California, and London-based XL Video; they are 8' x 8' decks, the tallest at 6' each with custom cube framework to allow for seamless video fascias. "I wanted to create something a little more special with these, because the cubes are the only set pieces on stage. I was looking at fascias and found black/white Perspex. It's been used on black shop signs that are lit white at night, and it transmits color well. It's got a really clean and clear gloss to it when it's not lit, and when I dim them right down there's a murky glow that I am really happy with. Using video panels instead of a lighting fixture allowed me to create much more dynamic looks, some with subtle movement," Potts notes. He took his drawings to All Access and XL Video. He continues, "I

requested the XL MC-18 Hybrid product for the fascias. We all sat in a room trying to make everything fit. I watched Gareth [Jeanne, XL's director of international touring] break a sample tile in half to make this work, which is pretty remarkable. Both XL and All Access have done an excellent job working together on this." Potts runs the video he created through a Catalyst V4 media server and a new Mac Pro. "The content was always going to be soft textures and colors, nothing too eye-catching, because the balance between reinforcement and overkill is so fine with this show," he says. "Even in a disco sequence when the band plays CeCe Peniston's 'Finally,' the temptation is to make them change color, but it's just not appropriate."

The final portion of the scenic puzzle is a 17' X-lift that is used in larger venues to make the star appear on stage at the opening of the show. "The X-Lift is a telescopic version of a ribbon lift developed by All Access. I moved to the X-Lift as I had heard about ribbon lift failures," the designer notes. The lift is eliminated during the B version of the production, which plays in theatres. Potts explains, "When we go into theatres, it's a case of squeezing as much in as we can and removing the right elements to suit the space. I am from a theatre background, so I feel very at home in these spaces." He adds, "I have to mention the amazing work and commitment by the electrics and video crew including electrics crew chief Andy Mitchinson and production electrician/systems tech Chris Titman. All the guys on the floor are at the front line of my design and make the show what it is—it's a long day and hard work building something curved and bigger than the stage area, sometimes even over the seats."

## Lighting

Potts is the tour's lighting designer, and travels with it as lighting director. Speaking of his design, he says, "I have always found curves to be comfortable and pleasing to look at. Most of the flown trusses are staggered curves opening up into the crowd. I really didn't want this rig to be a wall at the back of the room or even just a roof over the stage. By using PRG [the production's lighting vendor] BAT truss [which is pre-rigged] I was able to create long, curved pieces that 'hug' the audience, and allow the full 180 to feel involved in the lighting."

The workhorse of the lighting rig is the venerable Philips Vari\*Lite VL3000. "I've used them a lot in past and I know exactly what they are capable of," Potts says. "They've got a really great selection of gobos, and not every lamp has three rotating gobo wheels these days." On the back band truss are 20 Clay Paky Sharpy Washes. "They have a very rich color output and have been very reliable," he says. "I am really enjoying whipping them around a bit." Sharpys are also found on the floor upstage. "I needed a sharp beam to cut through the wash and strong background



Potts' color palette frequently dips into CTOs, CTBs, and whites.

colors," he adds.

For lighting the band, Potts uses Clay Paky A.leda B-EYES. He notes, "I needed a really strong LED wash light that could give me a very focused beam to highlight instruments but then give an even wash for more general focus. Most of the time, the band members are only lit from one angle, and I needed it to be very saturated against the cyc."

Above the audience, Potts originally envisioned two chandeliers to engage the audience's peripherals more. "As this part of the design progressed," he says, "I changed the chandeliers into crosses to mimic Sam's trademark earrings. They are the first visual part of the show and a real tease running up to the first Kabuki drop." The crosses are comprised of ten Sharpys and one B-Eye. The lighting gear, facilitated through Roy Hunt at PRG, includes Chroma-Q Color Force 48s, Color Force 72s, PRG Bad Boy spots, and numerous four-cell and two-cell molefays.

Potts has addressed the design brief of "class" through

the restrained and thoughtful use of color. "Sam is quite intuitive with his color feedback with me; we went with lots of CTOs and CTBs, and they keep it looking refined," he says. "I tend to go deeper on the big tracks and then anything in between is generally a shade of CTO or white. I've really relished working within a fairly limited palette."

Lighting is controlled on an MA Lighting grandMA2; it is Potts' first time out with the console. He moved to it for show file stability and programming feedback. "Making the leap is one of the most stressful things I've ever done, but it's been really rewarding at the same time," he says.

## Video

The production's IMAG is handled by director Jon Shrimpton. "In rehearsals, we had the mixes going straight through the HD system to the screens, and it was too squeaky-clean; it was annoying me," he admits. That feeling brought Shrimpton to use three Barco Folsom ImagePRO-II video scalars. "I wanted something quite cinematic, to go with lighting and the vibe of show," he





The left and right LED portrait screens only feature effected IMAG.

says. "I use the ImagePros to grade the contrast, gamma, color balance, and add a film-flicker effect.

"We didn't have a camera package for the first two shows, in Atlanta and Nashville, so I could go to the front and watch the show," Shrimpton adds. That front-of-house view revealed the show's pacing, which he wanted to match in his direction. "I've done a lot of bands where the screen cuts are quite frenetic but, on this, there are a lot of times where I've got one camera live for the whole song. There are times when he's just standing, and you think, I should do something more, but it doesn't need it. Basically, I'm trying to not make it too complicated, and not make it about the video director; you have to



The only scenery on stage consists of video-infused risers, which can change color and play back content.



The lighting gear includes products from Vari-Lite, Clay Paky, Chroma-Q, and PRG.

make it about the artist on stage.”

The left and right IMAG is presented on 20' x 14' portrait F-12 screens from PIXLED, provided by XL. “Having the LED, it’s a different way of working than with projection,” Shrimpton says. “It fits into the show a lot more nicely, and stands as its own light source—unlike projection, where you can get light spill. It’s not crazy-heavy, it’s about 3,000lb a screen, and when you go to black, they completely disappear.”

He adds that there are “two cameras at 45° to the center stage outside in the audience, one at FOH, and robocams on stage for getting reverses.” There are three Sony HXC-100 HD cameras, all with 86x lenses and three Sony BRC-TW-80 robocams [a slightly modified BRC-Z330] on the show. Shrimpton’s switcher is a Blackmagic Design ATEM 2 M/E 4K “The equipment package is quite straight forward, looks nice, and it suits this show very well,” he concludes.

## Sound

Audio engineer Simon Thomas says, “I did Sam’s first live solo US show in New York, which was in 2013, at the Mercury Lounge. Sam came on stage, he started to sing, and I said, ‘Wow. This guy is going to make it’.”

For the current tour, Thomas has a Clair Brothers i-5 PA supplied by Clair Global, of Lititz, Pennsylvania. “You require global support and therefore you don’t really have a lot of choices,” he says of his choice of gear vendor. “We’ve split the bid—we use Clair in America and beyond, and Britannia Row in the UK and Europe.”

The i-5 is new to Thomas: “I’ve worked on i-4s; fundamentally, it’s the same in looks, but it’s not the same internally. There was a learning curve.” For this tour, there are two main hangs of fourteen i-5s and 14 i-5Bs, with additional hangs of eight i-5s per side.

Thomas also says, “We’re using the new CP-218s which are really good.” The CP-218 is Clair’s newest entry into the subwoofer market. “What I like is you don’t need lots of them to get the results you need. We’re only using



Potts scales the production up or down, depending on the specific venue.

six per side in cardioid mode, which is great. It keeps the stage nice and clean, and they are really good, punchy-sounding boxes,” Thomas remarks. The subs are so responsive that he had to turn them down 10dB. “They are still relatively new, and you can tailor them to your uses. Sam is not all about huge amounts of rumbling, crazy bottom end; we want a very tight kind of sound and there’s enough energy and power in the box to allow you to do that. You can play around with the crossovers and tighten them up to your taste, basically.”

CP-218s have been gaining popularity, and Thomas has this to tell other sound engineers: “Do listen to what they’re telling you. If you don’t, you’re going to have problems, because you’re going to take too many subs on tour.”

At the front of house, Thomas runs the show using a DiGiCo SD10 console. He says, “With the nature of a show like this, where you’ve got pianos coming on and off, blackouts and all sorts of things and you’re in an arena, suddenly you start to realize the benefits of your digital

console.” The SD10 has been “really good and very stable,” he adds.

Thomas hasn’t left his analog past behind, however. “All of Sam’s vocal chain is analog,” he says. “From Sam’s radio mic, we run an analog line down our multicore into a pre-amp,” which is a Focusrite ISA Two. “Their ISA products are excellent. They are very stable, they sound really good—they’re not the most expensive ones but they’re not the cheapest ones. But they have some features on them that are very useful.”

Thomas also makes use of a variety of outboard gear: two Empirical Labs’ EL8-X Distressors, two Neve 9098 EQs, a TC Electronic TC 2290 delay, TC 6000 reverb, and two BSS 901 Mark 2s. “The BSS DPR-901 is a four-band parametric dynamic equalizer, which means that basically you’ve got frequency-selective compression,” he says. “I also have a Crane Song STC-8—that’s a high-end compressor limiter that I have inserted across my left and right of the system. It doesn’t color anything but just kind of pulls the mix right in.” When asked about his choice in



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outboard gear, Thomas has a simple reply. "Much of it is simply taste. It's just bringing in a different picture."

For Sam Smith, who might be termed a vocalist's vocalist, Thomas was very particular about his choice of microphone. "We needed something that would cover the whole frequency range of his voice. We went through various microphones, and both myself and the team working together all thought that was the best-sounding one," Thomas explains, referring to the Sennheiser 965 radio mic with 2000 Series transmitter on a 3732-II receiver. "For Sam, it's a good choice because, at the end of the day, we have a premium vocal and we need to use it with a premium microphone," he adds. The backing vocalists are on Sennheiser 5235s, with the same receivers as the star plus 5000 Series transmitters.

Thomas ran into a bit of a conundrum with his tom mics. He was on an Audio-Technica ATM 35, which was perfect for him; unfortunately, it was discontinued a while ago and replaced by the ATM 350. Eventually, he managed to source mics, but they sounded...different, because they had different power modules. "I rang up A-T and said, 'I

think I know why this mic sounds like this. Have you got any of the old modules left?' They went away and bench-tested them. They sent me the AT 350s with the old AT 8532 modules; we've put them together and created the same microphone, more or less. They're on my toms; they're very discreet, they're small, they are out of the way, and they just work," he concludes.

Thomas also has an interesting microphone on his ride cymbal, an instrument that can sometimes get lost in the mix: "There is a company called Lewitt, and they make some amazingly beautiful microphones that sound fantastic. We have some things from them, in particular we've been using the LCT550s, which is the first 0db (A) self-noise microphone. It's an amazing microphone." He also has Shure KSM137s for the underheads, an AKG C451 B for the high-hat, and a number of Radial Engineering DIs for bass, guitars, and keys.

Sam Smith wrapped up the first leg of the tour in North America this month; he is currently in Europe, and will move into the Pacific Rim in April. He can also be seen at Rock in Rio USA in Las Vegas in May. 📸



Sam Smith is singing on a Sennheiser 965 radio mic.

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