

Taking it Back, Moving it Forward

By: David Barbour



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The Guess Who's new tour is a blast from the past, yet totally of today

Banger for banger, you can't do much better than The Guess Who's *Takin' It Back Tour*. This is the first time in ages that group founders Randy Bachman and Burton Cummings have performed together, and here they unroll one hit after another, including “American Woman,” “These Eyes,” “No Time,” and “Undun.” If that's not enough, the song list includes numbers from Cummings' solo career and Bachman's group Bachman Turner Overdrive, such as “Takin' Care of Business.” It's a jet-propelled blast

from the past.

And yet, it's an oddly forward-looking entertainment, designed to honor the band then and now, embracing yesterday's concert styles while bringing them up to date. It's the work of Chris Medvitz and the team from Lightswitch, who found a way to embrace the band's history, rendered with 2026 technology.

Medvitz notes this is Lightswitch's first tour with the band. “When we got involved,” he says, “the remit was to do something bigger than what each of them has been doing on his own.”

The initial focus was on media: “They wanted to create an opening video, a celebratory, historical look at the band's heritage, to take the audience back in time. That conversation led to a direction for the whole show.”

The video, Medvitz says, “is a 90-second career retrospective. They had access to a treasure trove of photography and footage, lots of behind-the-scenes stuff. Much of it had never been published, or even seen, before. We conceived a high-energy piece that plays as the band takes the stage, then transitions to them playing live.

All photos: Corey Kelly

It's formatted in three sections. The beginning covers their history in the '60s and how they became a band. They were the house band on a Canadian television variety show for a long time, playing cover songs. In the late '60s, they started recording their own albums, and, going into the '70s, they hit this massive creative stride. We go through that and how they were rediscovered in the '90s on CDs.

"We do a motif in which the video's style progresses with the eras. We have '60s graphics and photography of Winnipeg, where they come from, back then. As we get into the '70s, we take inspiration from their album covers and from some of the more graphical film styles of the era. It's a trip from the mid-'60s to the present; the style, and even the frame rate, changes as we go through it. It culminates in their current logo, then the lights come up, and there they are."

Once this concept was in place, Medvitz says the conversation "went from there into media content for the show." Noting that the video content budget was fairly modest, he adds, "They didn't just want stock clips, so we came up with an emotional visual journey, breaking the show into three acts. For the first act, we do what a lot of bands do, putting up their logo behind them. But, rather than being static, the background and logo-style animations change from song to song. After that, we go into virtual scenery. For example, they do a song inspired by their many appearances on *The Midnight Special* [the NBC concert series that, from 1972-81, aired in the wee hours of Saturday mornings, right after *The Tonight Show*.] We recreated a virtual set to make it look like they were onstage there. We also found Easter eggs from their history: In 1972, they did a tour with a stylized Canadian flag as their backdrop; we recreated that." Another bit of virtual scenery recalls the band's appearance on the ABC series *The Johnny Cash Show*. "We always wanted to nod to their heritage," the designer notes,



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adding that the concert's middle sequence, which features selections from Bachman and Cumming's solo careers, relies on IMAG.

The video package, supplied by

Solotech, includes two Resolume media servers, running on Apple Mac Minis, one Sony MVS 3000 switcher, five Panasonic AW-UE 150 robotic PTZ cameras, two Sony HXC-100



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cameras, a 17-by-five ROE Visual Carbon CB5 video wall with a T4 touring frame, two 10-by-three ROE CB panels for IMAG, and Brompton SX 40 processors.

Lighting

In terms of the overall stage look, Medvitz says, "We really had to work with the parameters the band set. At Lightswitch, we practice what we call 'pragmatic design.' It's basically the idea that we balance creative ideas with financial objectives and logistical reality. They wanted a show that was flexible enough to play casinos, festivals, sheds, and arenas." At this point, he adds, "The tour's routing hadn't been established. So, they wanted to be as economical as possible. The original hope was that it would fit in two trucks; the idea was that, at a festival or casino, they would use as much of the house system as possible. But they also want-

ed a show that was unique to them and consistent, that didn't feel generic. So, we said, 'What if we design a touring show with things that you typically find in a festival or casino as part of the design?'"

Expanding on the point, Medvitz says, "Most festivals and casinos have a house rig with straight trusses overhead, spotlights, wash lights, blinders, and an upstage video wall that is 16-by-9. We started with that. Then, how to make it work with the creative narrative approach of the media? We wanted something that felt authentic and nostalgic for the audience, yet on a par with what modern audiences are used to seeing. We came up with the idea of lighting pods that look like old, pre-rigged truss PAR cans. The old shows always had six-lamp bars, two of them in a section of truss, hanging in various configurations."

Thus, Medvitz says, "We created light pods with moving LED wash

lights. Then we said, 'For the first third of the show, we're not going to move them or change color live.' All they'll do is dim up or down. We will change color between songs or cues, but never anything that you couldn't do with PAR cans. And we tried to emulate looks from back then."

Describing the classic PAR-can approach, he says, "It would be set up with different colors because there were no color-changing units. We did songs with the colors set like that; we created programming and creative restrictions on ourselves to make the show look like it could have been done in the '80s." For example, "We said, 'The blinders are never going to be anything other than warm white until halfway through the show, because color-changing blinders didn't exist back then.' We also said, 'For the first two-thirds of the show, no zero-count fade times; everything has to dim up and down the way incandescent fix-

tures would'." In the same spirit, "The set is very basic, a couple of risers and some soft goods that help fill out the backdrop. Otherwise, it's mostly backline on the stage."

For the show's final third, Medvitz says, "We relax all the rules and go full tilt with the rig." This approach "helped create this progression. We're always looking at new things, and the rig is revealing more and more of what it can do. It stays fresh through almost a two-hour set."

The tour, supplied by Christie Lites, is heavily based on Martin gear. "We're using Aura PXL fixtures for the pods," Medvitz says. "For a couple of casino one-offs, we had Robe Spiiders instead, but we could really have any medium-sized RGBW wash light." This was the kind of flexibility everyone had in mind. "We built the show in the winter," he adds. "But we had these one-off casino dates, so we used the house rig and video, bringing in the pods, which we sourced locally, as a floor package. The tour ended up being mostly arenas and sheds, so we ended up carrying the whole rig, or most of it. They wanted it to fit into two trucks. It fits into four and a half. When we realized where we were headed, we said, 'This is going to be bigger than you originally wanted in terms of trucks and costs. Do you want us to pivot?' They said, 'Nope. We like the direction you're going in'."

The lighting is often designed in tandem with the video. For example, the Bachman Turner Overdrive number, "Takin' Care of Business," starts with a flurry of kinetic white cues, then transitions to a fast-moving series of saturated looks. "That came out of the media content," Medvitz says. "It has a kind of glitchy video look, and it's mostly in black and white. But then the image starts to slip, and you see the separation of red, green, and blue layers. We pull that idea into the lighting as well. Up until then, we are reluctant to do everything you can do with a modern lighting rig. Today, you can do really vibrant, saturated red, blue,



The tour, supplied by Christie Lites, is heavily based on Martin gear, with significant contributions from ACME Lighting and GLP.

and green, snapping between them very fast. But, keeping with the show's context, we haven't done anything like that up to this point."

One product not previously covered extensively in these pages is the Martin MAC Aura Raven XIP. "It's an extra-large LED wash light that we used in the layer of truss above everything else," Medvitz says. "We also have them on a front-of-house truss doing a stage wash for the rest of the band. It's a great light; it's very bright, and the color saturation is really great." He notes that he didn't take advantage of the unit's pixelated back-light effect "because, again, we were trying to keep that heritage feel. But the Ravens look really seamless with the MAC Aura PXLs and Aura XBs," which are also in the rig.

Running the numbers, the Martin gear includes 84 MAC Aura PXLs, 32 MAC Aura Raven XIPs, 29 MAC Ultra Performances, eight MAC Aura XBs, and six MAC Viper XIPs. Also featured are 56 ACME Lighting Ultra Blinder

IPs, 12 GLP Wildbar 16s, four Look Solutions hazers, and four Martin Jem AF-1 fans. The rig features a combination of Christie and Tyler truss with Liftket motors, Skjonberg motor controls, and Broadweigh load cells.

Control is handled via two MA Lighting grandMA3 full-size consoles. "Alyx Jacobs, the associate lighting designer, programmed the show, extensively using the MA3 software's Recipes tool," Medvitz says. "It adds a lot of work to the programming process but, when you go into a new venue, whether a festival or casino, the show adapts to whatever the rig is. We don't have any timecode because there's no click track. The band plays the show live off monitors. There are no background tracks on Pro Tools or anything. It's just the seven guys onstage, and that's it. Some of the guys don't even have in-ear monitors."

This contributes to the show's appeal, Medvitz argues. "It's old-school, and it's kind of great because even people who are unfamiliar with



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the music see that they're having so much fun onstage. They see these guys are playing live and having a blast. It's stressful for lighting and media director James Spilsbury; it means he has to run everything and punch every 'go' button manually." This is the spontaneity that gives the show its kick.

Medvitz adds that the fun extended to the creative process. "It was a blast trying to recreate these different looks

from different times in concert touring. We looked at a lot of historical videos, concert films, pictures from the '80s, trying to make every song feel different. The audience probably doesn't notice this, but hopefully it makes them feel like they're living in a show from the past, but which holds its own compared to what you'd see from any other artist these days."

The *Takin' It Back Tour* ends on August 25 in Victoria, Canada. 🎸

Takin' It Back Tour

Show Designer: Chris Medvitz
Associate Lighting Designer/Programmer: Alyx Jacobs
Lighting Director/Media Operator: James Spilsbury
Media Design/Production: Orrin Zucker
Production Coordinator: Ian Borak
Production Assistant: Giuliana Mancini
Stage Manager: Micheal "Scooch" Pascucci
Lighting Crew Chief: Alfonz Micallef
L2s: Samantha McCamon, Veronica Ann (Ryder) Wiedl
LV/V2: William Robinson
Dimmer Tech: Joshua Gehman
Director/Switcher: Pippa Bagley
Camera Lead/LED Tech: Mario Larravide
LED Tech: Sylvain Henroit
Suppliers
Lighting/Rigging: Christie Lites
Video: Solotech