

THE MAN ON THE SCREEN

Tim McGraw's *Standing Room Only Tour* features a sophisticated mix of design elements

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"Only a few artists in country music could get away with calling their tour *Standing Room Only*, knowing that each night they're sure to play to a packed house even when they visit NHL and NBA arenas," writes Owen R. Smith in the *Seattle Times*. And, sure enough, Tim McGraw's return to big-time touring is packing them in. The show recaps

it that you get to see a legend of the game still healthy and happy 30 years after his first hit album debuted?"

The big screen

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Left and above: Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the *Standing Room Only Tour* is the enormous screen that horizontally bisects the stage. Much of the time, only McGraw appears in front of it; his band remains upstage, revealed at moments when the screen is backlit. ImageSFX supplied the extensive laser package.

the highlights of the singer's three-decade-long career with a song list that includes his greatest hits plus a cover of Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," his collaboration with Nelly on "Over and Over," and a video montage featuring Taylor Swift, who, in an earlier era, opened for McGraw. Clearly, it's more eclectic than the typical country show.

It's also entirely up to the minute, featuring arguably what is the biggest video element ever seen in a McGraw tour, framed by an elegant scenic concept, lively lighting, and rock-solid sound. The result, by all accounts, has been mass fan satisfaction. "After all," adds Smith, "how often is

the stage. Much of the time, only McGraw appears in front of it; his band remains upstage, revealed at moments when the screen is backlit. Jeremy Lloyd, the production designer, says the concept came out of early talks with the star and his team. "They wanted something new, something they hadn't done before," says Lloyd, who last appeared in these pages in our coverage of Ed Sheeran's *Mathematics Tour*. (Other clients serviced by his firm, Wonder Works, include Roger Waters, The Rolling Stones, and Genesis; Lloyd was also involved with the popular London-based attraction *ABBA Voyage*.)

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Video was a high priority from the outset. “Tim had seen other shows that we’d been involved in, and he liked the fact that the lighting and video were very much integrated,” Lloyd says. “We’ve been working with ROE [Visual] screen product, and we thought, why not use that to give more depth overall to the design? Having the ability to light through the screen was a big part of that.” The screen consists of ROE’s Vanish V8T, which, with its high transparency, was ideal for this application.

The video is especially striking for how live footage of McGraw is feathered into the content produced for the show. “We’ve done it in other shows,” Lloyd says, adding, “I brought onboard Mark Cuniffe to work with us as creative director and also to do screen content. We’ve worked together on other projects; I knew [the video integration] was something Tim would like.”

Indeed, when Cuniffe came on board, he made it clear that a traditional concert arrangement, with IMAG at left and right and content on a center screen, held little interest for him. “I loathe it with a vengeance,” he adds. At many concerts, he adds, “Go back ten or 15 rows; everybody is looking left and right because they can’t see the artist. I said, ‘I want to put you inside the content.’ He didn’t really understand that at first. When I told him, ‘The nuts and bolts of the creative should be between the PA, he naturally got it straightaway.”

When creating the content, Cuniffe says, “We came up with a palette created for each individual track,” then

devised a method in which the captured footage of McGraw became part of the overall video picture. (See photos on pages 29 and 30.) “We use a process called Notch Background Removal, which allows us to put the content into different parts. It is a fabulous piece of software. It’s not perfect by any stretch of the imagination but it does background removal. We work constantly with it to make everything look a little bit more flattering. It lends itself to strong textures in ‘Real Good Man.’ It works fabulously with him appearing and disappearing and it feels really live. It’s not polished TV content. It’s constantly evolving, and I love it.”

Basically, Cuniffe says, “We take the camera feed straight in the disguise media server. At that point, we take the background off, we cut Tim out live, and put him back onto the screen. If you were doing a straight shot of him, all you would see behind him would be a big lump of light, which has no graphic reason to be there other than it is the show’s background.” Integrating the star into screen content means “your canvas is the full width of the screen,” allowing for some eye-grabbing Panavision looks. The technology “is still very much in its infancy,” he adds. “I couldn’t have done it three years ago. I just managed to get it into Ed [Sheeran’s] show; that is not as clinical as what we’re doing here because it’s two-and-a-half years later and technology has moved on.” The media server is a disguise gx 3. “It’s the only one we would consider because it takes advantage of the latest graphics cards





Above: Cuniffe uses the Notch Background Removal tool to interpolate live imagery of McGraw into the created video content. Opposite: A key challenge involves keeping McGraw well-illuminated even in front of the screen. "We're just trying to shoot through all the horsepower," Brannon says. Note the pods that contain much of the lighting rig.

that allow us to do what we're doing." Video content was created by TwoTrucks Productions Ltd.

Because McGraw puts a high priority on fan contact, the stage is designed to thrust out into the audience, with a tiny B stage included. "He wants to feel part of the audience," Lloyd says. "We had quite a few different ideas to get him further into the house but, of course, you just keep killing seats if you go too far. You've got to find a happy balance. We were looking at different metrics where he could move left and right and get out into the audience, but there's a certain point where practicality has to take over. It's got to fit within a hockey dasher or you've got fire lines on either side, all things that have to be considered whilst trying to deliver an interesting creative." A more ambitious plan was abandoned for a single thrust leading to a B stage. The latter is "fairly small and not that far from the main stage but it gets him a bit further into the audience. He sees them on three sides and feels surrounded.

Other elements of the set, which was built by TAIT, include a pantograph staircase, built into the deck, for

McGraw's initial entrance, and tracking video screens that, when added, create panoramic screen looks. (See photos on pages 30 and 31.)

Cuniffe notes that McGraw and his team were remarkably open to new ideas. "We've never really worked together but [lighting designer] Pat Brannon and I come from the same creative spectrum," Cuniffe says. "It's been a real pleasure working with the members of [McGraw's] full-time staff. It was quite an interesting dynamic. You have a couple of limeys walking in and you can imagine that they're all automatically on the back foot. But we said, 'We're just here to help you deliver Tim's life.' It has been a really enjoyable process."

Noting the interplay of lighting and video, Cuniffe adds, "You've got an elaborate content creation budget and quite a large lighting budget. The last thing you want is a show where everything is going on at once. We sat down with Pat, saying, 'Here, let's turn the creative over to the lasers; we'll back off and just embellish it. We don't want to reach that point we're fighting the lighting. I think we came up



Tracking screens come in to create panoramic looks during certain numbers.

with a really nice balance. Tim loves his lighting; for the last track, ‘Live Like We’re Dying,’ we turn the screens off and it becomes his way of saying goodnight to his audience.” Overall, he says, “We’ve built a show that focuses down to him. Wherever you are in the stadium, you’re looking at him even though there’s quite a lot going on behind him. It’s not about looking left and right; it’s about the focal point.”

Lighting

Patrick Brannon, McGraw’s longtime lighting designer, describes his contribution to the tour in relatively modest terms. “Tim wanted it big and rock-and-roll,” he notes. “He’s always been a heavy lighting guy and I’ve been with him for 12 years now. Basically, I watched what Jeremy Lloyd did and I just filled in the blanks. The moving video screen complicated things a bit—it takes motion trusses and it picks up a third of the real estate above the stage—but we worked around it.”

A key challenge involves keeping McGraw well-illuminated even in front of the screen. “We’re just trying to shoot through all the horsepower,” says Brannon, speaking about the bright ROE product. “I’ve got my spotlights at about 115-120 footcandles, warming the color temperature

up to about 4,900. Normally, I run about 70 footcandles, so I’ve almost doubled it here and that’s due to the intensity of the screen. We’ve played with that a lot, finally getting a balance so everything shows up perfect.”

Much of the lighting rig is contained in movable pods, at least one of which comes in right behind McGraw during one number. (“I’ve had to mention it to him several times: ‘Don’t forget about the pods!’” Brannon says, humorously.) He adds, “I get a little crazy with them on ‘Real Good Man.’ We just go berserk with their pan and tilt; in other songs, they go up and down on many different levels. During some guitar solos, three of them go to the sides of the stage, with one over Tim.”

He adds, “It’s a very complicated rig. It took about a month and a half of programming. I spent about three weeks in [the production facility] Rock Litz. But when we put it all together, it was such a breeze. You wouldn’t think it was complicated to look at it. We were all communicating well, especially Mark and me.”

Breaking down the rig, Brannon says, “My big work-horse is the PROTEUS BRUTUS.” He’s referring to the latest big unit from Elation, a moving LED wash light that is also useful for effects. “They make the big, fat, white beams that you see in the show. My gosh, the intensity;

they're freaking bright." Another key unit is the CHAUVET Professional COLORado PXL Curve 12, a pixel-mappable, motorized, IP65-rated RGBW LED batten with individual control of zoom, tilt, and color across 12 independent heads. "They line the thrust and all the pods," he says, adding, "I sent one to TAIT to have custom trays made for them. Philip Mitchell [head of development, live, TAIT] said, 'Dude, this is the coolest damn light I've ever seen'."

In addition, Brannon has 96 Elation PROTEUS RAYZORs on ladders, combined with GLP JDC1 strobes. "On the last tour," he notes, "I used Claypaky Xtylos; you've gotta be careful with them because of their brightness. But I've found that if I put them on the floor, I don't have to worry about them; here, they're shooting up to the roof and they never get close to hitting anybody. To match the power of the Xtylos is a set of Vari-Lite VL10 BeamWashes. Six followspots are used: four Robe RoboSpots and two house units. Lighting is controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA3 console running in 2 mode; Brannon says he expects to migrate to the grandMA3 soon.

Laser provider ImageSFX supplied a team consisting of Tyler Scott, crew chief; Jeff Venix, console operator; and Tom Hart, laser technician, working with four Light Vector 100i Series units, six Kvant Spectrum 33 RGBY units, six audience-scanning Kvant Atom 12 RGB units, and eight

Kvant Spectrum 25 RGB units. Nick Arnold designed and programmed the lasers for the tour.

Some may be surprised by the rock-and-roll style of the production; as it happens, this approach fits solidly with his music, which straddles the line between rock and country. "When Tim first hired me," Brannon says, "He said, 'Are you gonna give me those rock-and-roll lights?' I said, 'Yes sir, if you play those rock-and-roll songs.'"

This is Brannon's tenth year with McGraw; to be sure, he specializes in long-term relationships with his clients. "I did Beyoncé for almost ten years," he says. "I did Bon Jovi for 20 years and Elton John for six years back in the '90s. Also, Bryan Adams for six years. I really like to take care of artists like that. That's what I pride myself on."

Again, Brannon says, the big challenges of lighting the tour have to do with the video. "Matching the screen's horsepower was the big thing." Fortunately, he notes, "Except for the VL10s, I've mostly got LED lights," which means he has plenty of lumens at his disposal. Still, he adds, "We worked the screen's temperature up and down until we got a really happy medium. I think the show now looks perfect from the audience standpoint." The other challenge, he adds, has to do with the Notch-based color treatments of the live video feed. "Because of the special effects, I have to up the temperature of the spots; you



Brannon's workhorses include Elation PROTEUS BRUTUS units and CHAUVET Professional COLORado PXL Curve 12s.

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know, he wears a black hat and it will disappear if you're not careful. So, keying it with the spots is probably the second-biggest challenge."

Audio

Front-of-house engineer Randy Rhodus has also been with McGraw for 18 years. "It's the same story with Tim," he says. "He wants the music to be powerful; it's hard to do that and keep him where he needs to be. But I've been with the organization for quite a while and it's something I just keep working at, finding little tricks to make it happen. Usually, he does a really good job, but when you're on your third of three shows in a row, it gets a little harder."

Rhodus also notes that McGraw loves performing on the thrust and B stages, putting himself in front of the speaker rig, a move that can also create engineering challenges. "Earlier in my career, I would fight it. But, you know, the crowd loves it. He likes being out there. I just deal with it. You can't fool physics, no matter what, but I work to get him represented the way he wants to be represented."

The bulk of the tour's loudspeakers consists of Cohesion CO12 boxes from Clair Global. "We have 16 deep on the main hang and 12 deep on the side hang," Rhodus says. "We're flying three subs per side behind the main hang with three subs per side on the ground. It's a

pretty compact little PA and it works very well. We average about 99dB per show, and it'll peak at 102 or 103dB."

Carrying a compact rig has many benefits: "The production manager says it fits in three-quarters of a truck, which is amazing because when I started with Tim, we carried two trucks."

Nevertheless, Rhodus points out, the compact system delivers the power he needs. "I'm a firm believer in taking what you need and no more. A lot of people would take more subs but that's not really what I'm about. I'm looking for low end but not like that. Some people are surprised that we have only six subs per side; I've been on tours that had 22 subs across the front."

And getting that power is important; like Brannon, Rhodus is very conscious of walking the line between country and rock music. "I think that's why I got the job," he notes. "I'm not your typical country mixer. I cut my teeth on rock and roll and I tend to mix it more that way. Lately, I've tried consciously to make the country songs a little more country. But there's definitely a lot of rock elements in Tim's music and I play up to that. And he likes that."

On previous tours, Rhodus mixed on an Avid console; now, however, he has migrated to the Yamaha RIVAGE PM7. "It's a fantastic console. I'm 62 years old and this is probably the last console I'll ever use. I love the way it



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sounds. I love the compactness of it and the little attributes it has.” It is, he adds, perfect for his approach, which has grown more streamlined over the years, relying less and less on processing. “I don’t use a lot of stuff anymore. I’m basically using the console, [TC Electronic] TC 1128 1/3-octave EQs, and an API 2500 [compressor]. It’s really working well for me and I’m enjoying the console.”

Again, simplicity is the key for Rhodus. “I like the PM7 because it has everything onboard. You don’t have to have a front-of-house rack. It’s a lot like the old PM5 in that it is all self-contained. You need a couple of stage racks, some fiber, and you’re good to go.” He adds that, compared to other consoles, the Yamaha wins the reliability stakes.

McGraw performs with a Shure Axient mic fitted with an SM58 capsule. “Robert Miller, our monitor guy, uses an added piece from Shure; it’s a button that lets Tim talk to Robert. It sends his voice down the talkback line instead of the regular line. It works out really great unless he hits it while he’s trying to sing, which has happened a couple of times, but he’s pretty quick about that.”

The Shure pairing “is really good when Tim is standing in front of the PA. It’s a tried-and-true microphone that can get fairly loud in front of a bunch of speakers. I don’t think I’d have as much good luck with using another element.

With a lot of other mics, condensers, and such, you’re gonna get killed in front of the PA. We worked hard to get him on the 58. It was hard with other microphones to get him where he needed to be. The 58 has been around a long time, and you know what to expect from it. As long as he’s happy, that’s what really matters.”

Miller, Rhodus says, mixes monitors on a DiGiCo SD7 Quantum, a new addition for this tour, with a minimum of processing gear aside from a couple of Neve 4054s. Also new is the use of Wisycom in-ears for McGraw and the band. “The band members are raving about them,” he says. “Tim’s raving about their separation and how much better they are than anything they’ve used before.” Changing out an entire system before a tour is a bit of a risk but, Rhodus says, everyone using the Wisycom gear is thrilled with the clarity they provide.

Rhodus notes that placing the musicians behind the ROE Visual screen posed few, if any, problems. “When I first saw the design, I thought, ooh, this might be a challenge. But I was very surprised. Other than the thrust, it’s pretty straightforward. We haven’t had any RF problems with the video screen, which we’ve had in the past.”

The *Standing Room Only Tour* is on the road until June 29, when it plays its final performance in Sacramento. 📶