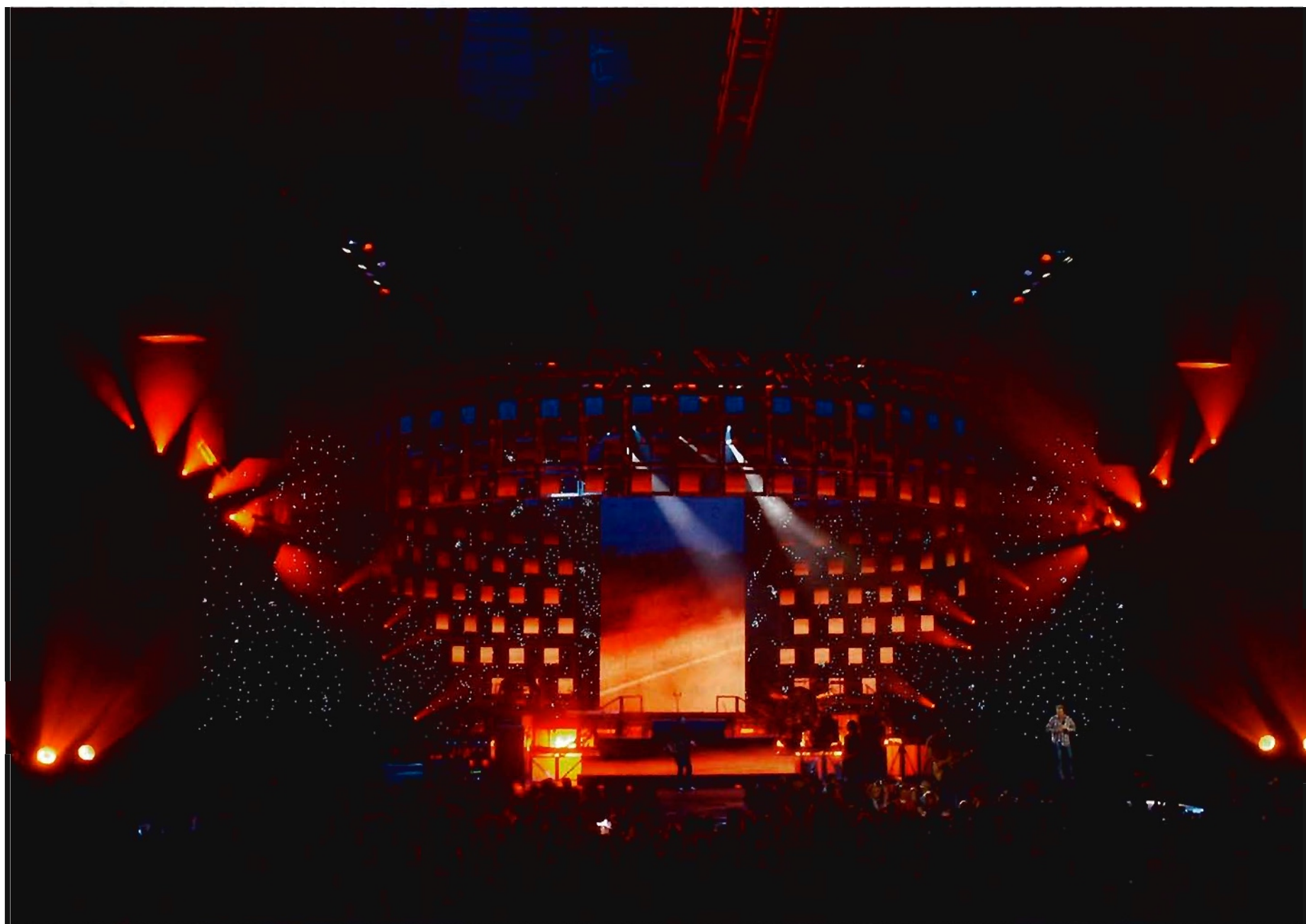


Building The Mothership

Immersed In Video On Rascal Flatts' *Me And My Gang* Tour

By Paul Berliner



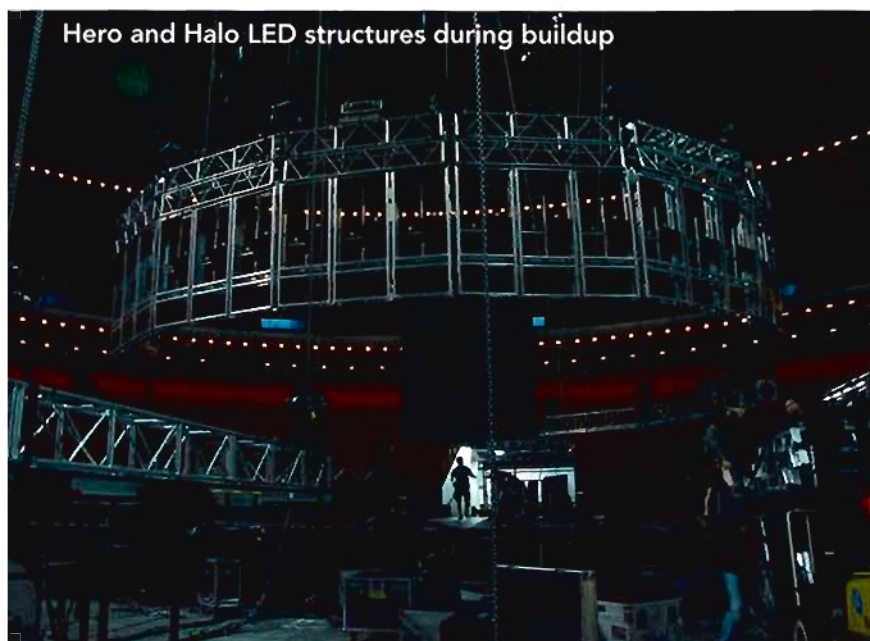
Earlier this spring, I had the opportunity to experience a headlining country band's concert from the crew's perspective, starting with the early morning load-in, all the way to the closing encore. The venue was Orlando's TD Waterhouse Centre, and the band was Rascal Flatts, three weeks into the *Me and My Gang* tour.

The goal was to learn about a creative use of LED video and to discover how a country band grew from using almost no visual reinforcement, to having one of the most visually impressive sets on tour today.

Many "conventional" sets use LEDs, but the screens tend to be flat, with standard landscape aspect ratios. The Rascal Flatts set also employs a flat LED wall, but from that point forward, the set moves well beyond the notion of a level surface. In conjunction with tour producer Turner, Nichols & Associates, the Rascal Flatts creative team—set designer Bruce Rodgers of Tribe Inc., rental and staging company I-MAG Vidco, lighting designer Andy Knighton of Bandit Lites—created a ground-breaking immersive experience that continues to astonish crowds at each concert.

Our idea was to introduce a completely different aspect ratio—something the audience would not be familiar with. In the end, the band went with the most daring of the three ideas.”

—Bruce Rodgers



Hero and Halo LED structures during buildup

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It's the Halo, however, that's unconventional. Dubbed the "Mothership" by the crew, the Halo is comprised of 225 Barco DLite 7 tiles that form a circular crown above the stage. The structure extends around the perimeter yet leaves sufficient room for a lighting truss within.

Using custom frames fabricated by All Access, the DLite tiles are arranged in checkerboard fashion, with tiles spaced 20" apart on both sides of the frames, creating optimum viewing from anywhere in the arena.

Tribal Set Design

Set designer Rodgers of Tribe, Inc. is a highly regarded industry veteran with credits that include Madonna and Sting. "I did the set for Rascal Flatts last year," says Rodgers, "but this year, when Trey Turner and Doug Nichols [Rascal Flatts' management team] called, they requested something more creative. Our idea was to introduce a completely different aspect ratio—something that the audience would not be familiar with. We presented three different options, and in the end, the band went with the most daring of the three ideas."

"You've got to realize," continues Rodgers, "that this set is a huge step for the band. Rascal Flatts is the type of group that could perform on a few wooden crates and still entertain the hell out of any audience. So I'm happy that they like to take design risks."

With a cutting-edge concept, Rodgers was keenly aware of the number of trucks required. "Once you get a single riser beyond the back of truck number one, you're into truck two, and those things are expensive. Last year, Rascal Flatts was a five-truck show. This year, it's 10."

Rodgers' decision to use Barco tiles was based on product comparisons that he worked through with Turner. They went with OLite and DLite tiles, which Rodgers describes as "crispy, perfect, and beautiful."

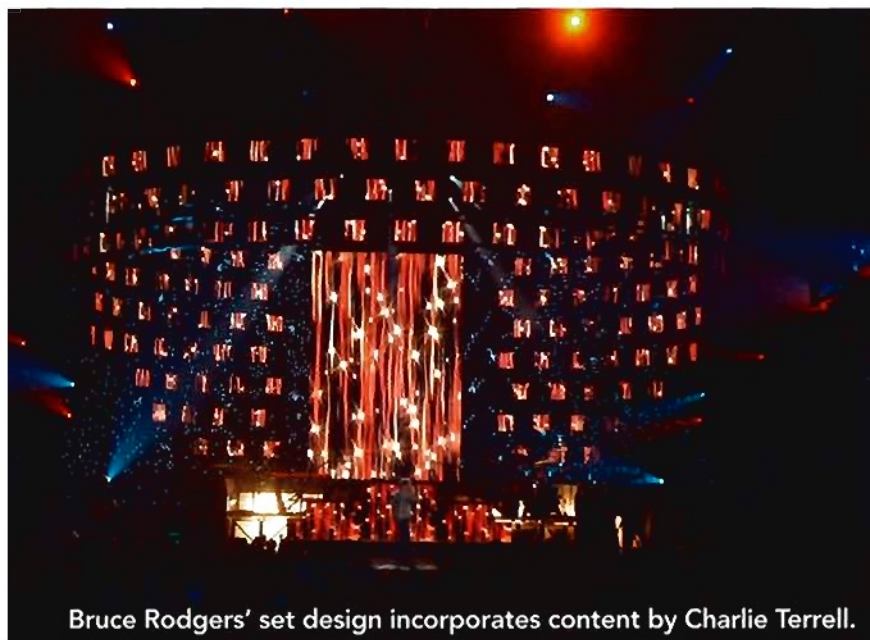
With the stage concept approved, Rodgers needed to realize his ideas for video, and so entered Charlie Terrell of Daddy Van Productions, who created and edited the content. As a musician and songwriter, Terrell has collaborated with Rodgers on many projects, including last year's Rascal Flatts and Reba McEntire tours.

"I don't want people to look at the video; I want them to *feel* the video," says Terrell. "Working from CAD drawings that Bruce provided, we figured out the pixel counts, and we designed special atmospheric content for each song. I wanted the audience to feel like they're part of a movie."

The content continues the concert trend away from standard fare; for instance, live cameras are not used. Instead, a package of pre-produced clips enhances each song with images such as waterfalls, lightning, and abstract geometrics.

"In terms of ideas, we had a lot of freedom to create," continues Terrell. "We used almost all original DV footage and cut it together with Apple Final Cut Pro®. During the editing, I added grain, scratches, and flicker to create a very organic look."

Terrell's initial concerns about displaying video on a huge LED wall were



Bruce Rodgers' set design incorporates content by Charlie Terrell.

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Heroes And Halos

The Rascal Flatts set is comprised of two main video components, the "Hero" and the "Halo." The Hero is a flat LED wall using 50 Barco OLite 510 tiles in a 5x10 array. The wall is positioned at the rear of the stage, with its base precisely aligned with the floor of a raised platform. Directly below, 22 additional tiles frame the "garage," a combination LED wall and door that conceals the piano. From the audience perspective, any musician performing on the platform appears completely suspended in video.



Pre-show setup shows off the many hues of the Hero and "Mothership."

"With this set, no matter where the performers are, you're always seeing a portion of the wall and the video content from any seat during the performance." —Keith Lavoie

alleviated during rehearsals. "People told me to watch black levels and stair-stepping with LED tiles," he says, "but with the Barco tiles, we had none of that. The clarity was great, and there was no need for color correction. It looked exactly like it looked on my edit monitor."

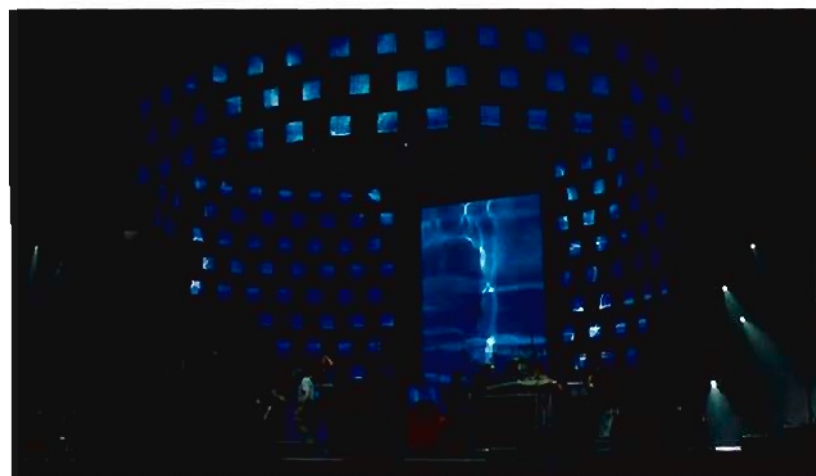
The Mother Of All Tours

I-MAG is the first North American video touring company to use Barco's DLite 7, ILite 6—and now the OLite—on country tours, according to owner Steve Daniels. "We've worked with Rascal Flatts before, and we've also helped to make Bruce's designs come true. We have Barco LEDs on four tours right now, including Rascal Flatts," he says.

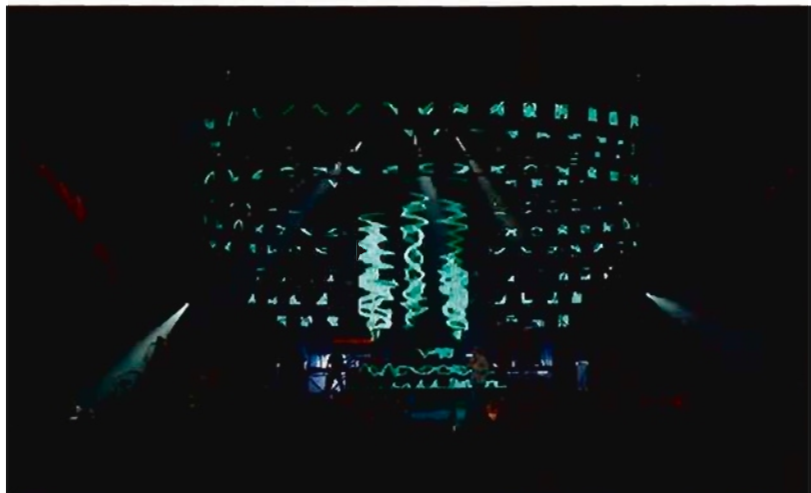
I-MAG also played a key role in designing the Halo as a multi-use structure. "The Halo is so big," says Daniels, "that in order to play in different size markets, we needed A, B, and C versions of the set. At smaller venues, you simply can't hang as much from the beams."

Chris Alderman, the tour's production manager, orchestrates the setup once the trucks pull in. His biggest challenge is going to different buildings each week, and with 65,000lbs in the air, suspended from 96 rigging points, it's a major responsibility.

"The best thing about this crew," says Alderman, "is that we have groups of individuals that help each other. It's a very cohesive team." Alderman has seen the band evolve from no video on the first tour, to a 40'-wide Barco LED



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screen on last year's tour, to the immense Hero and Halo set. "One of the best concepts of this design is that they took sight lines into consideration. The view's great from all sides," he adds.

With Terrell's clips in hand, the tour's video director, Keith Lavoie of I-MAG, controls all playback to the walls from two equipment racks. One SDI stream feeds the Halo and one feeds the Hero via two Barco-Folsom ImagePRO processors.

"With each concert, a lot of highly talented people collaborate to make this spaceship take off," says Lavoie. "Bruce did a great job, and personally, I think it's the coolest country tour out there because of the way that lighting and video go together. With this set, no matter where the performers are, you're always seeing a portion of the wall and the video content from any seat during the performance."



LD Andy Knighton used the void in the center of the Mothership to light the band.

Lighting The Ship

Because the LED wall can be so visually overpowering in terms of luminance, Lavoie actually brought the levels down to complement the lighting.

Enter Andy Knighton of Bandit Lites. As lighting designer, director, and operator, he wears many hats for this tour. "When Bruce presented the design, I said, 'Wow, where am I going to put a light rig?'" Knighton says. "And, I was also worried that I didn't have enough horsepower to compete with the video. In the end, the void in the middle of the Mothership allowed me to light the band, and I was also able to frame in the video walls with different focus positions."

For the overall design, Knighton uses 32 Vari-Lite VL3000™ Spot fixtures, 28 MAC 2000 Performance units, six Martin MAC 2000 Washes, and six Syncrolite™ SX3K units. "Keith and I worked closely together to balance the

levels," says Knighton. "He understands that his LED wall can compete with the sun, so he matched his horsepower to mine. It's the whole concept of the Rascal Flatts crew—teamwork is rule one."

With this circular set providing such an immersive experience, producer Doug Nichols suggests that the Halo could be a springboard for future designs. "One factor may determine that," he says. "We're looking at designing a stage that can play at the end of the arena or possibly move to the middle. If the stage was movable or even circular, that could translate into additional tickets. This set gets you thinking in a circular format."

Fans interested in experiencing the full immersion of the Rascal Flatts tour can see them throughout the US this summer and into September. **LD**

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