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# Video as Lighting:

## Mixing Media for Reba McEntire

by Paul Berliner

In this age of mega-concerts, with 18,000-seat arenas at full capacity, towering arrays of audio speakers putting out unimaginable sound levels, and performers that look like they're miles away, there's something to be said for an intimate concert venue. Imagine a small theatre...

The artist in question is Reba McEntire, and the venue is the Las Vegas Hilton Theatre, a delightfully small room that was once home to Elvis and is now Barry Manilow's current digs. It is the perfect setting for Reba's *Key to the Heart* concert series, an exclusive 28-show engagement presented by Whirlpool to benefit Habitat for Humanity.

In conjunction with Nashville-based IMAG Video, Starstruck Entertainment Inc., McEntire's production company, selected an array of video and lighting gear to outfit the Hilton Theatre's stage, including Barco MiPIX and iLite6 XP LED tiles, Barco SLM G8 projectors and light fixtures provided by Martin and Vari-Lite. To fit the stage, the equipment list is significantly scaled down from McEntire's 2005 tour.

Reba's set designer, Bruce Rodgers of Tribe Design, created an elegant set that the show's lighting director could literally "paint" with video. On the multi-tiered risers, thousands of Barco MiPIX LED blocks are used as the front fascia, and mounted behind plastic diffusion panels for a soft-focus look. By using the small 4 x 4cm MiPIX blocks, Rodgers easily filled the non-rectangular structure with LEDs.

Electronically, the MiPIX blocks were divided into three zones: stairs, top fascia, and bottom fascia. Video was routed to each zone from three Martin Maxedia Digital Media Composers, using three Barco Folsom ImagePROs to convert the output to SDI. In terms of "texturing" McEntire's songs, the combination of MiPIX and Maxedia provided an almost

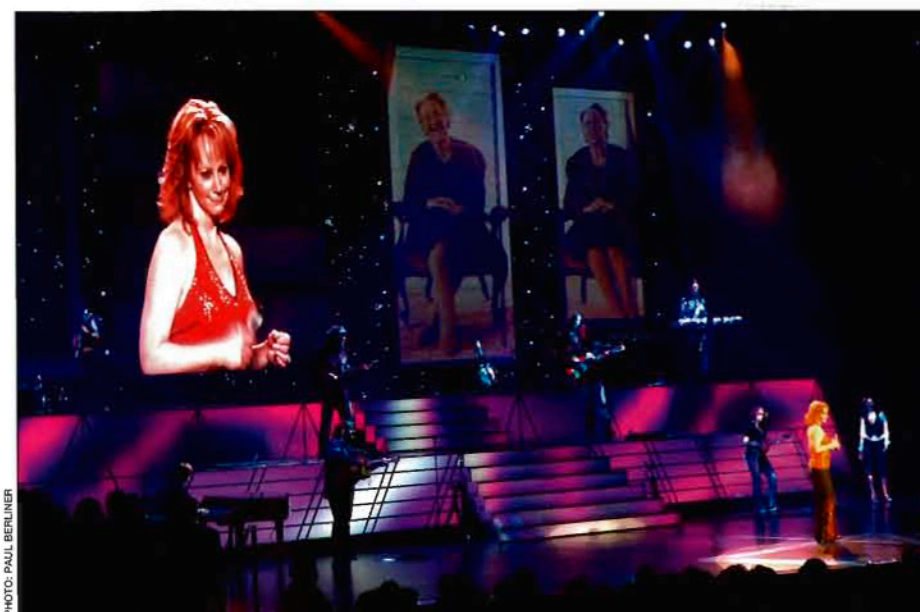


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unlimited creative palette.

Above the top riser, 120 Barco iLite XP LED tiles formed a 15 x 18' video wall, used throughout the performance for live IMAG and B-roll. The latter content was created by Brandon and Charlie Terrell of Daddy Van Productions, the team that created video for Rascal Flatts' *Me and My Gang* tour.

Above the audience, two double-stacked pairs of Barco SLM G8 projectors shined content onto the set's four louvered panels—each of which could rotate 180°, with fully controllable shutters and a surrounding array of Vari-Lite VL6 fixtures. Designed by Peter Morse and constructed by Tait Towers, the panels were almost invisible when perpendicular to the audience but, when parallel, they added four projection surfaces to the design.

Mark Fleming was the show's head carpenter, and he worked the panels during the performance. "Michael Tait devised the motorized systems for the louvers," said Fleming, "with the larger pair weighing in at 1,100lbs. each, and

the smaller pair at about 850lbs," he said.

"It's not unusual to have moving elements on a set, but these are extremely creative—closed for the projection to appear, semi-invisible, or fully open to reveal the LED curtain and backlights."

All video switching was performed on a Ross Synergy 2 digital switcher, which took SDI feeds from two showroom cameras, three POV cameras, Doremi servers, and the Maxedias. The Synergy's program output is routed to the iLite screen, while dedicated aux outputs feed video to the three MiPIX zones, and projected content to the louvered panels.

Bruce Green, the show's video director, is an independent contractor whose credits include performances by Whitney Houston, Eric Clapton, and Hilary Duff. "Reba's show is a nice amalgamation of lighting, video, IMAG, and playback," he says. "With Maxedia video routed to the MiPIX, IMAG to the LED wall and projection to the louvers, it all comes together as a superb blend of media."

Surrounding the entire set were over 200 Martin MAC units, controlled by two



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Left: The camera is routed to the LED wall, the Maxedia is routed to the MiPIX, and the louvered panels are perpendicular to the audience. Above: In "guitar city" under the risers, MiPIX blocs are connected via ribbon cable,

Maxxyz lighting consoles. Both consoles were connected via MIDI interface, with one dedicated to the three Maxedia computers.

"I've worked with Barco equipment since the early '90s," said Gayle Hase, the show's lighting director, "but this is my first time dealing with MiPIX. In fact, with the Maxedias as the sources, I'm treating the MiPIX as lighting elements, and controlling them just like the light fixtures, cues, and all. The programming is performed at each [Maxedia] GUI, but once the content is established, the desk treats the MiPIX just like lighting."

"To me, this is video as lighting," added Hase, "but it's also added another dimension to the show programming. We realized that, every time we did a lighting cue, we had to check what the MiPIX and the Maxedia were doing—as a vital part of the set's texture. Visually, it's amazing, but it's a little more labor-intensive."

One of the endearing things about country music is that each song tells a story. With the right video and lighting equipment in place, the impact on the audience can be perfect.

Narvel Blackstock is Starstruck Entertainment's CEO, Reba's husband, and the creative glue behind the entire production. "We've always tried to create a show that puts the music first," he says. "We spend at least three weeks putting a 90-minute show together. We storyboard each song, we look closely at the overall content when the band is in rehearsal, and then we bring in Reba to get her acclimated to what's happening around her. Especially with the MiPIX and the Maxedia, it's not enough to rent it and put it up on stage. With these creative tools, we have to be both artists and technicians to fully integrate it."

Green adds, "When I walk out of the theatre and ride up in the elevator, I hear people talking about the show. They have no idea that I work for Reba, but you hear a lot of really positive comments, and that's a real treat, to be part of this experience." Lighting was supplied by PRG. The LED curtain was by Perry Scenic UK. ☺

Paul Berliner is President of Berliner Productions in Davis, California, a company providing video production and marcom services to the broadcast and entertainment industries. He can be reached at paul@berlinerproductions.com.