



Opposite: Parton played to a packed venue when her *Better Day* tour came to London's O2. Below: The recent string of shows featured a larger lighting rig and greater video element than previous productions; The sequin-clad star of country music gave fans a trip down memory lane, singing hit after hit.



GLITZ, GLAMOUR AND THE QUEEN OF COUNTRY

IT TAKES AN ACT WITH GREAT STAGE PRESENCE, A PHENOMENAL VOCAL AND FAULTLESS PRODUCTION TO PUT ON AN UNFORGETTABLE PERFORMANCE AT ONE OF THE UK'S LARGEST INDOOR ARENAS. TPI'S ZOE MUTTER LOOKED AT HOW COUNTRY SINGING SENSATION DOLLY PARTON'S BETTER DAY TOUR WOWED AUDIENCES WHEN IT CAME TO LONDON'S O2.

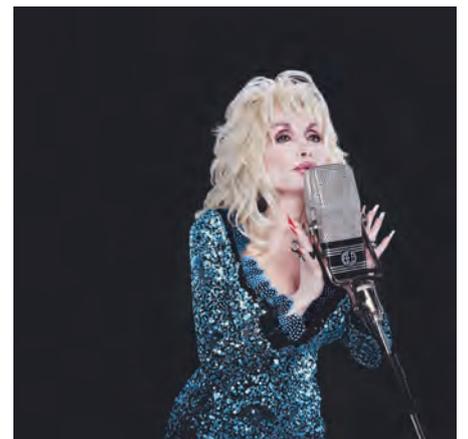
An artist such as Dolly Parton needs no introduction. Known worldwide as the Queen of Country, her sweet and note-perfect Southern drawl, extravagant style and equally effervescent personality have made her a global success. So it came as no surprise that when the star played London's O2 Arena for two consecutive nights on the UK leg of the legendary singer-songwriter's tour, fans rushed to get tickets for what was guaranteed to be a night of glitz, energetic entertainment and much-loved hits.

Named after Parton's new album, the *Better Day* world tour is best described as a trip down memory lane with one of the most iconic

stars of country music, explained Production Manager and FOH Engineer, Mike Fechner:

"The concept behind the show is 'an evening with Dolly' in which the audience is invited on a journey through her long career. Although we've had a similar format to this show for about five years now, we always look at what we did before and tweak it to make it better."

Before coming to the UK, *Better Day* toured the US in July, before heading to Europe. Following the O2 performances, the crew will tour elsewhere in the UK and then travel back to the US for another string of shows, before ending the tour in Australia in December. Fechner has been a busy man whilst on tour



Below: Neg Earth supplied the lighting set-up; Graphics and video content were displayed on LMG's 20 ft high by 30 ft wide video wall.



with Parton, taking on two roles within the production team. Originally from Buffalo in New York, he started working in the rock music industry before moving to Nashville 15 years ago. "Prior to working with country artists, I had an equal background in recording and live music. I spent eight years working with Joe Diffie, guest mixed for artists such as Tanya Tucker and then started working with Dolly five years ago," explained Fechner.

GETTING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD

With *Better Day* being the largest production Dolly Parton and her team have ever travelled with, packaging the show into trucks and getting it on the road needed to be thoroughly planned. "We don't carry catering in the US, but in the UK we do, so this was just one factor we had to consider," said Fechner.

Preparations for the tour took place in Nashville, with a month spent rehearsing at the in-house facility of Dolly's management company, CTK Management. The team then set up the audio, lighting and video equipment in a Nashville arena for almost two weeks of further production rehearsals.

Said Monitor Engineer Jason Glass: "I worked on technical specifications and preparing the rig for weeks before the first rehearsal. I was able

to set up a great deal of the internal working of the console at home on a computer, so I could just walk in, pop my data card into the console and I was 75% of the way there."

Once the show moves into each venue, the role of Head Rigger, Skip Bresnahan, and his team is essential to get the build process in motion. "I begin by marking-up and designating the locations on the stage we need to hang chain hoists (supplied by Columbus McKinnon) and lifting devices to pull the lighting trusses in the air," he said.

"Getting the imaging on a large enough scale so the audience can see it in a big arena such as this was important."

Bresnahan's crew normally consists of six riggers working in the ceiling and another three on the ground. The O2's height made it harder to pull lighting trusses the great distance, meaning three teams of five were required for the four-hour build session. Bresnahan emphasised the importance of contacting

venues prior to arriving: "If it is looking like the production will be too heavy to hang in a venue, I'll converse with the appropriate department to see if we can revise the amount of gear and lighten things up."

James Thomas Engineering's Swing Wing has proved invaluable for the show and saved the crew precious time: "The sides of the truss swing down for transport and it has wheels in it, allowing us to leave the lights on the truss and put the sides down to protect the lighting instruments when they are being moved,"

explained Bresnahan.

BIG SCREEN SPECTACLE

Sonically, the *Better Day* tour has been fairly similar to previous shows, explained Fechner. Visual elements, however, played a more prominent role this time around, with a greater

Below: The concept behind the show was 'an evening with Dolly', explained Production Manager/FOH Engineer Mike Fechner.



video element and larger lighting rig. "There is more content to display in this show, whether it be graphics or a music video. Getting the imaging on a large enough scale so the audience can see it in a big arena such as this was important," said Fechner.

This led LMG Visual Designer and Set Designer Ken Gay, Video Engineer Johnny Jordan and Video Director Ryan Stowe to choose LMG's display products. The dimensions of the two truss screens, which were positioned either side of the stage and featured live footage from the show, were 12 ft by 16 ft. For the duration of the first half, 150 of LMG's 18.75mm pixel pitch LED tiles were used to create an upstage video wall that was 20 ft high by 30 ft wide. "The large screen format gave us the chance to show family photos, the house she grew up in and some candid photos from the recent movie shoot," explained Gay.

The opening of the second half comprised a high-energy walk on entrance from Parton. For this, the LED was divided into three surface areas, which were moved using a custom I-track made by Accurate Staging. Said Gay: "The separation revealed lighting fixtures upstage of the screen and allowed the content to be a little

more artistic in nature."

Set designing for the show allowed Gay and his team to experiment with some fun concepts: "We had the opportunity for two opening sequences every night. The first half opening is a subtle slow iconic light level reveal created by the centre upstage LED screen. The silhouette of Dolly Parton playing the fiddle drives the room to their feet every time."

Throughout the production, as a sequin-clad Parton put on an energetic performance, the content displayed on the video wall varied from graphic representations of hits such as '9 to 5' to the music video for Parton's new single. Tennessee-based Rabbit Hole Creative produced video content for the show. The team at Rabbit Hole Creative - Jake Jorgovan and Kevin Fulda, Project Manager Dillon Bock and designers Amanda Scott and Alicia Waters - also worked very closely with Lighting Designer Garrett Rentz, to ensure each song had a cohesive colour scheme across lighting and the video content.

"When we were approached to design content, we were given specific guidelines. Parton's management made it clear the video was meant to aid her live show and not take

attention away from Dolly," said Jake Jorgovan, Co-Founder of Rabbit Hole Creative.

"Since we were limited as to how much movement we could put behind her on the screens, it became evident the design, colours and concepts had to be strong. We had to keep things very simple, and slow moving with the mixture of animated content and video footage. Video was the centerpiece for the introduction of the show and the Dolly reveal. The set started completely dark while Dolly was on stage. We created an animated sunrise that appeared from behind Dolly, silhouetting her to the entire audience."

Said Jordan, who made the transition from working with LED products in corporate events to touring five years ago: "Images on the screens are a focal point and integral to the whole look of the show. For example, during certain songs the video wall is used to create a backdrop of a front porch or the inside of a room."

For Video Director Ryan Stowe, who has worked with some of the biggest names in country music over the past 15 years, going on tour with Dolly Parton had been an ambition of his for some time: "Years ago, a good friend of

Below: Rabbit Hole Creative designed video content that aided Parton's live show, rather than distracting attention away from the singer-songwriter.



mine told me if I ever got the chance to work for Dolly Parton, I should snap it up. When this tour came up, I did exactly that.”

Video that ran on the screens was triggered by the lighting board, with a feed travelling from the lighting desk via Ethernet to the Catalyst media server at the side of the stage. Additionally, two Sony D50 triax cameras and three Sony BRC robotic colour cameras were used to shoot the show; with the footage being displayed using two Panasonic D10000U SXGA/DLP video projectors (10,000 lumens) on the screens either side of the stage.

FILLING THE VENUE WITH SOUND

Even though Dolly Parton has an incredibly powerful vocal, ensuring the sound fills a vast expanse such as the O2 so every Stetson-wearing fan can enjoy the show, is a daunting task for a technical crew working with any artist. Explained Thunder Audio Systems Technician Patrick Johnston: “It certainly takes a lot of speakers to do it. The Meyer Sound MAPP online prediction software for line arrays is one of the best in the industry - it helps me produce a model of the room on the computer and see what will happen if speakers are hung in a certain way.”

Audio equipment for the worldwide tour was supplied by Michigan-based Thunder Audio; with equipment support from Major Tom on the UK leg. When the production travels

to Australia, regional supplies of kit will be put in the hands of hire firm Coda Audio Services. “Thunder is the central figure and handle all of the worldwide sub-hires. We’ve been with the company for years and all the control and consoles come from them,” said Fechner.

“As we provided the same speakers as they use in the US, it was an easy transition into the UK shows,” added Major Tom’s David Vinnicombe.

When touring in all continents, the crew tries to keep the speaker system consistent. Thunder Audio and Major Tom’s complete sound system was made up of a large Meyer Sound rig, with the manufacturer’s Galileo loudspeaker management system controlling the PA. At the

Meyer Sound’s UPA-1P compact wide coverage loudspeakers for front fills. Said Johnston: “The whole rig is designed for maximum clarity everywhere. It’s not so much about volume, but about getting high-end audio to all parts of the room. We aim to ensure Dolly’s voice is clear in every corner and this is just the rig to do that.”

With an arena the size of the O2, the crew needed to use a greater number of speakers, which were broken up so the upper balconies, middle sections, lower bowl and floor were in different sections. “There are separate volume controls for each and you might throw it up a bit in the top zone or dial back a bit for the floor zone - this keeps the sound equal throughout the arena,” added Chapman.

“There’s a lot of storytelling and the spoken voice is critical; especially in a massive arena such as the O2.”

O2, a total of 18 Meyer Sound Milo curvilinear array loudspeakers were used each side for the main hang; along with two Milo 120’s at the bottom. These accompanied Meyer’s Mica loudspeakers for the side hangs, which were positioned 16 per side.

For subwoofers, Johnston and Audio Crew Chief George Chapman opted for 12 Meyer HP-700’s (arranged in six stacks of two) and

CRYSTAL CLEAR AUDIO

Fechner and Glass agree the most technically demanding aspect of the show’s audio was the dialogue, which makes up a large part of the production. “There’s a lot of storytelling and the spoken voice is critical; especially in a massive arena such as the O2. This is what made us choose Meyer equipment,” Fechner explained. “Of all the kit we’ve used, the Meyer

Below: To ensure the O2 arena was filled with sound, a large Meyer Sound rig was used, with the Galileo loudspeaker management system controlling the PA.



products have solved that problem. The music side is pretty straightforward, but the small headsets she uses can make it tricky to get the intelligibility needed so that everybody - all the way up to the furthest seat - can hear her speak."

Choosing the correct microphones and PA system was fundamental in making sure all audio was as clear as possible. For Parton and

Fat Head Live with Lundahl transformer and an Audio-Technica AT4040 were selected as electric guitar mics. For direct boxes, the crew opted for four Radial Engineering JDIs for the keyboards, two Radial Engineering J48's, four L.R. Baggs Para DIs for the acoustic guitar, fiddle, banjo and mandolin, two Fishman Aura DIs on acoustic guitars and a Manley Labs vox box for the bass guitars and upright bass. Utility

frontline of wedges for Parton; alongside two sub mixes for the drummer and bass player. "I chose the PRO 9 console to mix because the sound is incredible. It fits all the specifications I need to mix this many outputs and produce this number of monitor mixes for the large band supporting Dolly," he said.

When mixing FOH, Fechner uses mute groups frequently, but prefers not to use scenes for the *Better Day* tour: "I'm a little old school and I don't think scenes would be relevant for this show. If I was working on a Broadway production, I would be more likely to use them. On Dolly's vocal I run two separate channels, with one specifically EQ'd and treated for the dialogue. When it comes to the music, I'll switch to a channel that is processed more like a record and has effects and processing on it."

According to Fechner, the Midas PRO 6 POP (population) groups is one of its standout features: "I hadn't seen them on other desks. It allows you to block things together and fly them over to one side of the console. For this show, I'm using very few outboard features. I have a couple of my own vintage compressors, other than that, it's all in the desk." The *Better Day* production was multi-track recorded using the Alesis HD24 (24-track hard disk recorder); with a total of 72 tracks recorded at every show.

WORKING WIRELESS WONDERS

Since clean wireless performance can be a

"You have to know the environment and your equipment and the (wireless frequency coordination) package we use now is flawless; I've not had a radio interference failure yet."

the other backing singers, four Countryman Isomax W5 Cardioid were the headsets of choice. Hardwired vocal microphones used on tour included an AEA R44C Studio mic, a Shure KSM9 with OptoGate optical IR noise gate and two Shure Beta 58 drum mics. Over on the kick drum, an Audio-Technica AE2500 mic was placed, with five Audio-Technica AT4021's on overheads for the ride cymbal, hi hat and snare bottom. A total of four Sennheiser e604 mics were positioned to pick up the toms and snare top.

Elsewhere on the production, a Royer R121, Shure SM57, Cascade Microphones

microphones for the show were two Neumann TLM193's, two AKG C414 XLII's and two Audio-Technica AT4050's.

Fechner and Glass also specified the Midas PRO 6 console at FOH and Midas PRO 9 with Midas DL431 mic-splitters for monitors, selecting the desks for their compactness and sonic quality. In May, prior to rehearsals, they visited Thunder Audio in Detroit to programme and label the desks, and gather stage wiring.

Glass, who has previously mixed monitors for acts such as Joe Diffie and Sarah Evans, produced 10 stereo in-ear monitor mixes and a stereo left and right alternating down the

Below: Audio Crew Chief George Chapman; A total of 10 in-ear monitor mixes and a stereo left and right alternating down a frontline of wedges were produced for Parton; Monitor Engineer Jason Glass; The Midas PRO 6 console was specified for FOH, with the PRO 9 used for monitors.



major concern for many live shows, Glass has invested time looking into wireless frequency coordination over the past year and contributing to the development of software. The products - Pro Audio White Space Finder 4400 and Intermod Assist software from Rational Waves and the Signal Hound RF spectrum analyser hardware - made coordinating the *Better Day* tour's 32 wireless channels at locations around the world a manageable task. The system was used to monitor the radio spectrum in real time and use the data to calculate interference-free channels for all equipment used on tour.

"I worked alongside Rational Waves' Steve Leytus, who has paid close attention to the experiences of engineers like myself who work with large multi-channel wireless systems. He used these observations to create what I believe is the most comprehensive and advanced frequency coordination package," said Glass. "It's a pretty intense situation when you get into cities such as London where there's a lot of radio traffic already on the air. You have to know the environment and your equipment and the package we use now is flawless; I've not had a radio interference failure yet."

Just some of the wireless kit in the production included five Shure UHF-R KSM9 handheld vocal mics, two Shure UHF-R UR1-M

headset systems for Parton, 13 Shure UHF-R UR1 vocal headset mics and instrument systems and 12 Shure PSM-900 wireless IEMs.

CONTROLLING THE MIX

When mixing monitors, Glass likes to push the desk to its limits and makes use of the built-in gates and compressors: "I'm not using any out-board processing at all; it's all on-board reverb and dynamics processing. I love the plate reverb on the drums and that the console has different built-in models of compression. If you want a vintage sound, you go to a classic compressor and it will give you that little bit of grunge. Alternatively, if you're trying to correct the dynamics, there's a corrective model that's a very clean type of compression."

Glass used 76 out of the desk's maximum 80 inputs, taking a single input from the stage and splitting it to two channel strips. Minimal processing was carried out on the channel for the musician who was playing, and processing took place on the parallel channel that was being fed to the other musicians. "This allows me to really control the mixes, without drastically affecting the musician's perception of their own instrument. So it eats up a lot more channels than just a single channel per input," he said.

Glass made use of around a dozen scenes; with a baseline scene acting as a benchmark that he could easily return to when needed. "With the Midas PRO 9 console, they call it recall scope - it's a way of masking the recall so only certain functions will be affected. I use scenes because there are a lot of situations where multiple moods are occurring at once for different players on stage, while I must continue paying attention to Dolly."

Throughout the O2 performance, an assortment of in-ear monitors were used, including three Shure P6HW hardwired IEMs, eight Sensaphonics 3Max custom three-way IEMs, two In Ear Systems Fidelity 2x3 three-way IEMs, one In Ear Systems Fidelity Triples three-way IEM, one Future Sonics Ear Monitors IEM, one Shure E5 IEM and one Ultimate Ears Pro.Fi.5 IEM.

In addition to IEMs, 10 Meyer Sound MJF-212A dual-12 monitor wedges acted as Dolly's downstage and upstage mixes and two Meyer Sound 500-HP subs were used for the upstage drum and bass position sub-fills. Said Glass: "My main Dolly mix is located downstage on the console's main stereo bus, which are alternating left and right across the stage. Since everyone else is in-ear, even when I have performers walk down to the downstage line, they are relying on

Below: Lighting Engineer Jason Wright; MA Lighting's grandMA desk was used for lighting control; The show was filmed with two Sony D50 triax cameras and three Sony BRC robotic colour cameras; Lighting Director Garrett Rentz.



their own in-ears. In the past with Dolly, I had other members on wedges as well, and I would assign their mixes to a downstage wedge when they went down there."

Upstage, Glass positioned a pair of wedges, which acted as Dolly's mix for her entrance. This ensured she was covered through her walk to the downstage. Although on the European tour, Meyer Sound 500-HP subs were chosen, Glass opted for Meyer Sound USW-1Ps in the US.

One piece of kit that has particularly impressed Glass was the Manley VoxBox, which has been used on the tour since May: "Our bass guitarist, Jay Weaver, is playing directly through one and it is a ridiculously good sounding piece of equipment. It's as close to the perfect bass sound as I've ever heard. Jay owns a high-end recording studio and we were aiming to deliver the sound he's used to."

ILLUMINATING DOLLY

One of the priorities throughout the show was making sure Dolly Parton stayed well lit, so Lighting Director Garrett Rentz and Lighting Technician Jason Wight chose to use three truss spots. "Everything else is supposed to be subtle and transitional and she is the element that really pops on stage. We tried to maintain this throughout," said Wright, who has toured with

metal acts such as Marilyn Manson and Rob Zombie prior to working on the country singer's show.

"Dolly was looking for a mixture of elegance and theatre for the lighting element of the show, which I think has been achieved. We've incorporated small to large fixtures because we wanted to include spots, washers, LEDs and

conventional lighting; having the full gamut rather than lots of one particular fixture," Wright explained.

The lighting set-up was provided by Neg Earth and included 32 Robe 2500 ColorSpots, 10 Clay Paky Alpha Wash 1500's, four ETC Ellipsoidol 19° Enhanced Definition lens tubes, six Molefay 8-Lites, 56 Martin Professional MAC 301 LED moving head fixtures, two Diffusion DF-50 hazers and a Catalyst media server. "We had four High End Systems Showguns on the crown truss, six Showguns on the floor, 24

301's in four ladder configurations; with the remainder in the rig itself. All spots and washers were in the rig too and 40 Versatubes were attached to the truss fingers," added Wright.

Rentz – whose career history includes working with artists such as Blondie and Steve Vai – discussed lighting design concepts with Dolly's Creative Director Steve Summers. "We

"Dolly was looking for a mixture of elegance and theatre for the lighting element of the show."

wanted to achieve a theatrical theme, but it was equally important that the equipment would fit in all of the venues. Of the kit we are using, one of my favourite products is the MAC 301; it's a strong and reliable fixture. I've used them at festivals before, but this is the first time I've taken them on tour," said Rentz.

Different products were experimented with for the stage LED, before the crew found one that did not interfere with the audio. Lighting control for the *Better Day* tour was handled using MA Lighting's grandMA desk, which

Below: Video Engineer Johnny Jordan; Mike Fechner has taken on the role of both Production Manager and FOH Engineer for the *Better Day* tour; Systems Technician Patrick Johnston; Video Director Ryan Stowe; Head Rigger Skip Bresnahan's crew was made up of three teams of five for the four-hour build session.



was picked for its usability. "We opted for the grandMA because it's the most theatrical console and it can produce any look we want. The lighting for the show is all built on a cue stack, with scenes for each song. We took a different approach to each track and have gone through every trick to make the show a real spectacle," Wright said.

CRUCIAL CREW

Catering on tour, which was supplied by Sugar and Spice, is one element that has stood out for members of the crew such as Bresnahan: "It's been excellent. On the last Dolly tour, the catering staff heard me mentioning my preference for beef and Guinness pie. Two days later, there it was on the menu. They are very attentive, which is so important because if you don't get good quality catering it can be awful." Bussing from Beat The Street and trucking from Fly By Nite have made the tour run smoothly for the whole production team and musicians. Fly By Nite provided services on Parton's two previous European tours and supplied eight flat floor megacube trailers this time around.

"We got involved in this tour through Manager Danny Nozell, who we previously worked with on Slipknot. The American equipment was delivered to our base in Redditch, where we stripped the containers and airline pallets and re-loaded onto tour trucks for the UK, Scandinavia and Ireland," said Fly By Nite Founder and MD David Coumbe.

Beat The Street has supplied buses for Parton since Nozell approached them to build a star bus to her specific requirements and to supply band and crew buses for her 2007 UK and European tours. "We were only too pleased to do this as we already had a star bus build programmed in, which we altered to suit Dolly's requests. The bus then went on to other tours and was very well received by stars such as Pink and Joe Cocker; who thought the layout was fantastic," said Beat The Street's Tim King.

Following the success of the first star bus, Beat The Street built a second to the same specifications and provided two further tour buses and three crew buses. "This fitted in nicely with Dolly's request to use another bus to 'leap frog' the other around Europe when the

distances were too long to travel overland on just the one bus. Again, this was successful, and we were also then involved with planning the logistics to marry up the two star buses with her charter jet routings," added King.

Fechner is a strong believer in keeping hold of talented crew and has maintained many of the same team members from tour to tour. The majority of the suppliers for the current show are repeat vendors, chosen as a result of their spectacular work on previous tours. Said Fechner: "This is our third time dealing with the UK and Europe and vendors such as Major Tom, Beat the Street and Neg Earth have been fantastic. When you're touring with a whole bunch of people on buses, it only takes one or two to make it really unpleasant. This line-up is the best we've ever had in terms of both personnel and equipment."

TPI

*Photography: CTK Management/Dolly Records and Zoe Mutter
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