



Time to Shine All Night:

Martina McBride's New Tour Takes Her in a New Direction

About three-quarters of the way into Martina McBride's current show, the country singer boards a glowing blue crescent moon and flies above the audience, landing on a smaller B stage near the back of the room. It's the most spectacular moment in the *Shine All Night Tour*, which takes McBride in a brand-new direction—with the addition of a director.

Tom McPhillips, of Atomic Design, the tour's production designer, and Abbey Rosen Holmes, the lighting/video designer, were already on board—this is their third collaboration with McBride—so Holmes recommended Amy Tinkham for the director job. "I had worked with Amy on a Cheetah Girls tour; I thought Martina would really like her, and she would have great sensibilities and ideas," Holmes says. "Plus, I'm awed at how fast she can get a show together."

Tinkham says, "My role as the conceptual person is to make clear the artist's vision in specific, live-show ways, such as what's possible. For instance, yes, you can have a moon that lights up, you can sit on it, and fly over the audience—and here's how you do that.

"Martina obviously doesn't need direction as far as her singing goes, but she was interested in being a little more theatrical," Tinkham adds. "We broke the show up into four acts, and added music based on those divisions. I pitched different concepts to her, and she sent her feedback. Martina has a clear vision of who she is and isn't, which is what makes her so awesome onstage."

Tinkham also served as McBride's eyes, which allowed her up to perform more freely. "In rehearsals, an artist is often half performing and half trying to see what the show looks like," she explains. "She stopped worrying about

making decisions, or whether or not something was working in the middle her songs."

Once the plan was in place, "We came up with a design that fitted the show Amy planned," McPhillips says. "It became more of a theatrical event, with a specific opening, and everyone from the band and crew committed to making it work."

The moon's design fell to McPhillips. "We tried to think of the most minimal thing we could do," he says. "Eric Pearce and his team at SGPS built it for us. It was completely programmable, so she could fly very safely."

McPhillips also designed co-headliner Trace Adkins' show (with SGPS building the set). "The challenge there was to do something for Trace that looked as big as Martina's show, but could be folded away in 10 minutes," the designer says. "Part of it folds up into the truss, and the rest comes off stage. In a way, it designed itself, in that Martina's set had to be fairly upstage and had to fold back on itself, so it could fold out during the changeover."

McPhillips worked closely with Holmes to integrate the lighting, a concern at first because he had created a series of curved ramps. "I wanted that wide-angle aspect, to have something that wrapped around Martina," he says. "Abbey is definite about where she puts her lights—and there is a lot of close-up video on this, so you had better make the pop star look good! Abbey makes it all look so wonderful, so it's worth accommodating her. We kept playing with it, changing the sizes of the video cubes, until we were happy with where the lights would fit between the video."

McPhillips came up with various video shapes, including a pyramid-like center screen (27'W by 15'9"H) of high-resolution Barco SLite modules (supplied by MooTV) with lower-resolution single Barco MiTRIX panels (3' 9"H by 5'W) fragmented out along the curve, with five on each side. "I wanted to break it up more than that, but, as Abbey started to develop the content, we found we needed to make the video slightly differently shaped so it didn't look too strange."

Holmes also used curved upstage and front trusses in the lighting rig to carry the set's shape through the design. McPhillips says. "That U-shaped curve was repeated over and over in the set and lighting, and the whole picture looked very cohesive. I loved what Abbey did with the visuals. As usual, they looked fantastic. It was great to be able to provide a framework for that."

SetCo constructed McBride's set, while Atomic Design fabricated all of the tour's softgoods. Additional video gear includes a center screen that drops down for Trace Adkins, and is also used for McBride's IMAG. Holmes uses some front projection via two high-def Green Hippo V3 Hippotizers and one Martin Maxedia media servers. MooTV supplied all the video.

"I came up with most of the content for the show prior



to rehearsals," Holmes explains. "The show starts with a fun dance-club remix of some of Martina's songs, and there are images of clapping hands on the screens. Then an image of a mirrorball starts back on the large LED screen; it turns and zooms toward the front. As it does, Martina appears, coming up from a lift at the back of the catwalk, in front of the big mirrorball as it reaches full size."

After the first sequence, a translucent drape flies in for McBride's acoustic set. Following that, the scrim closes again and the audience sees imagery of a hillside and little town. "You see the sunset; a full moon comes up, travels over, and drops on the other side," says Holmes. "Right after it drops, the crescent—with Martina on it—comes up out of one of the side ramps. It's sort of a 'Starry

Night' 3-D effect, with LEDs from behind and projections from the front. The media on this show is there to complement and enhance her show, absolutely not to not distract you from watching her perform."

As is often the case nowadays, the lighting gear was chosen for its ability to read on top of the LED video output. The rig includes Philips Vari*Lite VL3000s and VL3500s, Martin MAC 2000 Wash units, Coemar Halos, star strobes, Mole lights for the audience, and truss spots. "Bandit Lites supplied all the lighting and generously let us program in their Nashville warehouse, which really helped us out," Holmes says. "Martina starts with a set list, but she has a really great band, which has been together for a long time, and they often play different songs from night to night. We aim to program 30-

40 songs, which is why we needed a little extra time.

"Luckily, Trevor Ahlstrand, who runs the show for me, is fabulously talented and can program new songs as the tour goes on," Holmes continues.

"Everything is run through the grandMA console, which was programmed by the incomparable Laura Frank. It's a great touring production team, as those guys have been with Martina forever. It really shows, and it makes it a lot of fun. I loved working with Martina and the same group of people again. Tom always creates a beautiful set—the softer curves made for a really pretty environment for Martina. Amy's direction did an amazing amount to give shape and dynamics to the show."

By all accounts, the new direction is a hit. "Some people started off saying, 'Is this really necessary for Martina McBride?'" says Tinkham.

"No, it's not. She could stand and sing her whole show and be amazing from one spot. But, on the first night, when she came out and landed on the other stage, the audience gave a standing ovation. It really revved up the next part of her show. Some gimmicks are worth it.

"They were calling me 'Moonraker'—that was my nickname—until it worked," Tinkham continues. "Martina is such a legit country artist, and there is a line where it's corny and unnecessary, versus what could be refreshing entertainment for her audience. Abbey did her usual gorgeous lighting, which always blows my mind. She's one of the best lighting designers I've ever worked with."

"Amy really galvanized everybody and got everyone on the same page," McPhillips concludes. "The show still had all the power and the glory of Martina's voice and Abbey's fantastic lighting. But because it was directed, Martina was more confident, and so was the band." —**Catherine**

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