



/ T A I L G A T I N G

A L L T H E W A Y

T O T H E B A N K /

For those of you not based in the USA, Kenny Chesney is somewhat of a country music phenomenon. I believe he did one show in the UK, and it's rumoured that he has been to Canada, but if I was selling over one million tickets before my North American tour even began, I doubt I'd bother with the rest of the world, either. Why would you? The setting for this adventure is the surprisingly lovely city of Pittsburgh, in the heart of Pennsylvania. Like many American cities, a river runs through it, and it's got two terrific ball stadiums, one of which is Heinz Field (yes, as in the ketchup and the baked beans). But even in Pittsburgh, you don't get baked beans. It's soundcheck day, and we've just checked into the rather suave Renaissance Hotel, situated pretty much on the river, and we're a 10 minute stroll from the stadium, we're told. Great. Now for the bad news: it's 35 degrees (that's Celsius, British readers) with 90 percent humidity to boot, and it's only 10.20am. Jesus. So the stroll feels more like a trek, but we make it. Just.

Heinz Field is quite the grandiose stadium, I have to say, and home to the Steelers and Panthers football teams. The show is a sell-out (obviously), and will bring in around 7-10 million dollars in revenue

for the city, though along with it, a shedload of trash (as in rubbish, not trailer), caused largely by America's tailgating community, who come in convoys of trucks and boats, armed with gallons of beer, and Kenny Chesney hits pumping out of their stereos. It has to be seen to be believed!

So this cauldron holds around 60,000 punters, all of whom are going to be up for a party. It's a hell of an operation, too. Nashville-based Morris Light and Sound are the tour provider, and our guide is the CEO and President of the company, David Haskell, whose passion for his craft is evident immediately. He is *proper* Nashville, a music nut, and has known Chesney personally since the artist played his first shows in the city's little music bars many moons ago. He's also got more than two decades of front-of-house audio experience under his belt. All boxes checked, then.

"Kenny's great," Haskell beams, ushering me into the amazing catering area, away from the 200-strong crew (half of which are permanent, half local), who are busy putting the finishing touches to the huge Nexo loudspeaker rig and delay towers. "We've come full circle with him, really - it's amazing to think how far he's come from those early days, and seeing him up there makes us all very proud."

WORDS | PAUL WATSON
PHOTOS | BRIAN PETERSEN

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Haskell means it. The guy clearly lives for his business, which has many arms, including a newly formed integration division that caters for major installs such as Mega Churches, which often budget for 5-6 million dollar systems! In addition to audio, Morris is providing all lighting for this tour. In fact, from what I can gather, the only thing they’re not trucking in themselves are the LED screens. Oh, and these ‘trucks’ I talk about are no ordinary trucks, they’re gigantic, and do about five miles to the gallon. FYI, that’s considerably less than a six-litre Bentley Turbo.

MUSIC CITY

I ask Haskell about the scene in Nashville, America’s ‘Music City’, and one of my favourite places in the States.

“Oh it’s changing all the time,” comes the response, his eyes widening. “You wouldn’t recognise the skyline, and did you know that music is only number seven on the totem pole in terms of industry in the city? I think we’re the first or second fastest growing city in the US right now, and it’s good for the economy, but also good for the production business. With companies like Bridgestone moving their HQ into town, of course they’re going to be doing events, you know? So Nashville in general is doing very, very well.”

Wow. Quite a development there, then. What I do know (I think), is that pretty much every music company worth its salt has a presence there now... MI and pro, right?

“Pretty much, yeah, but you have to remember in Nashville that guys like us [rental houses] don’t go out to tender for business for the most part,” he smiles. Really? “Oh yeah, you’ve got maybe 10 or 15 rental companies, each with a few artists, all



of whom are locked into their contracts. It’s the way it works there. But, you know, there’s enough work for everyone, and I don’t see other companies as competition, I prefer to look at them as allies with a common interest. The good news is, everybody is working, so the production industry is very solid.”

Again, I can tell he means it. As we head back to the main arena, I see everything’s basically set up. That was quick.

“Yeah it’s a very easy system to rig, [Nexo’s] STM,” Haskell says, arms folded, observing the stage carefully. I suggest to him that it was a pretty bold move taking a new system on what is basically the biggest tour in the US right now. He tilts his head, and pauses for thought. “It is, but when I heard the system, I knew it was by far the best thing out there. And we tried *everything*. Sonically, STM is genuinely mind blowing, as you’ll hear later, and the new M28 box is effectively the cherry on the top.”

I can vouch for that last bit at least, having followed the STM evolution for the last two

years. I’ve been fortunate enough to hear it in several very different environments: James Last (who we sadly lost just a couple of months ago) crooned into it at the RAH in London; Whitesnake and Def Leppard rocked out through it at Hellfest in Nantes; and a hardcore hip hop festival at the Stade de France showed off its incredible low-end capabilities. But this, apparently, is another level... And the first time I will hear it ‘complete’. M28 has been the missing component for some months now, but now it’s finally here. And Morris has invested in a ton of it.

“M28 is a great box,” Haskell states. “It’s the final piece of the STM jigsaw, but it’s also a great standalone box for delays and fills. It’s punchy, it’s warm, and it’s totally ‘relative’ to the other STM boxes.”

IN CONTROL

Next stop is front-of-house position, to talk to the very affable Chris Rabold, who rides the faders for Chesney when he’s not out with Lady Gaga. I ask him whether he thinks

M28 has been worth the wait. He does.

“What I love about M28 is, it’s a genuine extension to the STM system, and it’s voiced very similarly to the M46, so it’s just given us that extra bit at the bottom,” Rabold explains. “It’s extremely controllable, and it’s always hitting the thrust, which is great, as the artist is in front of the PA the majority of the time. I can manipulate the box if I choose to, but a lot of the time, I really don’t need to. It’s seamless, and it’s smooth.”

I ask Rabold about STM as a whole. “It’s now complete”, he assures me.

“The whole system is right where I want it to be, and Nexo have done exactly what they said they’d do with it,” he says. “We doubled the amount of subs for this tour, but not to add more volume, just to produce an even coverage, to smooth it all out a bit. In Kenny’s band, some guys are really sensitive to excess boom, and although we now have more boxes, we have less resulting low-end effect on stage, as we run them in cardioid mode. The subs and the flown subs have been completely flawless on this tour.”

Because STM is voiced so specifically, Rabold explains, he chooses to respect what the system wants him to do with it. I nod, unconvincingly, pretending I understand. He smiles, and says:

“Ok, what I *mean* is, I have learned how important it is to work with the system the way that it was designed, so I have spent time finding out what it wants me to do to it, and what I want it to do, so it’s been about finding a marriage of the two,” he explains. Okay, with you now, Chris. Do continue. “I think we had, like, six cuts on it last night, and that was cool; it’s really about what makes my mix translate the best, so whatever I am doing here is coming back at me accurately. And it does, without us really doing much at all, actually.”

Rabold’s right hand man at front-of-house position is Morris system tech, John Mills, who recently took over from the highly regarded Mark Bollenberg.

“Mark deserves a serious mention, as he set up a lot of this before I got onboard,” confirms Mills, and begins taking me through his setup. He describes himself as ‘more the scientist’, and Rabold ‘the magician on the console’. So we’ve covered the low-end, now what about the power at the other end of the audio spectrum?

“Oh, STM has so much high frequency power,” Mills insists, shakily, as a huge thunderclap rings out in unison with him, accompanied by a giant fork lightning bolt that literally lit up the stadium. “Storm’s a ‘comin!’” he says. Great. “So, as I was saying, it means I can basically do whatever I want with the system. When we first made the move from

our previous rig to Nexo, we had 16 delay boxes back here, and we now have 12, and I’ve actually turned them *down*, so the throw of the system is unbelievable. We have done a few shows where we’ve had to throw 500-feet with no delays, and STM does it. Incredibly, it still sounds fairly HiFi in the back, too. Sure, you have your physics of air loss, but it still sounds better than anything at distance, and the vocal still sounds like it’s right in front of you. It’s pretty unreal.”

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The muggy, sticky air has now lost much of its humidity, and the storm has indeed arrived. As rain like I’ve *never* seen peppers us like wildfire, Mills and co. remain calm and collected, and proceed to cover their control hub as if they’ve practiced it a million times before, with the same discipline and precision of those hard working ball boys (and girls) at Wimbledon. Ten minutes pass...

“Okay, where were we?” returns a dripping wet Mills, apparently unaffected by the tsunami-esque downpour. I’m petrified. I ask him about the tuning, and how easy it all is to put together. “Nexo’s NS1 is one of the most accurate systems out there. If you do what NS1 says, it is going to do it. I spend a considerable amount of time in it, because then I have to do way less work with the system itself. And in terms of flying? It’s *astronomically* faster than most systems out there. I wouldn’t do a stadium by myself, but with any 12-box gig with one motor and myself, I have comfortably flown the whole thing.”

Kenny also relies on in-ear monitoring for his shows, namely a set of JH Audio JH16s.

His crew are also using the 16s, and Kenny’s seven-piece band is also on JH, namely the Roxanne model. I ask monitor engineer, Phil Robinson, why JH is the preference.

“The low end is definitely tighter and faster with the newer armatures,” he explains. “Also, the clarity is far better with a fuller and rounder sound overall. The fit has improved too, which makes it better for long shows, and sometimes full days.”

It’s also all that bit easier to put together, Robinson adds:

“Even the cables have become easier to plug inside a smaller 1/8-inch jacket. This is actually really important, because with the newer ear packs, it’s very packed around the plug, and smaller is better in this case.

“We are also using the Rev 33; that has showed to improve the image of the mix and overall ear fatigue for the show. Kenny has asked for very few changes in his in-ear mix this year; we have a nice Avalon VT737SP on his vocal, which pairs nicely with the JH ears to make every day a great day in monitor world!”

‘Everyone’s so happy here,’ I say to myself, also aware that showtime is approaching. We have an hour or so to plug as much free booze as possible, backstage. Drinking half-litres of rum sounds daunting, but I find it surprisingly easy. I vaguely recall chatting (nonsense, probably) to the very polite owner of the Steelers football team in that bar (a selfie found on my phone the following day confirmed it), and I guess it just shows how relaxed and calm the whole Chesney entourage was. It’s a huge, and meticulously run ship, full of passionate audio fanatics, who love their music, and more to the point, love their jobs.

The show began mid afternoon, and after hearing main support act, Eric Church, deliver a nigh-on perfect half-hour performance, pressure seemed on Kenny to deliver. But deliver, he did. He entered the stadium in style (on a high-wire, no less), and for 90-minutes plus, proceeded to thrill a completely receptive crowd, working his butt off on stage. The system was pumping, the mix was tight, and the audience were jumping.

I grabbed a final word with David Haskell to see what Kenny thought of everything:

“Kenny is so hands on with *everything* he does in his life. He looks at every lighting cue, every video element, every bit of design, and the sound design; and as long as it’s working, he is happy. He has my number, I have his... [pauses] And we only ever meet under good circumstances!”

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