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KENNY CHESNEY

NORTH AMERICA'S BIGGEST COUNTRY
MUSIC TOUR STEPS OUT OF THE PACK WITH
AN SSL AND NEXO CONSIGNMENT

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NEXO SOLID STATE LOGIC AND THE KING OF COUNTRY







KENNY CHESNEY LIVE FROM PITTSBURGH

THE GENRE MAY NOT BE HUGE IN EUROPE, BUT COUNTRY MUSIC IS SERIOUSLY BIG BUSINESS IN THE US. ONE OF ITS MOST SUCCESSFUL MALE STARS, KENNY CHESNEY, IS PART WAY THROUGH HIS LARGEST TOUR TO DATE, *THE BIG REVIVAL*, AN IMPRESSIVE STADIUM FEAT ABLE TO LURE IN DEDICATED FANS AND NATIONAL PRESS IN EACH AND EVERY STATE IT VISITS, MEANING SOUND QUALITY MUST BE A HIGH-END AFFAIR. TPI'S KELLY MURRAY TRAVELLED TO THE HEINZ FIELD STADIUM IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, TO HEAR THE SOLID STATE LOGIC AND NEXO COMBINATION ENABLING THE SINGER'S LIVE REPUTATION TO STAY AT THE TOP OF THE BILL.

May 30, 2015. It's my first time in the beautiful city of Pittsburgh, and, as one would correctly assume of many a Mancunian, also my first adventure in country music. I'm in good company though, as 55,000 revellers are lining the streets, and the city's car parks - they have been for two days now [waiting for venue entry to be permitted]. Looking around at the kinship and endless flow of beer, I'm not entirely sure why tailgate parties have never caught on in Europe. Plus the threat of rain certainly isn't putting these fans off, it's merely encouraging the camaraderie of Chesney's loyal army, further fuelled in part because tonight is a co-headline show with Eric Church, another of America's most popular country performers. Things, I feel, are about to get fun.

The wonderfully stormy weather unleashes giant droplets of warm rain from the confusingly

blue sky, and inside the stadium gates, Chesney's production crew are hard at work, preparing for what is clearly going to be an almighty party atmosphere. Yeehaah indeed.

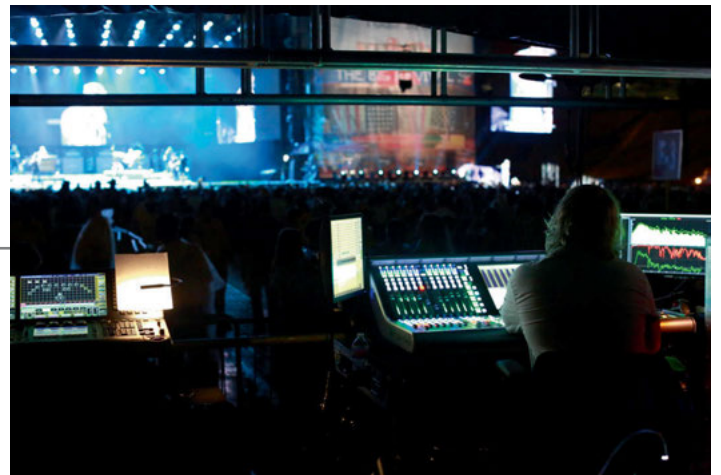
In charge of supplying crew and all equipment to the show is Nashville-based Morris Light & Sound, a company which despite its relatively small size, is championing new products, paving the way for them in fact, and delivering flawless service to the tour. The products in question are Nexo's latest release from its STM Series, the M28 and SSL's new large format live console, the Live L500. Both are key audio elements trusted for a tour of this magnitude (five months, should you be curious).

Chesney has toured with a Nexo STM system before, but *The Big Revival* is the STM M28's US tour debut, a decision which is proving the right one on the road. At the forefront of the well-oiled Morris Light & Sound machine is President and CEO, David Haskell, who works very closely

with Production Manager, Ed Wannebo, a man who has gained an undisputed reputation as one of the most relaxed and professional PMs the industry has to offer.

During his career, Wannebo has received a Parnelli Award for Production Manager of the Year, a CMA (Country Music Association) Award with the same title and following that, a lifetime achievement from the Parnellis too. "That was really something cool!" he smiled. His story began in 1976, when he had a small lighting rental company in Portland, Oregon. He worked with artist Randy Hanson who did a Jimmi Hendrix tribute show called Machine Gun. "Sometime in the late 70s, we wound up at the Old Waldorf in San Francisco, a club downtown," said Wannebo. "In the audience was [Film Director] Francis Ford Coppola, and the next thing I know Randy is working on the soundtrack to *Apocalypse Now* and he's in the credits to the film!" Wannebo then went

Opposite: Kenny Chesney greeted 55,000 fans in Pittsburgh. Below: Nexo's STM system was the PA of choice for rental company, Morris Light & Sound; The tailgating community; Chesney has had a touring career spanning two decades; Nexo loudspeakers were also configured for delay towers at the Heinz Field Stadium; FOH Engineer, Chris Rabold mixed the show on an SSL Live L500 console.



on to work with Van Halen, Hall and Oates, ZZ Top and David Bowie. It wasn't until he got a call from Faith Hill and Tim McGraw that his country music debut began. "I took over as Tim's Production Manager and Kenny Chesney opened for him in 2001. When the tour finished Kenny was ready to start headlining. 11 years went by and I've been with Kenny ever since," Wannebo stated.

"What we have here is an interesting tour, in that we must prepare for a multitude of venues. We play sheds, arenas and we play stadiums; it's part of the design challenge."

There's certainly a special relationship between Wannebo and his preferred rental company, Morris. He continued: "They're a small company, but they service us well. When we get through our design phase they've always come

through with whatever we've needed."

Morris CEO Haskell added: "When you have a Production Manager who has already been inducted into the Hall of Fame, that helps everything run smoothly!"

Perhaps the success of Chesney's touring productions is in part due to the longevity of the people who work for him. The notion of trust between these colleagues is not only

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Below: Award-winning Production Manager, Ed Wannebo; Morris Light & Sound is the first rental company in North America to have toured the full Nexo STM system and the SSL Live L500 in unison; Morris Light & Sound CEO, David Haskell with Nexo's Ginny Goudy and Piers Plaskitt of Solid State Logic; Chris Rabold at FOH.



obvious, but also historical. "Morris started off as a management company; the founder, Dale Morris is an artist manager and I toured with the group Alabama - who Dale looked after - for 17 years. In the beginning instead of renting, Dale wanted to make sure he had the best gear possible and in order to do that, and control the environment each day, Alabama became the first country group that really toured with a full production," explained Haskell.

The move enabled Haskell to concentrate on investing into some of the most powerful and reliable equipment in the current market place, namely the Nexo STM modular line array system and Solid State Logic's mixing Live consoles.

Said Haskell: "The relationship we've had with Nexo since the beginning is a big part of STM being on a huge tour like this. We're the first company to have taken the system out on tour in North America, so working

the French manufacturer has been a key part to the success of this very high profile tour. The STM system has of course garnered a strong reputation in live concert sound in mainland Europe, but to take it out on what is essentially the biggest tour in North America is somewhat of a statement and a testament.

Continued Haskell: "We've very happy with the STM. I liked the way it sounded, but its versatility is what really got me - the modularity of it. Historically we're a 'big box' company, but now whenever we finish a big tour, we can break the system up into pieces and place it on smaller shows.

"Kenny is so hands-on with everything in his life, not just the touring aspect. He looks at every part of the design, every lighting cue, video element and sound design. If he's unhappy, trust me, I would be the first one to know!" he laughed.

"Simply put, the throw of this system is unbelievable..."
- John Mills, System Engineer on Nexo's STM.

"One thing led to another and we bought a PA and then got into lighting. Originally the company was set up as Morris Leasing, with the sole purpose of serving Dale's artists. We were the in-house company that provided production for his management clients, then five years ago - it's been a business almost 25 years - I took the company over. We'd amassed all of this equipment and I thought we should really make a go of the rental business outside of the camp."

together was paramount. We had some R&D involvement because with every brand new system and brand new box, there has to be a dialogue that myself, John [Mills, Morris Light & Sound System Tech] and all of my engineers have. Francois [Deffarges, Nexo R&D Director] totally understood that, and it's been very open, in real time as we've toured. Nexo have been very supportive and also very quick to act. Their service has been impeccable."

Being a flagship rental company in the US for

THE FORTH ELEMENT

Replacing talented System Engineer, Mark Bollenberg, who worked on 25 of *The Big Revival* shows, is the aforementioned Morris Light & Sound Director of Training and Development, John Mills. His job is to continue the smooth running of what Nexo itself describes as the 'fourth element' in the STM compatible loudspeaker modules, the M28 two-way loudspeaker cabinet. This latest piece of

Below: FOH Engineer Chris Rabold described Chesney's show as one of the most fun he's ever mixed.



the puzzle is what's exciting the audio crew.

The M28 is the same width as an STM M46 main cabinet and can be arrayed as part of the existing loudspeakers or used independently. In this case, it's a welcome addition to the mammoth PA, and is used as downfill. "Scale through modulation; the beauty of this system is just that," stated Mills. "Array length is going to change some of the lower frequencies and how much there is, but tonally it's really great. It has so much high frequency power too that I can do whatever I want with it.

"When we first made the move from our previous rig to a Nexo system, we had 16 relay boxes, now we only have 12 and I've turned them down. Simply put, the throw of this system is unbelievable.

"We've done a few shows where we've got to throw 500ft back with no delays, and it does it - and still sounds fairly hi-fi at the back. The vocal still sounds like it's right in front of you; it's pretty unreal. The physical flying of it is astronomically faster than almost anything out there too," he added.

The main array (firing forward) comprises 44 Nexo M46's, 44 B112's and three M28's. The Aux Array (aimed approximately 40 degrees off stage) comprises 30-36 M46's (depending on venue), 30-36 B112's and three M28's. The 270 degree array (aimed 70-90 degrees off stage depending on venue) is made up of 24 M28's. Flown subs are 44 S118's (deployed as one for front firing, one for rear firing per row, 12 rows deep, for cardioid pattern control). Ground subs are 16 RS18's designed in stacks of two in cardioid mode. Aux fills (the video screen creates an obstacle for the 270 degree hang so this

ground stack cover the seats shadowed by the screen) are four Geo S12's firing approximately 45-60 degrees offstage, again depending on venue. Front fills comprise 20 PS10R2's and the two delay towers boast 12 M28's on each tower.

The whole system is powered by NX4x4 amplifiers and six Lake LM44's drive the system; two at FOH taking console inputs and distributing L / R, subs, fill signals via Dante / fibre to two LM44's on each side of stage. The first takes the LRSF info and routes to their respective outputs. The second drives the delay towers and two spare outputs.

Continued Mills: "The support from Nexo in France has been amazing. Any time we've had a question, they've been there with an answer. Francois has personally called me in the middle of the night - his time - to make sure things are going okay."

Renowned FOH Engineer, Chris Rabold - last seen in TPI mixing Lady Gaga's recent world tour - is also a big fan of the STM system, and its new addition. "The M28 really is just an extension that's voiced very similarly to the M46, it gives us that little extra bit at the bottom of the hang. It's very, very controllable too. Kenny spends the majority of his time in front of the PA so those boxes are in a critical zone. A change on this tour has been adding more subs, but I had to explain to people that we weren't doing that to add more sub volume; we were doing that so that we could improve overall coverage, and really work on an arc to smooth it all out."

SOLID STATE OF MIND

As one of the world's top touring sound engineers, Rabold is not a bad unofficial

spokesperson to have touring - and loving - your products. From his own position of FOH - completely unphased by the relentless rain which is currently engulfing the stadium and turning it into more of an Olympic swimming pool - describes mixing Chesney's show as "one of the most fun mixes I've ever been given the opportunity to do. It's like mixing rock 'n' roll; a bunch of guitar solos which isn't country music in a traditional sense."

His desk on this occasion is of course the SSL Live L500, one of the most highly anticipated pro audio releases in recent years. Famous for world-class sound recording, SSL is now finding its place - quite comfortably - in the live sound environment, on some of the most high-profile tours of 2015 - Sam Smith, Ed Sheeran and now Kenny Chesney to name but a few.

"I don't see how you could not have an interest if SSL put out a console for the live market," said Rabold. "It's such an exciting time in audio. I've turned a lot of my outboard off from using this desk. One place, for example, would be from the dynamics. I'm convinced SSL could sell the dynamics on this console as a standalone product! It's just such an incredibly flexible desk. I find a lot of sound engineers will often list features for why they think a desk is superior and sound is somewhere around point six or seven. Where as with this thing, the bottom line is that it sounds phenomenal. And that's what we're getting paid to do - to provide audio for our clients and for the audience. SSL really does sound as good as you would expect, in fact, it sounds better than I'd hoped.

"Another great thing about this console is that there's three ways to do everything. That

Below: "Its versatility is what really got me - the modularity of it," said CEO of Morris, David Haskell, on the Nexo STM modular line array system. Thanks to the addition of the smaller M28, seen here in a downfill configuration, the various STM components can now service a variety of tour sizes.



has actually been the biggest stumbling block for me because at first I would start to do something and then realise 'oh God, there's three different ways to do what I want!' he laughed.

Haskell also noted: "I've always been a fan of SSL. Morris has a recording studio too, so I'm very familiar with the SSL family of products. When the rumblings came out that they were getting ready to do a live console, I thought it was amazing news. We saw it, we looked back and forth - as you do with every new piece of gear - but hands down, SSL has done it; there is no question. The architecture and sonic quality of this desk is unparalleled. It's a piece of art. To date, we haven't had any issues on the road and I see a lot more of their consoles in our future."

And, just as Haskell and Mills expressed their gratitude to the support from Nexo, Rabold is able to echo the sentiment for SSL. "The support from SSL has been 24/7. I didn't expect it to go as far as it did, but the level of service they provide is amazing. It exceeded my expectations, to the point where I have a curiosity question, I want to call the guys up because I know for a fact they're going to call me back!"

THE LIVE TRANSITION

Like the Nexo system, the artist, sound engineer and rental company are all happy with SSL and the way it's handling the demands of a multi-venue, cross country tour. And, like Nexo and Morris, SSL is a relatively small company, which is able to provide top notch, hand-tailored quality to its clients. But how, exactly, did the most sought after and debatably most expensive mixing console in the world become a sound investment for the touring rental market?

CEO of SSL US, Piers Plaskitt explained: "Since the 1980s, any manufacturer in the audio console business saw SSL as the company to beat."

And Plaskitt should know - he's worked in professional audio since the early '70s, when he was somewhat accidentally hired by The Beatles' Apple Recording Studios in London.

"Six weeks into that job the chief engineer called me into his office and said, 'we need to have a talk.' I thought, 'oh God, I'm fired'. But he said, 'I've got good news and bad news - I'm leaving', and I said, 'is that the good news or the bad news?' He said 'well, I've recommended that you take over my position'."

"I'm convinced SSL could sell the dynamics on this console as a stand-alone product! It's just such an incredibly flexible desk..."

- Chris Rabold, FOH Engineer

From there on out, Plaskitt's career in pro audio was cemented. He moved to an American studio, and was later hired by SSL. Even a four year stint at running his own diner couldn't keep him out of the business for long. "When I rejoined the company in mid-2015 we were very fortunate to have Peter Gabriel as an owner as he not only understands the business but also uses our gear. His involvement in the company extends into suggesting features like Eyeconix on the Live console."

Gabriel was a driving force in transitioning the brand into the touring world and Plaskitt admires him as both an artist and a businessman. His return to SSL was a no-brainer,

so the company's progression on both sides of the Atlantic is in good hands.

"The real challenge," said Plaskitt, "is to influence the influencers, and you do that by investing a considerable amount of time with them to understand their needs and get them comfortable with your product. Several years ago we became aware of an individual in London who was at Queen Mary University and had published a paper on automatic mixing, a concept that was very interesting to our R&D people. We had decided to get into the live business, and so we brought this individual in. It turned out that in addition to being a brilliant scientist, he was also a FOH engineer who goes

by the name of Enrique Perez Gonzales.

"Coincidentally, he also happened to grow up in his parents' touring company. Enrique is a rather understated individual and impressed everyone SSL, especially our senior R&D people. Shortly after the interview, we brought him on to help pioneer the development of the live console. He did a brilliant job, so soon after we promoted him to Head of R&D and later, to the board as Chief Technology Officer."

Continued Plaskitt: "When we were nearly ready, we approached Morris Light & Sound. As a company, Morris is a thought-leader rather than a follower. They went to Chris Rabold and said 'we really think that you should try this out

Below: Chesney is one of the most popular touring acts in North America.



for the Kenny Chesney tour', so we delivered a console to his house and let him play with it. He gave us a tonne of really useful feedback but what I think really tempted him is that we deliver exceptional sound quality coupled with an intuitive user interface. We're proud of the fact that we don't require you to work in one particular fashion. You can do things your way, so it's never learning from scratch," explained Plaskitt.

KENNY LIKES IT THAT WAY...

As dusk falls upon the stadium and the flood lights go out, the roar of Chesney's 'no shoes nation' could surely be heard for miles around

the venue grounds. The singer appears via zip wire on a chair which enables him to get closer to his fans and the first track *Drink It Up* fires out over the mammoth STM system to great applause. The show is already a success.

Looking at his giant tour map, covered in a zigzag of geographical and stadium feats, in his backstage office, Production Manager, Ed Wannebo has the last word: "Everybody here, all of our crew chiefs and engineers are first rate. It's nice to work with good people all the time and we're blessed; it truly is a family. As big as this machine is, you can still pick up on the family vibe. Kenny likes it that way."

The Pittsburgh show grossed over US \$5m,

which is almost as impressive as there being zero complaints about the sound when 55,000 country fans had been partying for 48 hours in storm showers and summer heat. This audio formula it seems is working brilliantly for this touring family, and if the fans are happy - whatever the weather - what more could the 'People's Superstar' ask for?

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