

Versatile By Necessity A flexible system strategy for MercyMe live

By Linda Seid Frembes

MercyMe first came to widespread attention as Christian music's fastest-selling new act of 2001, and they've also received considerable airplay on pop, country and adult contemporary radio stations in the U.S.

That success has translated well for the Texas-based, six-member rock band in the concert touring realm, and they're now back on the road appearing in a wide range of venues in support of *Undone*, their latest album.



Spectrum Sound of Nashville, headed by Ken Porter, is supplying the sound systems as well as support for the tour, with the house rig headed by versatile d&b audiotechnik C-Series loudspeaker arrays. "For about a decade, MercyMe has been known regionally, performing for youth corps and crusades," Porter notes. "We first teamed up with them about three years ago as they started to appeal to a wider concert audience."

Veterans of working with Third Day, another popular contemporary Christian act, Garry Brown and Bobby George have teamed up again to head up live sound for

MercyMe. Brown provides the front-of-house mix in addition to serving as lead system tech, while George lends his talents to monitor mixing.

“In terms of mixing, Christian tours aren’t that different from the mainstream,” Brown is quick to point out, referring to his experience in working with both genres of tours. But while the mix approaches are similar, the schedule in comparison to the mainstream touring market is not.

“Hard ticket sales for the Christian market are in the fall and spring, and perhaps in the winter for a Christmas tour. But during that time, they’re also competing with Christmas productions at churches, some of which start as early as October or November,” explains Porter. “And some of those church productions have budgets that can rival any touring show.”

With this competitive environment and a somewhat smaller overall audience base, venues for a Christian rock tour can vary widely, ranging from “A-” and “B-” level arenas to sheds to large churches. Cash flow ends up varying as well, and Christian artists tend to offer lower ticket prices. (*Bravo! – Editor*)

“This makes for more of a gamble for the promoters, which in turn drives being more cost-effective in terms of sound equipment selection,” Porter adds. “Yet to be successful, Christian artists still must be as relevant as mainstream bands, as well as deliver a performance that meets or exceeds the ticket holder’s expectations.”

TAILOR THE COVERAGE

A tour leg earlier this year highlights the degree of flexibility these circumstances dictate in terms of the PA - the main loudspeaker configurations in particular. As noted, this portion of the system is comprised of a variety of d&b C-Series loudspeakers that are adept in ground-stack or flying applications.

Spectrum Sound supplied 22 C4-TOP mid/high cabinets (35-degree by 35-degree dispersion), eight horn-loaded C3 line array modules (35-degree by 5-degree dispersion), six C7-TOP two-way cabinets, and 28 C4-SUB subwoofers. These could be augmented with up to four d&b Q7 compact cabinets (75-degree by 40-degree dispersion) for frontfill as well as 12 more d&b B2 subs. All loudspeakers were driven by a combination of d&b P1200 and D12 power amplifiers.

“Each venue required a different loudspeaker configuration and hang,” says Brown. “I was a bit limited by the number of boxes we brought, but the fly bar for the arrays made all the difference, offering flexibility to tailor the horizontal coverage.”

Using a proprietary spreadsheet provided by d&b, Brown entered the unique parameters of each venue, which in turn supplied guidelines for array structure

and placement. Certain elements stayed the same; at most, the size of the fly bar limited the arrays to a maximum of four boxes wide. In addition, he followed d&b's recommendation to keep the ratio of C-TOP and C4-SUB cabinets the same.

"Arenas were always four boxes wide and a maximum of seven deep (at the inner segment of the array) because I needed the output, while theaters were usually two wide by seven deep," he adds. "The C7 has a wider coverage, so I usually used it in the far left and right columns to get coverage further upstage. This system is very useful because I can configure it any way I want or need from night to night."

Meanwhile, the B2 subwoofers were always ground-stacked, two rows of six boxes (two pairs of three cabinets). Each row was in the company's Cardioid Subwoofer Array (CSA) formation, meaning the middle sub of three faces backward. "This lessens the rollback onstage and directs more of the low frequency energy forward," explains Porter. "It also makes for a better environment for in-ear monitors on stage."

Once the loudspeakers were set, Brown dialed in factory recommended settings on the system's Lake Contour digital processors. He could then more finely tailor each array's performance from that point, using a Contour wireless tablet to walk the coverage area and making processing adjustments as he went.

A GOOD FIT

At the 18,000-plus-seat Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, the original plan was for "half-house," with only the floor and lower portion of the bowl requiring coverage. However, a big jump in ticket sales changed that plan, with coverage needing to be extended to the upper seating level. This was handled with the addition of two C3 line array modules to the top of each array, along with two more subs on the inner stage portion of the hangs.

Meanwhile, at another stop at San Antonio's Municipal Auditorium, all loudspeakers were ground-stacked, with C3's at the top aimed to cover tough corners and C7's shooting coverage "upward" to the top of the bleachers.

"I can't get this level of flexibility with a line array," Brown notes. "The C Series is also a good fit for this band because the live mix is all about the vocal. I've found I can run it louder as long as the vocal is clear. There was only one loudness complaint in the whole tour."

Like the loudspeaker structure, the location of the front-of-house mix position also varied widely from show to show. Generally, Brown's preference is to mix at about 80 feet from the stage, but this tour, the location varied widely from 90 feet up to 130 feet away.

The band has few demands for his mix, Brown adds, noting that the two guitarists would like to be a bit more prominent in the mix, but his approach focuses on more vocal, drums and bass and vocal, with the rest weaved into that fabric. He also burns (to CD) a two-track recording of each mix so that he and the band can review and make notes for future adjustments.

Both house and monitors were headed by 96-channel Yamaha PM1D digital consoles, and these were also utilized by the opening acts. MercyMe has an endorsement arrangement with Shure, and it shows in the predominance of the company's Beta 52, 91, SM57, KSM32, SM7B, and KSM137 models on stage.

Brown also brings along several PreSonus microphone preamps that he applies to several channels – drums, vocals, bass, acoustic guitar and keyboard. The preamps add a bit of “warmth” he's seeking with these facets.

“From a system perspective, what makes this tour work is the processing and the C Series loudspeakers,” he concludes. “This combination defines the sound.”

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