

First Robe FOOTSIES in the US on CMA Fest

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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE - JUNE 11: Tim McGraw performs on stage during day four of CMA Fest 2023 at Nissan Stadium on June 11, 2023 in Nashville, Tennessee. (Photo by Jason Kempin/Getty Images)

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Lighting designer Mike Swinford of UpLate Design loves new tech as much as he loves the chance to be the first to use it, so he was delighted when everything aligned for rental company Fuse to invest in the first Robe FOOTSIE luminaires to arrive in the USA ... which he utilized as a key lighting element for the 2023 CMA Fest.

The 4-day festival is hosted by the Country Music Association (CMA) and recorded at the Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tennessee, in front of live audiences and broadcast on ABC a couple of months later, but this year the popular airing date was brought forward from its traditional August slot to 19th July.

Mike has lit the star-studded multi-camera event for the last 21 years.

Being a massive televisual event as well as four days of fantastic live music for fans there in the venue, key lighting is critical to everything.

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Photo credit Mike Swinford

As a country music extravaganza, cowboy hats onstage are almost guaranteed and with that comes the inevitable shadows over faces which challenge lighting designers and directors ... but this year Mike had an additional cool tool up his sleeve with the FOOTSIIE!

Thirty FOOTSIIE luminaires were positioned in a line along the front of stage, giving Mike a stylish, clean, and solid strip of footlight illumination in the perfect place.

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Mike used the inbuilt FOOTSIE diffuser and commented, “They looked beautiful, very smooth, and worked perfectly for eliminating face shadows.”

As the FOOTSIE has an integral cable tray, all cabling was concealed resulting in a flat, streamlined look onstage emitting a smooth, high-quality output and impressing camera director Alan Carter and stage manager Cindy Sinclair as well.

“I had every confidence the fixture was exactly what we needed ... and they worked precisely as I envisioned! Perfect job done!” declared Mike.

Mike’s FOOTSIE journey began a few months back at the Robe factory in the Czech Republic, when he saw late-stage prototypes of the ingenious product that was launched at Prolight+Sound in Frankfurt.

He loved the idea so much that he specified them for the CMA Fest and the units arrived at Fuse via Robe North America just in time for their high profile live and TV debut.

Robe’s revolutionary IP65-rated FOOTSIE redefines the concept of traditional ‘footlights’ with a smart design that effectively removes the visual barrier between audience and performers whilst delivering dynamic LED foot lighting, whatever the production, environment, or weather!

FOOTSIE is currently available in two standard lengths, FOOTSIE1™ measures 600mm and FOOTSIE2™ is 1200mm – this was the size that Fuse ordered. The luminaire has a choice of warm or tuneable white LEDs or RGBW high power single chip LEDs. The classic warm white LEDs offer a CRI greater than 90 which is perfect for the key lighting of faces, which is exactly how they were used here. The tuneable white ranges from 2,700K – 6,500K.

The CMA Fest FOOTSIE luminaires certainly had their waterproofness tested during the festival as the weather on the final night was seriously soggy! “They took A LOT of direct rain, we left them out there and they just worked flawlessly,” recalled Mike.

Another huge advance for multi-camera environments is that pedestals in the pit, hand-helds and Steadicams onstage can shoot right over the low-profile FOOTSIE luminaires, making no impact on sightlines. “It’s just a brilliant, inspired and highly practical fixture,” enthused Mike.

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Water is removed from the stage before performances during the fourth night of CMA Fest at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tenn. Photo credit Andrew Nelles USA Today Network.

Additionally, he also specified 80 x Robe Spider luminaires on the rig which were installed on 18 x 35 ft vertical towers positioned across the back and around the sides of stage and used for stage washing and for whizzy pixel effects which looked great in all the back-of-camera shots.

On top of 10 of the towers at the back were 10 x Robe FORTE luminaires, six running on RoboSpot followspot systems.

Mike has been a big fan of this system since using them on a Kenny Chesney tour shortly after their launch. "Another great Robe product," he says, referring to both the RoboSpot system and the newer FORTE, currently Robe's most powerful LED moving light.

Mike thinks that Robe as a brand is good at "listening to what designers are discussing and

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wanting, and at responding with excellent products.”

He worked alongside a talented FOH team including lead programmer Mark Butts, and Andre Petrus who took care of the key and audience lighting. They collaborated closely with television lighting director Mark Carver and gaffer Cole Kiracofe to produce a slick and dynamic live experience for country music fans in the stadium and watching on TV.

Fuse’s account handler was Scott Bishop. It was their first time as the CMA Fest lighting vendor, and Mike noted “they did an excellent job,” in addition to making the FOOTSIE investment to ensure that he had the rig he wanted.

“The CMA Fest is an iconic event in the country music and live production industries, and we were thrilled to be a part of it,” said Scott Bishop, Fuse Technical Group.

When Scott and Fuse’s Kevin Forster were asked by Mike to supply the new FOOTSIE luminaires as part of the lighting package, they knew they could count on Robe to deliver an innovative lighting solution. “It was a lot of fun to be one of the first production providers to see the FOOTSIE in action,” Scott added. “It was robust and made a tremendous impact on the stage design.”

CMA Fest has moved away from having large amounts of video onstage in recent years, leaving lighting right at the forefront of the aesthetics.

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Photo credit John Russell Country Music Association

The biggest challenge was the tight time window and no rehearsals, straight in to the first night on Thursday, which even for professionals with the experience and skills of this team was some serious pressure! They did have some pre-viz time, but because it was a festival set up and many artists played special sets, no one was completely sure of what they were getting until the artists were onstage and playing live.

Mike takes all these challenges in stride, commenting that it's also part of the enjoyment. Many of the production team have worked on the project for several years and a great synergy and creative energy exists between everyone across all departments.