Robe Hits the Highway with Billy Strings

Posted on January 23, 2026

Bluegrass musician Billy Strings' 2025 tour, built around his hugely successful 2024 album, *Highway Prayers*, mixed headlining arena and amphitheater dates with festival slots and international shows.

Lighting was designed by Colorado-based Saxton Waller, who chose 37 x Robe iFORTES and 26 x MegaPointes to be at the heart of the lighting rig, which, for the Fall US leg of the tour, was supplied by Bandit Lites out of Nashville.



Photo: Jesse Faatz

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With no video onstage, it was all down to lighting to provide maximum visual impact and reinforce the band’s music and performance.

Saxton had been off the road for a few years immediately before this opportunity came up, although still busy lighting, programming, design engineering, and CAD drawing, but just not touring. However, he was recommended by several sources to the artist’s management team, who wanted a fresh and invigorating look to the lighting that created a presence but kept the focus fully on the music.

“They essentially wanted a proper rock ‘n’ roll light show,” Saxton explained, “complete with all the drama, accents, highs, lows, and general energy. I knew that it was paramount to underscore the sheer musicianship onstage, and I also wanted to introduce a bit of mystery, surprise, and anticipation to the show to help keep fans engaged visually.”



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This raw and direct approach needed bright, dynamic, and multipurpose fixtures, so iFORTES and MegaPointes immediately came to mind, although Saxton did also explore several potential options before making the final choice of fixtures.

Seeking to create an architectural framework for the stage, the idea of 9 diamond-shaped pods evolved, four mid stage flown up high, with five upstage at a lower trim, all made up from custom Tyler truss pieces, and with a projection surface skin stretched across the centers. They were outlined with a linear pixel product.

There were four flown LX trusses, which were made up from general-purpose trussing, with LX1 through 3 having iFORTES and MegaPointes equally spaced out along them.



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These were complemented with a section of GP truss upstage on the floor, along with another

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nine iFORTES behind the band on the deck, which were utilized for projecting gobos, color, and texturing onto the diamond skins, in addition to back lighting the band.

With a certain amount of jamming involved in each performance, lighting very much calls for a busked style of operation with latitude for spontaneity, thinking on the feet, and going with the flow of the music, for which Saxton builds cue stacks that are accessible at any time. Whole sections of these cue stacks included iFORTES and MegaPointes, with around 130 or so looks available to create some complex signature eye candy scenes with all the iFORTES on the rig pointed upstage, complete with a gobo.

The MegaPointes with the frost filter in were used to highlight the band through these giant cyc looks. Saxton operates the console very much like he is playing a musical instrument each night, getting immersed in the rhythm and vibes, and he finds this style of operation extremely invigorating and a great challenge to enjoy, and of course a huge contrast to running the large timecoded EDM shows that he’s also done.



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Before the start of the tour, Saxton conducted an exhaustive shootout between around 16 potential beam and long throw fixtures at Bandit’s Nashville shop, before finally deciding on the iFORTES and MegaPointes.

He knew both fixture types and their capabilities already, and he decided that they were still the best combination to create the right show ambience. “I love Robe’s color mixing system for its consistency, as well as the rotating and indexable gobo packages in both fixtures, so everything else was edged out of the picture!”

He appreciates the color wheel layout, with the “right colors in the right places.”

The set lasts 3 hours, including a 20-minute break in the middle, so that is a lot of show to keep busking, although it’s an MO that comes very naturally to Saxton.



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With a catalogue of hundreds of potential songs that can be played, plus numerous solos and improvisation happening onstage, you must be fully alert and tuned in. Consequently, the lighting canvas is an ever-evolving work that is never quite finished, a living, breathing piece of art that is different and unique each night, mirroring the vibes of the music.

Saxton loves working with musicians of this caliber and is inspired by their talent and dedication to producing incredible, breathtaking, and memorable shows that are different every night.

It has also caught the eyes of others, as Bandit has been nominated for a 2025 Parnelli Award for its work with the Billy Strings tour.

Photos: By Jesse Faatz

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