



On Stage and Behind Closed Doors

GEORGE & TAMMY

BY JONAH MARKOWITZ, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

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Often, when confronting a new project and meeting the writer, director or creator, one of the first things I am interested in discerning is how “real” they want to film or series to be. I often do period work, and with little exception, it has been based on real people or events. This is a particularly important question. Sometimes a project calls for meticulous recreation, but often, others beg for interpretation. This series wasn’t just a true story, it was a story of two megastars—a couple that a huge part of this country grew up listening to. So, one of the first conceptual questions was—OK—how close to all of the well-documented spaces they performed and lived in does the production want to be, and how much can we use the design instead to inform the story? I feel like I always walk a fine line between verisimilitude and stylization on these projects, and based on Abe Sylvia’s scripts, I knew that this would require both approaches to pull off.

It was clear this would be the first thing to bring up in ascertaining if I was the right designer to collaborate on this ambitious challenge. Luckily, when I met Abe Sylvia and John Hillcoat, I quickly learned we were on the same page—neither of them wanted to make a replica. It was important for the story to be accurate, particularly in the public spaces the subjects performed and recorded in, but they also wanted to build a visual world that told the story of who Tammy and George were out of the spotlight. We were going to dutifully recreate the performances and the things viewers knew and saw collectively as a culture, but we were going to dig deeper and also show a side and a narrative of these characters that America didn’t see. And with this portion, we all agreed to not try to make a facsimile, and that telling their story in the best way possible was the true way to do right by them, as well as for the audience.

Inspiration came from an encounter early in preproduction. Production Designers don’t always get to have a lot of collaboration with actors, but on this project, I was lucky enough to have early contact that helped shape the design. Jessica Chastain and Michael Shannon came into the stages very early to do a rehearsal and some camera tests. By the time I saw them sing together, Jessica had been developing this project and preparing for this role for over a decade, and Michael had been on for a long while as well. It was obviously inspiring and spectacular. But seeing them sing together, I realized that they were walking this same line. They sang everything live and it was captivating. But no one is going to sound like Tammy Wynette or George Jones. It became clear watching them that instead, we were telling the story through song, telling a story about this massive love affair. Their chemistry really shook me—not just when they were performing but what happened before and after they sang. Just like George and Tammy—there was this dance between the spotlight and the shadows—but it was a continuous, unending dance. It would be my job to make sure the world they were in supported this—showing the performances and the things the public saw to some degree, but equally focusing on what was happening behind closed doors and how they changed as people through three decades.

A. GEORGE AT FIRST LADY ACRES. TAMMY’S LEGENDARY HOME. SHOT ON LOCATION IN WILMINGTON, NC. THIS BEAUTIFUL MID-CENTURY LOCATION PROVIDED PERFECT ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS TO COMPLEMENT OUR LANGUAGE OF FRAMES WITHIN FRAMES. PRODUCTION STILL COURTESY OF SHOWTIME.



A. GRAND OLE OPRY STAGE. PRODUCTION STILL BY DANA HAWLEY.

B. NASHVILLE RECORD STORE. SET PHOTO.

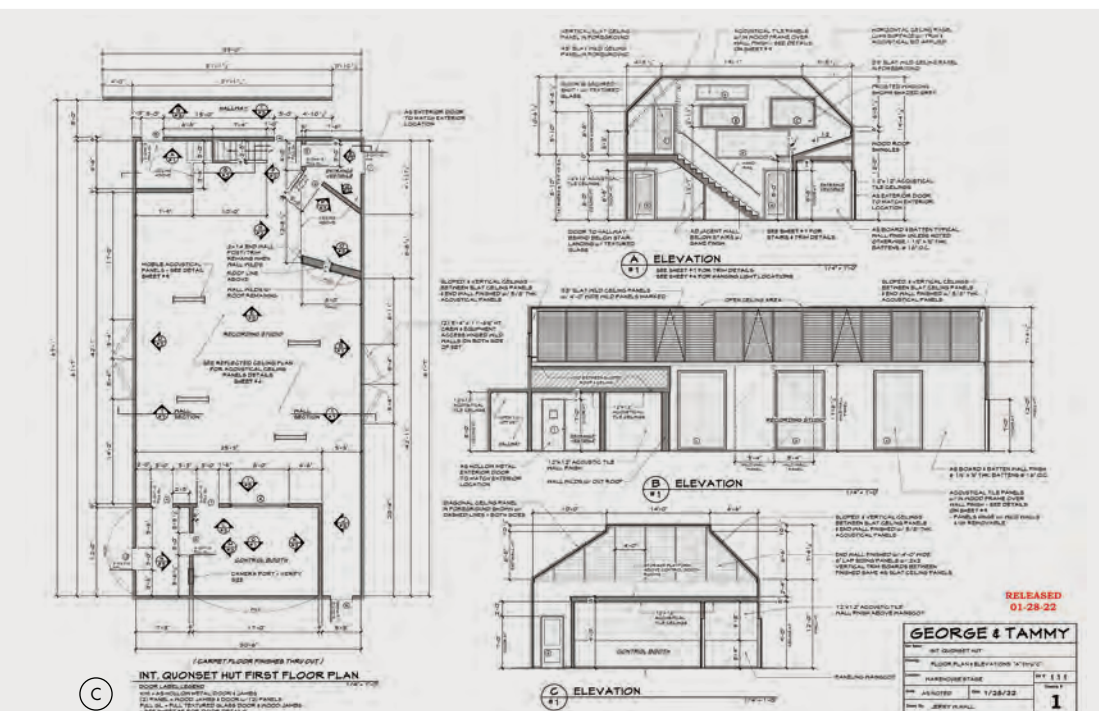
C. THE QUONSET HUT RECORDING STUDIO. PLAN AND ELEVATIONS BY JERRY HALL.

D. COLOR STUDY FOR QUONSET HUT INTERIOR BUILT ON SOUND STAGE IN WILMINGTON, NC.

E-G. THE QUONSET HUT. PRODUCTION STILLS BY DANA HAWLEY.

Early on, I knew I was going to get the freedom to interpret the script and that my team and I would really get to bring everything we had to help tell this personal story. Set decorator James V. Kent and I met often about this approach. As James explains: “My collaboration with Jonah is a very organic process. It starts with conversations about the script and story, the characters, and our different perceptions of who these people are and the world they inhabit... In some ways, this is an opera. It’s a tragedy, an epic love story about two people whose lives were forever intertwined but who were doomed by their own flaws to ever succeed as a happy couple.” We always kept the real, human relationship at the forefront of our design and decoration choices.

Another department I don’t often get to collaborate with is the music department, but that was another great resource of inspiration. Abe’s scripts were so wonderfully written, and the interplay between the plot and the songs they were singing in each episode was sublime. If I ever needed to zero in or refocus on what was really happening in a scene, I could always play the songs that were in that scene or episode, or talk to Abe, John, Jessica or Rachel Rusch (music producer) about the lyrics or the story behind the scene. For all the creative builders on this project, this was a guiding light for where we were at in the story if we ever got lost.



Quonset Hut Color Study - Ep 101-103



Historical Reference.



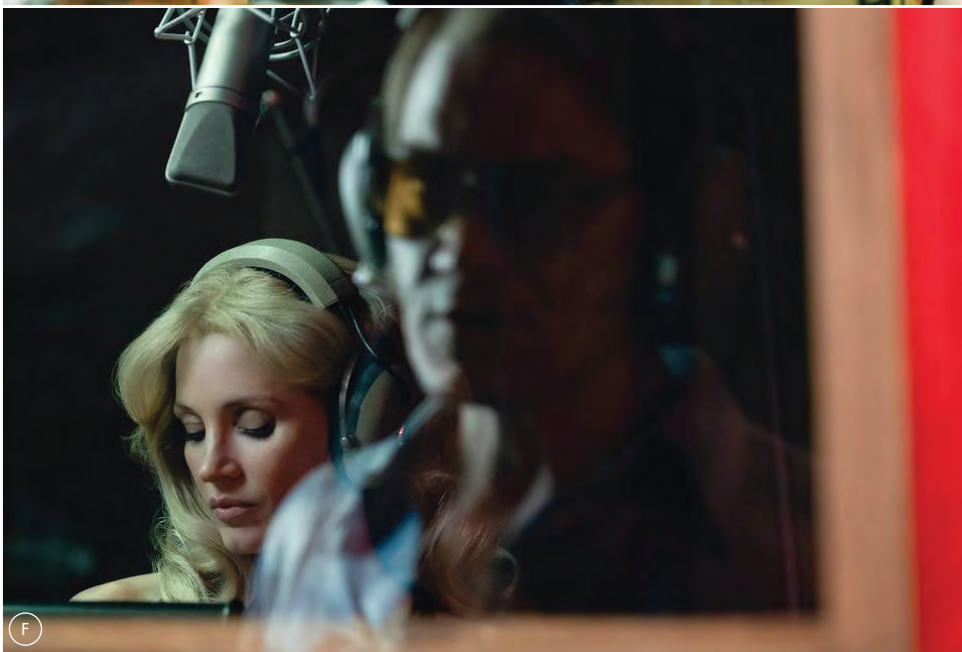
Color Ref



Ceiling Ref

Getting It Done:

The creative team was in agreement—the design in their personal lives would serve as metaphor for character progression as opposed to a recreation of known images and events. But there was still an enormous amount of research to be done to tell the public side of this story that spanned forty years and had dozens of musical numbers. We weren't just doing private spaces that we could decide to interpret, we were also doing sets like the Grand Old Opry and many musical performances that would have to be recreated. Like any Art Department, there were boards and boards of photos on the walls—filling every office and spilling out into every hallway. Art Director Amanda Knehans was hugely valuable in guiding this meticulous research, as she was with every part of this process. I always think Art Departments are lucky to work in perhaps one of the last visually analog workspaces left in the world. But not all the research was visual. Georgette Jones, Tammy's daughter, was an enormous help—she would talk to the team at length about whatever we asked—where her mom liked to ride in the tour bus, what it felt like to be backstage at the different shows, how her mom was a star and still made dinner every night. These are many of the things that we keyed off to inform the design process—real human moments and the juxtaposition with that of celebrity.



Proposed Rendering



Proposed Color Palette





Another wonderful collaboration was with the cinematographer Igor Martinovic. One way we wanted to visually highlight the public vs. private theme of the series was to lean heavily into reflections and frames within frames. I developed some ideas for how the design could interact with, prepare for, and inform him and his departments' own language. One place we really used this was in the stage build of the iconic Quonset Hut recording studio in Nashville, where countless country and rock legends have recorded albums. It's an iconic place in country music history and the show really did come very close to what was originally there. But we added something to help with this theme that was a perfect mix of design and camerawork. In the '60s there was reference of acoustic dividers in the studio—simple wood frames with batting and burlap that separated the different artists when they recorded. We embraced these but with a change—we added glass panels at head height which were installed at a 45-degree angle, as well as a huge window to the control—both so that whenever George and Tammy were recording—either in a duet or singing

solo while the other listens, you could see both of them in frame via one of these reflective planes. It created a beautiful motif—whenever they were in the studio—a collaboration more successful than their love or family life, they were always in the frame together. It worked best in my favorite musical number of the series—“He Stopped Loving Her Today,” where the whole scene plays out entirely within these planes of glass.

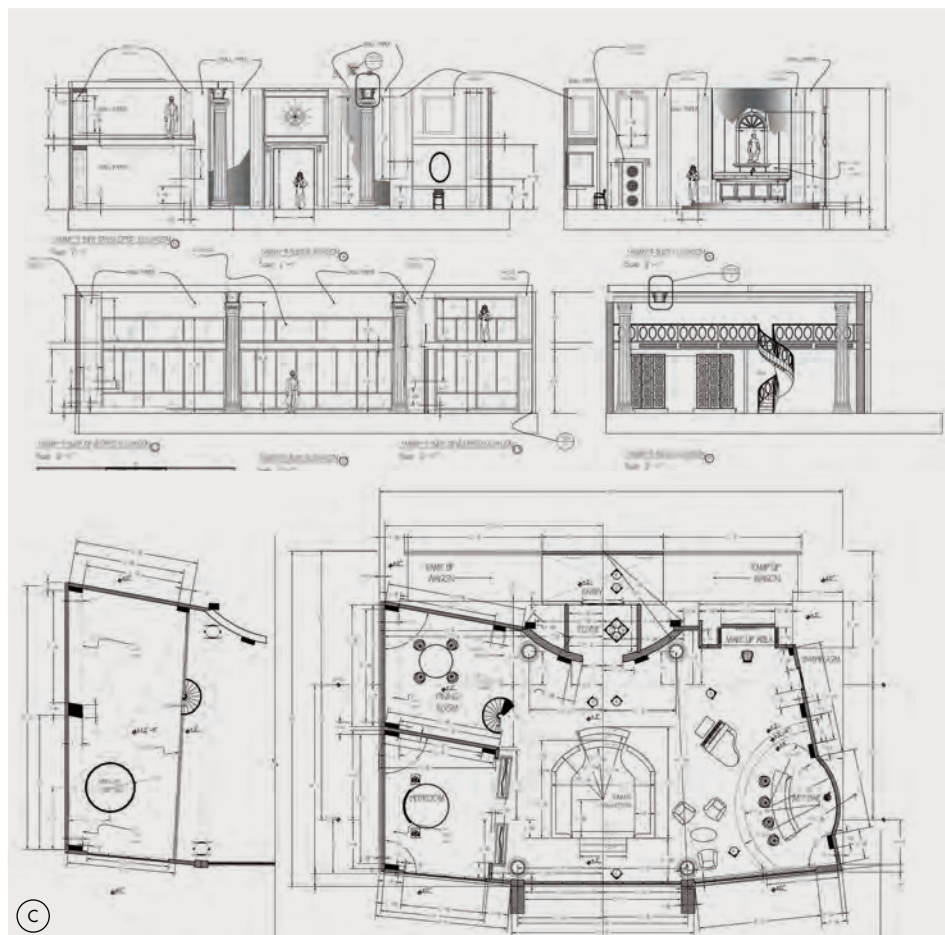
A. “TILL I GET IT RIGHT” PERFORMANCE. PRODUCTION STILL COURTESY OF SHOWTIME.

B. “TILL I GET IT RIGHT” PERFORMANCE. PRODUCTION STILL BY DANA HAWLEY. THIS MUSICAL NUMBER WAS HEAVILY BASED ON RESEARCH OF AN ACTUAL PERFORMANCE.

C. VEGAS PENTHOUSE. PLAN AND ELEVATIONS BY KEVIN HARDISON.

D. VEGAS PENTHOUSE SUITE. SET SKETCH BY JONAH MARKOWITZ.

E. & F. VEGAS PENTHOUSE SUITE. SET PHOTOS.



As their lives separated, these reflections were used to isolate them, as in two particularly heavy scenes where both Tammy and George deal with their substance abuse. Tammy's bathroom/dressing room was an important set in her legendary home First Lady Acres. It's where she retreats in private and where she falls into Richey's web of manipulation. The crew installed a double mirror behind her and shot through it, so there was an infinity effect of mirrors in front of and behind her. Thanks to the two-way mirror, it was all done in camera—without the need for VFX, creating an image that showed a fractured, fragmented, tortured soul. Similarly, when George is in Nudie's tailor shop, he's constantly framed by the mannequins in the shop—inanimate representations of fame that surround and torment him. The production shot in mirrors and through glass almost daily, but one set that pushed this concept to the limit was on the musical number "Till I Get It Right." The set was just mirrors and a multi-tiered platform on a black stage—Tammy is glamorous, successful and powerful—yet completely alone.

Another way the series showed their separation and loneliness was by using scale. The Landmark penthouse suite was definitely high on the list of the team's favorite sets. But here was an instance where we leaned away from the real in order to highlight what was happening between the two—again rooting the design in the progression of our characters and their love story. Of course, it's a fabulous set—it's a 1972 Vegas penthouse, but it wasn't just visual. People often underestimate how hermeneutic our job as designers, Art Directors, decorators and everyone in the departments we work with is. When I really studied the scenes that unfolded there, I realized that this was the most alone that Tammy ever was—a real turning point. She and George were invited to be the first country headliners in Vegas, and he didn't show up. I wanted her to be the most out of place she would ever be visually in the series. The color palette and the decoration were much different than their fabulous but grounded residences. But more than that, the size of the room is what I knew would really drive this home. I wanted her to feel tiny in this room—swallowed up by it. She's got the world



(D) Landmark / Tammy's Suite



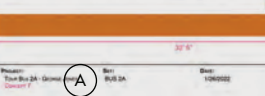
109 BUS 2A George's New Bus Shoots 3/22
(changed over from George & Tammy's Bus 2B)

BUS #2A GEORGE'S NEW BUS - INT. AND EXT.

1.41 EXT. KNOXVILLE PARKING LOT - NIGHT (MAY) GEORGE'S SPANNING NEW BUS
After the show, Tammy looks her sleeping get into the back seat of her
a parking new bus and up to her George.

1.42 INT. STAGE - NIGHT (MAY)
George's heart beats in fear with the wretched expert, the life alone.
Clamping out the window, up to the ceiling of the wretched
Pammy's pointed George is a lot of articles.

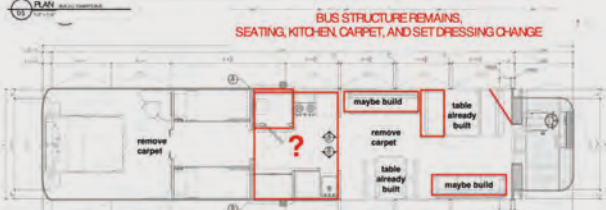
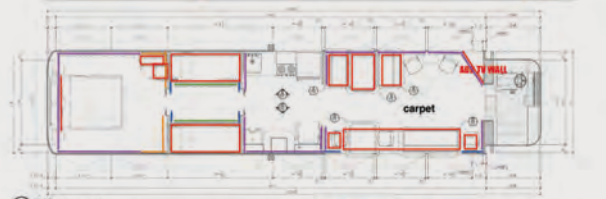
1.43 INT. STAGE - NIGHT (MAY)
George and the other two are stuck off their seats.
Behind them, down the long bus hall, seated on the edge of the bus
in the Presidential Suite we see a solitary figure, Tammy, contemplating



Area: 9' 2" x 1' 10"



KEY:
BUS 2C — BECOMES — BUS 1
TAMMY'S BUS — GEORGE'S 1ST BUS
MARCH 15-16 — MARCH 21
CHANGE OUT SECTION AS INDICATED & RE-DRESS



BUS STRUCTURE REMAINS, SEATING, KITCHEN, CARPET, AND SET DRESSING CHANGE

remove carpet

maybe build

table already built

remove carpet

table already built

maybe build



GEORGE & TAMMY

INT. TOUR BUSES

BUS 2C & BUS 1

RENDER 4

AS NOTED

DATE: 10/11/00

BY: BRIAN BAKER

00

at her feet but she's the smallest she has ever been. Research of the Landmark showed the real size of the suites. I quadrupled it and added a level.

Similarly, there were instances where the sets were tiny by most standards, and intentionally so. Specifically—the tour buses. Between interiors and exteriors, the Art Department had eleven buses to design. That was its own challenge. We quickly realized that we couldn't shoot on actual bus frames—Michael is 6'–3." But more than that, there were major scenes happening here—turning points, scenes with conflict, many with multiple characters. I asked Abe why so many of these long, important scenes were playing out in such tiny spaces—just making sure that this was what he wanted. He explained that in his research and conversations with Georgette, he learned that when one is living on the road, many of these important moments do happen on the buses. So, then the challenge became making them feel small but still be shootable. The crew welded frames with removable panels to help light and shoot and made the busses slightly oversized to accommodate the actors and the crew. Then the shooting schedule came out. The production would have to shoot four of the 1960s buses back-to-back. But we only had space to build two. Denise Hudson, the Supervising Art Director, aptly said: "Eleven buses? On this schedule? Impossible. Let's do it." She came



up with a way to flip one bus while the other was shooting and it resulted in an almost theatrical forty-eight hours as if we were changing the scenery during a live performance. The drapery department, led by the incredible Jen Sluk, upholstered over seventy-five panels and they, along with construction, set decoration and VFX, did a two-day dance around the shooting crew to pull it off.

After the cinematographer, creator, director and I had basic theories on our approach to the “reality” of our world, as well as how the composition would work and how we would use scale, it was now time to think about what’s always the real launching pad for me to start seeing the uniqueness of any project—the palette. We all knew that we wanted to show this story in a new way, and I was well aware that I had to bring that desire for novelty to the color story. One thing I’ve been more and more comfortable doing as I continue to design period projects is to resist anything remotely cliché—the low hanging fruit, at every turn. The majority of the series takes place in the ’70s, but I didn’t want to have the series be dominated by oranges, browns and greens—colors that are more prevalent in recollection and communal representation of the period than in reality. Instead, we used many colors that were just as prevalent, but somehow don’t get chosen anymore. Teal, fuchsia, pink, primary colors, fluorescents. It was daunting, different

and incredibly refreshing. I developed a close relationship with the wonderfully talented costume designer, Mitchell Travers, and would often go to his warehouse for inspiration. I remember the first week of shooting—looking at dailies—there was a scene that, between the two of us paired primary red, teal and bright pink. It just wasn’t what is usually used for this period. It was a big leap for me. I asked him how it made him feel. He just said excited. Which was exactly what I needed to hear.

And that sums up what this project was like, very exciting and incredibly collaborative. Everyone worked together on such a major scale and all added to what is a unique and original take on George Jones and Tammy Wynette, the American south, the country music industry, the poetry of country music, and most of all, love. The work of everyone in the art, set decoration, construction, paint, drapery and props departments informed and was informed by every other department and we all quickly saw how special the fruit of this collaboration was. Having these guiding themes and approaches from the beginning is sometimes a luxury, but always worth it. We were all so proud when we saw what we helped to make. I can only hope to have more collaborations this rewarding, and more crews this talented in the future. **ADG**

Jonah Markowitz,
Production Designer
Denise Hudson,
Amanda Knehans,
Supervising Art Directors
Brian Baker, Bill King,
Assistant Art Directors
Jerry W. Hall,
Kevin Hardison,
Set Designers
Chad Fogland,
Graphic Artist
James V. Kent,
Set Decorator

A. TOUR BUSES RESEARCH BOARD. ONE OF THE MANY METICULOUS BREAKDOWNS THE TALENTED ART DIRECTORS DID TO CONQUER “THE BUSSES.”

B. TOUR BUSES. PLANS AND REFERENCE BY BRIAN BAKER.

C. TAMMY’S HOSPITAL ROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

D. TAMMY’S BATHROOM AT FIRST LADY ACRES. PRODUCTION STILL COURTESY OF SHOWTIME. DEMONSTRATES THE USE OF THE TWO-WAY MIRROR TO ACCOMPLISH THE INFINITY EFFECT IN CAMERA.

