

# Lighting in the Rock'n Roll Business

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Mention the Rock'n Roll industry to the theatre lighting purist and you are likely to find his pre-conceived notions on the subject are of long haired hippies who do not know one end of a pattern 23 from the other. In fact nothing could be further from the truth.

The popular music industry relies very heavily on live concerts by its artists to promote record sales and consequently there exists a highly professional international industry to organise and support tours.

Only a handful of bands actually own their own lighting and sound systems. The normal procedure when an act is to go on tour is for the promoters (recording companies) to approach the major rental companies and ask them to produce a set design from a given brief, to a particular budget. This will cover most aspects of the required stage craft and involve a detailed knowledge of the venues, stage machinery, lighting and control, sound, transport, manning and accommodation not to mention financial planning.

The cost of running a major tour is high and the schedule for most tours is pretty gruelling by any standards. Typically a tour involving a main band with a supporting act would start a tour in, say, Bristol on a Tuesday night with back to back 'gigs' in Bournemouth, Brighton, Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, then the Hammersmith Odeon for 3 days—and on to Scandinavia, Europe, then to the USA or even Japan. Because of the need to amortise the tour overheads over as many venues as possible, in the shortest possible time, the rental companies have to be highly disciplined and efficient. This and the promoter's need for new and bigger stage effects has dictated the development of the industry and the products that it uses.

The current state of the art is summarised by Richard Dale, the Managing Director of RDE, one of the foremost UK rental companies.

"We have recently completed a tour for John Miles, where a 30 foot model of Concorde, incorporating aircraft landing lights, cockpit lights etc and back

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John Miles — on tour — 160 lamps on 3 truss rig.

projected moving clouds were used on the show. As well as all the standard effects—160 × 1kW lamp rig, smoke, dry ice and thunder flashes. We often try to develop a visual connection with the artists product and this very often ties in with album sleeves, designs etc. The company incorporates both lighting designers and set designers and we use the services of local set builders as well as our own team to build the models for the creations. Having discussed with the client the concepts of their music, a design is taken to model form and, if approved passed over to the set builder for construction. Most major tours require a good deal of rehearsal time to get all the various elements of the show right, from lighting cues, to set changes.

Because of the client's need to impress the industry and constantly improve on past performances the emphasis is always on more technological inventiveness and imagination in designs. This often leads to some pretty outlandish constructions being toured on a night to night basis. As a result the industry has had to develop its own efficient and fast rigging techniques which are generally far in advance of conventional theatre practice."

The first development of lighting control systems specifically for this industry was some 13 years ago. At that time Electrosonic Ltd. was approached by *The Who* rock band and asked—to produce a 24 way 2 preset 2kW a channel touring dimmer board complete with special effects such as sound to light control, chasers etc., all to be capable of being driven from a 13A power supply! After explaining the difficulties due to Ohm's Law, a system design was undertaken. At that time Electrosonic were in the enviable position of manufacturing Thyristor dimmers and controls—mainly

for other manufacturers in the industry—but with no deep rooted pre-conceived ideas to restrict the design team. Therefore a degree of lateral thinking, together with a high standard of electronic design capability within the company resulted in a product that the client actually wanted and more to the point was reliable. The dimmer board is still in active use today!

The first professional rental companies for Rock'n Roll were formed around this time. John Brown started his company E.S.P.—which became the biggest and best known lighting rental company for several years—the formula at that time being very simple. Win the contract from one or two major rock band tours, arrange for the band (or its recording company) to finance the purchase of the major capital equipment, on the understanding that the rental company operates the equipment and when the band is not using the equipment, hire out the equipment and your services to other bands and acts and give back a royalty to the original owners of the equipment. Thereby obtaining the maximum usage of the equipment and maintaining the key staff of the rental company. Any excess profits being ploughed back into capital equipment purchase for the rental companies stock. That way ESP were able to expand and develop packages for dimmers, control desks, luminaires and rigs.

As the demand grew for bigger and better systems, so did the need for standardisation and compatibility.

## Luminaires

The first area of standardisation was to be the luminaires. Here lamp source dictated the luminaire. The PAR 64 1000W 110V had been used in the USA as beam lights to great effect and was first introduced in the UK by ESP in 1968. This lamp is still the standard today—although until quite recently only 110V lamps were available—and were used on series pairs.