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Classic Gear: The Birdie

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

At a time when it often seems as if every new lighting product is bigger than the one before, it is perhaps instructive to cast an eye back to a light created entirely for lack of size, and even named for it: the Birdie, christened by a golfing fan for being one under the industry-standard PAR can . . .

Now a standard fixture in any theatre lighting rig that needs a tiny light source hidden in scenery or located on the front of the stage, the Birdie was actually born out of the burgeoning trade show industry of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Leading design and presentation company Imagination was one of the pioneers of bringing theatrical-style presentation to corporate events. The company's contract with Ford saw Imagination lighting all of the car manufacturer's UK and European motor shows; Imagination's lighting designer Andrew Bridge used PAR 64 cans as the centrepiece of his design since they were powerful, lightweight and reliable with a good lamp life.

While the big PAR cans lit the stands, Bridge also needed to light the display panels within the stands. Originally he used track-mounted PAR 38s, but the arrival of the compact reflector MR16 lamps offered a versatile new lightsource. In pondering a housing for the new lamp, Bridge wondered whether fitting it into a tiny, scaled-down clone of the big PAR cans would allow him to replace the track lighting with a fixture that visually matched the rest of the rig.

Bridge persuaded Howard Eaton - surely the leading candidate for 'classic electrician' should that column ever appear - to build some



photo: Doughty Engineering.

prototypes. The final product was a perfect miniature of a PAR 64, complete with removable back for lamp changes, yoke, colour runners and even a tiny colour frame. Made in silver, black and eventually a whole rainbow of colours, designed into Ford stands by the hundred, Imagination needed a name in order to detail the product on equipment lists and carnets; the tiny light was christened by production manager/electrician and golf fanatic Jack Raby . . .

The little light quickly spread to other productions and to new uses. Another lighting designer, Patrick Woodroffe, saw them and realised they made possible an idea he'd been toying with to help pre-light rock-and-roll shows: a studio where a set model could be lit with a scaled-down version of the lighting rig. The Birdie was fractionally larger than the quarter-scale Four To One Studio would work at, but it was close enough and, with its interchangeable MR16 lamps, able to match the beam angles available from the bigger PAR lamps; LSD even made up touring six-lamp Birdie bars for the studio.

Now the Birdie copies its bigger brother in many ways - available as a short-nose version, and with a whole range of accessories such as top hats, barndoors and more. They've been around long enough to be everywhere, most venues having at least a handful tucked away somewhere. And they're ready for the future, to provide the same compact, robust housing to a new generation of LED-based M16 replacement lamps . . .

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