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Classic Gear: Catalyst

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

Sometimes the classic you make isn't always quite the product you set out to make. Take Catalyst. You know it now as a media server, the first to arrive at this intersection of lighting and video, a pointer to the future we now inhabit.

But the media server is only half the story. Originally it was an attempt by lighting designer and inventor Peter Wynne-Willson - creator of liquid light shows and a number of other classic lighting tools that we somehow just haven't got to yet in this column - to completely redefine the lighting fixture, freeing it from the physical limitations of a 16-colour scroller or a six-slot gobo wheel to create a tool that could project light anywhere, in any colour, with any image - still or moving.

The inspiration came from a multi-function space on a cruise ship that Wynne-Willson and his partner, the late Tony Gottelier, were designing. It would have a video projector to show sports when the space was used as a bar. But, he wondered, could that projector not do double duty as a lighting effect when the space was used as a disco?

Step one was to take the double-mirror orbiting head he had already designed and licensed to Coemar, which avoided the limited field of view of traditional moving mirror lights, and graft it

onto the front of the projector. But, that achieved, how to control what came out of the projector?

An introduction was made to Richard Bleasdale, a software programmer whose SAMSC was already well established as the glue binding together lighting, moving lights, audio, video and more on shows of ever-increasing complexity. Bleasdale created software that could select, combine and, in numerous ways, manipulate video images under DMX control - as if the projector were just a (complex!) moving light: what we now call a media server.

Put mirror and software together, and you had Catalyst. It had a sneak preview at *Showlight* in the summer of 2001, then collected awards during the autumn trade show season. Though we'd been teased with video-as-lighting before in LSD's Icon-M moving light, this was clearly the future . . .

But for Catalyst, life took a slightly different turn. While the orbiting head was useful, the real power was in the software. As a projection tool for live entertainment its appeal was compelling whether you were a lighting designer wanting to control all the visuals, or a projection designer now able to respond in real time as a show was created, free from the constraints of slides and film.

And the timing co-incident well with another technological shift: the rise of the LED. As designers built these into complex arrays, traditional lighting consoles struggled to cope. But a pixel is a pixel whether its in a video projector or in an LED array; with a little adaptation Catalyst, the software, became a powerful tool for controlling those, too.

The software is still going strong - High End Systems sold Catalyst originally, but Richard Bleasdale ultimately bought the software back from them and continues to develop it. It is a classic that created a category (one that now gives it a lot of competition) and arguably redefined the way visuals are composed in live event production. Not a bad outcome - even if not quite the one originally planned.

We will doubtless eventually get to the day when our lighting fixtures are really video fixtures, able to project anything for us. Just not quite yet . . .

Catalyst: > <http://samsc.com>

Peter Wynne-Willson:

> <http://peterwynnewillson.com/products/catalyst.html>



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