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ALPHA MALES

Clay Paky, once the acknowledged kings of disco lighting with classic fixture designs such as the Golden Scan and the AstroRaggi, has recently reinvented and reinvigorated its market presence with the much-discussed Alpha Series of luminaires. Sarah Rushton-Read travelled to the company's base in Bergamo, Italy, to find out more . . .

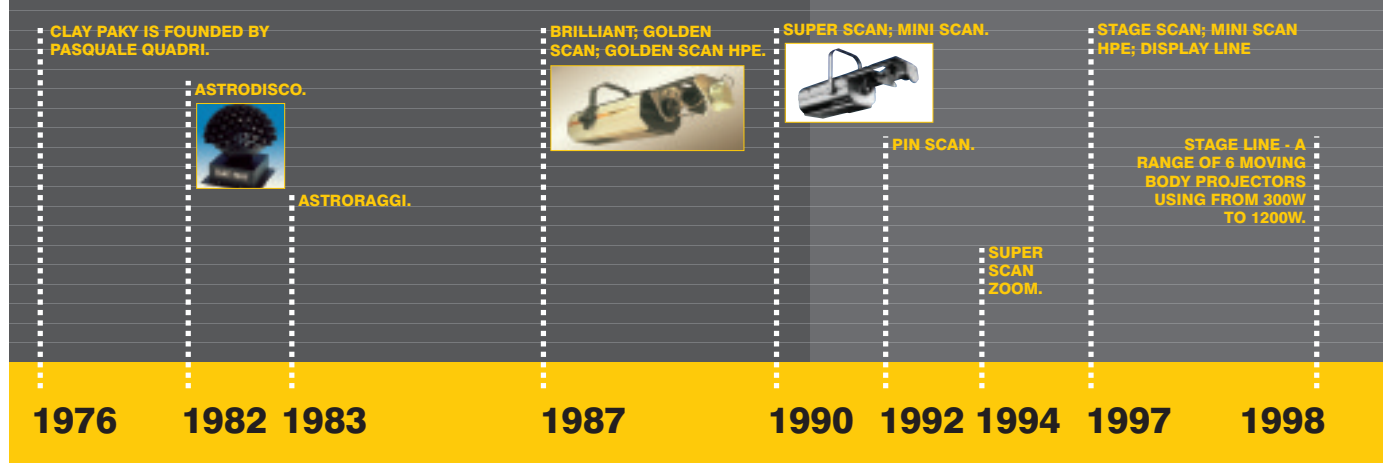
Until a few years ago, mention Italian lighting manufacturer Clay Paky to me and what immediately sprang to mind was up-market, dynamic disco and club lighting and, perhaps more specifically, the once-ubiquitous Golden Scan. Showing my age I know, but in my defence is the fact that Clay Paky products were supremely memorable.

Clay Paky's approach to lighting fixture design set it apart from other manufacturers and revolutionised the disco and club scene during

the 70s and 80s. It also provided the early inspiration for the style of many of the dynamic rock and roll lighting designs we see today. Back then, every self-respecting hire company, super club, disco or cruise ship the world over had Clay Paky in its stock or rig.

More recently, the company has launched another lighting coup and, in the process, substantially revitalised its own image. Today, when I hear the name Clay Paky I no longer think of disco, but of the award-winning Alpha Series of professional moving heads and in particular the ground-breaking Alpha Beams.

TIMELINE OF CLAY PAKY





Above: Clay Paky headquarters.

Facing page: Key members of the Clay Paky team, L-R: Davide Barbetta (marketing), Roberto Midali (R&D), Pio Nahum (sales & marketing), Angelo Cavenati (R&D), Pasquale Quadri (president), Marco Zucchinalli (customer support), Enrico Caironi (customer relations), Valter Rossi (manufacturing) and Aris Quadri (R&D).

The Alpha Series incorporates wash, spot and beam lights, in discharge and halogen sources, ranging from 300W - 1500W. In a remarkably short space of time these products have made a substantial impact on what, at present, is an ever-changing market, having been used on everything from the Olympic Games in Beijing and Tina Turner's recent world tour to West End shows such as *Oliver!* and plenty more besides.

In fact, the Alpha range is as popular with hire companies and lighting designers as the Scan series was to clubs and cruise ships in its time. Its appeal is across all sectors, from rock and roll to television, from theatre to events and festivals. This is no mean feat, given the level of established competition around in professional lighting, never mind the fierce brand loyalties that have often dominated many a designer's decision.

Of course, many companies change their strategy, develop new markets and create new products - there's nothing so remarkable about that, it's the nature of running a business. Nowhere is this more true than in entertainment product development - a market that lies on the border between

emerging technology and fashion - where we're constantly looking to thrill our audiences anew.

No, what is remarkable about Clay Paky's change in direction is that it was made directly after the devastating events of 9/11. As most businesses battened down their balance sheet hatches and prepared to weather the market storm, Clay Paky set sail on stormy economic and political seas to invest in new technology and pursue new innovative concepts in design philosophy.

So what drove this brave, some may say foolhardy, strategy? The answer is the leadership and insight of Clay Paky's founder and managing director, Pasquale Quadri - known simply as Paky to his friends and colleagues. His inspired business foresight allowed the company to deliver a completely new product concept to market, at just the right time, somehow filling a niche that became obvious only after its launch.

This kind of confident, speculative investment, particularly in a harsh economic climate, does tend to come from smaller, privately-owned companies, where the passion and

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2004 RAIN SPOT 575.

2006 ALPHA RANGE - A SERIES OF 575W MOVING BODY PROJECTORS: ALPHA SPOT HPE, ALPHA SPOT AND ALPHA WASH.

2008 ALPHA 1500 SERIES.

2009 ALPHA 700 SERIES.



engagement with the product and company philosophy can take precedence over the bottom line.

In Clay Paky's case, this has a great deal to do with the fact that not only is Paky the founder and managing director of the company, he is the beating heart and soul of it: his presence resonates down every corridor, through every process, in every employee mindset - and, of course, in every product designed: did I mention he's also head of R&D?

Not that he's a megalomaniac. He just has an extremely clear vision for the future and has set the strategy accordingly. This kind of vision provides the motivation and inspiration he, along with everyone else in the company, requires.

So where did this passion for lighting start? In 1972 Paky was a big fan of clubbing and music. Not an easy passion to satisfy given that he grew up in the medieval, Catholic church-run, northern Italian town of Bergamo, where nightclubs were banned (and still are).

Paky was clearly no conformist and learned to swim against the tide from an early age. In the 70s Clay Paky was one of the first manufacturers in the world to produce lighting effects and colour changers. The company exploited rapid advances in lighting technology, not just in the disco and club market but in all sectors of the entertainment and show business world. Its portfolio of fixtures grew and with them the applications and markets they were sold into.

From 1972 to 1992, Clay Paky was responsible for bringing sexy, spinning classics such as the AstroDisco - a single

lamp in a multi-lens unit producing multiple beams of moving light; the AstroRaggi, which is still copied today, and of course the then omnipresent Golden Scan, which established itself as the world's most popular and best-selling mirror projector on the market. Today the Golden Scan is actually identified as one of the most prevalent lighting items bought on eBay and many still remain in numerous hire companies' rental stock. (For a trip down memory lane just search for 'Clay Paky' on YouTube and check out the retro disco effects!)

In 1988 Clay Paky was the first lighting company to implement micro-stepping motor technology, using electronics from Pulsar Light of Cambridge in the Golden Scan. It was a real milestone in the show lighting industry which, around 1993 and beyond, allowed Clay Paky to break into more demanding lighting applications, including theatre, TV, architecture and events.

To fit this new market segmentation, Clay Paky's product offering had to become more articulated; so, about the same time came the Super Scan, the Mini Scans, the pioneering Super Scan Zoom - the first projector with a CMY system that was equipped with a variable focal length for light beams - and Shadow, one of the first intelligent followspots on the international stage. Not long after that came the Stage Scan with a multitude of graphic effects, whilst the Display Line introduced similar lighting technology into the architectural sector.

As moving lighting manufacturers established their foothold and vied for the top slot, Clay Paky began to produce moving body projectors for professional use. The Stage Line was born and this

introduced another first - a real framing system on four focus levels.

However, competition was strong and the playing field was not always even. It wasn't until the advent of the Alpha range that Clay Paky's name was again in the market's proverbial lights.

Pio Nahum, commercial and marketing director, who returned to Clay Paky in January this year after successful directorship roles at both Martin Professional and Targetti Poulsen, says: "When I returned to Clay Paky, I found the Alpha Series was the perfect foundation to start a new marketing and international distribution effort. Clay Paky's leadership had been challenged over the years, but today the scenario is changing. Some of the major competitors have disappeared and some are less aggressive - there's room for growth. We're in a good position to strengthen the brand and create more awareness and confidence in our product range."

Another perceived benefit for Nahum is the size of the company - medium for this industry but small in relation to the rest for the world. As he says: "It means we can react fast, almost overnight, and have a very effective time to market."

However, the level of product development investment required to develop the Alpha Series has been considerable. Paky explains: "Every season we launch new models in the Alpha range. Each new fixture offers something fresh and innovative in function, yet each retains the strong identity of the Alpha family. From the beginning of this project my idea has been driven by a desire to match our products with true market needs, to offer a constant drip-feed of updated and improved merchandise



Facing page, from left:
Clay Paky president Pasquale Quadri.
R&D manager Angelo Cavenati.

This page, left: The factory floor.

Above, general secretary Piera Imberti and Enrico Caironi hold the PLASA Award for Innovation which the company won in 2008 for the Alpha Beam 300.

whilst still fitting in with the original concept of the Alpha family - that is to maximize light output and effect from the smallest, quietest, most efficient fixture possible."

The company has also responded to customer desire for energy efficiency, as Nahum says: "Many manufacturing companies are looking to achieve energy-

savings in products through LEDs. What Clay Paky is demonstrating to the world is that you can considerably improve the efficiency of luminaires by employing conventional lamps with more effective optics and electronics. We are now getting the same output from a 700W lamp as others get for a 1200W, and from a 300W as from a 575W - proving you can massively

improve light output and energy consumption, without the need to move to a totally new technology."

Having said that, it doesn't mean the company is not looking at LEDs: Paky elaborates: "We're taking our time. At the moment we're still in research rather than development. We feel LEDs are mature for



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general lighting applications but not yet impressive enough for entertainment. Our business is all about the wow factor - about power, impact, emotion, surprise - we need to do more than just add some colour and light to a situation if we are to electrify our audiences."

This the company consistently achieves with almost 20 different products in the Alpha range. Paky's unwavering confidence and support for his team of engineers and designers, through some challenging times, has allowed the company to confront its competition at the highest levels of the professional entertainment lighting arena. "For the first time in a long time we believe Clay Paky is the company that others will follow, we are no longer the followers. Now we're setting the standard for future development," says Paky.

Of course, a great product is never the end of the business success story. The hard work really starts when you have to re-enter a market in a new incarnation, dispel entrenched attitudes, crack staunch and established brand loyalties and persuade designers, hire companies and end users alike to stock and specify your products.

So how did Clay Paky change the industry's perception of it as a disco and club lighting manufacturer and establish the Alpha Range in the market, so quickly? Enrico Caironi, corporate marketing advisor explains: "Basically, we started opening our ears and listening to the lighting designers and end users. We took a long, hard look at what qualities ensured the success of flagship, popular products and



Olympics 2008, Beijing.

reflected on the main values of the Clay Paky brand - those being excellent optics, reliable, efficient electronics and good relationships with our customers. Armed with plenty of feedback from LDs and end users we looked at the aspects of lighting technology that we felt had room for further development and created a new wave of design and function."

Nahum also stresses that effective product distribution also has a big part to play: "The big strength for any company is in the success of its distribution network and its relationships with end users. We have an established and loyal network throughout the world. In recent times, for various reasons, the playing field has levelled and today sales are much more about the end product: if it's good it will speak for itself."

This is a philosophy that permeates throughout the manufacturing process. There's a strong pride and a connection between the workforce and what they produce. Paky's long-time right hand man in R&D, Angelo Cavenati, discusses the development of the Alpha range: "Paky wanted to develop a product with maximum light output from the smallest wattage lamp, inside the most compact, lightweight body. However, heat is an issue in such designs and requires suitable ventilation, but ventilation can often mean noise. Balancing these issues was, and still is, a crucial part of the design. The development was therefore a multiple task, done as a team, inside and outside the

company. We have worked in association with lamp and electronics manufacturers, it's been an exciting exchange of experiences and knowledge."

Unfortunately, the penchant for Chinese manufacturers to copy designs is also prevalent. How does Clay Paky deal with these issues? "When we attend exhibitions and find that the fixture has been copied it's depressing: I look inside a product and think, this is mine! However, we remain optimistic simply because we continue to sell our fixtures to many prestigious Chinese projects including the Shanghai Opera House and the Shanghai Oriental Centre, so even the Chinese are not buying these copies! This has much to do with the end users' desire for reliability and quality," says Cavenati.

To the company's gratification, Clay Paky's assertions of product reliability and quality were backed up officially in 2002 when it was certified as UNI EN ISO:9001 compliant. Certified activities include design production and marketing of professional lighting products. However, the company's quality control processes are generally of a higher standard than even the exacting requirements of ISO 9001.

Caironi discusses: "We pride ourselves on our strict quality standards but at the same time we want to be as flexible as possible in product development. We're situated in a part of Italy, and indeed Europe, where industrial and high-tech companies abound, so we have good contributing resources and excellent quality control strategies. Each



Clay Paky's demo room.

individual on the factory floor signs off his or her own work and is responsible for their own subgroup of assembly. Every component is locally tested before it goes on to the next assembly process and at the end it's also submitted for rigorous electronic and functionality tests. 100% of our units are tested before they leave the factory. We could test by samples every 10 if we wanted to, but we don't."

Perhaps the ultimate testament to Clay Paky's business success is its staff loyalty: many key staff members have been with the company from the early days. Even Caironi, who 'retired' a few years ago, remains a key player in the company's customer relations development.

Today, Clay Paky exports 95% of its products. In recognition of this, along with the advances the company has made in technological design, the President of Italy granted Paky the title of Commendatore - a highly coveted and respected accolade, both in Italian business and social circles. He says: "I feel extremely honoured to receive this title, not only because it endorses my entrepreneurial success but also because it's an official acknowledgement that we succeeded in raising our business to considerably high levels. We have become masters in selling the most advanced technology very successfully worldwide, to highly discerning customers, who use them in decidedly visible and sophisticated applications. It's a real achievement . . . and it's the guideline for Clay Paky's future development."

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