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Classic Gear: Strand Chromolux

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

Colour is the new frontier in lighting control, because LED fixtures - particularly complex fixtures with multiple colour sources - have made it challenging to control (when you have more emitters in your light than encoders on your console you need to take a different approach to just dialling in colour) and more challenging to understand - since it turns out that while we've always used colour in lighting, we often haven't truly understood it.

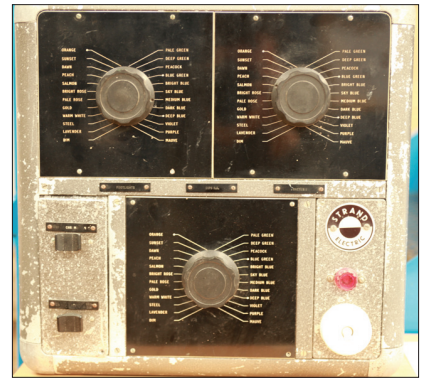
The best of the current consoles are now helping us by providing calibrated tools that take away the need to understand. Instead, at their simplest, we can just pick a familiar colour name from a carefully pre-defined colour library and have that exact colour delivered on stage. The first time you experience this is a revelatory moment . . . but, as with so much that is innovative and 'new', this turns out not to be so new after all: it existed pre-World War II in Strand's Chromolux controller.

Chromolux is basically a colour library system for the pre-digital age. The 'user interface' is a front panel presenting you with multiple selectors, one for each zone of lighting in your system. Each is surrounded by a range of colours, half of them tints, half stronger colours, all the names comfortable, friendly, easily understood - 'sky blue', 'sunset', 'dawn', 'salmon', 'rose'. Some reflect the difficulties of

naming colours we still find today when storing colour palettes, with both 'dark blue' and 'deep blue' featured. Turn the dial to a colour and the lighting would cross-fade to that colour. Simple. Perfect for venues that wanted the magic of shifting colour but didn't have staff skilled at, or interested in, operating a conventional lighting control - cinemas, ballrooms, exhibitions, ice rinks. When more excitement was needed, a toggle switch would let the Chromolux cycle through either soft tints or strong hues; a second would select static or changing colours, or fade all the lights out.

Remarkably, some of the colour names featured are eerily prescient for our new world of LED lighting: 'warm white' and even 'lime green' featured in some systems. But of course Chromolux predated this technology by decades. The colour mixing was achieved using tungsten lights, set with pre-defined colours (usually either the three primary or three secondary colours) by Strand, so that they knew, and so could pre-define in the controller, the precise mix required to create each colour. The colour names around the dials differed depending on which colour set was chosen - 'red' vs 'orange'.

The lights were driven to these levels by Strand's familiar motor-driven, magnetic-clutch operated dimmer racks. The connection



between controller and dimmers was just a low-voltage multicore, allowing the Chromolux panel to be positioned where most convenient.

Chromolux predicted the future in one other way: Strand weren't the only company active in this market for simple colour controls, and the controller ended up in the subject of a court case between Strand and Holophane, the latter alleging patent infringement and ending up with a deal whereby Strand made Chromolux but Holophane sold it.

This kind of easy colour control is now, of course, easy to replicate in software - but that doesn't have quite the satisfying clunk of those big old Chromolux dials . . .

Chromolux Brochure: > //plasa.me/cukng

And how the colours could have been made:
> //plasa.me/rjbj1

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