

Lighting & Sound international

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Close Encounters

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The L&SI team reports from Earls Court

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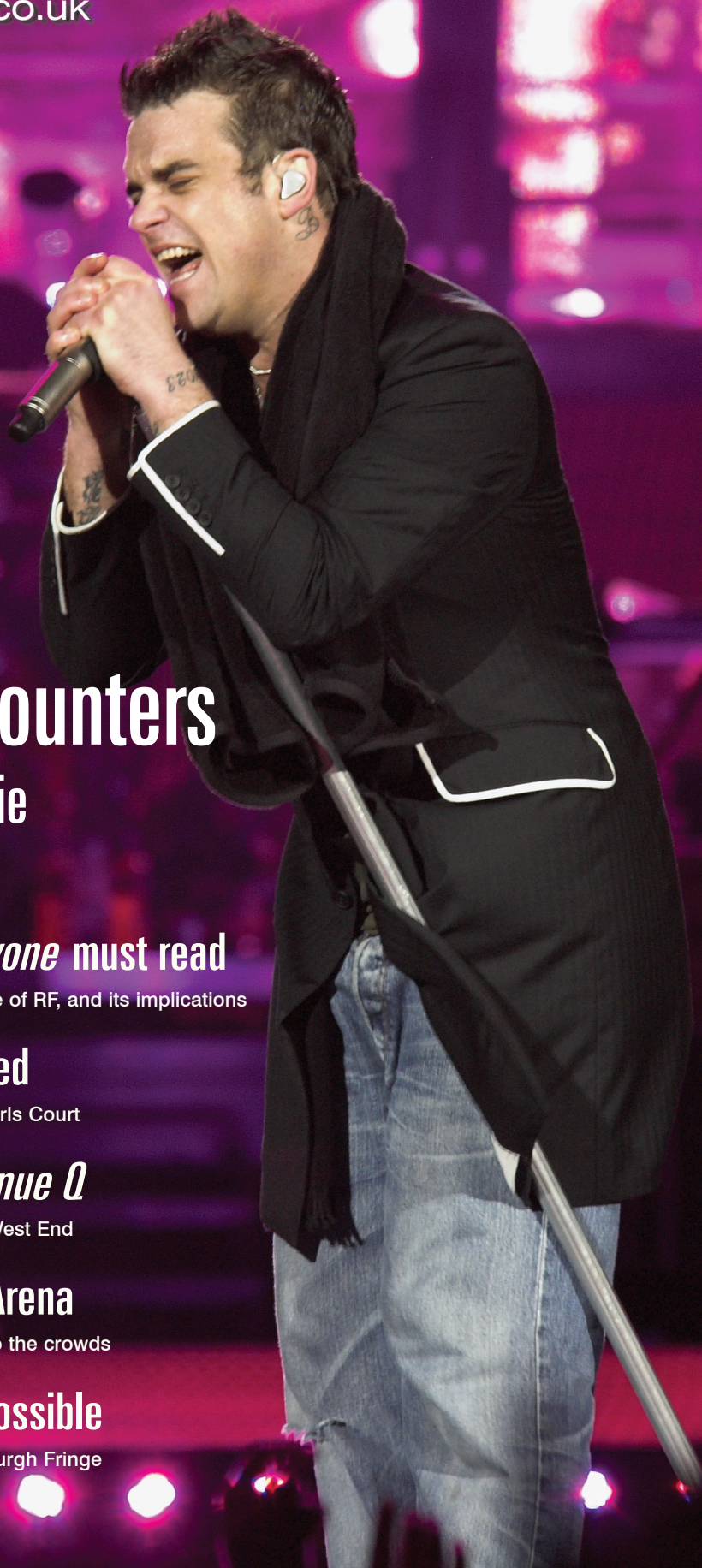
The musical comedy hits the West End

Jay-Z at the MEN Arena

How the Def-Jam boss plays to the crowds

Achieving the Impossible

The logistics behind the Edinburgh Fringe



Classic Gear: The Vari*Lite VL5

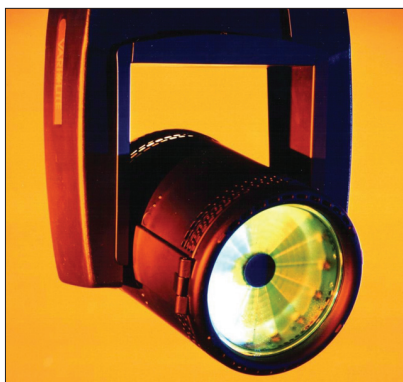
Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

It certainly wasn't the first moving light, and it was never going to win any prizes for being the most feature-packed, but sometimes it's elegance and simplicity that counts, and Vari-Lite's VL5 had those in spades. The concept wasn't to cram in as many features as possible - it was to build a modern-day replacement for the Par Can - just lamp, colour change, movement.

At first glance the finished product looked like a Par 64 on steroids. A 1000W tungsten lamp generated light that was collected by a dichroic reflector. Colour could be mixed using a colour system unlike any other: for each of cyan, magenta and yellow the VL5 had 16 vanes of dichroic glass mounted perpendicular to the beam. As you dialled in the colour those veins would rotate into the beam; look straight into the front of the lamp and you also got to see a fabulous jewelled 'jet engine' effect that became an effective visual in its own right. A fourth set of vanes provided beam control, with the ultimate beam size chosen using a clip-in lens.

To make it work, you also needed a Smart Repeater box - a 'brain' for up to six lights - but for the first time, and this was an enormous breakthrough at the time, the smart repeater could understand standard DMX as well as data from Vari-Lite's Artisan console. Here, finally, was the Vari*Lite for the rest of us . . .

Hence its classic status: the VL5 was, surely, the most democratic of moving lights. The 'modern day Par' design philosophy extended to



The VL5

cost, too; designers were excited that they'd be able to use moving lights en-masse for the first time. A year later, with Pink Floyd's Division Bell tour (classic gig column, anyone? Or buy the newly-released DVD and see for yourself!) LD Marc Brickman proved the power of doing exactly that with his arch and backline full of the baby Vari*Lite.

At the other end of the production scale, low-cost meant that a few moving lights became affordable to many more people, particularly given Vari-Lite's enlightened access policy that made the rental cost for educational or other worthy clients directly proportional to what they could afford. The VL5 then behaved like

a regular light - plug it in to a dimmer, watch it light up - rather than requiring the careful discharge-source management earlier lights had needed. Plus it was small enough and light enough to be hung just about anywhere, forgiving of a bit of abuse in inexperienced hands, and silent - something that very few moving lights are capable of, even now. The result? A generation of moving light users cut their teeth on the VL5.

And a generation still loves its strengths. Witness the latest product from Vari-Lite, launched more than a decade after the original: the VL500. Effectively the same light, just a bit better made. Quite a compliment to the original, and to the people behind it.

The VL500 was reviewed last month in our September issue. >>> www.vari-lite.com

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