

SWEET 16

Zero 88 celebrates its 16th birthday far away from the attic days of its youth

LES AFFAIRES

BY BOB ANDERSON

In 1972 four recently graduated engineering students from Brunel University decided to set up their own business. "We gave ourselves fifteen years to make it work," says one of the original four, Richard Thornton-Brown. "The countdown of fifteen from '72 reached zero in '88. Thus was born Zero 88." This was just the first step in a modern success story.

Thornton-Brown, Peter Brooks, Chris Fenwick, and Alan Munton had learned at college about the potential of the new microchip electronics and had also observed that the pop-music business was beginning to attract money for more sophisticated effects. At first their energies were directed at audio hardware but, with many other small and not-so-small firms already operating, the quartet turned their talents to lighting.

Work started in an attic, but within two years had expanded sufficiently to force the first of several moves to larger premises. The product was to be mass-produced disco lighting aimed at the semi-professional and do-it-yourself mobile disco teams appearing and prospering with the onslaught of disco. Forceful music required equally bold and dramatic lighting effects and these were what Zero 88 aimed to supply.

One of the ideas contributed by the Zero 88 team was the idea of a lighting effects cartridge. Disco controllers could already chase and do sound-to-light effects, but these were wired-in and each new effect required purchase of a complete new controller. The Zero 88 idea split the effect generator from the power handling system—the dimmers—and put the effects part into a plug-in cartridge that could be changed by the disc jockey just as easily as changing the music cassette. Starting with three effects, the system now offers 16 different effect cartridges and has been incorporated into the Zero 88 theatre lighting desks. It has also been adapted for use in conjunction with the powerful specialist multi-dimmer controls used in the big BBC television studios.

The first Zero 88 theatre dimmer control was launched in 1976 and was a three-preset manual system for up to 72 dimmers. This was soon followed by their first memory system, Lightmaster 1200, which

provided two-preset control for 12 dimmers and 15 selection memories. These were aimed at smaller users—colleges, amateur theatre groups.

The next development, launched in 1981, was the product that made the professional users sit up and take notice. It was the modular Eclipse system, offering dimmer memory level for up to 120 dimmers. The Eclipse caught on and remains the top of the market product from Zero 88 for theatrical use, selling about six systems per month. It offers master control modules for level memory, switch matrix memory, grand master and cross fader masters, a programmable chaser, and two sockets and controls for Zero 88 cartridge effects system. For smaller installations, the company's latest product, Sirius, provides control for 24 dimmers from two manual presets and 99 programmable level memories, nine programmable level chases and timed dipless cross fades. Sirius is beating all records, taking an estimated 50% of its potential market since being launched in June of 88. Both Eclipse and Sirius are designed to allow both spur-of-the-moment operation as well as carefully rehearsed cue sequences to satisfy both concert and theatrical operation.

In addition to their theatre controls, Zero 88 concentrates on development for the disco user. Touchlight 12 provides momentary or latching keyboard type control for twelve lighting circuits; FX4 provides the simplest possible control of channels and strobe lighting; Mercury extends the concept to 16 dimmable and 8 switched channels and incorporates internal installer controls to tailor the standard product to the user's installation and minimise the risk of confusing the light-jockey. Orion is the most sophisticated of the range and intended for the biggest fixed disco system. Microprocessor technology controls 24 channels in 99 patterns using 1,000 steps of memory. Any length of chase, in any order and speed, may be memorised. Though designed for the easiest possible show operation, to avoid losing all the information needed to make use of such versatility, a security access code must be entered before anything can be altered. Used



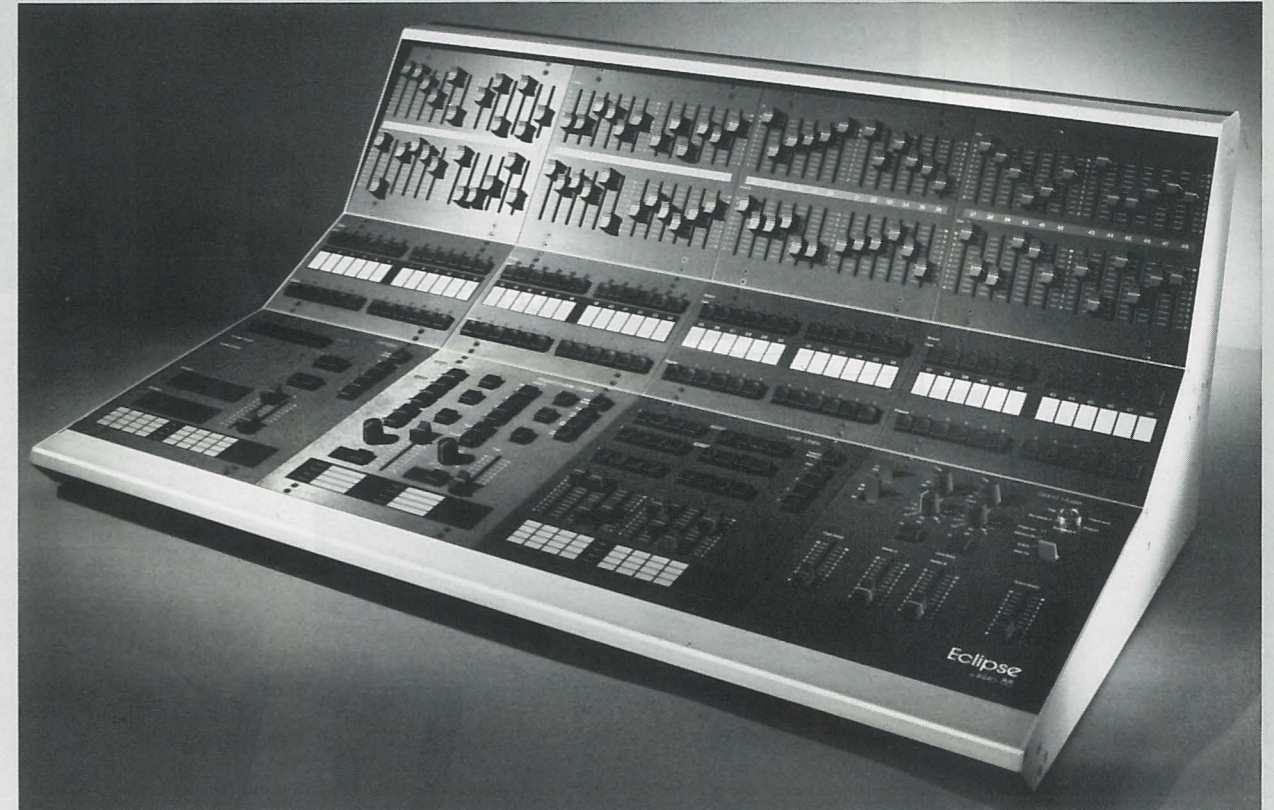
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■ The Eclipse (1) and the Sirius (2) established Zero 88 as a major force in the lighting industry. The company was founded in 1972 by production manager Chris Fenwick (3), managing director Peter Brooks (4), and development director Richard Thornton-Brown (5), who were joined by sales director Freddy Lloyd (6) in 1980.

● L'Eclipse (1) et le Sirius (2) ont établi Zero 88 comme une force majeure dans le secteur de l'éclairage. La société a été fondée en 1972, et comprend le Directeur de Fabrication Chris Fenwick (3), le Directeur Administratif Peter Brooks (4) et le Directeur Technique Richard Thornton-Brown (5), à qui s'est joint le Directeur de Marketing Freddy Lloyd (6) en 1980.

▼ Eclipse (1) und Sirius (2) Vervollständigten Zero 88 als einen wichtigen Faktor in der Beleuchtungsindustrie. Die Firma wurde 1972. Das sind production manager Chris Fenwick (3), managing director Peter Brooks (4) und development director Richard Thornton-Brown (5). Im Jahre 1980 kam Freddy Lloyd (6) als sales director dazu.

GESCHAFT



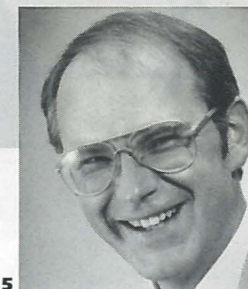
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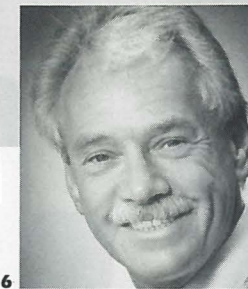
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in slow mode, each step of the programme can take up to ten minutes, offering applications for less frenetic performances such as shop window and museum lighting.

Zero 88 dimmers are low cost, small size, five and ten amp, basic designs using triacs and intended to be packed into small spaces. Control input is still analogue for flexibility and economy.

Zero 88 prefers not to create customised installations or design unique specials. Consequently, designs are tailored for non-specialist installations and kits of parts are offered to help the installer adapt these to most foreseeable conditions. The needs of overseas markets make this a troublesome task as, besides different voltages and plug standards, many countries comply strictly to safety standards which differ from country to country. Looking to 1992 and the EEC intention to harmonize such regulations brings some comfort to Richard Thornton-Brown, the technical di-

rector, but Freddy Lloyd, sales director, gloomily points out that this still leaves many other countries uncommitted to any form of consensus.

The forty employees of Zero 88 currently work out of a 585 square meter factory near the centre of St. Albans, 32 kilometers from London, although the company is virtually bursting at the seams with its

Sirius is beating all records, taking an estimated 50% of its potential market

continued growth. With an annual turnover of £2 million (US \$3.5 million), Zero 88 products are sold all over the world.

Of the original four graduates, three remain: Peter

Brooks is managing director, Richard Thornton-Brown is development director and Chris Fenwick is production designer. In 1980 they were joined by sales director Freddy Lloyd, who comes from the pop record industry.

Today Lloyd reckons the future for Zero 88 is "pretty rosy." He hopes to further increase the 70% of their output sold abroad. "We intend to remain very much oriented to the wider European market and are taking steps to improve management language skills and the multi-language availability of literature and front and back panel labelling." He describes his attitude towards competitors as "a gentlemanly aggressive stance. We offer customers value for money, and the latest and best technology."

Given good luck and the success of these policies, Zero 88 should retain, as their advertising slogan asserts, a "touch of brilliance" for another fifteen years.

BUSINESS