

## CELCO MANUFACTURES AND DISTRIBUTES LIGHTING CONTROLS FOR CONCERTS, TV, AND THEATRE

# Celco in control

BY ELLEN LAMPERT

**I**n 1978, 19-year-old lighting designer Keith Dale designed the lighting for Joe Jackson's first tour. Today, Dale is the marketing director for Celco, a British company with an annual business of £2.4 million (US \$4 million).

"For the first Joe Jackson tour I used Strand equipment," says Dale. "After that I began to use equipment by EFS, which eventually became Celco." The company was born in 1981, the profitable merger of Celestial Lighting Company, a hire firm, and EFS Ltd., manufacturers of lighting equipment and controls for the rock 'n' roll market. Celestial was owned by Dale, and partners Tim Bridle and Andy Reed, while EFS was owned by Matt Deakin. With the addition of sales director Colin Whitaker, these five, with Bridle acting as managing director, Deakin, technical director, and Reed, engineering director, make up the principals in today's Celco.

"EFS manufactured pin matrix boards," Dale recalls, "and in those days rock 'n' roll began to develop its own fashion of lighting boards." According to Dale, the rock 'n' roll lighting designer usually operates the board every night, implementing his own design. "In the theatre this isn't usually the case," Dale notes. "The designer doesn't run the show and the cues don't change from night to night. As a result, the boards designed especially for rock 'n' roll leave more room for improvisation and hands-on access."

The Celco boards were designed for dimming the intensity of the lights, but they are built so that the integrity of the electronics allows them to be adapted to other uses. "The boards can be used to control moving lights, like those built by Clay Paky," says Dale, whereas Vari\*Lites, which Dale considers to be the market leader in moving lights, have their own dedicated control board. "To do it right, a designer should use Vari\*Lites with their own board, and a Celco board for the fixed lights."

Dale estimates that 15 - 20% of the annual budget is spent on the research and development of Celco products. "We take special pride not only in the way our products work, but also how they look." Each board is fully tested before it leaves the factory and each one is documented. Celco offers a service contract, "like routine servicing for your car," and the company

also offers a 24-hour back-up service to provide a replacement board or fly someone out to fix a problem. "Once in New Orleans," Dale recounts with a smile, "one of our boards was flipped 3 meters during a tornado, and it was still working."

One of the company's design goals is to make the technology transparent to the designer. "We are very concerned with the user, with what the designer wants to do. And we think that the Celco board is the easiest to use. The designer can do his work without worrying about how the board works. The technology should not get in the way of the designer."

With a range of lighting control boards designed for jobs of all sizes ranging in price from £2,150 (US \$3,655) for the Celco Baby to £18,750 (US \$31,875) for the Celco Gold, Celco devotes two to three years to the development process of a new board. A team of seven different people usually have a hand in the process. "First we look at what's needed by the market," says Dale, "and then we come up with a solution in terms of what the board will do and how it will do it. We make it as easy to use as possible, and go over and over the operation of the board on paper." Mid-way through the design process, a small model of a new board will be built at the Celco factory in South East London, where the company houses its 32 employees. The security around the research and development department is very tight. "We have real security concerns and visitors are not really welcome," according to Dale.

Matt Deakin builds a prototype with the electronics of a new board, while Dale and graphic designer Catriona Forcer work on the outside design and styling. "We work on the aesthetics," comments Forcer, "choosing the materials we use and the colours for the buttons, that sort of thing. The younger designers who are more design conscious tend to opt for Celco."

The Celco software, such as Celcosoft and Soft Options 88, is also designed in-house to further enhance control of the product and the knowledge of how it works. "We travel to all the trade shows," says Dale, who was seen in the Celco booth at SIEL in Paris and at ABTT 1989. "We know everything about our product, and like to get direct feedback from the users." To further their outreach, Celco has hired on Thomas Reiman,