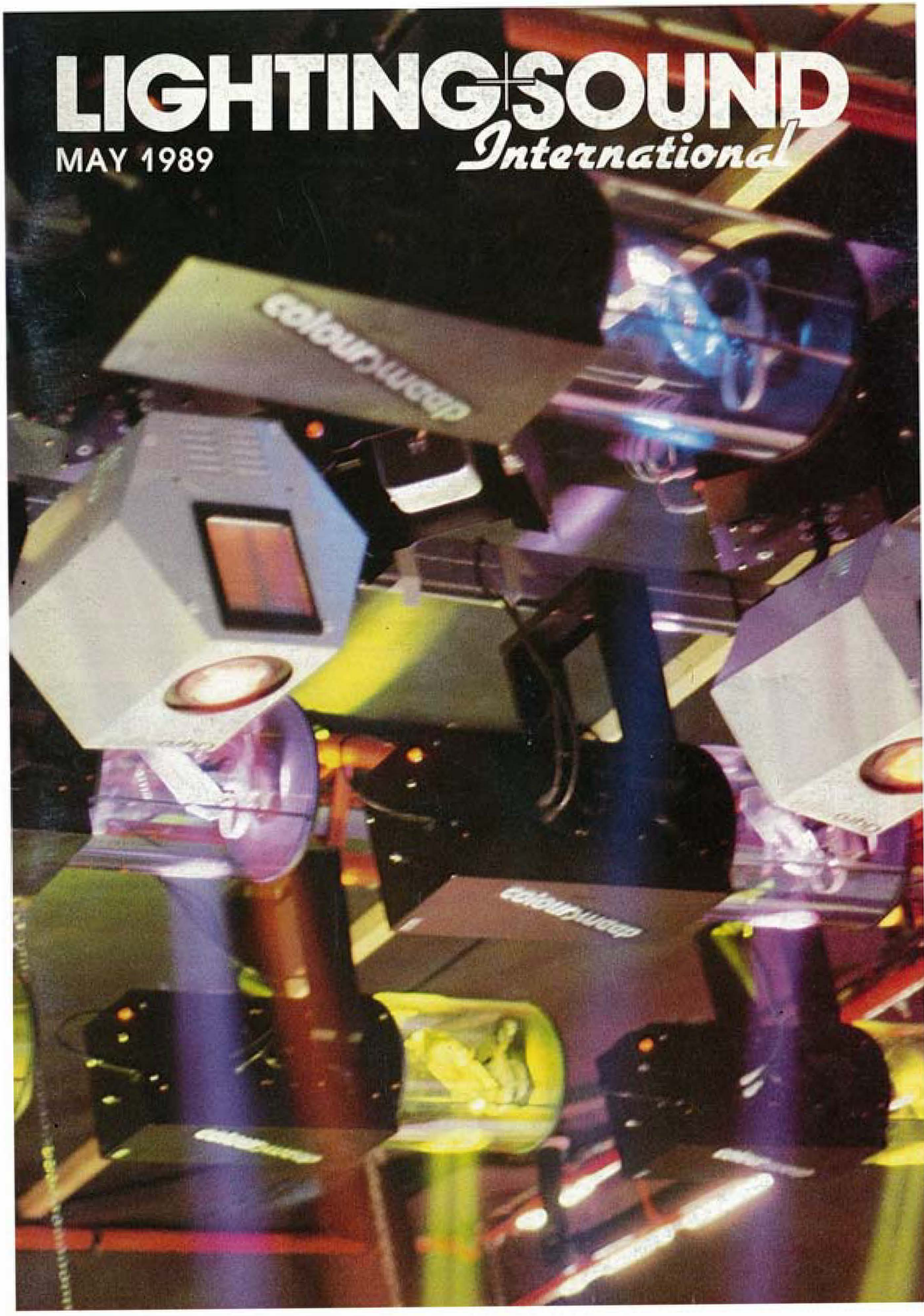


LIGHTING+SOUND

MAY 1989

International



Meteorlites

The company who are specialists at moving lights around the world are now well-practised professionals in the art of moving the instruments by degrees. John Offord talked to Ronan Willson, who has also moved the company's base and at the same time invested huge sums in automated and television lighting equipment.

There is no doubt that young, privately-owned, professionally managed and singularly directed companies are now progressively taking over the reins of power in the industry - be it in manufacture, sale or hire of equipment. Many are approaching levels of turnover up towards the £5m marker, and more often than not, they are the driving force behind new ideas and innovations. The bosses are usually within a few years of forty, and have plenty of energy in hand to take their operations on to much bigger things. And as if to aid the process, some of the major operations whose markets they are attacking, have been going through a period of self-inflicted wounding.

We have already featured many such companies in the pages of our previous issues, and I would take a guess that the majority we have spoken to have at least trebled and in some cases quadrupled their business since the first edition of *L+SI* in November 1985. To do it they have had to broaden their market base, and reinvest profits so that the latest technology can be taken on board - be it in new production equipment and research facilities or in the raw tools of the rental business.

We profiled Meteorlites Productions in late 1987 (see Vol.2 No.12) and the business was then Stevenage-based and essentially geared to rental, design and production of major concert tours, primarily for the rock industry. A little bit of television lighting business had also just begun to creep in...

Last autumn, director Ronan Willson took the company down to Borehamwood next door to the M25, and as part of the process has re-aligned the operation and invested massively in new technology equipment and allied facilities. I asked him about the background to the decision.

"The real concept behind the move was to increase the profile of the company. Out in Stevenage we were definitely perceived as being on the fringes; we weren't quite 'in there' as a London company. It perhaps

typified us as an operation; always just bubbling under the surface but not getting in there in the way I wanted. So the location change was very specifically to get close to or inside the M25, to have a London phone number, and to get a much more desirable position for people to come to. Also, we needed bigger premises.

"Here we are very convenient for both the existing Elstree Studio complexes (BBC and Goldcrest) which are a source of work in themselves and also extremely useful for any of our clients who wish to rehearse their shows. We have an arrangement whereby we can put our acts in at preferential rates. From a practical point of view it's good for everybody, because we can back-up and service a client during rehearsals.

"In Stevenage we were under pressure. We had a lack of space, as much in offices as warehousing. Coming here we now have an adequate facility for the work we undertake. We've got 23,000 sq.ft. and a very presentable office complex. The main advantage from day one was that we could organise all our facilities - equipment, racking, etc. - in a way that everything was clearly accessible.

"In the same way as location-wise we were on the edge of the business, in a pure business-sense we tended to be as well. So there was a deliberate strategy change to say 'let's grow, and let's get into the major markets and do our very best to establish ourselves as a division one rental company'. In addition to that we have set out to diversify and dispel the image that we perhaps had, which was that of a rock and roll rental company. To help break down that image we have diversified the hire stock, so that we can genuinely service all these different markets, being television, industrials, and so on."

Into Television

Over the past two years, television has provided an ever-growing proportion of Meteorlites' income, and it has come about on two pretexts, as Ronan Willson explained.

"Firstly, television is learning to use the technology and equipment of the rock industry, so the tricks and hardware we are already very familiar with have proved valuable. Also, we have chosen to diversify our equipment into conventional television lighting, and are therefore able to supply the total package. On speed of rigging we can save clients money. People who are used to working in conventional television technologies are definitely financially ahead by using rapid rig and de-rig equipment that rock has always used."

Automated Lighting - a major investment

Meteorlites has invested over £500,000 in pure inventory over the past nine months, and that's in addition to the spend on the infra-structure and facilities at the new premises. Much of the new equipment now out on hire is automated lighting, and Ronan Willson described his reasons for taking a direction that would frighten many a traditional hire company.

"Partly our decision was based on the fact that we have to remain competitive in the rock business, but we also recognise that the future of lighting is in new technology. The days of Parcans and simple luminaires en masse being the main lighting is really a thing of the past, and it was necessary for us to take a decisive step. We didn't want to dabble in a few changers here and there, job by job.

"The first thing we did was to negotiate



Ronan Willson: "the future of lighting is in new technology. The days of Parcans and simple luminaires en masse being the main lighting is a thing of the past."



Parscans in action on a major tour, Gary Moore style (lighting designer Paul Devine).

photos: George Bodnar

with Showlites in America to buy their British company Showtech, to take over lock stock and barrel all their inventory. It had a very large amount scroller technology and moving, colour changing Parscans. That was the first step. On the back of that we then bought heavily the latest generation of the same equipment, which are now sold by Strand - the Parscan and the full range of scrollers. In fact, we bought their entire UK inventory at the time.

"The result of those two acquisitions was that from literally having no technology we

then became one of the largest stockholders of scroller and associated automated lighting in Europe, and this has enabled us to be truly competitive on all our contracts, by not having to depend in any way on sub-rented technology. It has also enabled us to offer some realistic and viable alternatives to, for instance, a Vari*Lite show. While nothing we have is the equivalent of Vari*Lite, and the VL2 in particular is a product in its own league, there are clients who don't have the budget for these kind of items, and being able to present them with a

good looking automated show using different technologies does open doors in itself."

Meteorlites reckon they can now put a scroller on practically anything, from 1k or 2k profiles through to 8-light Moles and 2, 5 and 10k Quartzcolor units. And obviously they've now got a full range of film and television luminaires to put them on, based on Quartzcolor, from 2k Bambinos, through the HMI's, to 5 and 10k's. General stock-wise, Ronan Willson has stayed with Strand and the Cadenza and Cantata ranges.

"We've also broadened our followspot range," continued Ronan Willson. "We now have a substantial stock of long and short throw Xenon Supertroupsers and Lycian HTI's. Aside from that, one significant piece of new equipment is a new ground support system. We have developed with Thomas a new tower which is capable of a two-ton payload with a 40ft trim height. Along with this is another Thomas product, their grid truss - a 1m x 1/2 metre truss which is capable of a 3-ton point load on a 60ft span. In fact, it is capable of unsupported spans of 100ft or so."

"The combination of these enabled us to build what we call the 'Wembley' grid, which is a 60' x 40' grid that stands 40' high and can have 9 tons flown from it. The entire structure stands on six legs and it was built for Iron Maiden at Wembley last year, allowing them to use their entire US touring system on ground support."

Technical Support

Holding a huge stock of entertainment lighting equipment, with much of it now involving far more tricky bits and pieces than



Snowy Johnson, chief technician, ensures Parscans are maintained in perfect order in Meteorlites' technical area. A total of over 350 automated lighting units are now held in stock.

simple racks of Parscans, trussing and cable, has also involved setting up support staff and facilities.

"It's taken time to piece together the team. It's not only true of the pure technical requirements, but throughout the company the infrastructure has taken time to get together, with a massively increased turnover compared to 15 months ago. But specifically on the technical side we have set up a nucleus of five people who handle all the maintenance, and within the team we have a broad range of talents, from metalwork to electronics, to handle all the routine maintenance as well as the construction of specials inevitably needed show by show.

"We don't take on many large scale sets, by we frequently undertake small projects like the building of risers, projection screens and backdrops - in fact any gadget or gizmo that might be required. Another element is provision of special pieces of control equipment which might involve a combination of electronics and metalwork such as customised control units.

"Our staffing is continuing to expand, and there are some high skills coming in. One will be a highly qualified electronics engineer who will be able to get involved in preparation of custom software, and also the implementation of the computer system we are developing including a completely computerised job management package. In future we hope we will be able to respond much more quickly when clients hit us with extensive equipment requirements. We want to be able to bid them literally in a matter of minutes!"

The key men who handle the various avenues of Meteorites' operations are: Tony Panico, who looks after outside broadcasts and location contracts; John Cadbury, who handles many of the rock and touring accounts; Geoff Benson, who takes care of dry hire and rental into studios and television; and Tony Slee, who handles the trade and industrial market. Ronan Willson, quite naturally, has connections in each area, but gets involved principally with the major rock clients.

Technology on the road

"There has been some scepticism about scroller technology, and how reliable it is," suggested Ronan Willson. "What we have discovered, and it's really very straightforward, is that the equipment is quite adequately reliable provided you manage and maintain it in the right way. And this means spending money. You can't hope to buy a few scrollers, chuck them on the shelf, and when somebody wants them send them out and expect them to work.

"There are two things: preventative maintenance to ensure the units are working properly when they leave, and very crucially, the skill of the man on the job. Provided you do these two things, then we have total confidence in all the automation we put out.

"And the shows we've proved this on in the last year have been quite significant. We've had Supertramp out with a lot of technology, Iron Maiden, Kiss, Elkie Brooks, and a very recent one that's still running - Gary Moore.

"Gary Moore is probably the pinnacle of the shows with technology at the present time, and we have no less than 96 devices on tour, including 24 Parscans, which are performing extremely well. I think it's an extremely good-looking show, and worth talking about because of the scepticism that has existed."



More Parscan action from Gary Moore.

So far, so good. But what about maintenance on the road, particularly for long tours?

"There is guy on the Gary Moore tour whose job it is to look after the automated devices," explained Ronan Willson, "and he has the appropriate back-up from base as necessary. Any micro-processor device can crash at some stage, but it's a question of what consequences that can have. All the equipment has the ability to be reset locally, so that if one head does misbehave, you can shut it down, reset it, and bring it back on line within a matter of 30 seconds or so. From the show's point of view, the fact that it's got out of step is not in any way detrimental.

"A lot of problems tend to be power problems, and we've learned that the way to overcome this is to provide clean power. We carry line conditioners with all the systems to give accuracy of voltage. That, together with the other bits of general management protocol, such as cabling the systems, all add to the reliability.

"But the fundamental starting point is maintenance and the right man to look after the equipment. And for this reason we generally don't like putting the equipment out as a sub-hire because the skill doesn't necessarily go along with it. Someone may rig something, it may then malfunction, and because there's nobody who knows how to



The 400 watt HTI Strand Lightscan is a hard-edged automated fixture with two internal 16-colour changers, five gobos, remote control of iris, dower and focus, variable speed, and high digital accuracy. Meteorites will soon hold a considerable stock of these powerful light sources - ideal for major concerts or industrials.



Leading lights: (standing) John Cadbury, Ronan Willson and Geoff Benson, with (seated) Tony Slee, Dizzy Gosnell and Tony Panico.

deal with it gets a bad name. The result is they blame the equipment. The right man on the spot can maintain it to stop it from glitching, and if it ever does glitch he knows exactly how to deal with it."

Innovations

Along with expertise on high technology instruments has come some interesting innovations on the scroller theme. One is a followspot changer utilising a 'sandwich' of Geljet units.

"The Geljet was originally intended as a drop-in scroller for Pars or profiles, but our application is to put three of them together, with each one carrying two colours and clear. By arranging them in this way you can select the exact colour you want without having to scroll through several you don't want, and this is very relevant for follow spot changing, with dozens of changes throughout the show.

"We've found them to be extremely reliable and have made them to fit a number of spots, through the HTI range, Supertroupers, and so on. It gives a tremendous effect if you have 6, 8 or even 12 spots that all change, exactly in time with one another, and so rapidly. The other advantage is that the control runs on the analogue output of the desk, so actually built in to scene presets you can have the spot changes. It's an innovation that people have fallen in love with, and luckily they seem to end up specifying it!

Comparative Costs

Obviously the cost of hardware goes up dramatically if you compare a 'Par 64 show' with an 'automated' show - but there are advantages, as Ronan Willson pointed out.

"In running terms the client can often find a cheaper peripheral cost because the trucking is less, and one can do with 200 lamps what you might previously have done with 400. And it obviously means there's less in the air.

"More important, show's start looking less 'metal' and more 'creativity'. There is a real education necessary on the part of designers, because working with a static design is one thing, whilst learning to take the step into devices that change colour involves more forethought. But instruments that both change colour and move is a third step - and it really can be quite difficult in making that third step."

Who leads? Instruments or Designers?

"I'm sure the changes are designer-led. I'm aware of good designers being critical of software available within some automated control systems because they feel they want to do something that the software inhibits them from doing. Inevitably one can overcome these problems, but I think the designers will set the pace.

"The bottom line is that any self-respecting designer wants to get the opportunity to work with automation. Maybe as yet he hasn't had the opportunity, but we would all want to broaden our knowledge, I think.

"I feel that this is where some of the alternative technologies we're investing in are relevant because not everyone can afford the top of the range products like Vari*Lite. You can do an awful lot with Parscans, and in my opinion they are a very under-rated instrument. Anyone who sees the Gary Moore show will be aware of that. The colour change is extremely fast, the movement fast and accurate, and from a calibration point of view one can repeat the same show in different locations and the accuracy stays the same.

"Control-wise, on the Taskmaster board



Part of Meteorlites' huge warehouse at Elstree Way. Adequate headroom means full stage sets can be built.

there are a lot of copying facilities, grouping, and a number of things that make programming very easy. Having set up initial parameters of focusing and colour and groups, you can grab elements from other presets and build new scenes very quickly. Of all the products it's the Parscan that I feel most enthusiastic about, and also I think it's the most under-rated."

Europe and the Future

Meteorlites has been heavily involved both in America and Europe for a number of years, and Ronan Willson explained that there has been a massive swing towards Europe in international business of late.

"Our own base in America was established a little over three years ago, at what was probably the tail end of a boom in American business, which the industry had enjoyed for about 15 years or so. But now there's a real emphasis on Europe, and a real decline in America.

"Much of this originates out of Britain, although I may be biased. Certainly in the touring market the whole concept of 1992 everyone is opening up to. A number of hire companies have made decisions to form



Custom-prepared dimmers - part of the routine.

alliances with other local companies around Europe to form a network, or have actually opened their own regional offices.

"But the single point is that there is money in Europe. The demand is here for entertainment in a big way where it wasn't before. That's always been the strength in America, with big budgets on shows that could tour major arenas and stadiums for many months. But the business in America has been dying, possibly due to overcrowding. There are now tighter budgets, and promoters are being much more careful, whereas Europe is in a very optimistic situation.

"Traditionally, touring Europe has been a poor man's business, except for a handful of absolutely top grade acts who can sell stadiums. Now, more and more of what might be called small or middle market acts are able to play the larger venues, and the sheer number of acts going on the road, and the complexity and scale of productions has gone up, thus producing a much bigger demand."

As a result of these shifting trading patterns, Meteorlites made a decision about 18 months ago to place less emphasis on its American end. "Up to that point we had run a total parallel operation, and hire stock was maintained at precisely the same levels. So if we bought a desk we automatically got one on the other side.

"The choice was to narrow the scope of the operation in America, bring some of the plant back here to Britain, and to really concentrate all our efforts in one place, and get the best team we could here while still maintaining the ability to service our clients in America - which we still do."

Ronan Willson has taken some very bold and brave steps to lead Meteorlites into the future. So it's good to report that things are buoyant down on Elstree Way.

And by the way - that's '01' for London.



New investment: a complete range of television and film lighting equipment.

METEORLITES

AUTOMATION FOR CONCERT, STAGE AND TELEVISION LIGHTING



▲ PAR-SCAN



▲ FRES-SCAN*



▲ PAR-SCROLLER



▲ PRO-SCAN*



▲ 5K/CYC/4 LITE SCROLLER



▲ DROP IN 6 1/8" SCROLLER



▲ LITE-SCAN*



▲ TASKMASTER CONTROL CONSOLE

METEORLITES PRODUCTIONS LTD

4 ELSTREE WAY, BOREHAMWOOD, HERTS WD6 1BS

TEL: 01-207 5111

FAX: 01-207 3655

E-MAIL DGS1518

* AVAILABLE SOON