

# LOOKING IN THE 'I' OF THE ICON

Tony Gottelier worships at the shrine

In a business where the sexual prowess of its stars, the lighting designers and directors, is considered demonstrated by the physical size of their favourite rock desk, it is inevitable that it creates its own talismans. I can think of many over the years, culminating in the ubiquitous Maglite (I shall keep the rest to myself for fear of causing offence, or treading on the sensibilities of others).

It is refreshing, indeed, to come across a leading commercial player in that same business which has no qualms in acknowledging this fact; whose directors and managers, despite claiming a 64% market share, are still wide-eyed enough about the surface on which they have chosen to play, to give their new haute technologie product a name symbolic of all the hero worship and idolatry endemic to any entertainment related business. That the company in question is the subsidiary of a large industrial group, only adds to this poignant contradiction. And it's not cynical either, while the rest of us are still asking ourselves, or worse being asked by others, "when are we going to grow up and get proper jobs?", these guys are revelling in doing precisely what they have always wanted to do, and having lots of fun and making tons of money while they are about it.

In case you haven't yet fathomed it out, we are talking here about Light and Sound Design, the Birmingham based rock-n-roll, concert and touring outfit, better known as LSD; the company which was sold to Christian Salvesen, the trucking to generators conglomerate, in 'a whale of a deal' last year; the company whose founders, Nick Jackson, Terry Lee, Steve Dawkes and the gregarious Simon Austin, are fast living up to the original British meaning of those initials, in cash terms, though it is good to see that they have not allowed the LSD go to their heads, in any of its possible connotations. (For American readers, LSD, is a historical English acronym for pounds, shillings and pence). They remain, seemingly untainted, at the helm.

This is also the company whose newly formed Special Projects division, under ex Meteorlites' Dave Smith, kicked off with a small gig called the Barcelona Olympics. The same company which this year completes its most ambitious project to date, with a cost tag of £5 million, the launch of their own in-house designed and made, automated luminaire and



**Idolising - LSD's Icon automated luminaire.**

control desk - to be called Icon! And who, in so doing, have thrown down the gauntlet in the first serious challenge to industry leaders and iconic mega-stars Vari-Lite, Inc.

Until a couple of years ago LSD was one of the best kept secrets in the business, only those in the know had heard of them, yet in keeping a low profile they still managed to build up and capture a very significant share of R-n-R rental revenues, to the point where they attracted the attention of Salvesens, acquired two vast warehouse factories, one for rental stores and the other for manufacturing and, last year, started gobbling up symbiotic companies to increase their production line-up (Total Fabrications and Lumo Lighting, previously Lee Colortran). Then came the rumours of this new luminaire, and for a long time a cat and mouse game went on as interested parties sought confirmation of its existence, neither confirmed nor denied, which in the end simply added, unintentionally perhaps, to the hype.

And then we heard that it was being road-tested with Roy Bennett on a mini Madness tour at the end of last year, but still we weren't allowed to see it. Then there were unconfirmed reports of possible patent infringement problems, confirmed recently by Simon Austin's irreverent questioning of Brian Croft at the Live!

show debate - this is Austin's pet project and he cares deeply about it. Then some Icons appeared on the Eurovision Song Contest, and now with Patrick Woodroffe on the current Depeche Mode world tour, where they are being used alongside VL5s.

Even now, there are rumours, firmly denied by all concerned, that Woodroffe had thrown them off the tour, that Vari-Lite had the requisite number of their own heads on stand-by in Dallas to rush to France for the tour, even that these were already en-route. All the rumour, gossip and stories of tension behind the scenes, more akin to the launch of a new movie, or more appropriately perhaps, a new album from an established supergroup, than a humble automated luminaire. But then it's in such company that these guys have cut their teeth. Yes, it was definitely time to make the trip to Birmingham to beard the beast in its den.

On arrival at Gravelly Hill, the company's 70,000 square feet manufacturing base, we went straight to the shrine to worship at the feet of the Icon. Of course, this is LSD's showroom, with the typically high ceilings of a post Victorian industrial building, where I am to be introduced to the green-eyed idol by well known industry figure, and project general manager, Peter Johns, whose background is steeped in the concert and touring ethic. Keith Owen, head of the industrial design department, and the project development leader, lurks in the background, should I get too technical. And the demonstration was a wow, considering that these are actually hot-off-the-production-line units on soak-test. Beautiful saturated colours and hues; smooth, subtle moves and even smoother fades; but it's the colour splits which really linger in my memory; certainly an impressive feature and one which is being heavily pushed by LSD.

People will expect me to comment on light output, claimed in the brochure to be '... the brightest beam of any moving head luminaire'. Unfortunately, I can't, because the shows I

watched were generally irised down to pencil-beam dimensions, thus limiting the brightness. In theory, however, if it is possible to achieve a collimated beam at the full aperture of its large objective lens, Icon's power should be very impressive. At the altar of Icon's control console stands Kay, not a high priestess of the genre,

**The shrine: Icons in action at LSD.**

but lately snaffled from a local disco. Yet the way she flashes across the LCD buttons, crunching out the presets, even when busking it, belies her lack of experience and proves the point - this desk can do the business! Though, for some, it may prove to be a new mind-set, for this is a sweetie with a soft centre and a hard outside. In reality, a computer inside a friendly package.

You have really got to throw away your precepts about presets, and indeed the whole language of theatre lighting boards, which factually became obsolete with digital multiplexing, or soft-patching to thee and me. As soon as it became possible to tell any lamp to come on with any other, in any order or



**The altar - the Icon console with massed ranks of LCD buttons, crunching out the presets.**

combination whatsoever, we needed to throw away that dictionary and start afresh. The problem is that until you can do that you are shackled. Because now there are no limits, apart from those set by the processor or the capacity of the hard disk to store the information, which effectively, these days, means no limit. So even a simple thing like a chase doesn't mean much any more. Every step in that chase might be a multipart cue telling several automated luminaires to move from A to B at a given speed, and on to C at yet another, and so on, fading colour, changing zoom and iris dilation along the way, and all the while the conventionals, controlled from the same desk, are fading through a complex colour sequence on gel scrollers. Can you still call this a 'chase', or even the parts thereof 'cues' and 'presets'? It hardly does it justice.

Not only that, but such levels of complexity require a new approach to plotting, if only to retain the operator's sanity. Anyone who has tried to programme such complex manoeuvres on a conventional push-me-pull-you memory desk, structurally restricted by the application of the above language, set in stone in the hardware, will tell you - it's basically impossible. So special desks are needed at the very least, ones which allow complete freedom of access during plotting, and which enable fast cue-crunching, and which recognise that what is required of a board pre-show, is something quite different from what is necessary in performance. These days the hard work is done long before the first show and, on the night, it should be a matter of simple manual response to the running order, without removing the option to fly should the need arise.

The Icon desk certainly addresses these issues, though one suspects that they might have gone a lot further, were it not for the surprising conservatism of lighting designers. It was probably a wise decision not to, you can't buck the market, and anything too radical is likely to get sidelined for the time being, until others catch up. LSD have already confronted this problem by offering an on-screen Mac-based graphic version of the control surface which, in reality, must make the plotting of a complex show a great deal easier and quicker, "so far, nobody wants to know about it," Keith Owen told me. "They don't seem to be able to separate the pre-show programming function from the performance itself which, to my mind, requires different hardware solutions. Anyway, it's a useful back-up and great for editing shows away from the venue." Nevertheless, the hard control surface is ergonomically designed and modular to enable the user to configure the control panels to his own taste. I suspect that it will not be entirely unfamiliar to anyone who has used an Artisan previously either.

Based on the Motorola 68020, the system has bags of processor overhead. Giving numbers of possible cues, focuses, or presets is really misleading, as I have said it is limited only by the capacity of the hard disc. So, think of a big number, multiply it by another, and still you may not be close. The hands-on items are user definable rotary encoders, for pan, tilt, colour etc, plus backlit LCD buttons which select presets and also behave like manual controls, scrolling through functions, with tactile clicks, double clicks and holding keys to give an intuitive feel. These LCD switches, which show their status in the key cap, and the alpha numeric displays associated with all functions and controls, make the whole console user transparent. There is a keyboard lurking in a drawer somewhere for the purpose of all the labelling which is required. There are ten definable sub masters (which can be scrolled



Icon's first outing - ballyhoo and Madness.

to yield 10 x as many submasters as you want), and 24 matrix faders for managing conventional lamps. Generally, programming and playback functions are intelligently separated. The heads operate on linear or harmonic tracking, and all moves can be timed. Indeed, all parameters can have different timings within a cue. In addition, you can crossfade between focus positions and initiate fades. Most valuable, there is a facility, enabling complex geometric moves, such as circles and ellipses, without the need to plot each point in the chase. Here again we run into a language problem: they call this facility 'ballyhoo', which I believe is vari-speke for some craziness inserted between focuses. What the Icon desk actually offers is what others call 'a stack synthesizer' or 'ramps'; far too useful for the fun label LSD have borrowed. The board can control 1000 channels, or 100 Icon heads, and is configured accordingly.

Keith Owen comes to life and lovingly unveils the fixture itself. It has quite an unusual look, partly characterised by the shape of the lightweight covers made of GRP, which envelope the luminaire top and bottom. Once off you have ready access to the internals of the lantern. As you would expect, the whole thing has been well thought out with the riggers (sic) of touring in mind, with Nylock nuts and screw-locks used throughout. The horizontal drive and power supplies are in the base, the vertical drive in the armature of the yoke. The DC Servo drive gives 360° of pan with 270° of tilt and speeds for the whole manoeuvre from 2.55 seconds (tilt) up to a theoretical slowest of nine hours. (I realise that nice, smooth, slow movements are the designers choice, but nine hours does seem just a tad excessive!) The lamp is a 600W HTI with a colour temperature of 5300K, set in a precision designed ellipsoidal reflector and, unusually, placed at right-angles to a cold mirror. The forced cooling, which seems virtually noiseless and has a slow option, is placed at this point, taking the excess heat straight out at the rear.

After passing through its condenser system, the beam exits through a 150mm objective, and an out-of-focus iris which acts as a mechanical dimmer. The real iris allows variation of the beam diameter from 38°, described as flood, down to a collimated pencil beam. Soft and hard-edged focuses are possible and the optics, designed by Roger Harvey, who previously performed the same function for the Starlite project, include a 2:1 telescopic zoom. The synchronised shutter can also provide a strobe

effect.

The Icon console allows 256 definable colours, though more than 1000 are feasible, achieved by mixing three graduated dichroic colour wheels. Split colours can be selected, in fact this is one of the spectacular successes of the new luminaire. There are seven indexable, rotating gobos and seven fixed, and, unusually, you can crossfade between them. All are interchangeable. Despite a switch mode power supply, the unit weighs in at 35 kilos, which is something Keith Owen and his team will be working hard to reduce over the succeeding months. However, they are flight cased in threes and the overall physical and dimensional proportions seem to make sense.

Peter John's role in life for the foreseeable future is to oversee the transition of Icon from a development item to a full commercial and supportable operation. To this end he has Tom Nulty, better known as a Roy Bennett sidekick, in the building planning the documentation and wet support services needed to secure a high tech product on the road. Keith Owen's team will continue to enhance the product for the future and to be in place as a quick response team for any new innovations demanded by LDs. As Peter says, "LSD have a reputation to maintain for being able to engineer the impossible, to an impossible time scale. We are not going to back off from this now."

Johns is keen to emphasise that they hope to operate an open-door policy as far as sharing the system's operating software is concerned. "We don't want people to think, because we have gone for a dedicated structure, rather than DMX, that we are trying to lock them into our desk. The reasons we did that was entirely on the basis of legal advice and of balancing the risk of a possible patent infringement. In fact, we had to turn back at the brink because of that." It would, indeed, be a shame if this meant that the option for some LDs to go on the road with an Icon rig and a Wholehog desk, for instance, was to be cut off at the knees. DMX will eventually be available from the desk for the control of dimmers and scrollers and other such items. With the possibility also of MIDI, SMPTE and MSC, subject to demand but allowed for in the architecture, Mark Hunt, the project's software specialist, won't be short of things to do over the next few months.

Despite all the ballyhoo, and users of the V product please don't read something else into the use of that word, Icon will definitely be formally launched at this year's PLASA Show in September. Be there or be square!