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Spotlight on 'Top of the Pops'

Joanna Turner talked to Robert Wright, Head of Television Lighting at the BBC, and Lighting Director Eric Wallis about the background work involved in setting up television's major light and sound show.

Eric Wallis, secretary of the Society of Television Lighting Directors, was the lighting director responsible, in that particular six-week spell, for the BBC 1 programme 'Top of the Pops'—recorded on Wednesday September 18th and broadcast on Thursday the 19th. Background work began on Monday the 16th, and I caught up with the operation on recording day to see a somewhat tacky-looking studio transformed into a colour spectacle all set up and ready for the day's audience and television recordings in the early evening. How was it all achieved?

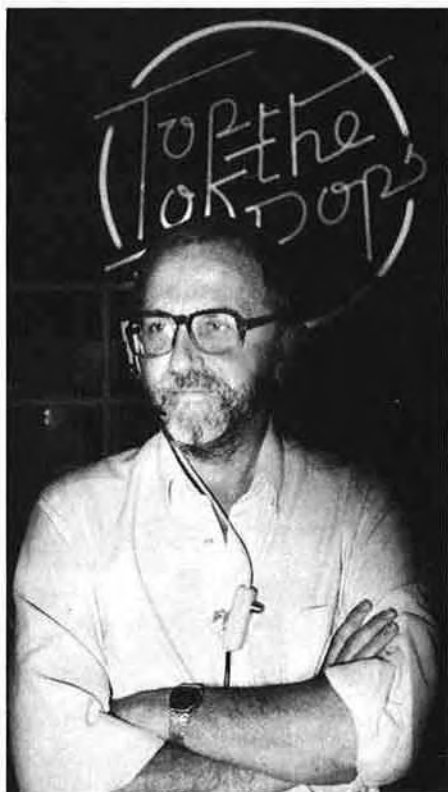
The answer is by three days of hard work, within a very tight schedule, and close co-operation between the lighting director, the scenic designer (Katy Atty), and the visual effects designer (Andy Lazell). Even with a major television show like Top of the Pops studio time is strictly limited, and the fact that the pop charts aren't published until the day before the recording session adds to the pressure by compacting the time available into a very short duration.

The only normal thing about lighting designer Eric Wallis's week is that it begins on a Monday, when he roughs out the basic lighting plot. He will know by then which studio has been allocated to Top of the Pops for that particular week, and the set-up of that studio—for the week in question it was Studio 6—and this will have to be vacated by the previous users in time for a Tuesday morning rigging-up session by the 5-strong team of electricians.

At 9.30 a.m. on Tuesday the planning meeting takes place at which the producer, lighting director, production designer, technical co-ordinator, make-up designer, costume designer, camera supervisor, and sometimes the electronic effects designer listen to the discs selected, decide the running order and treatment of the songs and format of the programme.

Eric Wallis then takes copies of the discs to listen to and moves into the drawing office to finalise the plot, having by this time decided the colours he will need, and the effects he wants to use in the show. Close liaison with the scenic designer now becomes important in terms of incorporating neons into the set, floor lamps under it and the overall endeavor to create an atmosphere of lighting and scenery working together as one. Special effects are then added to the equation to provide the finishing touch.

Once the outline scheme is finished, and the required gels are ordered, the plot is given to the electricians so that the necessary equipment can be obtained from stores before the scenery starts to come in.



Eric Wallis: "Visually we follow the pop industry and try to reproduce in the TV studio the excitement of the pop concert and the best discos".

The Top of the Pops show is a major operation for the BBC's electricians because basically it uses the studio in warehouse fashion, ignoring much of the standard rig resident in any studio and hiring in much extra equipment. From a production viewpoint it could be described as a semi-resident roadshow, starting almost from scratch week-to-week.

Recording day (Wednesday) starts with a 2-hour session setting the lamps, before camera rehearsals begin at 11 a.m. Eric Wallis then moves up to the gallery and inspects the pictures coming up on the monitors, leaving assistant Geoff Thonger to carry out adjustments from the studio floor. Having made sure all the lamps are in position, by the time of the first run-through all facilities will be at his fingertips, all effects ready.

Meanwhile vision supervisor Roy Adcock and his assistants have been plugging up all the ancillary equipment installed in the gallery, and setting basic memories on the lighting console.

By now, barring major hitches, most of the work is done. Although during the day

alterations and adjustments may have to be made, and any lights not rigged up to the rock board will be controlled manually during the recording of the show.

By 6.00 p.m. all rehearsals will have been completed, and recording of the chart run-down and chart-breakers will also have been concluded. Apart from cheer-leaders who will be making friends with the day's audience, all those concerned with the production will take an hour off to eat and relax before returning to the studio for the sound and vision line-up. If all goes to plan recording should commence at 7.30 p.m. and the show, although pre-recorded, is treated as "live" and runs for its allotted 30 minutes. Any problem patches that the producer feels need improvement can then be re-recorded and edited into the tapes. Pre-recorded videotape sections will be inserted during the running of the show.

Occasionally, when things like Bank Holidays intervene, the show comes out live on the Thursday, but as Eric Wallis commented it doesn't have that much of an effect except in that it tightens the schedules somewhat. "The principle is to record Top of the Pops as live, so that when we do have to do a live show, it's no great hassle. It's good—it gets everyone tingling," he told me.

Planning for Top of the Pops as far as the lighting is concerned is quite different from many other television productions. The show is a cross between a pop concert and a disco, and therefore has to combine the lighting effects of both—that is, to emphasise both the stage with the performers on it, and the dance floor. Also important from a planning viewpoint, is the fact that for many young viewers, it may be the one time they get to see their 'idol' and so close-up shots must dominate. This involves quite a different approach for the lighting designer because rather than planning with camera angles in mind he must start with a portrait of the artist or Disc Jockey, and, using wide-angled shots, follow up with lighting and effects to create the general atmosphere.

One of the most enjoyable things about working for Top of the Pops for a lighting director is the challenge of trying to incorporate new equipment and effects as and when they become available. Bob Wright, Head of the BBC Lighting Department, told me: "I know a lot of producers around the country who have nothing to do with pop shows, who watch Top of the Pops to see what's new; not only in terms of lighting equipment, but what effects are being used, and how. We tend to use Top of the Pops to



Area A, the 'master area' for production of Top of the Pops with back projection area on the left and the show's logo on the right. This was used by the group 'Red Box' for performance.

try out new things, and the producers and directors are very good in that area; in fact they are more experimental than most."

I asked Eric Wallis how he hears about new equipment. "As Secretary of Television Lighting Directors, I am on various mailing lists, and information is coming to individual members all the time, so I also hear from that source. Because of the sort of programme it is, I also make a point of visiting discos and watching pop concerts occasionally, to keep up to date on what's happening outside. I go to hirers on occasion, if I hear they've got something new, and they then demonstrate what they've come up with. Manufacturers usually only contact us through the hiring companies although within the BBC all the information goes to the Head of Lighting. Occasionally we have lighting director meetings where manufac-

turers come and demonstrate their latest equipment. They take over a whole studio, put all the gear in, and everyone is invited to come down and play with it and meet the representatives. This happens fairly frequently; about every three or four months."

The equipment that was being used the day I visited Top of the Pops included: standard Berkey luminaires, CCT effects lanterns, IRIS 4 for cyclorama lighting, Antares as a soft source, parcans on pre-wired bars, pin spot battens, a light curtain, Meteorlite 8 Light units or 'audience blinders', and lots of ray lights. The above include standard equipment which would already be rigged in the studio, and equipment hired from their two main hirers for this particular programme, Playlight Hire Ltd, and Meteorlites Productions Ltd. The mobile effects are hired from Richard Martin Lighting, and for this show

comprised of contra rotating twists and pillars, Sparklite battens, HMI guns, and Rafal Tubes.

It is interesting to note that there are limitations to the lighting effects that can be used on Top of the Pops because they have to be suitable for recording through the eyes of the camera. Lasers for example cause many problems with reflection of metal structures in the studio, and interference with the television signal.

The scenery is built to incorporate neons, which had been designed by a BBC designer, and manufactured for the BBC by Desart. Special effects used were dry ice and smoke, which was directed through a wind machine. The lighting console used was a Strand MMS console in conjunction with a hired Avolite 12-way rock board. An Avolite Ultra Chase II was used for the neons, and a Zero 88



Area B with its 'stage scenery' setting was used by Midge Ure.

Eclipse portable effects desk was used for chasing and sound-to-light sequences.

Whilst talking to various manufacturers before visiting Top of the Pops studio, I had heard that the BBC had a reputation for requesting modifications to almost every piece of technical equipment they bought, but that this seemed not to be the case these days. The main problem with lighting equipment used by the BBC is that it has to satisfy the highest standards of safety and robustness because of the treatment it receives during the course of its life. As Bob Wright said, "the main criteria are primarily safety, robustness, durability and effectiveness. There is a department called Studio Capital Projects Department which does a lot of the installation of new equipment. They will go out to the manufacturers if one of the lighting directors has seen something which he thinks

meets the specification and would do the job he wants, and they will look at the lamp, probably borrow it for a while and do some measurements on it, look at its construction and see whether it is robust or safe enough.

"They would probably come up with quite simple things, for example, some lamps are held together with pop rivets whereas the BBC prefer nuts and bolts for safety reasons. The manufacturers concerned have often complied with these requests and changed things to suit our specifications. Because the BBC's safety standards are so good, some manufacturers embody these modifications into all their equipment. For example Zero 88 were making a lighting control desk which the BBC looked at and liked, and the modifications they made were actually adopted for wholesale manufacture."

One piece of standard equipment the BBC

use a great deal was designed specifically for the BBC by Berkey, and is now used in other fields as well to some extent. This is the Berkey luminaire which is designed to produce both soft and hard light. Before this, one either had hard light or soft light luminaires, but these 'twisters' as some people call them have been reasonably successful. Hard light can easily and quickly be changed into soft light simply by turning the lamp around, and the power intensity can also be altered at will.

Eric Wallis thinks that for other standard luminaires the standard is good, technologically. "We are using these lights every day of the week, so they've got to be strong, safe, and come up with the goods regularly. They must not need a lot of looking after because we can't keep taking them out to service them. I think the lamps outside

reach a standard without the BBC pushing all the time. Generally we buy most things off the shelf these days because if you do order things specially you've got to make it worth while to the industry: it costs so much to develop a new lamp."

And what about the standard of equipment hired in? "Most lamps now meet our specifications. Certainly any other odd lamp which we don't normally use goes through our safety department anyway. We are not allowed to use it unless it's safe, and they might make small modifications. Every light which we hire goes through our workshop for a safety check, and an engineer goes to the hirer to see that he works within the BBC

standards of safety. They've got to stand up to being put in, changed around, taken out, sent back to the hirers etc. Most luminaires go up and stay up, but those going in and out do take a bit of hammering. They have got to be safe electrically, so the BBC does specify certain standards of safety that they have to meet. Before we ever used Richard Martin's stuff, our engineers went to see him to see if he met our standards. But even so, all his rotating devices you'll see here have been put in cages in case any pieces should fly off. If that happened in a television studio, with the amount of other equipment around, it could be a very dangerous and expensive accident. You won't have the need



Bob Wright: "We tend to use Top of the Pops to try out new things, and the producers and directors are very good in that area; in fact, they are more experimental than most".

for this in discos, because once they're up they stay up, whereas ours come on and off the rig all the time. It was a bit of a bind, but Richard Martin have met all our standards before, and they made the cages for us."

The cost of hiring all the equipment for the show is met by the programme budget, a proportion of which is allocated for this purpose. The lighting director will go to the producer and explain that for a certain effect he wants to achieve he needs to hire a particular piece of equipment. If it is too expensive, the producer knows that the lighting director, if he can, will get around the problem one way or another. If this is not possible, the producer will accept this. Michael Hurl, the executive producer, appreciates how important lighting is to a programme like Top of the Pops, and makes sure that a realistic portion of the programme budget goes towards hire of lighting equipment. The BBC avoids having out-of-date-equipment on its hands by only buying what is called 'work horse lanterns', which can be used on any type of programme. Any specialist equipment, like the Harvester or Cosmis Balls, or anything that might go out of fashion, it is policy to hire. "If we're looking for a long-term hire for Top of the Pops, we go out to tender to the hirers, and seek the most competitive rate," explained Bob Wright. At the moment about 10% of the actual total lighting used on Top of the Pops is hired.

Eric Wallis's view is that lighting is a very potent force in the Disco and Pop world, and the equipment has become very sophisticated, producing the most exciting results. "There have also been more subtle changes, such as the introduction of scenery. With a programme like Top of the Pops, what happens over the next few years will be dictated by what happens outside. Visually we follow the pop industry and try to reproduce in the TV Studio the excitement of the pop concert and the best discos," he said.

And a final note for the industry: in addition to its regular hire requirements the BBC spends £1½m annually on lighting equipment as part of its capital programme of regular refurbishment of studios across the UK.



Area C, base for Lloyd Cole and the Commotions, is linked by 6' high bridges to areas B and D in the Top of the Pops studio.