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Classic Gear: The Wholehog II

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

An indication of a classic product is when you re-read an early brochure and find a statement that just sounds obvious. Then you remember that until that product, things were very different.

Take this: "uses words, not numbers, to make it easy to understand and use. At a glance, the screens show everything clearly labelled - Gobos in Blue directed Down-Stage." That could describe just about any current lighting console. But in fact the brochure in question is from 1995; the product: Flying Pig Systems' Wholehog II.

As its name suggests, though, the Hog II wasn't the first go-round. Less obvious: it was actually the third, two of the Pigs, Tom Thorne and Nick Archdale, having collaborated on the little known DLD6502, before joining with Nils Thorjussen and the lesser-known fourth partner, Peter Miles of SpotCo, to create the original Whole Hog. Best new product award winner at PLASA in 1992, the big Hog gained a lot of attention through its then-unprecedented ability to run up to 6000 channels across twelve DMX universes. Expensive to make and expensive to buy, it wasn't ultimately a big seller - but it gave the team the impetus and belief to create a smaller, more cost effective successor incorporating all they'd learnt and targeting a wider market than just concert touring. The result was the Hog II.

It was compact - you could almost carry it under your arm. Its twin touchscreens made that possible, replacing the many, many - but never enough - buttons of the first Hog with an infinite number of virtual buttons. The software exploited this to brilliant effect, offering palettes of positions, colours and gobos, the desk even setting up the basics of these for you after you patched your rig. Want red? Find red on screen and touch it, job done. Between that, the control keypad, four encoders for attribute control, nine playback faders and a grandmaster - well, that was about all you needed.

The clean, elegant software, unencumbered by years of history from earlier consoles, innovated in other ways, from the powerful Effects Engine - movement by applying mathematics rather than creating step chases - to the quirky Instalook, which could create your lighting for you when you ran out of inspiration.

The product's late-1994 debut could not have been better timed: with even Vari-Lite having conceded that DMX was now the defacto control standard for moving lights, the world was in search of a control option that wasn't either a previous generation of rock-and-roll controller or a theatre console stretching to deal with something quite different. Astutely, the Pigs had also backed WYSIWYG, giving them both a great way of showing off their product and yet another new trick, focussing lights by touching them on the WYG screen...

The Hog quickly became the console of choice for many, many users - those who'd dealt with moving lights for years and, crucially, those meeting them for the first time. It became the standard controller across many types of shows for more than a decade, many users sticking with their IIs in preference to the newer Hog III for years. And, of course, its influence on just about every other current lighting controller is obvious, while its original creators have gone on to innovate in other areas, notably the Pharos architectural controller.

The Wholehog II knowledge base and forums are still available at
>>> www.flyingpig.com