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Classic Gear: The Lil'DMXter

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

I'm pretty sure a standard can't really be considered a standard until it has a support infrastructure built around it - imagine a screw without a matching screwdriver. That means more than just tools to make it work - it means tools to prove it works and, more importantly, to figure out what's gone wrong when it doesn't.

It can be hard to recall now, nearly 30 years on, the fear with which many regarded DMX - the miracle of 512 dimmers down a single cable that had what looked suspiciously like audio connectors on the ends (though some of that fear has re-appeared as we move into the Ethernet age). What helped calm the fear was the arrival of a test tool: Bob Goddard's Lil'DMXter, which was to troubleshooting DMX issues what the voltmeter and continuity checker were to solving more traditional lighting problems. Which is to say: a tool that could simultaneously provide a nervous user with reassurance, an advanced user with powerful diagnostic tools.

It helped that it was simultaneously unthreatening (just a small LCD display and a few buttons for navigation), practical (particularly since it could run off mains or its internal battery) and rugged, with enough heft to be taken seriously and built into a tough case to protect it.

Plug a DMX cable into its 'DMX In' connector and it could display incoming levels, proving that the correct data was getting out of the console and reaching whatever destination the DMXter was at. Plug a cable into its 'DMX Out' and you could drive channels to levels to prove lights could be turned on even if the console was having trouble doing so.

More advanced users could use it to check cables were good or to check for oddities in the transmitted data using 'flicker finder', which would grab a snapshot of a DMX state then monitor it for changes. And power users had the ability to tinker with just about every parameter of DMX, including alternative start codes, signal timing, signal breaks and more - all useful at a time when the industry was still learning, the DMX spec was still a little vague, and weird oddities - a flicker here, a random flash there - were not uncommon. The Lil'DMXter could help track down the culprit so that solutions, or at least workarounds, could be put in place.

The proof of the need for the tool is that there are now a host of alternatives - but the Lil'DMXter is still going strong, the current version looking identical apart from a few more buttons. Internally, though, its functionality has kept pace with the way we've evolved, adding support for storing



Photo: Courtesy of Goddard Design

backup looks and for acronyms that hadn't even been invented when it was - USB, RDM.

The proof of the ruggedness of the tool is that the original came back to Goddard Design a couple of years ago, its original customer wanting it serviced. It turned out to be in fine condition, really just needing a new battery to continue its working life . . .

However much we'd like to move to a completely networked, super-high-tech, ACN-enabled future, it's clear that in the real world DMX isn't going away any time soon. One suspects that as long as it's with us, this classic tool will be with us too . . .

A Manual From The Early Days:
 > www.goddarddesign.com/pdf_doc/dmxman101_w1.pdf

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