David Gilmour

Live at the RAH

Also Inside:

PLASA Show Review
The story from Excel . . .

SiPA: A 10 Year Plan
Sustainability goals for us all

Production Park
Many things to many people

Platinum FLX
Elation Pro's new fixture reviewed

PLUS: Order from ArKaos ● Review: DPA's d:fine headset mics ● BEIRG Campaign Update
Jody Chiang's Farewell ● Rigging Call: PLASA Rigging Conference ● LD Terry Cook in Profile

LSi: 1985-2015 - 30 Years as the Industry's favourite magazine!

Classic Gear: Arri Imagine

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

Disruption, when it comes, usually comes from an unexpected source, a source without a history that it has to honour, a source that hasn't settled down into a complacent routine. In the mid-1980s, in the UK, in lighting control, that disruption came from, of all places, a film lighting company, when Arri introduced the Imagine console.

Imagine pulled off the remarkable trick of being instantly recognisable as a lighting control (24 faders to the left, playback faders in the middle, keypad centre, level wheel to the right, then grand-master, then a new-style 3.5" floppy drive), yet at the same time with its colour-coded, precise, clicky keys, compact form and sharp lines feeling immediately cleaner, more modern than its rivals.

Compared to those rivals, many from Strand, it was also reasonably priced and quite highly spec'd, able to control up to 250 (or, later, 500) channels soft-patched to 512 or 1000 dimmers. It could drive one or two external monitors, in colour. It offered new features like macros, support for an external digitiser tablet so you could create your own control surface, as well as powerful cue-editing functions, including blind editing and both the ability to track changes when recording and to follow and edit channels through the show rather than cue by cue in tracksheet mode. If it lacked the high-end features found on the top-end Strand consoles - well, most people had never used them and so would never miss them.

Besides, if you were new to memory control, the Imagine felt more logical than the Strand consoles of the time, with their carried-forward-from-history operations like having to engage 'seq' mode to move through the cuesheet, or to load a cue into a playback. They keypad was clearly laid out and labeled with obvious-sounding commands. The screen would give you hints as to what you could do next, and a real innovation - a 'help' button, giving immediate information when you got stuck without the manual to hand. Though its release button could be a bit nerve-wracking . . .

Round the back, it was bang up-to-date, offering the then brand-new DMX512 protocol. Of course, Arri had to offer a box, the Connexion module, to convert this back to analogue control for theatres wanting to connect Imagine to existing dimmers (and a mini-industry of convertor boxes sprang up for connecting it to dimmers expecting Strand's D54 protocol), but if you were ready to embrace the future the connection from desk to dimmers was now just one piece of cable. Particularly if you were touring both, this was a revelation.

If you looked closely, the start screen hinted that while badged by Arri, Imagine wasn't really made by Arri: the copyright was credited to something called ETC. Britain hadn't really heard of them then (though they soon would!). Imagine was a re-badged ETC Expression, a console that had taken America by storm. It was a descendent of the MegaCue, one of the first microprocessor-based consoles, and subsequent products the company had made for Disney, for Berkey Colortran and for others before starting to sell products directly. Inside, Imagine ran on two 64180 CPUs with a 320C25 slave processor, its code written in Fortran80 and the whole thing operating with just 128kb of RAM.

The other thing that set it apart from its contemporaries: its reliability. I toured an Imagine around the world for two years and it was impeccably behaved - an often under-rated, yet crucial, feature in a lighting control.

Manual still available from ETC!
> //plasa.me/dok4h