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IN PROFILE: MATTEO BIANCHINI OF EIGHTEEN SOUND - AND MUCH MORE . . .

plasamedia

classic gear

Clear-Com Intercom | by Rob Halliday . . .

➡ Sometimes, an anniversary provides a reminder of a classic. Other times - this time - the idea is there, then you discover it's also an anniversary. So let's get the celebration out of the way first: happy 50th anniversary to Clear-Com, pioneer and still manufacturer of communications products for our industry.

It's hard to imagine working without products like comms beltpacks and headsets now - sitting down at the production desk and sliding on the headset is a sign that you're here, ready to work, for lighting designers and stage managers just as I imagine it might be for pilots.

But it wasn't always like that. In theatre, lighting designers had long used cobbled-together systems of microphones and loudspeakers to communicate with their board operators, but functionality was limited and the systems were prone to feedback. In the concert industry, ever-increasing volume levels through the 1960s meant it sometimes became difficult to communicate clearly even with those standing right next to you.

Two people involved in the music scene in San Francisco at around this time were acutely aware of this problem. Charlie Butten was renowned for fixing and improving the guitar amps destroyed by the likes of Lindsey Buckingham. Bob Cohen was the mixer at the Avalon Ballroom, handling visiting acts like The Grateful Dead, The Doors and Janis Joplin. Bob and his team had been using telephone-type handsets, but they didn't cope at all well with the high volume environments. Ultimately, Bob gave Charlie the challenge of creating a better way of communicating.

What he came up with in 1966 is familiar to us all today: a headset with earphones and microphone connected to a compact, rugged metal beltpack. The beltpack gave access to a 'partyline' of full-dupex communications:

Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for more than 25 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic… or just old!

anyone could talk, anyone could listen, any time.

Audio and power were carried over standard shielded mic cables. The beltpack had controls to turn your mic off and on, adjust your listen volume, and included a call light to attract the attention of anyone who'd taken their headset off. The system's frequency response was contoured to aid intelligibility and had sidetone so you could hear yourself.

Technically it was a 'single channel distributed amplifier analogue intercom system', the beltpacks fed by a master station but then daisy-chained together, up to 30 beltpacks in the early days.

Butten called the system 'Clear-Com'; in 1968, that became the name of the company, the beltpack now known as the RS-100.
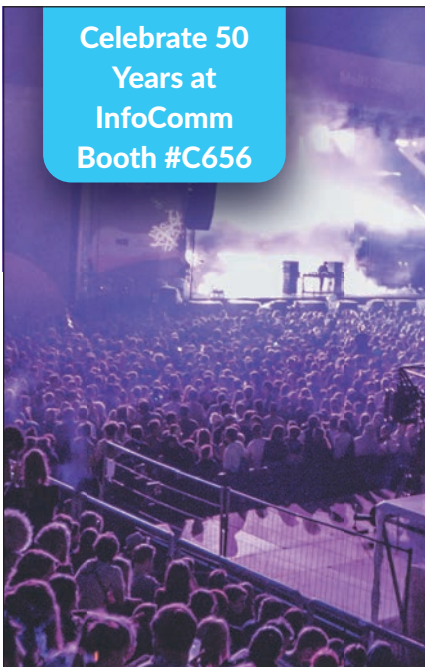
Inevitably, not everyone thought this new approach an improvement. In his book *The Sound of Theatre*, pioneering sound designer David Collison talks of trying to persuade his lighting colleagues of the benefit of a headset-based system. They thought they could not possibly wear headsets for all-night plotting sessions, and that the wire would get in the way. Only one member of the Theatre Projects team - David Hersey, who'd used such systems in America - did not see the problem; others soon followed his lead.

Arguably, Clear-Com and the systems descended from it, such as the dual-channel version Theatre Projects created and which is still sold as Tecpro, and Clear-Com's later RS-500 that has formed the communications heart of the biggest shows for decades, have changed the way we work, making the intensive, collaborative process of tech through which shows are now generally made possible. ⊗

Clear-Com at 50:
◤ //clearcom50.com