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Classic Gear: The Zero 88 Sirius 24

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

There's a big difference between available and affordable. By mid-1988, computerised memory lighting consoles were available, and in professional theatres and mid-to-large shows were the industry standard. But that left an enormous range of smaller shows and venues who'd have loved computer control but couldn't afford it, particularly if they wanted to retain the familiar 'hands-on-faders' style of desk they were used to; the cheapest models from the recognised lighting companies used keyboards rather than expensive faders.



The Sirius 24 from Zero 88.

It was into this niche that Zero88 launched their Sirius 24 - and rarely can there have been a more perfect match of product and market need. Compact, clearly laid out, yet rugged and able to stand a bit of abuse, the Sirius at first glance looked like a big brother to the two-preset manual consoles it set out to replace. There were two sets of 24 faders that could be used manually if required (the console included A/B masters with dipless crossfade), and flash buttons below the faders.

But it also offered six memory master faders for quickly storing looks and nine easily-programmable effects with sound-to-light control, if required - both ideal for busking shows. And for those who wanted to program the entire show, the Sirius could store up to 99 states with programmed fade times, though these could also be over-ridden using the rate dial located above the 'go' playback key. The Sirius didn't offer any support for a monitor, but green and orange LEDs below each fader showed when a light was active and when the fader had been matched to the

programmed level - modifying levels in programmed cues on a Sirius was something of an acquired art! A key-switch allowed access to the desk's functions to be limited to program, preset or run only.

Designed by a team led by Richard Thornton Brown (electronics design), Chris Fenwick (mechanical construction) and John Brown (software), the console was based on Motorola's 68B03P processor coupled with 32K of RAM and 32K of EPROMS for the console's firmware; output was +10V analogue, with -10V available as an option.

Easily understood and affordable, the Sirius was an immediate hit. But Zero 88 didn't rest on its laurels; a year later, the Mk2 version offered an optional DMX output (fitted as standard from 1995), a memory card slot for show storage, and 90 'point cue' memories for adding cues between existing memories; it was also joined by a big brother, the Sirius 48.

The Sirius was finally retired in late 2000, but can still be found in active service in many smaller venues and schools. The name passed to the Sirius 250, an ambitious project that was the first to use timelines to manage cues, and was arguably ahead of its time. The Sirius spirit now continues in the popular Frog range, adding moving light functionality to the familiar, friendly, practical operating approach and reasonable pricing that the Sirius established so well.

Sirius User Manuals and other documents are still available at <http://support.zero88.com>

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