

Into the Future with Vari-Lite

Francis Reid witnesses the launch of the latest Vari-Lites.

The Genesis date list omitted one of the most important gigs of their May tour - Bray Film Studios. However this was neither a performance for the fans nor a shoot for a promo video. The sounds of the band shook Samuelson's hangar studio but this was Hamlet without the Prince. The speaker stacks, the rostra and the lighting rig were all there but Genesis were on tape. We had come to see the lights. The Vari-Lites.

Or more precisely, the VL2 and the VL3 which have been developed out of the original Mk.I. 'Development' and 'Mk.II' are words used rather loosely in many industries including our own. But these new Vari-Lites are in no way related to the badge engineering which hopes to extend the brand life of many cars, washing machines and, yes, even profile spots. The new Vari-Lites demonstrably do more things and do them better; and I am prepared to believe that they do them more reliably. (As a down-market lighting designer, I only wish there was a way of doing it all more cheaply!)

At the initial UK launch in 1985 I enthused about Vari-Lite - both in terms of what had been achieved and (even more so) the future potential. I am happy to report that the Bray demonstration did not dampen but positively fuelled my enthusiasm.

The demonstration took the form of letting Vari-Lite do its Genesis cues. So in essence we saw it act as a scenery substitute. In rock lighting the visual patterns made by the coloured fronts of the lighting instruments are almost just as important as the light that is emitted. And since that light has to create an environment rather than merely reveal one, the beam passing through the air is considerably more important than what happens when it actually hits something. The Vari-Lite's capacity for all this was fully proven. The rig was always dramatic to look

at and sometimes even quite poetic, particularly when truss movements worked in harmony with lighting movements. In rock, the essential lighting requirement is the ability to catalyse the emotional contact between band and audience by hyping the rhythm and by making dramatic crosscuts. Vari-Lite is king in this respect. But it also enjoys the potential for a lighting designer to explore subtleties with the kind of flexibility that can be severely eroded by the customary need to rely on ladders for each and every adjustment except intensity.

This potential of Vari-Lite as a design tool was, alas, not fully demonstrated at Bray. In fact the Samuelson team rather let their product down by not offering a properly rehearsed performance of a single Vari-Lite showing the full range of its possibilities, function by function, limit to limit. The afternoon demo of a single instrument was so ad lib that they may perhaps have decided to get their act together for the evening session - but by then I was studying the brochure to discover the new parameters of Vari-Lite technology.

It is a good brochure and particularly interesting in its cut-away diagrams which give some insight into the technology. The Mk.I was a mysterious box whose contents were a matter for speculation, fanned by an apocrypha built up in saloon bar nudges, nods and winks from those who knew someone who knew the technician who had taken one apart while the Vari-Lite operator was locked in the loo during an all-nighter.

The new Vari-Lite comes in two models, the VL2 Spot and the VL3 Wash. The spot version is essentially an update (a quite considerable update) of the original Mk.I. Its dichronic wheel colour changing system produces over 120 colours from tints to saturates, although the actual range of these

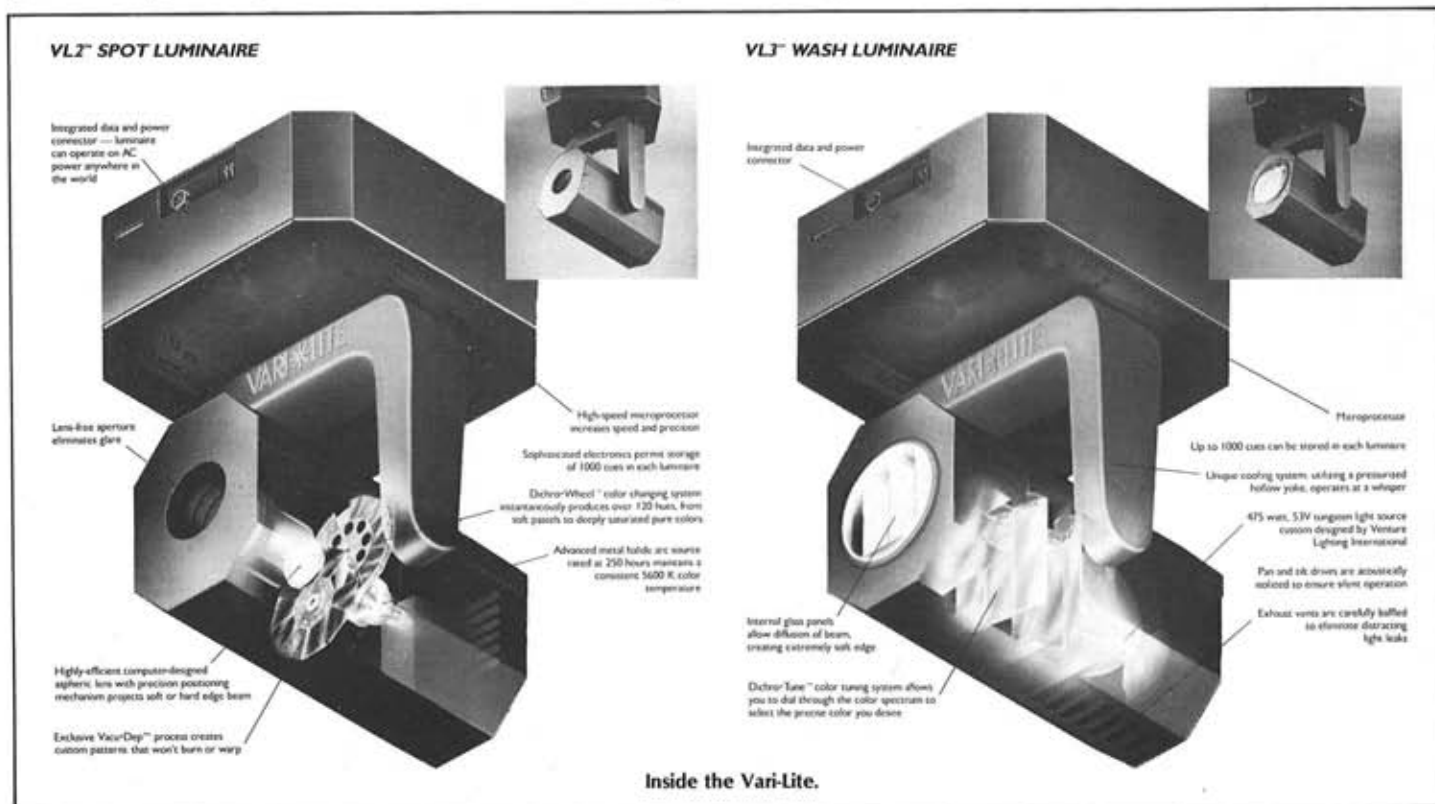
is biased towards more variations in the saturates than in the tints. A pattern disc offers nine standard or customised options. These are not etched metal gobos but are made by placing a thin reflective layer on glass. Thus there are no supporting breaks in the pattern - one of the standard patterns for example, is a perfect unbroken circle projection.

Beam size is by iris, and focus is by positioning of the aspheric lens for hardening and softening of the beam. Since the lens is inside, the instrument's lens-free aperture is said to "eliminate glare". I am not quite sure what they mean by this but I have a hunch that if hung close to scenery, this light might well turn out to be relatively free from glare. Certainly the effect of this recessed lens, together with the heat convection currents, gives the impression that light and smoke are pouring forth in a torrent from the front of the instrument.

The source remains a metal halide arc. Panning (360 degrees) and tilting (270 degrees) are, like every other function, programmable via each unit's personal microprocessor and the new 'Artisan' desk which can control up to 1,000 instruments. Comprehensive control facilities offer, for example, the capacity to store 1,000 cues per instrument.

The VL3 Wash has a tungsten source (475 watts, 53 volt). Internal glass panels allow diffusion of the beam to a quasi-fresnel soft edge or to a simulation of an MFL par. The colour change system, called Dichro-Tune, claims a virtually unlimited palette. The chromacity diagram suggests a considerably more even balance between tints and saturates than in the VL2 disc system. Comparison of the drawings of the two dichronic systems indicates the reasons for the greater flexibility in the newer system.

How much of all this is the shape of the



future? As a lighting designer, I regard the colour selection as the most significant development. As a lighting manager, I particularly welcome the remotes. I am sure we are going to see more and more low voltage and arc sources, and I believe that digital instructions will increasingly be separated from power distribution as more and more functions in addition to dimming are taken over by a centralised control desk.

And what do I worry about? Strangely enough, not the cost! I think that can and will be budgeted in due course. No, my prime worry is noise. Despite phrases like "pan and tilt drives are acoustically isolated to ensure silent operation" and "engineering advances in cooling and mechanical systems have created an automated luminaire which can operate even in demanding low-noise theatrical situations", I remain unconvinced

that we are close to accepted levels for the straighter forms of theatre. But I hope I am wrong!

For Vari-Lite Mk.II I am as enthusiastic, envious and adoring as I was for Mk.I. Forward to Mk.III!

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People . . .



Bill Crisp.

● Very occasionally an editor has the opportunity to pay an open, direct and personal tribute to someone in the industry without any fear of comment from others of 'favouritism'. And I welcome this chance to print a few words of appreciation upon the occasion of the retirement of **Bill Crisp**, publicity manager of Strand Lighting.

A long time employee of Rank, Bill commenced his working life with G.B. Equipments in the summer of 1949, selling 16mm educational films, and concurrently Bell & Howell 16mm sound projectors. The latter, together with 8mm and 16mm cameras were manufactured under licence from Bell & Howell, Chicago at a factory in Mitcheldean in Gloucestershire. Formerly the site of a brewery, it was to become better known as the main manufacturing plant in the U.K. of Rank Xerox copying equipment, and Bill readily recalls the time when Rank Xerox was formed, with premises in Mortimer Street, London W1 and when the staff consisted of just two men and a girl.

In the fifties, and with a change of name, there was a merger with another Rank company G.B. Kalee, specialising in 35mm sound and projection equipment. The 'in-thing' at the time was Cinemascope and 3-D film formats - all very exciting developments to attract greater audiences to the cinemas.

Over the years the product range was enlarged and diversified, and at different times included tape recorders, dictating machines, language laboratories, physics tubes, microscopes, 8mm loop projectors and electronic organs.

By the early sixties Rank Audio Visual was the favoured name, and the company was relocated to Shepherd's Bush, to a site close by Lime Grove Studios. The Studio Division of Rank also operated from the same site, and with various changes of name eventually became part of Strand Lighting.

At the end of the sixties Bill Crisp transferred to Strand at King Street, Covent Garden, and then to Brentford, where Strand Lighting is today.

Most of Bill's career was involved with publicity, and that is how I will remember him. I feel sure I speak for all of those involved over the years in magazine and book publishing and many areas of wider research, when I say you couldn't find a more efficient, accurate and helpful person to deal with, whether it was with editorial, advertising or more general industry 'information' from the Strand archives. But the greatest thing of all

was his great courtesy - even under pressure. And you never ever had to make a reminder telephone call to Bill Crisp.

Having taken early retirement he promised me he's "looking to the future" - and certainly not ready to don carpet slippers. I have the feeling we'll be keeping in touch, and that he will retain a communication with the industry, and L+SI in particular.

John Offord

● Lighting Design Partnership, now relocated in new offices in London and Edinburgh, has announced its third partner, **Barry Hannaford**, who has joined Andre Tammes and Jonathan Speirs after an initial 18 month period as LDP's London based Associate. The Partnership employs 18 people and claims to be the largest specialist lighting design practice within the UK.

● Star Hire, major suppliers of Turbosound/Soundcraft based PA systems, have appointed **Kevin Draper** as senior technician, a newly created post. Kevin was with Quad Electroacoustics for the last 15 years, holding the position of production supervisor before leaving.

● **John Walters**, a director of James Thomas Engineering, joined the Lighting Industry Golfing Society in the early Spring and within two weeks had lifted their major prize. "Now I'm sorry I got him in," said Zero 88's Freddy Lloyd.

● **Bruce Tompsett** joined Donmar on May 5th as service and installation manager to run this expanding department. He has been the service manager for Horam Electrical, Strand service agents, of Heathfield, East Sussex for over ten years and during that time has gained a high reputation for service and installation work in the counties south of London. Bruce's skills will now be applied at Donmar not just to Strand equipment, but to the ARRI range of Image Imagine 250/500 controls as well as Green Ginger, Pulsar, CCT, Electrosonic and Le Maitre equipment.

● Soundtracs Plc, has announced the appointment of **John Carroll** as sales and marketing director. He has been associated with the company for the past 12 years, both in the United Kingdom and overseas as international marketing manager, and his appointment is coincidental with just having received their second Queen's Award for Exports. Married with one child, John lives in Cobham, Surrey.

● Tannoy Limited has appointed **Barry Carter** as marketing manager for their Systems Division at High Wycombe. He will be co-ordinating the High Wycombe and Scottish operations (Tannoy's



Barry Carter.

Head Office is in Strathclyde) in expanding the company's specialist systems design service which combines Fire, Security and Evacuation systems with the famous Tannoy Public Address systems.

● An ex-keyboard player with 'Time Out' has joined the Pro-Sound division sales team of Toa Electronics Limited. **Martin Sweeting** was previously a full-time musician working abroad.

Martin, who hails from Knaresborough in North Yorkshire is responsible for the company's retail dealer network in the North of England and Scotland.

● Samuelson Lighting Ltd., has strengthened its administrative team by two new appointments in preparation for an exceptionally busy year ahead. **John Wilson**, formerly personal assistant to the managing director, becomes general manager, while **Mark Whitfield** joins the company as client contact.

John Wilson has worked within the Samuelson Group since leaving school in June 1967, when he joined Samuelson Film Service as a trainee film administrator. In September 1978 he moved to Samuelson Lighting, where he handled customer calls and bookings, until becoming PA to managing director Graham Anderson two years ago. In his new role as general manager he will provide an administrative support service for his colleagues in client liaison.

Mark Whitfield began his career in the industry at Moviecam, where he became sales assistant at their Wardour Street shop in March 1980. He subsequently joined Cinebuild - now LTM UK - initially handling sales of their special effects accessories and later moving into their film lighting division.

● As part of its recent strengthening of its Management team, CCT has appointed **Jack Watling** as sales manager responsible for entertainment sales. Jack has had a long and successful career at Strand Electric, which he joined in 1953. Working in various parts of the UK, he moved to London in 1978 as export sales manager for Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

In 1983 he took over responsibility for all export marketing of architectural dimming and control, to which he added the UK 1985. He joined Playlight as national sales manager in 1986.

With the arrival of Jack, **Ken Rickman**, who joined the company in 1986 from Marlin Lighting, where he was general sales manager, will be able to concentrate on managing the growing non-entertainment markets for CCT's products and expertise. **Nigel Pashley** will also be joining the sales team as export sales administrator. Nigel has re-joined CCT after an absence of thirteen years, and during this absence has gained wide experience in theatre and stage lighting, his most recent job being deputy chief electrician at Sadler's Wells.



John Carroll.

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