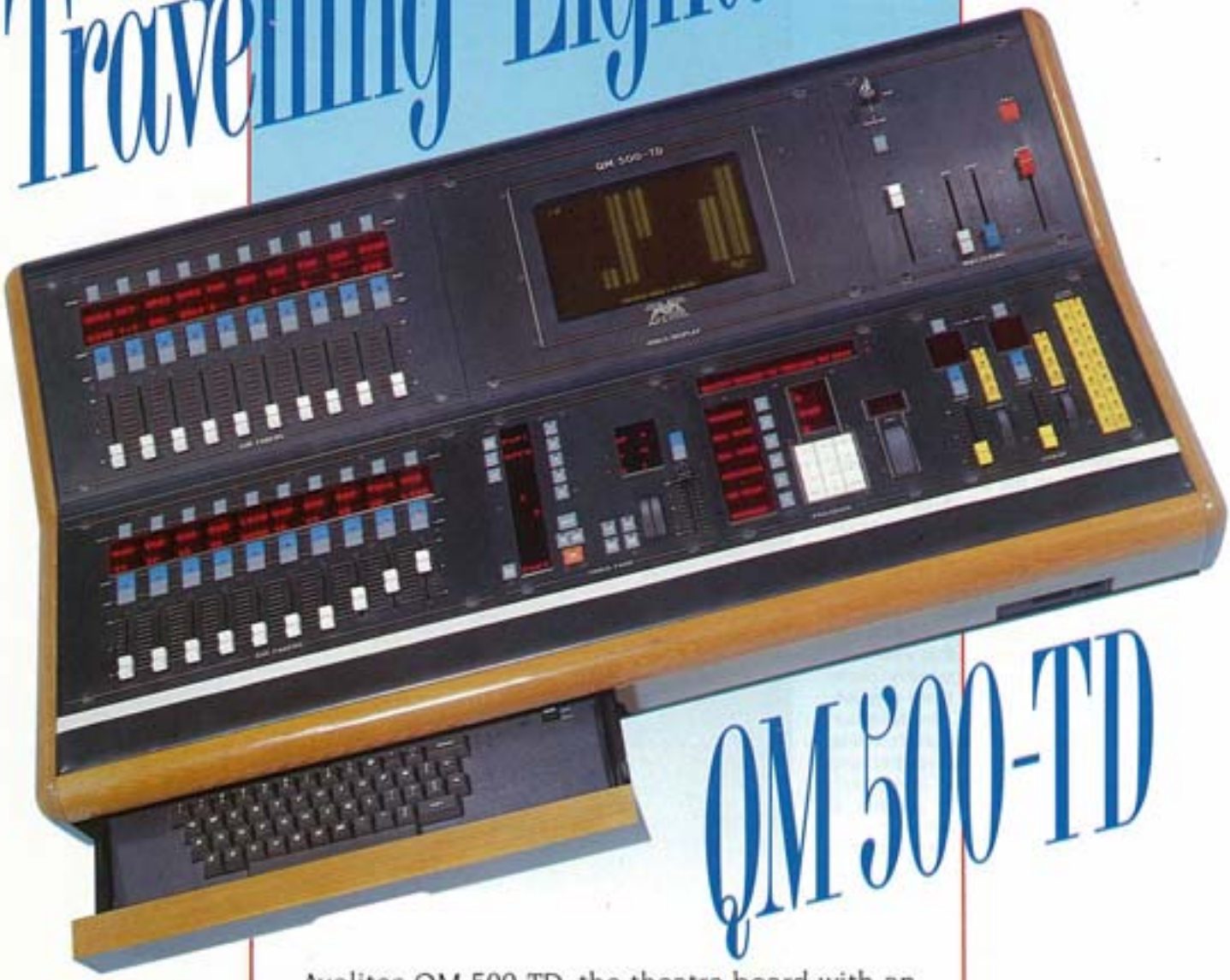
M A K I N G L I G H T W O R K

Travelling Light.



QM 500-TD

Avolites QM 500-TD, the theatre board with an impeccable pedigree.

Developed from the original "QM" the benchmark for touring boards, combining state of the art technology with craftsman construction.

Technology you can trust from the winner of the "Performance Award for Lighting Equipment Manufacturer of the Year, 1988"

Avolites QM 500-TD "the" theatre board.

AVOLITES PRODUCTION COMPANY LTD.
184 Park Avenue, London NW10 7XL.
Telephone: 01-965 8522. Telex: 24652 SPOTON G.
Fax: 01-965 0290.

AVOLITES

AVOLITES INC.
9700 Owensmouth Avenue, Unit B, Chatsworth CA 91311.
Tel: (818) 709 1116. E.MAIL IMC 506 OLLETT-US.
Fax: (818) 709 0153.

List of Agents: AUSTRIA Technik Design Tel: 43 7242 86633/4 · DENMARK Berkey Technical Tel: 45 110 6211 · FRANCE Regiscene Tel: 33 1 43 96 50 50 · GERMANY Camco Tel: 49 27 32 3080 HOLLAND Jansen Jansen Tel: 31 2907 6955 · HONG KONG Engineering Impact Tel: 852 3 715 4203 · ISRAEL More Productions Tel: 972 3 454 003 · ITALY Audiolink Tel: 39 521 598 723 JAPAN MTC Japan Tel: 81 3 295 4731 · SPAIN CYP Internacional Tel: 34 1 464 1148 · U.S.A. Avolites Inc. Tel: 1 818 709 1116

Avolites America

John Offord visits Avolites Inc. in California and gets an industry view from the 'other side'. President Clive Standley and vice-president Dick Ollett provide most of the words.

Based in West London, Avolites Production Co. Ltd. established its US operation in 1983. It's small and tucked away at Chatsworth, one of the far-flung bits of suburban growth on the north-west edge of the Los Angeles conurbation. But its size has nothing to do with its degree of importance to the Avolites set-up. Apart from the all-important servicing of its clients in the States, and an involvement with the heart of the touring music industry, Avolites Inc. USA plays a part when it comes to making decisions on the design and production of control equipment.

President of the US operation is Clive Standley, and vice-president, Dick Ollett. Together with a small and skilled staff they have the job of keeping the Avo flag flying at the sharp end of American operation and linking the UK with much of the origination of major concert touring productions that set out from the States on their world-wide junkets.

Clive Standley has been in LA for four years. I asked him about the differences he had encountered within the industry, when comparing the US to the UK.

"I found that there's an attitude of 'we're all in the entertainment industry together' much more than I ever noticed in England. Here there are certain organisations that are a forum for the expression of ideas and for the laying down of certain industry standards. Up to the time I left England, I certainly never knew anything that existed on that level over there. Companies here are certainly more friendly with each other and there is much more inter-company business. On the other hand, there are also companies undercutting each other, which we hear about because we're in the middle! However, I found people very friendly and there is certainly a noticeable freshness of approach."

Dick Ollett left the UK 10 years ago and went to America as 'one of the first wave of European roadies'. "I found myself in a situation over here where the equipment was anything but portable and the US market suddenly went wild for the English way of doing things. By now they have absorbed this methodology with a high degree of panache, in so far as you can go into almost any town in the States to obtain equipment, both for theatre and rock and roll. De facto standards that have evolved have been kept to and far more so than in England, although I admit I haven't been back for some time. I find it strange that a country as large and diverse as this should be as concentrated in its efforts and direction, rather than England."

Carrying on with comparisons, I asked how British lighting crews rate. Dick Ollett: "British crews are used over here because you can pay nickels and dimes for them before they realise the rate of pay over here is really far more!" Clive Standley (on a more serious note): "The fact is that English crews have to deal with a lot more variety than their American counterparts. American crews are used to a more standardised range of equipment, whereas British crews are more adaptable, having had to cope with touring such places as Spain and Italy, for instance." Dick Ollett: "A good soldier with a bit of European touring experience is a very valuable person over here."

Clive Standley (left) and Dick Ollett.

"I think the basis for the 'English invasion' is the fact that because the environment in which you have to tour in England is so demanding, systems developed to cater for that demand," explained Clive Standley. "Obviously, if it works well in Europe, then it's going to work extremely well in America. In the small section of the entertainment business that is the music touring industry, British equipment such as Avolites control and Thomas trussing is used in a major way. However, US companies are now much more aware of the competition certainly having the same level of technology and they are now much more compatible than they ever were. We are fortunate in that now the industry standards have been set, our equipment is one of those 'standards'."

But there are 'standards' and 'standards' and the sophisticated intermingling of equipment raises further questions.

Dick Ollett: "Nowadays people think of equipment less in terms of European or US equipment, but more in terms of Socapex connections or DMX. DMX originated over here and Socapex over there. As time goes by we'll see much more integration of systems."

Clive Standley: "Interlinking is a very important factor. Over here we're very aware of the need and organisations such as the USITT (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) are getting to grips with it and various sections of the industry are in collusion. This is something I can't really see hap-

pening in England. Although the USITT is basically a theatre-orientated organisation, it is making a great effort to include other areas such as ours and to get feedback from us. There is a great sense of the 'entertainment community' over here and we are at least working towards some sort of sensible technology, rather than everyone going off in their own direction.

"We are now a much bigger part of the overall industry and the industry itself is becoming a lot less fragmented. There is now much more crossover between rock and roll, theatre, television and video and we are being asked to interface with a variety of different things that we were never asked to interface with before, because we are now becoming much more recognised."

Dick Ollett: "Thinking way back to early rock and roll, a lot of our best talent has obviously moved on with the times. The sort of person who was following rock and roll tours around is now very often doing much bigger things - working for CBS or on Broadway, for instance. But the best that came from rock and roll, he obviously takes with him, so this has also given some cross-fertilisation. Which area is pulling which I've no idea. Maybe it's a bit of both. Certainly things are getting much more standardised right across the industry."

Clive Standley: "I think it's very important we don't get USITT standards and ABTT standards. They must start working together because we are so closely linked and the industry is now international."

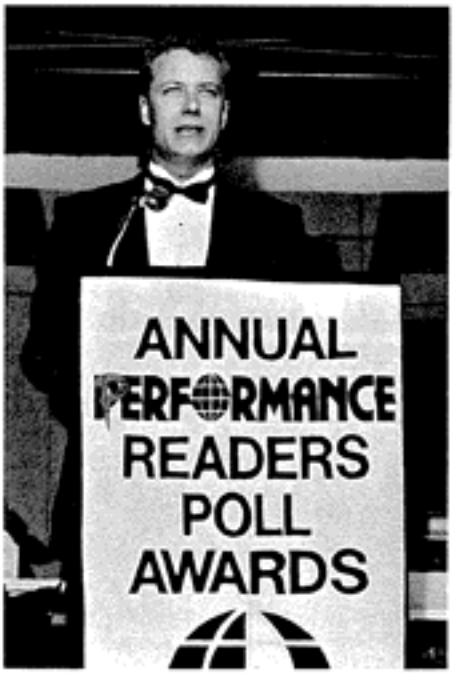
Dick Ollett: "That's right. The industry is world-wide. Nobody in their right minds would want to use three different systems (say) for the Far East, Europe and America when they could use the same. Obviously it's neither practical nor cost effective."

I asked Clive Standley about some of the specific problems that the company encounters and the key areas that need addressing.

"The biggest one is obviously the control interface problem," he explained. "We have traditionally used analogue control in our industry and now we're moving onto digital protocols. At the moment we continually have to deal with: 'is it analogue, is it AMX 192 or is it DMX 512?'. We have just been asked to do a job for a TV awards show at Disney Studios in Burbank utilising analogue controlled Gel Jet colour changers which we are supplying, and they want to use a Light Pallette console which outputs AMX 192. They are considering converting AMX 192 to DMX 512 to analogue to get things together. There is obviously something wrong here!

"But this comes up constantly and the reason for it is that manufacturers are initiating their own standards. It may have been OK five years ago, but it isn't OK any more. Nowadays, users are much more aware of all the different varieties of control and they don't want to be involved in interfacing AMX, DMX or whatever."

Dick Ollett: "I think an attempt has been to increase the level of abstraction. In the old days it was, for example, multicore, which might be 30 ways which controlled 30 dimmers. Now I think the concept is to control dimmers. It doesn't matter if it goes down a multicore dimmer or not and DMX fits rather well into that. It has meant that people can look at a show conceptually. The original DMX can handle lighting and colour changers, but moving lights it certainly can't. The resolution of DMX is not enough. There are always ways to expand it to suit, but technical considerations are possibly such



February 1989: Clive Standley receives the Performance magazine's 1988 readers' poll award for lighting manufacturer of the year.
photo: Bob George

that we might have to use a different media transmission because the band-width on DMX is not wide enough. But, as long as we keep to the abstractions, and as long as standards develop, and develop the abstract concept and not a specific one, then I think we'll keep going in the right direction.

The next development will possibly be midi, which is coming along big. I know a lot of people have trouble working out why an intrinsically sound-orientated signal should be applied to a lighting console, but a lot of performers and lighting designers don't see this differentiation. They see information which is within time and it has relevance. We've yet to come to full agreement on how that's going to be done. Put two technicians together and it is going to take a long time! But I think it's probably going to happen.

"Nobody should have to push a button if the information to push that button is already intrinsic in the information we have. In many situations there exists an SMPTE or midi signal. If you're trying to isolate a kick drum, for instance, so that you can turn your red light on, and the guy at the other end has to remember to push his finger at the right time, sometimes he gets it wrong. But with a relevant signal doing it, it would always be in synchronisation."

Clive Standley: "I think the same thing is happening now in the world of moving lights. Different manufacturers are using their own protocols again, and certainly the time is going to come when we are going to need to interface with each other. There just seems to be a syndrome where many people in new technology will work in their own direction. It is bound to be better if we could talk to each other.

"We're in the business of control and there are people out there who are making fixtures that need to be far more closely related to control than they ever did in the past. At the moment we have to use various different black boxes to interface with each other. It would obviously make better sense to have this all incorporated into the one unit. But we can't do that until we agree on standards!"

Back to Avolites itself, the company is known world-wide for its control systems and most directly with the music touring industry. These days however, and particularly in America, there are many other areas where products can be sold.

Clive Standley: "We are moving into many different areas, particularly at the smaller end of the market. There is a huge market here in schools, colleges and churches. They're all very aware of the sophisticated technology that exists and are very keen to be a part of it. Many churches over here are financially strong and some of them have huge 'auditoriums' with multi-million dollar facilities that they are very interested in making the most of. They are often presenting their 'message' in an 'entertaining' fashion. In fact, some of them have a new production every week.

"At the top end, we are moving much more into the television area. We've just supplied CBS in Los Angeles with a system of colour changers, for instance, and we are also actively promoting our new Precept series of control consoles. They are proving extremely popular and again offering the traditional Avolites 'hands on' approach coupled with sophisticated memory technology. Precept is proving extremely popular with everybody from religious institutions through to smaller scale self-funded rock bands."

Avolites' success at the top end of the touring business is a fact that can almost go by without getting a mention, with the QM appearing on many an equipment list in the 'On Tour' section of this magazine, for instance. It's a story that runs and runs.

One of their unsung heroes is the Rolacue series of memory consoles, designed for small to medium applications. "It has been very successful in the middle section of the market where many different operators are going to have to use it," explains Clive Standley. "It comes into its own where production companies have a great variety of different operators who need to be able to learn a board very quickly, yet still require the power that Rolacue can offer. You can get results without having to invest a great deal of money or spend too much time reading manuals. I can teach anybody everything about a Rolacue in around 15 minutes."

Dick Ollett: "A lot of production companies have a Rolacue for when they split up a system into a smaller production. It's easier to have a Rolacue for some situations, rather than a QM, both physically and weight-wise. Also you can expect to get a good result in the minimum amount of time."

Avolites' new compact QM that offers 180 channels of DMX 512 output control complete with soft patch and integral screen is aimed at the less 'hands on' areas such as theatre and industrial presentations. "Alternatively," said Dick Ollett "the lighting designer can design a show in rehearsal and then take the show on the road on the 180 saving a lot of time, money and space. It also protects the integrity of the show, with the operator far less likely to bring up the wrong lights. It's a nice little board, for sure."

The Avolites operation at Chatsworth is a sales, service and rental operation. Clive Standley: "Obviously service has always been of utmost importance to Avolites and its customers, and with most of our business concerned with the touring industry, it's very important that we are able to jump on any problems extremely quickly if they happen to arise. We've recently opened a new service operation on the East Coast at Newark in New Jersey and this has improved our

Avolites' QM 500-TD theatre board.

ability in this direction considerably.

"We have a rental stock of every item we sell, basically as a buffer for the production companies, our major clients. So, if they wish to do a larger tour than they have the facilities to provide for, they can rely on us to be able to back them up. We also handle from here a part of the advertising campaign and the creative work involved. I also handle sales for both North and South America and it is from the South that we are now beginning to get some very good enquiries. I think that the large multi-talent shows that have been there recently have had the effect of promoting our equipment for us."

Another operation carried out at Chatsworth is the testing of all equipment shipped in from England. "Obviously, all new equipment is tested extensively in the UK, but the hardest part of its life is often its flight from England to Los Angeles by common carrier, " said Clive Standley. "The hardest part of any equipment's life is often its first two months of existence," joined in Dick Ollett. "Any flaws usually show up in the first part of the equipment's life and we are ideally placed to check out the products after their journey from the UK."

As reported in our February issue, Avolites was the subject of a recent buy-out, and the company is now a member of the UEI plc group. I wondered how this might affect the US operation and asked Clive Standley for his comments.

"We're very excited about the recent changes and developments and I am sure our joining forces with the UEI group, who are world-leading high technology companies, will give us a very solid base on which to progress. There is also the potential for some exciting crossover technology from such people as Quantel and Solid State Logic, for instance. It goes without saying that we will be continuing to produce more and more high technology products for the industry in the future."

LIGHTING+SOUND International

APRIL 1989