

Time To See The Light?

Show us the money!

By Gary Gand

As an industry, we sound folks have gotten ourselves backed into an overly expensive technological corner. Gigs seem to require more and more gear, plus more and more labor. Yet the price we charge has hardly moved. (Up, that is.)

Large-format audio consoles are also moving up in price. (Not down) And they're not getting all that much smaller, still requiring an average of four crew members and a forklift to load into a truck. (Although – thank goodness for innovation – EZ Tilt stands have presented a break in set up.)

At the same time, we talk about mixing the show on a laptop computer on the bus. But how many sound techs can actually pull that off?

Even with breakthroughs like the “industry savior” line array, we still have 40 to 100 loudspeaker cabinets needing to be trucked and flown for a given show. Sure, they generally sound “better” and provide enhanced coverage and directivity, but they sure aren't any cheaper than the stuff we bought 10 years ago!

In fact, quite the opposite. Line arrays also go up and down faster, but I haven't noticed any of us loading in later.

MORE \$\$\$ PER WATT

Power amplifier technology is coming along nicely, with massively higher power in much lighter weight frames. So what do we do? Send out 200,000 watts when we used to dispatch 50,000 watts. Are we making more \$\$\$ per watt? I don't think so.

So, here's where it stands: we've gotten ourselves into a vicious circle where bigger is better, but we don't get more money for it. Smaller is better too, but we spend so much to acquire it and then turn around and give it away for the same price!

Let's look at a parallel industry: lighting. Could these pukes actually be right about something? Yeah, I know all the “light headed versus sound minds” rips. But focus on the bottom line – the dough, the moolah, the cold, hard cash.

Generally speaking, the lighting industry doesn't care what is used for a particular show. Light is light. It can be a VariLite, or a Studio Color, or a Mac 2000 – doesn't matter.

If it will point and light and change colors, they'll use it. A par can is a par can – a piece of rolled sheet metal with a 1000-watt bulb in it. There is no lighting equivalent to a (Shure) SM58 or (Sennheiser) 421.



CHRIS KATHMAN

Can it be true? Do lighting people actually have it right??

To lighting folks, it's all the same. And here's the kicker: they charge about four times as much to rent a par can as we do for an SM58.

A full-featured Whole Hog lighting board is about the size of the average "compact" digital audio console, and as the brand name implies, the lighting board does everything the industry demands. And it costs about one quarter of the price of today's audio equivalent, yet rents for double!

Further, the lighting board can be easily programmed on a laptop PC, and for that matter, the complete lighting rig can be mapped out in 3-D and specified on a laptop as well. (They don't need no stinking band!)

ULTERIOR MOTIVATION?

I know one of the guys who wrote the WYSIWYG software for lighting applications, which has been on the market close to a decade. He and his buddies look at our large-frame audio consoles and accuse us of "driving the big phallus." Sad but true: maybe so.

Lighting requires one XLR cable, no snakes. Meanwhile we're plugging dozens of wireless microphone systems into dozens of hard-wired shielded copper pairs running 400 feet to mic inputs on a banquet-table-sized mixing console.

One lighting guy and a crew of

stagehands can load, set, rig, program and run a show. For sound: front-of-house tech, monitor tech, stage tech, band gear tech, wireless tech... And a crew of stagehands.

Many times the lighting gear can even bum a ride on the sound truck. During setup, the lighting tech (wearing loafers) is drinking espresso (made on the machine he/she brought in) while we're drinking water and scraping the gunk off our boots. They're even allowed to smoke indoors while we have to stand on the dock outside.

The last straw: get the lights in the air, and aim 'em later! Meanwhile we sound folks aim as we go, finally deploying that laptop for something useful. We spend the rest of the day walking around to make sure we got it right, using test mics, pink noise, CDs, and good ol' "test, check, one, two..."

What's wrong with this picture?

The final insult: just when we think we rule by blasting that Audio Slave CD at 120 dB, the lighting director takes a single moving light and scrolls it slowly to front of house, blinding us at the console like David smiting Goliath in the battle for territorial supremacy. Further, a lighting guru can shut down the entire event "to focus" while we can hardly get the lift driver to quit backing up (and all the while having to listen to that OSHA Top 10 hit "Beep, Beep, Beep...").

My call to action: the audio industry needs – no, demands – the VARI-SPEAKER, the PIGLET CONSOLE, and the WIRELESS WIRE. We also want a machine that creates an oily glaze that only lands on lighting instruments. When the sound is checking, the lights should buzz.

And when this stuff comes to market, it should be cheap and we should all say, "Yeah, cheaper IS better." And no lowering our rates in response!

Really, it comes down to this. We love this business, we love the art and science of sound, we love it when the band is channeling a soundstage that seems bigger than life. It's a cool gig, indeed.

But we must CHARGE MORE because we DO MORE. Further, we REQUIRE MORE to do what we do. Audio people unite – together, let's figure out a way to fix this mess.

Ah, just think about it – all of that extra money to spend on cappuccino makers and fine leather shoes. Or to do our jobs better, run our businesses better, and take care of our families better. Any of it, all of it – sounds about right to me.

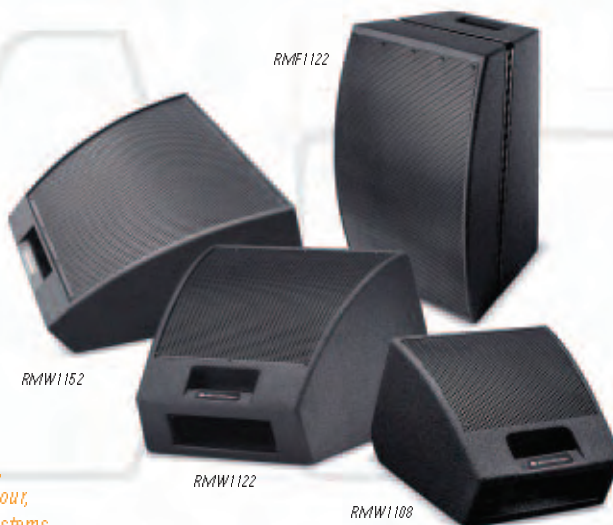
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