

## Over The Rainbow

Evolving to a national touring presence

By Linda Seid Frembes



**W**ith little investment in sales and marketing, Rainbow Concert Production (also known as New England Audio Tech) has managed to grow steadily over the past 25 years into a significant regional touring sound company. Now, the company has taken aim at developing a larger national presence.

With that in mind, *Live Sound* recently caught up with Rainbow Founder/Owner Bill Blaine at the company's headquarters in Hampstead, New Hampshire to talk about the business of building and running a sound reinforcement company.

**Live Sound:** It seems a bit odd to base your operations in a small town in Southern New Hampshire.

Wouldn't it make more sense to locate closer to larger markets?

**Bill Blaine:** This is actually an ideal, centralized location for us because our clients are spread out across the New England states. Our regular client venues include the Hampton Beach Casino Ballroom for the past 22 years, the South Shore Music Circus for the past 12 years, as well as the Cape Cod Melody Tent, Meadowbrook Farms, and live events at City Hall Plaza and the Hatch Shell in Boston.

The company sits on 14 acres of land originally purchased by my great-grandfather. He built the farmhouse where I live now – I'm proud to say that I'm the fourth generation of our family making a living on this property. All company and production operations are run from this location, as well as a 10,000-square-foot warehouse for our gear

**Live Sound:** Specifically, what market segments do you serve, and with what services?

**Bill:** Ninety percent of our business is live event and touring. The other 10 percent is corporate AV and installations. We can offer any kind of setup, from a single microphone small system to handling the entire production management of live events of any scale.

Of course, our services shift depending on the time of year and market conditions. In years past, the corporate quotient was much bigger, thanks to the dot-com companies. When that market imploded, that business went away fast. It's starting to come back now, slowly but surely.

We still do some installs as part of



Rainbow Owner Bill Blaine and the company's new MISO rig, housed in a rural New Hampshire facility shown in winter beauty. And left to right, part of the "Rainbow gang," including Steve Tkachuk, Blaine, Frez Tetreault, Scott Tkachuk, Sooner Ruthier, Gerry Parker and John Wade... Oh, and don't forget Speck the dog!

our winter business, the most recent one at Concord Capital Center for the Arts, where we deployed Meyer Sound M2D line arrays. The venue could never support a flown rig because there wasn't proper rigging points. We chose to hire an expert in theater rigging, and he found some interesting ways to fly the permanent system.

**Live Sound:** What are some of the more interesting gigs you've done over the past 25 years?

**Bill:** We used to do sound for a live concert series in the Cambridgeside Galleria, where a band was stuck on a raft in the middle of an outdoor pond. These were the days before wireless, so everything was cabled. We had to constantly feed and wind the cables since they were free-floating in the pond.

Atlas Pyrotechnics, also based in New Hampshire, does fireworks events synchronized to music. Every year they have an event in Jaffrey, New Hampshire for a crowd of about 25,000.

It's interesting because the fireworks are triggered completely with computer control – no hand firing. The gig is all about timing. Atlas also controls the music source, and we delay the loudspeakers to try to get things in sync by the time the fireworks are exploding and sound is reaching the audience. Every year we learn a little more about how to enhance this show.

**Live Sound:** You don't advertise and don't have a website or even a sales staff. How have you managed to grow your business?

**Bill:** I was a professional guitar player for 20 years before entering the audio business, so I had some idea as to its cyclical nature. One of the ways I've managed to keep my head above water is to recognize the business swings and prepare for them.

For example, we're gearing up for a moderately busier season than last year, simply, because some of the recent positive signs point to an uptick in incoming calls for our services.

It's true that we're very negligent in advertising and marketing, but we've done well with word-of-mouth.

*Source: Butterfly System White Paper by Guido Noselli*

# Butterfly... Perfectly Simple

## D.P.R.W.G.

### Double Parabolic Reflective Wave Guide (\*)

**Single Hi-Pack element features:**

- Volume = 0.067 m<sup>3</sup>
- Weight (including flying hardware) = 35 kg. / 77 lb.
- Number of speakers = 5
- Centre-to-centre step = 0.243 m. / 9.5 in.
- Continuous power = 920 W RMS (AES Standard)
- Max. SPL (peak) 1 m. = 140 dB

**16-element Hi-Pack array features:**

- Max. array height (straight array) = 3.89 m. / 12.8 ft.
- Total weight (including flying frame) = 620 kg. / 1365 lb.

**outlinearray**

[www.outline.it](http://www.outline.it)

# Sound Profiles

People know us by our long-term reputation. Plus, it's a small industry, so it's easy to get well known. There are always plans to advertise, or start a web site, but that always seems to fall by the wayside.

**Live Sound:** Rainbow recently had the opportunity to do some national touring. How did that come about?

**Bill:** We recently supported a national tour with the band Moe. Originally, we were contracted to supply our new (Meyer) MILO line array-based rig at the Ben & Jerry's Festival in Woodstock, New York, but it was canceled at the last minute.

But Moe was also doing its festival north of there. The band had been interested in MILO since opening for the Dead a few months prior, and wanted another chance to use it. Enter Rainbow.

Moe is made up of extremely good musicians who play a nice mix of song genres. They absolutely loved the rig, and asked us to tour in support of them. So we supplied the MILO system, consoles, processing and some lighting.

**Live Sound:** How does national touring differ from your regional work?

**Bill:** We found that there are similar challenges. The biggest advantage we have in New England is a working knowledge of all the venues and labor crews. On a national tour, each place, and the people, can be so different. It

was our good fortune on the Moe tour to be helped by some folks who know the national landscape.

Overall though, the national touring business is quite different than regional production, with a whole separate set of rules. I'm just now learning now how to deal with it, both in terms of the logistics and giving up some control.

There's also the personnel aspect of it. We've had one of our people out on tour with the gear at all times. But because a national tour means long hours and close quarters, they (the band and production staff) wanted to know they could get along with our folks before letting them come aboard.

**Live Sound:** What's your criteria for evaluating new equipment?

**Bill:** There's a lot of intuition involved in knowing when it's time for new gear. I've been an EAW dealer since the beginning, so I've always been privy to their R&D – I could demo new products and run it through the rigors before practically anyone else. In fact, the (EAW) KF760 was the first line array we used.

Regarding line arrays – in all of my years in the sound industry, I've never seen technology that made such a large difference in sound quality and capability. I've been enthralled since its introduction. We now have five line array systems in our inventory, and are acquiring Meyer M2D line arrays for the Cape Cod Melody Tent.

Overall, new gear is about raising the bar. You want to sound better every time you go out, but this must be balanced with cost. Especially because new technology is invariably expensive. One of Rainbow's advantages is that we don't usually feel the need to invest in large amounts of

inventory. And we have a diverse clientele that helps us make sure that even our older equipment stays busy.

**Live Sound:** Crystal ball time. What do you see in the future of the touring/live event industry?

**Bill:** Clear Channel is such a big force in the concert business these days, and you just can't tell what direction they and the business will go. There are now fewer and fewer small promoters, and that impacts the entire industry, not just my business.

But no matter what, there's always some business to be had. We do our very best to be a competent production company, so I have to believe that we'll always have something to do. There's not a single year that I've been in business that I couldn't make an excuse for being optimistic about the next year.

**Live Sound:** Any advice from that sunny side of the street where you're standing?

**Bill:** The only way I know how to start a business is the way I did it. Buy your first system and start working small gigs. Make sure you can handle what you take on because one bad showing negates 100 good ones. Keep an eye on costs as you work your way up to bigger things. Analyze it down to the level of what it costs just to drive the truck out of the shop so you know exactly why and how you're negotiating your fees.

Staffing can be a problem, as with every business. Like most businesses, ours is seasonal. Know that and hire accordingly. We currently have 12 full-timers on staff, and that can be expanded with free-lancers. During crunch time, we have 20 to 25 folks out there working shows.

There is no single right way to run a business. We've been fortunate to meet great clients who are long-term. Our client relationships – as well as my staff relationships – are very strong. I can't worry too much about every little thing anyway because so much of it is out of my control. ■

*Live Sound regular contributor Linda Seid Frembes did the interviewing honors with Mr. Blaine. Reach her at [linda@frembes.com](mailto:linda@frembes.com).*



A look at the MILO arrays deployed for the Moe Down festival in Turin, New York, summer 2003.

