

## A Path Of Perseverance

Allen & Heath celebrates 35 years

By Steve Harvey

Allen & Heath is currently celebrating “35 years of audio excellence,” as the U.K.-based mixing products manufacturer’s logo proudly proclaims. It would be nice to think that Mr. Allen and Mr. Heath are enjoying their company’s anniversary year, but alas, they’re not.

In fact, neither gentleman has ever been involved with the company. The pair gave their names to a London engineering works, a tool-making enterprise that went bust in the late-1960s. Joe Batiste, looking for a business to set up for his son, Steve, “backed into” the company – in financial speak – in 1969.

Andrew Stirling, Ivor Taylor and Andy Bereza (who later helped develop the Tascam Portastudio) were the initial prime movers behind the company. (Hmmm – “Stirling, Taylor & Bereza” as

the company name? Doesn’t quite have the same ring to it...)

“For the first five years they worked for nothing,” recalls current Allen & Heath Managing Director Glenn Rogers. “Joe (Batiste) was using any money that came in to pay off the previous company’s debt.”

Regardless, the three persevered. One early project, a custom quadraphonic desk produced for Pink Floyd in the 1970s, has since become legendary, not least for the way that it was built. By then wise to the company’s financial burden, Stirling and company worked on the desk after-hours, hiding it from Batiste in an elevator shaft.

The company has come a long way in the intervening years, figuratively and literally. In the early 1980s, fleeing the high costs and cramped conditions of central London, the company split into two. “Manufacturing went to Cornwall, and sales and R & D to Brighton, because they were paranoid about being too far from London,”



The early 70s saw Allen & Heath develop this quadraphonic console for Pink Floyd; Managing Director Glenn Rogers hard at work.



# Milestones

explains Rogers, who started with the company shortly after that move to Brighton, which is located on the south coast close to the capital.

The company has since expanded its base in Cornwall, a largely rural county southwest of London, consolidating R & D, manufacturing, and sales into 30,000 square feet. Employing approximately 250 people, Allen & Heath now produces in a month what the company produced annually 10 years ago.

## GETTING TO FIRST

During 35 years, a succession of “firsts” have been racked up, with the company’s designers responding to constantly changing market conditions. “It’s great to lead,” observes Rogers, “although sometimes you don’t get it right, and sometimes you don’t get the credit for it. It’s about picking the right time, at the right price, for the brand that we have. We’ve got the technology and we’ve got some guys with some great ideas.”

The spirit of innovation permeated the company from the very beginning. “It was a fantastic time, according to Andrew (Stirling), in terms of doing things, setting new standards, and breaking all the rules,” Rogers recounts. “They came up with something that we treat as standard now,

mounting pots and switches on the circuit board. Before that, they were all wired. That was the start of modular mixers, and an Allen & Heath first.

“We were the first to introduce small mixers in 1972 with the MiniMixer, which was 6-into-2, transistorized, with a separate power supply. It was only about one inch high,” he continues.

Allen & Heath’s Synchron A was the first mixer to use op-amp technology; the CMC brought microprocessors and MIDI capabilities into a mixer for the first time; the multi-mode console – combining FOH and monitor capabilities in one desk, a standard approach now – was introduced with the GL3.

The company plunged into digital audio in the early 1990s. “We saw that installers were having to buy all these components and having to wire them all together,” Rogers says. “We thought, we can do that in one processing block.” By the mid-1990s the company had also introduced with it terms the first digital live sound mixer, ICON.

“It’s all down to risk,” chimes in sales and marketing director Bob Goleniowski. “Developing digital technology is very labor intensive. The hardware is probably easier to do than the software. But it was a lot less risk to the company to enter the market with a product on which we were not that dependent.”

The iDR Series of installed DSP control systems now accounts for roughly 15 percent of the company’s sales, reports Goleniowski. Live sound consoles – the ML and GL Series – make up just over half of all sales, with the remainder split between compact MixWizard consoles and Xone DJ products.

## A CLEAR FOCUS

Now strongly identified with live sound products, Allen & Heath originally concentrated on recording desks. Having produced a succession of recording desks, from Synchron A and B through to the Sigma and GS3, the company turned exclusively to live sound products.

“It was only really after the GS3, the last push on recording, that we realized the market was shifting toward digital. We didn’t have the background in hard disc recording and software, so we decided we’d concentrate on live, and that’s where the GL3 was born,” explains Rogers.

By the 1990s, the company started to grow significantly, says Goleniowski, who joined in 1993. “The product line was streamlined and we had a very clear focus about where we wanted to position the different products. You could see the reason for each product’s existence, which we felt was crucial to the success of the brand.”

Allen & Heath had meanwhile been acquired. “Being part of the Harman Group with another group member also making consoles, the conflicts, in reality, were few and far between, but there were probably more opportunities that we could have exploited had



*Current capability sees the company producing as many products in a single month as it did in an entire year a decade ago.*



The current product line offers diversity, as seen in the flagship ML5000 console, iDR-8 DSP control system and Xone:92 DJ mixer.

we not been part of the group," acknowledges Goleniowski. In 2001 the company's management bought the company back.

"The buyout was something that occurred because we believed strongly in our own ability to take the company forward. We still do; we believe we have the talents," Goleniowski says. In addition to the long-standing R & D team of Rogers and Carey Davis, he notes, a team of two dozen is constantly at work on products for the company's key markets, headed by Andy Rigby-Jones on the DJ side with Anthony Jackson and Rob Clark developing digital products.

### MUCH GOING ON

Allen & Heath has become pre-eminent on the DJ scene over the past five years. "We were looking at the

future for live music," remembers Rogers. "There didn't seem to be much going on, but the underground club scenes and raves seemed to be the new entertainment. We ended up with a product based on the Wizard, called ClubWiz," he says.

The company's first DJ mixer, the Xone:464, as well as other models followed, including the "Rolls Royce" of rotary mixers, the Xone:V6. "Andy felt we could set the high-fidelity standard," Rogers explains. "He came up with a Class-A signal path, all transistorized. We went trawling around for the best in classic circuits and modern components. It's not a volume seller, but something to be prized and treasured, a valued item like an old Pultec. It's been very successful."

The latest DJ product, the Xone:92, is another first. MIDI-

enabled, it addresses the DJ market that now incorporates live performance into shows. "They're adding their own rhythms and adding these wonderful gadgets from Korg and elsewhere and using them live," says Rogers. Furthermore, he adds, "Using the crossfader with MIDI, you can control video at the same time as audio."

Here's to another 35 years? Seems likely, given Allen & Heath's pedigree and passion for developing audio technology. "We get our rewards from providing innovative and practical products that help sound engineers do their job better," Rogers concludes. ■

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