

Thirty Years Of Crafting Sound

Soundcraft embarks on its fourth decade

By Chris Shuler

Like many things in the touring business, the live sound mixing console as we know it is a relatively young piece of gear. It wasn't until the early 1970s that the clunky boxes with big rotary pots began to make way for a much more sophisticated breed of products with linear faders, onboard filtering and other modern amenities.

And certainly one of the companies in the midst of it all, then and now, is Soundcraft, which recently – and rather quietly – marked its 30th anniversary.

Originally formed as Soundcraft Electronics Ltd., the company was the brainchild of Graham Blyth and Phil Dudderidge. Blyth was an electrical engineering graduate of Bristol University and a classically-trained organist who had spent time at Kelsey Morris, a custom PA shop in London. There he designed mixing consoles and loudspeaker systems for groups like ELP, Ten Years After, T. Rex, and King Crimson.

Dudderidge's background, on the other hand, was quite different. Dropping out of high school, he "stumbled" into the pro audio industry initially as a roadie and chauffeur for bands like Fairport Convention, the Incredible String Band, and Soft Machine. This eventually led to a stint as Led Zeppelin's first dedicated live sound engineer – a role that cured him of his ambitions to tour with rock bands but ignited his passion for pro audio.

These two divergent paths eventually crossed at Rotary Speaker Developments (RSD), a firm akin to Kelsey Morris, and by September of 1973, Blyth and Dudderidge had decided to establish their own company exclusively dedicated to mixing consoles. Thus began the genesis of the Soundcraft era.

FIRST IN LINE

The initial product to emerge from the fledgling business was a 16 by 2 mixer branded the Series 1, and unique to the time, built into its own flight case. Debuting in 1974, the desk featured four bands of equalization, sends for monitor and "echo," as well as an optional 19-pair multicore cable with stagebox. Attractively priced, the product became a hit with U.K. bands and new PA companies that were springing up to rent out sound equipment.

Aside from its highly musical sonic characteristic later termed the "British sound," the Series 1 – and subsequent Series 1S, which introduced the concept of sweepable mid-band EQ – was extremely simple to use. This design philosophy of making things intuitive,



Above, Dudderidge (center) and Blyth (right) with their second Queens Award for Export Achievement in the mid-'80s. Sgt. Pepper dropped by to present the award. Right, the Series 1S with its own flight case.



literally “elegant in their simplicity,” as Blyth notes, has been cited as one of Soundcraft’s core strengths.

The company also was a leader in promoting its products to more than one market niche. Even the Series 1, originally designed as a live desk, had a four-output version created for the recording market within a year – a move prompted by a dealer down the street from Soundcraft that wanted a mixer to sell with his four-track TEAC machines. And as the number of channels increased on multitrack recorders of the day, so did the number of outputs on Soundcraft consoles.

ROLLING IT OUT

While Blyth was responsible for product development as the company’s technical director, Dudderidge devoted most of his energy to sales and marketing, developing the brand and the international distribution network.

The Series 1 made its “unofficial” debuts in 1974 at Frankfurt’s Musikmesse and Houston’s Summer NAMM, both on other companies’ stands. According to Dudderidge, the buzz it created with very little hype was significant. “The thing that surprised me about those first two shows was that there wasn’t anything like the Series 1 out there,” he recalls. “There were other little boxes with a few knobs on them, but nothing that could even remotely be considered a traditional mixing console, which was great for us.”



Fast forward to now with Blyth (left) and Dudderidge, both still thriving in the industry.



Shortly after, Greg Hockman, then of Kalamazoo, Michigan-based SysTech, became the initial importer of Soundcraft consoles into North America, eventually opening Soundcraft’s first North American office. By early 1981, U.S. distribution moved to Southern California, where it remains today, and thanks to the work of Betty Bennett, Wayne Freeman, Erika Lopez, Gary Lynn, Shane Morris, Mick Patterson and the rest of the “So Cal” team, the early ‘80s saw Soundcraft make significant inroads in the U.S. pro audio market.

MADE TO ORDER

“I vividly remember lunch meetings with Albert Leccese of Audio Analysts where Graham would start designing stuff with Albert on cocktail napkins; there was a terrific synergy between them,” recalls Dudderidge, talking about the company’s commitment to partnering with the marketplace. “And the things we worked on with Tom Schlum and Mick Whelan of Electrotec prior to that were just as exciting. We produced a custom board (in a light blue frame with shiny aluminum end cheeks!) for them that eventually went

on to join our inventory as the Series 4. These people were truly instrumental in enabling us to deliver what the market was after.”

Over the years, the company would go on to debut features like active pan pots, onboard noise gates and several others. In addition, for eight years, the company produced analog one- and two-inch multitrack machines (as Soundcraft Magnetics).

Harman International purchased the brand in 1988, while Dudderidge decided to move on to other interests a year or so later. (He’s now chairman of Focusrite Audio Engineering Ltd.) As for Blyth, the launch of the cost-effective Spirit range in 1991 – a line that continues on under the Soundcraft banner – ranks high on his personal timeline.

Today, Blyth continues to play a very active role with the company he co-founded, remaining a primary force behind the recent MH4, MH3 and LX7ii consoles, and is duly optimistic about Soundcraft’s future.

“With Andy Trott now on board as our managing director, I really feel that we have the right leadership and entrepreneurial spirit to once again show the touring world that we’re still very much the same innovator as when we began,” Blyth concludes. “And having foresight into what products we’ll be introducing over the next year or two, I’m certain that we’ll be bringing back old Soundcraft fans as well as creating many more new ones in the process.” ■



Dudderidge between the Borehamwood, U.K. factory and the Series 500. Right, Electrotec’s custom desk.



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