

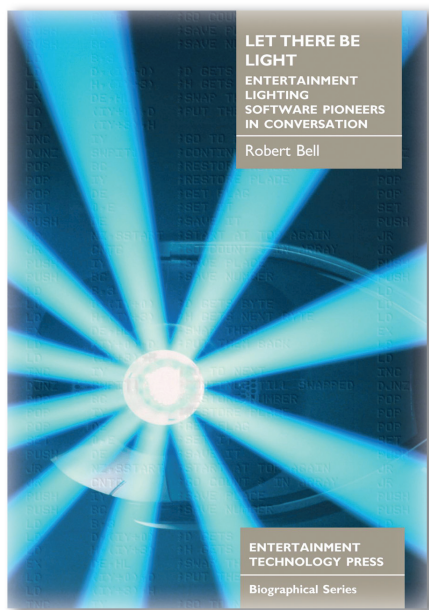
Let There Be Light: Entertainment Lighting Software Pioneers in Conversation

BY KARL G. RULING

Oral histories of the impact computerization of lighting technology played in the development of many significant products we know today.

I'M SORRY I DIDN'T WRITE A REVIEW of Robert Bell's *Let There Be Light: Entertainment Lighting Software Pioneers in Conversation* last year when it was first published. If I had, perhaps more people would have enjoyed it and learned something from it by now. On the other hand, because of the continuous updating made possible by Entertainment Technology Press' print-on-demand system, the book being sold now is a better book than the one that debuted in March 2004. Readers coming to it at this time will find an interesting and informative book.

I came to appreciate what the book has to offer when I recently had an assignment to write a 5,000-word article about changes in theatre lighting technology. Five-thousand words is a lot, but not enough to cover all the changes for all of stage lighting history, so I narrowed it down to what I think is the most important change in recent history: the computerization of lighting technology over the last 30 years. *Let There Be Light* deals with this exactly. It offers interviews with thirteen lighting software engineers, some famous and some not so famous, who have been part of the digital revolution, which has taken the industry from a few score control channels and single-page



magic sheets to thousands of channels and databases complete with JPEG photos for keeping track of what everything does. Although I set aside *Let There Be Light* after reading it in early 2004, it wound up being used so heavily this summer that the binding broke and the pages fell out.

Let There Be Light should be of interest to *Protocol* readers who do not have a 5,000-word writing assignment. First of all, it tells stories of the development of many

significant products over this 30-year period, including the EDI LS-8 used on *A Chorus Line*, Kliegl Performer, Morpheus Light Commander, Horizon control system, Strand Light Palette, Lightwright, ETC Obsession, Vari*Lite Virtuoso, Wholehog, ColourMag scrolling color changers, Icon automated luminaires and console, Mbox, Cyberlight, Virtual Light Lab, Express-Track, WYSIWYG, Lamp-Tramp, Art-Net, and the forthcoming RDM and ACN, to name a few. The stories of these products are told in transcribed conversations with people intimately involved in their development: Robert Bell, Eric Cornwell, David Cunningham, Tom Grimes, Wayne Howell, Mark Hunt, Richard Lawrence, John McKernon, Philip Nye, Gordon Pearlman, Tom Thorne, Chris Toulmin, and Anne Valentino. The stories are mostly about the considerations that drove the technical choices, but there are also stories about battles with lawyers and about aggressive or obsessive sales and marketing people.

Secondly, there is lots of information here that would interest a current product developer or person who dabbles in designing and building electronic devices. I particularly enjoyed Mark Hunt's comments on the utility of Field Programmable Gate

Arrays and the strategy of avoiding patent infringement by controlling the Icon luminaires via UGLI boxes so there was technically no data network. The discussions with Tom Grimes about the advantages and disadvantages of DOS versus Windows and C versus assembly language are also interesting, as is the discussion with Eric Cornwell on the ultimate counter-productivity of anti-pirating stratagems and hardware keys. Other readers are sure to find other parts interesting, based on their own experience making or using computerized gear.

There is a lot of history in *Let There Be Light*, but it's not a complete history book. It doesn't claim to be, and readers should not be disappointed as long as they don't expect it to be one. There is a lot that is left out, of course. The thirteen people recorded in these conversations does not include everybody who developed everything of note in the last 30 years. Readers should also keep in mind that these are oral histories, stories about what happened and why they happened related by people speaking without notes or other reference materials. As result, sometimes there are minor technical errors in the things people said in the interviews (e.g., a 12-bit word is written with four octal characters, not three) and the stories are told from a highly personal perspective – but that's part of what makes them fascinating. It is interesting to compare Gordon Pearlman's story of the power supply on the LS-8 blowing up a few weeks before *A Chorus Line* opened with the same story told by Tharon Musser in *Stage Lighting Design: The Art, the Craft, the Life*, by Richard Pilbrow. The stories are congruent, but they aren't the same.

So what's not to like? The very light editing. Every writer, every book needs an editor, someone to help catch errors and to shape the book. One of the reasons I had set the book aside in 2004 was that after reading it I went through and made a list of errors. It was a fairly long list. None of them were really serious – baud rate mixed up with bit rate in a footnote, writing Pixion (a webconferencing service) where Pixon (an LED lighting company) was meant, referring to ACT in San Francisco as the "American Contemporary Theatre" when it is the American Conservatory Theater, and so on – but it left me disappointed. It was after going back and looking at all that is right with the book, that I have become positively excited about it again. I sent that list of errors to Robert Bell, and most of these errors have been corrected (only Pixion in the index is still wrong), so if you buy a copy now, you'll be buying a better book than the one I found so useful when trying to compress 30 years into 5,000 words. (See sidebar on page 60) ■

Let There Be Light: Entertainment Lighting Software Pioneers in Conversation.
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