

# AUDIO / VIDEO

## Xylo's Turbine power

by Caroline Moss

**S**patial sound and video consultants Xylo inhabit a small space within the labyrinth known as Britannia Row. A year ago it was called Robodevco and had spent four months contracted to Sony in Japan for the system design and production of video disc sequences for the Mick Jagger world tour, which would have involved a bank of video screens displaying such technological wonders as the present day Jagger holding a conversation with himself as a young Stone in the mid 1960s.

However the tour was cancelled and the four founder members of Robodevco decided to set up a company to market the 'black box' known as The Turbine which they had designed to trigger audio and video from a variety of sources.

Hugh Roberts, programme director at Xylo, explained the concept behind The Turbine. "The Turbine is a precise, high speed computer controller of multiple visual, audio and other devices. Currently, we're running this on modified 286 boards because they're inexpensive, reliable and fast. And we can 'talk to' and control an increasing number of off the shelf devices; it's surprising just how many machines now have the capability for MIDI, serial or analogue interfacing.

"It's not the technical aspects that are important to the users, though. Their priority is to achieve an end result with the minimum of fuss.

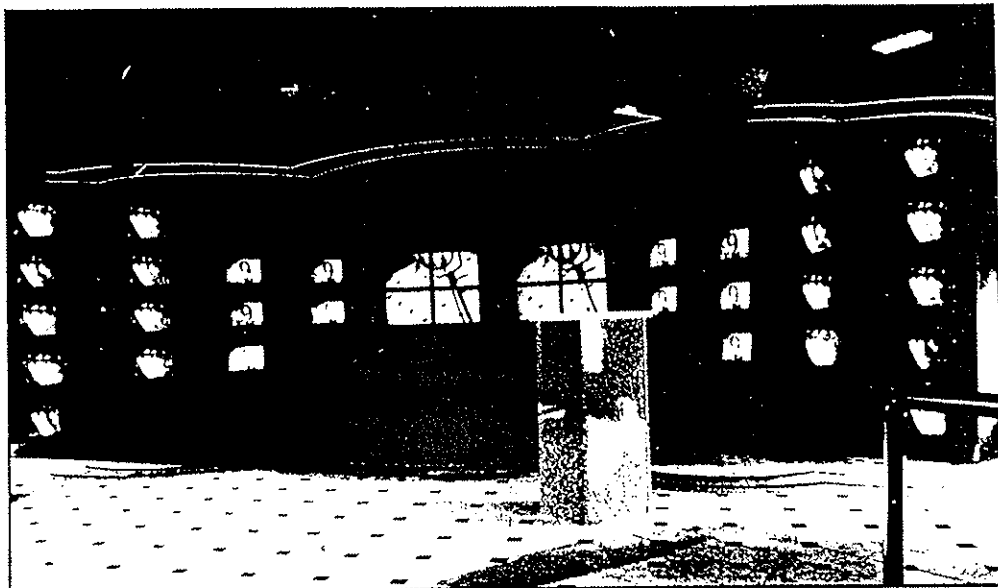
"Personally, the end results I like use the entire space available. Stereo is limited; it just sits there at one end of the room. The same is true of conventional video walls. The more an audience is surrounded by an experience, the more senses you can effect, the more impact it has."

Peter Maben, software co-ordinator, adds: "Currently, if people are using video in shows, then it tends to dictate the performance. It is categorically important for us that the performer dictates to the machinery, breaking through the technology to get back to the music."

The first Xylo installation took place in the middle of last year at a new nightclub in Darlington called Zhivago's, 32 video screens were set up around the dancefloor. Nine available video sources can be called up and directed to the individually controlled outputs in whatever combination or sequence the operator desires. The image can also be split up and shown on a group of screens, and the monitors can be strobed or scratched in time to the music.

The whole system is controlled from a touch panel similar to a standard disco lighting control panel which Roberts describes as being 'idiot-proof'.

Several months later the second installation called for the company to use the technology in a totally different application, this time at the National Museum of Racing's Hall of Fame in Saratoga, New York.



Zhivago's: the Darlington night club was Xylo's first installation

It was asked to design and specify an ambisonic 'surround sound' installation and produce the ambisonic soundtrack for an 18 minute film to illustrate horse racing across America, both as seen by the public and behind the scenes.

The film is projected from super 35mm through an anamorphic lens onto a 40ft x 10ft screen which takes up most of the front wall of the auditorium and is either used for full panoramics or up to six images running simultaneously.

The ambisonic soundtrack is via an 8-track audio tape through 23 speakers (Electro Voice in custom cabinets) and is designed to provide accurate spatial sound throughout the auditorium. Ambisonic decoding takes place via an Audio Design Ambi-8 Auditorium Decoder.

Hugh Roberts and Peter Maben of Xylo carried out the ambisonic production of the soundtrack at Britannia Row and Wessex studios in London and synched it to the film using 25-frame EBU time code. It was first shown at the Hall of Fame in August of last year, and was the first ambisonic fixed installation in the world.

Another ongoing task is the marketing of its database of ambisonic recordings and production personnel which it has built up over the past four years and which now stands at details of well over 300 released recordings using ambisonics.

The database will be known as AmbiS and will be available from the middle of March on a license fee basis which will include regular updates. AmbiS will initially be available for use on Apple Mac computers and features will include multi-level user access with password protection.

Commented Hugh Roberts: "Ambisonics looks set to play a central role in the development of spatial sound in the 1990s. We expect the publication of our database to accelerate this trend."

Since the beginning of this year Xylo has concentrated its efforts on the design of The Turbine as a range of production units, and is preparing to market the system to nightclubs and discotheques, as well as working on interfaces for control of video walls, laser discs, tape systems, graphics and spatial sound which will be available as add on modules.

With the future in mind, Xylo's managing director Tim Davies said: "Because The Turbine offers such a new range of communication possibilities we are not just intending to sell units, but also to make a complete system available for hire, together with the necessary creative and production expertise.

Pete and Hugh are particularly keen to work with musicians on live shows and the more imaginative trade presentation companies."