

# Fit-for-Purpose

...design philosophy of The P.A. People



An interview with Chris Dodds, Managing Director



Chris Dodds, Managing Director of The P.A. People, learnt the fundamentals of electrical and audio engineering from the ground up. Coming of age in the days when professional equipment was either unavailable or prohibitively expensive in Australia, Chris is part of a generation of audio practitioners who often built the tools they required by hand.

Since the 1980s, Chris has been involved in the development of a series of ground-breaking audio systems and communications technologies. Whether to create the perfect system for The P.A. People to use in event production or to satisfy a customer's specific need, this experience has shaped a design philosophy that melds a capable pragmatism with the goal of being comprehensively 'Fit for Purpose'.

The ability to find the perfect balance between utility, quality, serviceability and attainability is a skill only learned through years of real-world experience.



## Hard Wired

Chris was born into electrical engineering. Growing up in Canberra in the 60s and 70s, his father ran an electronic component supply business. Building a PA out of JBL components, Chris started doing sound and lights for high school functions before he could drive. His passion led him to study Electronic Engineering at a tertiary level, first in Canberra, before moving to further his studies at UNSW in Sydney.

While Chris valued his studies, the actual practice of building and using PA equipment always took precedence. In 1979, the business that would eventually become The P.A. People, CS Services, was operating out of a quad garage in the inner western suburb of Enfield. Chris worked for them part time, building mixing consoles, speaker systems and multi-core cables. CS were doing everything in-house; they sprayed and printed metal housings and built circuit boards. The equipment they manufactured was used for live production and installations.





## Hand Made

Such a thriving cottage industry in electronics is hard to imagine in today's Australia. "It was a much more restrictive trade environment" recalled Chris. "There were import margins of 100% and sales tax was 27% for most items, though if it was designated as 'professional equipment', the rate was 15%. This was why Australians and New Zealanders had to build things. It was an era when Jands were touring ABBA with a 20,000 watt system that they built themselves with JBL components."

Other extra-curricular activities for Chris included a tour of duty on the NSW clubs circuit with the late, great, Don Lane. "We did about 15 shows a year in the Sydney clubs like Rooty Hill and Revesby" reminisced Chris. "Don brought along his musical director and some musos from Melbourne and also picked up some local players. I was hired to carry bags, organise sheet music and operate the sound system."

1979 also saw American loudspeaker manufacturer Bose Corporation set up in Australia. With his hands-on experience in componentry, Chris was hired to service Bose products for the newly established subsidiary. His job also extended to installing Bose' extremely expensive car stereo systems into luxury vehicles. Chris' tenure at Bose saw him develop a long affection for the brand, and the in-depth knowledge of their products he gained would prove invaluable in his next venture.

## The Light On The Hill

In order to continue his education, Chris moved back to Canberra in 1982. He revived his PA business as a partnership with what had now become The P.A. People in Sydney, took premises and opened a line in pro audio retail. A typical gig at this time was the Australia Day festivities, which Chris would mix with a 16 channel Allen & Heath mixer, six pairs of Bose 802 loudspeakers and JBL subwoofers.

The business thrived and in 1984 was made exclusive supplier to the then enormous Canberra Festival. "In the Canberra Festival's heyday we would be providing 30 or 40 PA systems over two weeks" Chris continued. "In 1982, we were mixing a series of concerts on the lawn in front of the old Parliament House".

Chris' company attracted the attention of Opera Australia, who staged annual amplified outdoor performances in Canberra but had never been happy with the results. Chris was given the opportunity to tackle the gig in March 1984. Chris used the 'Bose Tree' (developed by the Company years earlier), 16 Bose 802s per side on custom-made metal structures, so each box could be steered. Both the press and Opera Australia were thrilled with the result, and this success led to bigger things back in Sydney.

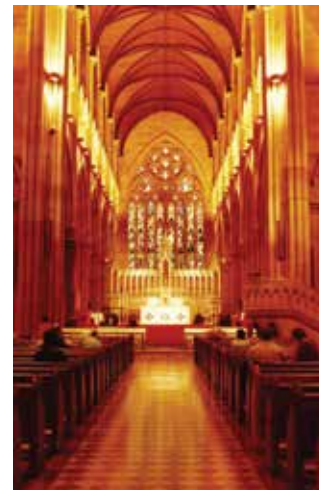




## Merry Christmas!

Close relationships between Opera Australia and Carols in the Domain gave Chris and The P.A. People one of the biggest and longest running gigs the company had seen. Appointed as PA provider in November of 1985, they quickly built two 14 metre tall Bose Trees, each carrying 48 Bose 802s. "We tried to run the delays off 18 foot winch-ups, which didn't work" noted Chris. "Two weeks later we had manufactured eight 28 foot high delay structures. We went on to hold the Carols in the Domain contract for 10 years."

Major event experience brought The P.A. People into a new level of the production market. A typical job for the company became touring the Sydney Symphony Orchestra with two trucks full of sound and lighting equipment. Chris and The P.A. People found the demands of live production at that scale were not being met by existing products, and often invented and built their own solutions.



## Creative Audio

Under the banner Creative Audio, Chris and the team addressed one of the production issues that would become their speciality; communications. They designed and built the Creative Audio partyline system, which contained ingenious innovations such as monitor loop through, enabling audio engineers to connect their show communications to their monitor loudspeakers, freeing them from wearing communications headsets that detracted from their work.

The P.A. People became experts in integrating wired communications systems with wireless technologies like 'walkie-talkies' for large scale events. Over the years, they have built on this in-depth knowledge of radio communications and are now the world's leading wireless event communications company.

Their skills have been deployed on international stages including the Olympics and Commonwealth Games.

Forever keen to provide the best possible result and value for money to his clients, Chris often delved into loudspeaker modification or manufacture. With famed electro acoustic engineer Glenn Leembruggen, Chris and Creative Audio designed and built their own three-way monitor wedge in 1986. Then as The P.A. People moved into major touring productions, arena-filling artists like Diana Ross, James Taylor and Gloria Estefan used both their services and their products. "We were always striving for clarity and intelligibility" explained Chris. "We wanted our systems to reproduce the source as closely as possible."



## The Dawn of Digital

As the age of digital audio technology began in the late 1980s, Creative Audio expanded their engineering capacity to embrace the new possibilities. A new Creative Audio facility was established in Brisbane in 1989 with the hiring of broadcast engineer Neil Packer. By 1992 the team had grown to three, and Chris and The P.A. People were delivering customised digital solutions to a growing range of installation clients.

1992 saw Creative Audio at the cutting edge of new technology with an innovative solution designed and built for NSW State Rail. Regional railway stations were in need of a way to have announcements delivered to them automatically from a central office and broadcast to their platforms. Creative Audio designed and built a digital message storage box that could receive and store data sent down a standard telephone line. The data travelled from central control to the stations, was stored, scheduled and then played back accordingly. It was ground-breaking stuff.

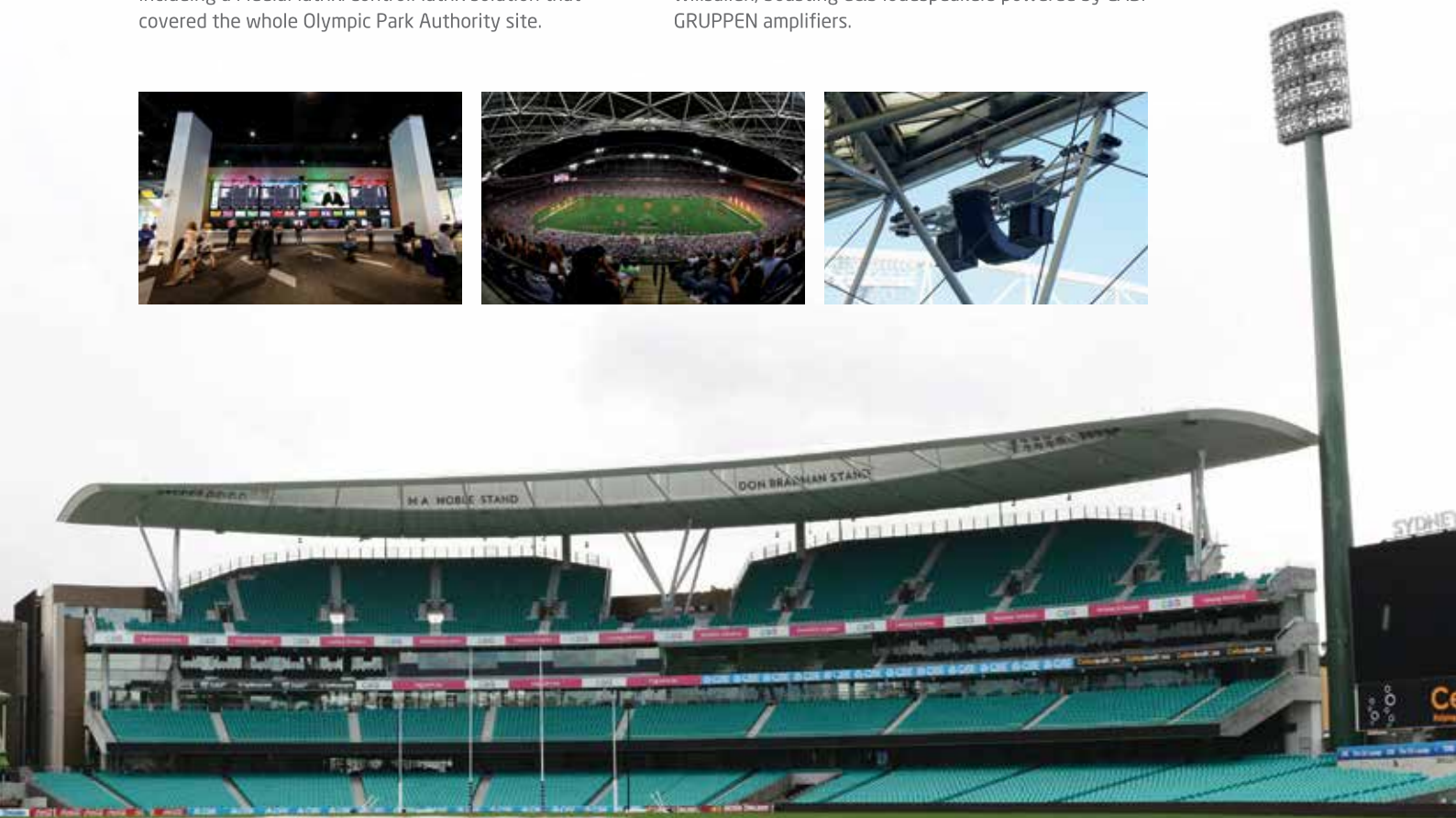
## Paging, Networks and Stadia

As digital systems advanced, products such as Peavey's industry changing MediaMatrix DSP units hit the market. Seeing the inherent power now available off-the-shelf, Chris and The P.A. People used MediaMatrix as the core of their vast stage management and paging system for The Sydney Opera House. Over three years, Chris and Creative Audio created the code that turned a host of third party controllers and the MediaMatrix cores into a highly flexible, networked paging system. It became a commercial product in itself that was dubbed ControlMatrix.

As the Sydney 2000 Olympics approached, The P.A. People were awarded the tender to outfit Stadium Australia and its environs for the games. By 1999, all the PA, paging and ancillary systems were in place, including a MediaMatrix/ControlMatrix solution that covered the whole Olympic Park Authority site.

Signal was distributed via an Ethernet network running CobraNet - a technology still relatively unknown in Australia at the time. "We built all the hardware and controllers" Chris related. "We also designed and built CobraNet cards for the amplifiers, making them the first CobraNet enabled amplifiers in the world. Crown released the first commercial unit 2 ½ years later."

The Olympics marked the beginning of a long relationship with Stadium Australia, now known as ANZ Stadium. "We have maintained the system and operated every event for 15 years" Chris said proudly. "We reconfigured and updated it once in 2002, making new additions and upgrades. We then replaced it in 2013." ANZ Stadium now boasts one of the world's finest PA systems, designed by stadia acoustics expert Scott Willsallen, boasting d&b loudspeakers powered by LAB. GRUPPEN amplifiers.





## The Long Run

Long-term relationships with clients are extremely important to Chris. It's one of the unique propositions of The P.A. People business. The company doesn't just want to install an AV solution into a building, they want the people using it to have a positive experience, to support the client in the long term and be there when the client is ready to refresh or upgrade. "We seek to deliver reasonable value that provides an appropriate whole-of-life solution" Chris expanded. "That philosophy is one we try to embody."

When assessing a product or system design, this philosophy asks 'Is it appropriate? Is it serviceable?' These are key questions often overlooked in the quest for technical solutions. While a product may exceed all desired performance criteria, its cost or maintenance requirements may render it a poor choice. Another product may be attractive in price, but will ultimately be too difficult to use or fail to live up to the customer's expectations.



## Communication and Craft

In negotiating the vast amount of choices that need to be made in any technical project, Chris and The P.A. People keep the customer's needs, aspirations and practical realities at the forefront of their thinking. "These are the things that drive our culture and identify us as who we are" explains Chris. "These are the things that drive our product selection. They are what drive us to provide longevity to our customers by developing long-term relationships with our suppliers."

Chris firmly believes in the value of having an experienced integrator involved in the design and deployment of any AV solution. The P.A. People history of finding often unique solutions to live production and installation challenges means they are

aware of many pitfalls that may not be obvious at the outset of a project. "An intelligent approach is to know what you don't know" Chris observes. "An intelligent design is one that states a system's goals, the volume required, its intelligibility and the area it must cover, without specifying one particular solution. That is truly understanding design and capturing what the customer needs."

The ability to find the perfect balance between utility, quality, serviceability and attainability is a skill only learned through years of real-world experience. "Fundamentally, 'Fit for Purpose' is an engineering approach" confirms Chris. "It's all about what's best for the job."



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