Behind The Gear

This Issue's Racounteur of Routing

Glenn Coleman by Holly Lane

I became acquainted with Glenn Coleman when we shared a week together at the Audio Engineering Society Convention (AES) in New York. Glenn's early employer, MCI, was a leading manufacturer of pro audio recording equipment from the '50s to the early '80s. Later he found work at Atlantic Studios and Martin Audio as well as founding his own Coleman Audio where he designs and manufactures top quality DAW monitor controllers, alternate speaker switchers, VU metering systems, surround level controls and surround switching modules. Coleman Audio gear is used by The Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder, The Dave Matthews Band, Atlantic Recording Studios, Sony Music Studios, Bose Corporation, Microsoft, NBC, CBS, ESPN, Warner Bros and many other facilities, large and small.

How did you come to study electronics?

I saw the Rolling Stones in 1969 on November 24th in Detroit and that's when I knew I wanted to work in the music business. I had taken guitar lessons and I realized I wasn't a musician, but I really wanted to get into the recording or music business. I grew up in Canton, Ohio, and went to college for a year at Urbana University to try and stay out of the draft. After the first two quarters I was going to flunk out. I begged them to keep me in one more quarter and then I flunked out again. Too much partying; not enough studying. I was then almost drafted. This was 1969 -1970. Not knowing if I was going to get drafted or not, I hitchhiked to San Francisco. I was living in the Tenderloin district between Turk and Eddie Streets. Coming home from the grocery store one day, I noticed this one building. It was the only building that looked decent in the whole neighborhood. I knocked on the door to find out what was in there. It was Wally Heider Studios. I said, "Give me a job." They said, "You either have to know somebody, or you have to know electronics." I went back to Ohio, and my mother paid for me to go to United Electronics Institute – a two-year technical school that turned out TV technicians. I graduated in January of `72; from there I moved to Florida, where I had friends.

How did you end up working on recording gear for MCI [Music Center Incorporated]?

Around 1973 I got a job at Motorola, in Fort Lauderdale, where they were building pagers at the time. I worked there about a year, but still wanted to get into recording somehow. A friend of mine, Steve Beverly, was working there as well. We found out that there was a recording class at Criteria Studios in Miami given by Karl Richardson, who was a big time guy. He'd later record *Saturday Night Fever* by the Bee Gees, Average White Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Eric Clapton… and the list goes on. So we went and the first thing out of Karl's mouth was, "We have all MCI equipment here, because they build it in Ft. Lauderdale." Steve and I look at each other like, "They build all that, and we're working at Motorola?" The receptionist took my job application, once a week, for eight months, before MCI hired me. I think she was throwing my applications away.

You were working on consoles at MCI?

After working there for about a year, MCI brought out a new model, the JH 528, a larger console than the previous JH 428. It really had everything: more EQ, more sends and 32-track assignments. MCI started selling a lot of the larger consoles. I had been relegated to checking out the smaller 428s; they had brought in another guy in to do the 528s. But Wally [Watkivs] told me that if I didn't have anything to do, I could check out the 528s too. Eventually I only worked on 528s. The first three prototypes went to Criteria (serial #1) and Atlantic Studios (serial #2 and #3) with the promise of an automation package and light meters to be added as they were designed. They had started selling a great many of them and the engineering staff had been going out to install them. They didn't want to do that anymore, so they decided to see if I was up to to doing the installations. I went to Nashville on my first service call, with a design engineer named Larry Lamoray. After that trip Larry didn't go on the road anymore, I did.

Why did you move from MCI to Atlantic Studios?

I continued travelling to studios around the world for MCI. Then, in the early '80s, Sony bought MCI. Within a month or so I could see that I didn't like what was happening. During my many trips to Atlantic I had made friends with Sami Uckan who was the chief engineer at Atlantic Studios. Sami had told me, "Anytime you want to get a job up here, just call me."

How is it that you founded Coleman Audio?

While working at Atlantic Studios I started Coleman Audio as a freelance service company for recording studio repairs. So while I was working at Atlantic and Martin Audio, I had my own service company going too. There was a lot to do in Manhattan back in the days when tape was the format. My first client was Nola Recording Studio on 57th Street, in the Steinway Building. Every sound you heard on *Sesame Street* back then came through Nola. They had an MCI, which I had built while working in Florida, and that's why they hooked up with me. I can remember when Tom Spahn, who rented Studio B from Nola, was doing the first Tickle Me Elmo toy. Two to three weeks of comparing Elmo laughs for 10 hours a day. This is why I'm not a recording engineer! Martin Audio was bought by a holding company in New Jersey, and they started downsizing. It got so small that I was the only one left, and I was on the end of a pager – if they needed me, they would beep me. I was still doing a lot of freelance service work. The sales staff that had left Martin opened a parts department at Sam Ash. Jim Gillespie was the manager. He came to me and said, "Look, we know you have built things here and there." While at Atlantic I would build a meter panel or a switcher, as needed. Gillespie said, "If you could build a pair of stereo VU meters, Sam Ash will sell them." So I did, and that was the first Coleman Audio product. It started with the VU meters, then a cable tester, and then a switcher for "tape one/tape two." Back then they were still using tape decks and small mixers only had one "tape 1" input on the board, so you could take the output of my MS6 and you would have six inputs. After that, I built a speaker switcher. Tracey Dell from NBC called one day and said they needed to A/B between speakers with a really accurate, balanced level control. I built a custom module for them but I thought, "That's not enough in a box to sell as a product," so I added four stereo inputs, three stereo outputs as well as left and right mute switches. That was my M3 box. They were using it do post production editing for *Saturday Night Live*. NBC Burbank's network news department also wanted a custom box, which I built for them. Jim Pace, my dealer with Audio Intervisual Design, had been contacted by NBC's David Jackson for the device. Jim said, "Maybe I've got a guy who will build it." *NBC News* and *Access Hollywood* use this custom SS8 that I built for them – they've got it in Tel Aviv, Moscow, London, Washington DC and Miami. They have bought 42 of them. They usually buy six pieces a year. It's not a commercially marketable product, but it's exactly what they want. If someone comes to me asking for a custom box, I'll build it. If it looks like it's something that could be marketable, I'll turn it into a product. Like the first M3 box I built for NBC.

What are your thoughts on the current state of the art?

The computer audio workstation has really changed the whole recording industry. But you don't have the analog sound that people still want. That's why there is still a market for vintage gear, like Pultec EQs, Neve mic preamps and tube compressors, not to mention old microphones. I'm kind of a retro company. I try to keep things passive, which is as old school as it gets, from a technical point of view. I also try to accommodate that aesthetic for the user of the very latest digital audio innovations.

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What are you focusing on now?

Right now I'm redesigning a section of the M3PH MKII, because a guy at AES walked up to me and said, "You ought to have the left minus right when you hit the mono button, instead of just the phase reverse on the output." This is how it happens all the time, and that's why it's important for me to be at places like the AES conference and the NAMM Show, to speak directly with the end users and learn their needs. Tell me what you need, and I'll build it. I always answer the phone and I'll help anybody that calls me, even if it's not about my product. The person may have my product but the real problem is with other equipment in his studio. I will do my best to help them figure it out. ☮

Read more of Holly's talk with Glenn at tapeop.com
Photo by Kevin Downs

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Holly Lane is a music industry veteran who has run recording labels and studios. www.hollylane.org

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Another features allows the user to choose whether the bypass switch cuts the delay cold or allows it to trail off. Also, an expression pedal input not only allows a rocker-type control to be assigned to any parameter, but it will also accept Strymon's own Favorite Switch, which allows the user to recall a most-used patch, regardless of the knob twiddling that has occurred — very useful in a live setting, and effectively turning it into a two preset unit. *Tape Op* readers are handy with a soldering iron, so I assume an SPDT switch plus a TRS cable could easily equal a DIY version of the Favorite Switch, plus aftermarket ones are out there, but the official issue one is available for only $49 and shares the Strymon aesthetic.

Delay ranges from 25 ms to 1.5 seconds, but that depends on which mode you're in. Loop lengths can be up to 20 seconds. Next to the bypass switch is a tap tempo which, when held, triggers the good old cycling/feedback effect we all love. The same switch doubles as the loop control. All in all, a fantastic, great sounding little box that delivers on its promise with no exceptions.

Since I was already in "space", it was easy to make the transition to the *blueSky Reverberator*. At first glance, there seem to be almost too many options available for a reverb pedal, with its five knobs (Decay, Mix, High Damp, Pre-Delay, Low Damp) and two toggles (Mode and Type), but like the *El Capistan*, it lends itself to having the user tailor it to his or her needs. That becomes even easier when you consider the Favorite Switch is built into this box, right next to the bypass. In no time, I had this set up as a double unit. The manual settings were dialed in to a great, deep, spring reverb, and the Favorite setting was dedicated to a washed-out room, with light modulation, that couldn't be obtained with an analog device. And that's just it; the *blueSky* can deliver genuine spacey tones — some entirely unique to the unit — as well as classic mechanical reverbs. Anyone just looking for spring replication might want to save their money and buy one of the many boxes available at a fraction of the cost, even though the Strymon sounds great. The real reason to buy the *blueSky* is because it goes way beyond what other reverb pedals can do, almost into rack territory. When the left toggle is switched to Mod, a light chorus effect is added that is both subtle enough to not sound like you're rehashing dated, '80s sounds, but strong enough to add some interesting depth. It's hard to describe what happens when the same switch is in Shimmer mode. As the reverb decays, harmonics develop and "bloom" — the longer the decay setting, the more intense the harmonic development and overall effect. It's very unique, usable, and can take things in an almost synthy direction.

Pre-Delay is useful if you want to avoid a "crowded" reverb, and Damp helpfully tames and contours tones as well. These features are particularly useful when using Plate effects. I found that I never needed to set these in real-time, however, and occasionally kicked them during live performances. I feel like much smaller knobs for these effects would be a minor improvement. That would still allow tweaking but would clean up the face of the unit and make it even more suitable for stage use. Like the *El Capistan*, the user can decide whether the reverb cuts when bypassed or continues until it decays.

Both Strymon pedals accept instrument or line-level, are stereo, and signal-to-noise is an impressive 115 dB, so these double as a studio option. They offer true bypass, and the dry path is always analog, without conversion. These things are understandably power hogs, so they won't run on batteries; they require their own slot on a power brick and don't always daisy-chain well, so be forewarned. The manuals are well laid-out and very easy to read; and there is an abundance of great information on their website and blog. Warranty is only one year for manufacturer's defects; I think Strymon could do a lot better here considering the price-point they are competing in and what most other high-end companies offer.

I think Strymon is really onto something, bridging the gap between the boutique market and studio-quality gear. Plus, Strymon manufactures in Los Angeles. Their products leave few details unaddressed, without overburdening the user with too much choice. And the attention to detail is more than skin deep; it's present in the entire design. *($299 street each; www.strymon.net) –Alex Maiolo*

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