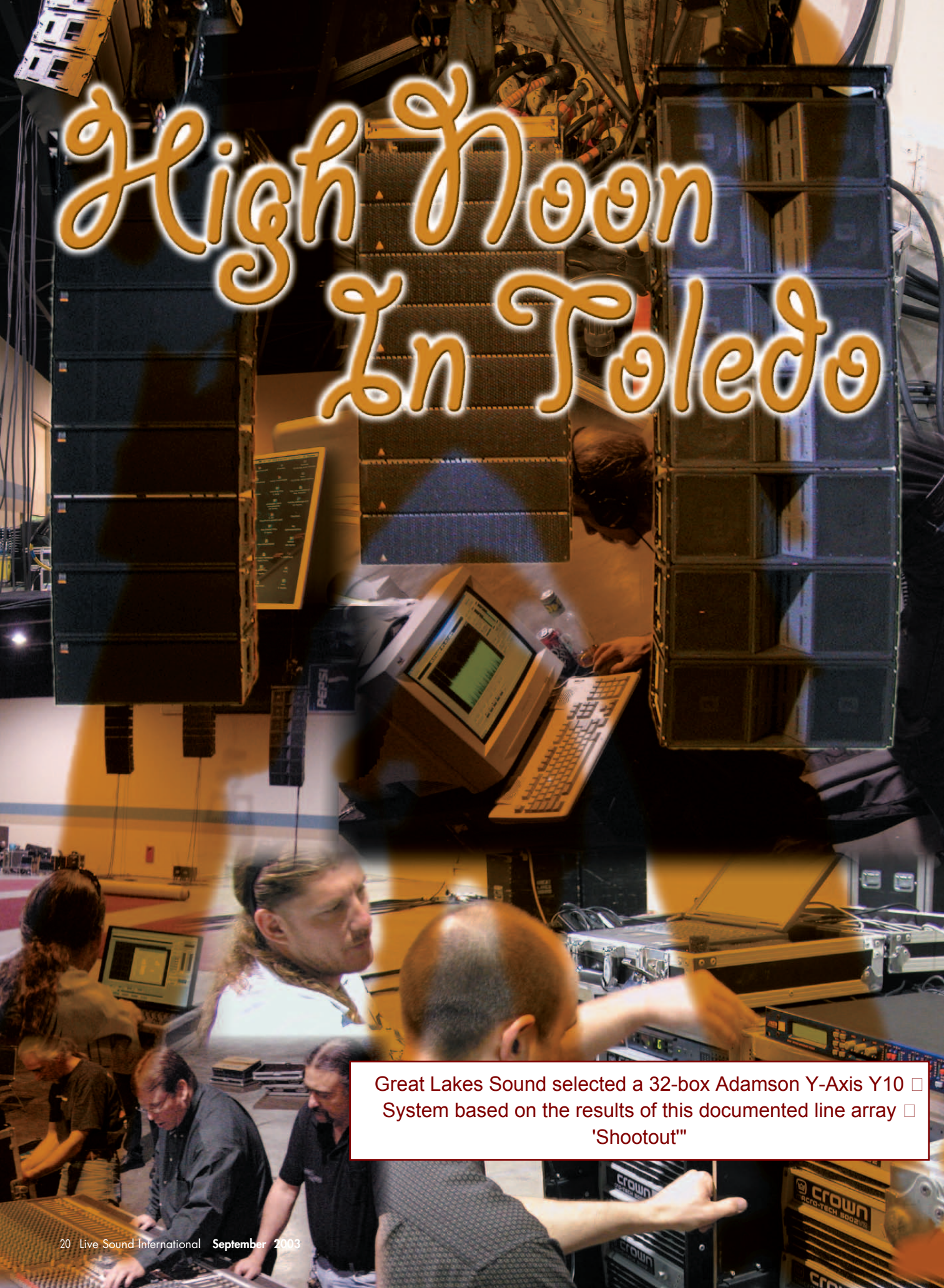


# High Noon In Toledo



Great Lakes Sound selected a 32-box Adamson Y-Axis Y10   
System based on the results of this documented line array   
'Shootout''

## **"Shootout" – a glamorous term for a well-informed decision**

**A**bout four years ago, Bill Robison and the team at Great Lakes Sound & Lighting began to get bitten by the line array bug. Happens to us all from time to time.

But rather than acting immediately to jump on the bandwagon, Robison and partner Todd Mitchell chose to wait, let the market settle a bit while doing plenty of homework leading to resolution of the issue for their self-described "small" regional production company based in Toledo, Ohio.

I recently caught up with Robison in the midst of the culmination of this effort, in the form of a "shootout" between three leading contenders in the line array wars. The three finalists were invited to participate in a thorough head-to-head face-off for the Great Lakes crew at the main exhibit hall of the SeaGate Convention Center in downtown Toledo.

The process, which involved key representatives from all three manufacturers, spanned well more than a day, with plenty of time provided beforehand for set-up and "tweak."

"We started looking at line array boxes several years ago. At the time, I went to hear a (L-Acoustics) V-DOSC line array rig at a festival near Yosemite Park, and realized this was a direction our company would need to evolve toward," Robison told me during a break from the action. "And then so many new systems started hitting the market. We needed to make sure this wasn't the latest 'flavor of the month,' and in the intervening time it's been fine-tuned and is now obviously here to stay."

**By Keith Clark**

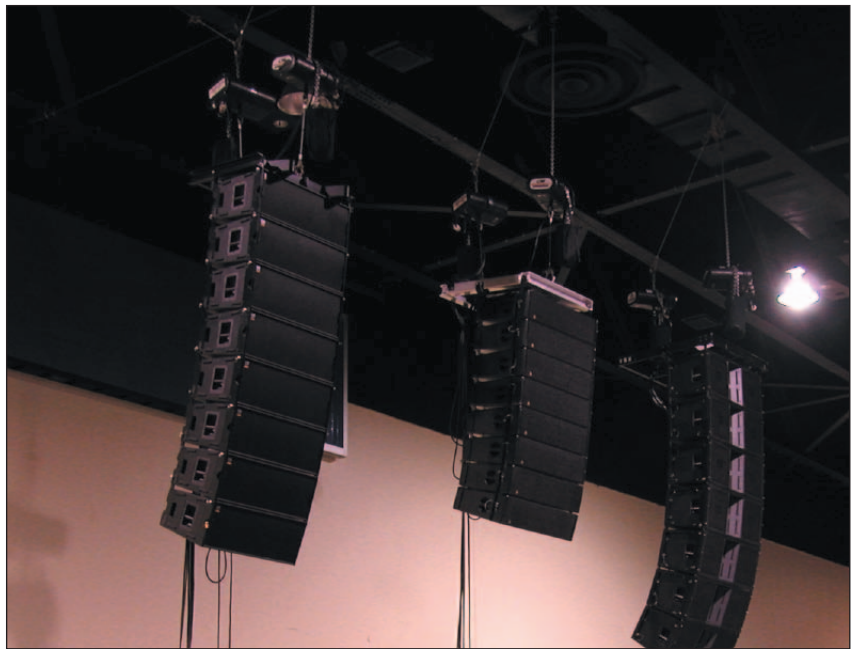


## STEADY, RELIABLE

Founded in 1985, Great Lakes Sound has steadily built a solid base of business in the northwest Ohio/southeast Michigan region, providing sound and lighting services for concerts, festivals, corporate/industrial and other events. "We're a regional company, and we know our limitations. Our biggest asset is a dedicated staff," Robison explains. "Anyone who knows anything about this business knows that your success or failure is most determined by those working in the front lines."

A Crest-powered 48-box Adamson 200 Series loudspeaker system has served as the heart of the company's main rig, and still does a steady, reliable job at larger events where it's required. At the same time, Robison and Mitchell kept on eye on the line array phenomenon.

"This is the first product, in all of our years of doing this, where the clients are specifically asking about it," Robison notes. "At the same time, it's been a tough business climate. I don't know of very many sound guys, myself included, who are business people by choice. But it's a necessity as you get into this and find you want to make a real go of it. So while it's tempting to jump on the latest technology, and to



*The contenders, left to right: Martin Audio W8LC, Adamsom Y10 and JBL VerTec.*

answer those client inquiries, you also have to keep the bottom line at the front and center of every decision."

The past four years have been spent in researching each new line array model as it hit the market, talking with colleagues about the plusses and minuses, and a whole lot of personal evaluation. Robison estimates he's heard most, if not all, viable line array systems on the market at least once, often more.

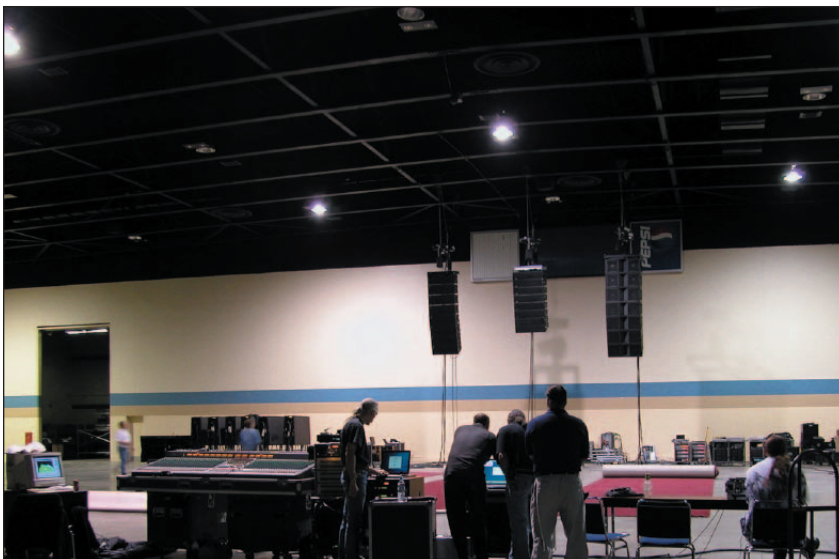
He adds that even with cutbacks in recent years, the corporate/industrial market is a place his company still

sees good growth potential. A line array system can help bridge to higher success in that sector. It's logical that the economy will snap out of its doldrums at some point, and as a production company, Great Lakes desires to be poised to take advantage of the upswing as soon as it happens. And at the same time, the down economy has presented an upside.

"Let's face it – right now we're in a buyer's market," he says. "At the present point in time, you can work the deal side of this more to your advantage. We're in a good position, because there are 25 to 30 different line array models out there, from a variety of manufacturers. And with this choice, there is maturity to the technology that has shaken out. Often in business, it's best to be conservative, but there are times when you need to take risks in order to take advantage of conditions that might not last much longer."

## SEEMINGLY AT ODDS?

The mounds of research led Great Lakes to a "final three" selection, with all finalists quite compliant about participating in the head-to-head evaluation, often known better in industry lore as the shootout. The models "locked and loaded" for the contest, in alphabetical order, were an Adamson Y10 compact system, a JBL VerTec full-size system and a Martin Audio W8LC compact system.



*Some perspective of the shootout set up. The cavernous room presented relatively realistic conditions.*



Wait – two compact systems and a full-size system? Shouldn't this be an “apples to apples” comparison? “Yes, it seems kind of at odds,” Robison acknowledges. “But weight is one of our primary selection criteria, and those who know can tell you that while the size differences in these models are notable, the weight differences are not.”

So, score one right out of the gate for JBL? Not necessarily. “One or the other of these systems might get louder than the others, and I don't really care,” Robison explains. “That's not a big consideration for us. We are doing this evaluation at similar levels to see how each works at these levels, evaluating their performance as a line array system, how they put sound into a space. Every box is going to sound a bit different, and any two people are going to perceive them as sounding different, in their own way and for their own reasons.”

Weight indeed is a top criteria for Great Lakes because a smaller company doesn't always have access to bigger crews. So a 280-pound box can present problems for just two crew members, while a 150-pound box is much more practical.



*PC at the ready for any processing tweaks.*



*SMAART Live data, for both real-time and later analysis.*

Another key factor is economics, both in terms of the purchase “deal” as well as the key factor of cross-rentability appeal to other sound companies. Frankly, it's an important revenue stream for a company outside of the constantly busy environs of a major market like New York, Chicago, Orlando, Las Vegas, etc. Just because the owner of the system doesn't have a gig on a particular day doesn't mean the system has to sit idle.

Aesthetics also enter the picture. “You hate to say it if you're a ‘true’ sound guy, where how it sounds should be the only thing, but how the product looks is a fact of life of the real world,” he admits.

Manufacturer support is yet another factor. Great Lakes has been happy with its Adamson rig for several years... Score one for Adamson? Not so fast. “Adamson has been very good to us in terms of supporting their product and our needs,” Robison explains. “But all of these contenders were asked to be here because our research showed that they do whatever it takes to support their customers.”

And then there are the non-quantifiable factors that go into an investment of this nature. In essence, what do you like, what don't you like? Are you comfortable with a product, got a certain feel for it? Yes, the intangible always lurks to play a role.

### **THE OK CORRAL**

Both compact arrays were made up of eight modules, the full-size array was made up of seven, and all were

tapered in a gentle “J” configuration. The array size/count was about half of what Great Lakes expected to be an investment in a system of 16 loudspeakers.

Tom Kneisel, shop manager for Great Lakes, coordinated all system set-ups, including the flying of the arrays the day prior to the evaluation. Ken Miller of Great Lakes did a lot of the “heavy lifting” in support of Kneisel and the manufacturers. Ducks were in a row, so to speak, when it came to show time.

The convention center exhibit hall proved a reasonable facsimile of “real world” conditions, the type of room where corporate/industrial shows are held every day. Runs of carpeting were placed on the floor in front of the arrays to help lessen any initial slap off the hard concrete, but that was the only “special” consideration made in the environment.

“For some applications, this isn't the ideal space with its hard surfaces, but in other ways, it is. In any evaluation, you have to read between the lines a little bit,” Robison explains. “In some ways, I'd like to be doing this in a shed or outdoors, but that's not possible.”

Each manufacturer was allowed to supply its own amplification, bringing up another interesting point. (For the record, JBL was powered by Crown, while Lab.Gruppen drove both Martin Audio and Adamson.) Great Lakes ultimately hoped to be able to use its existing racks with the new boxes, but didn't necessarily want to close the door on a more optimal approach.



As a result, the company's current Crest-loaded racks were also evaluated with each system, all headed by XTA DP226 digital processors. Klark-Teknik third-octave graphics were in the front-of-house racks for tweaking, but weren't really touched, while the console was a Yamaha PM3500.

"The XTA processors are some of the finest units available, and we've already determined that we're going to have them in our racks with whatever loudspeakers we choose," Robison adds. "Our view is that they're the best DSP out there in a single rack space. The bottom line on amps is that most are pretty darn good in terms of beefiness and sound quality, and they're priced similarly. We've got Crest for our big rig, and they've served us well, but there's a lot of good choices."

#### **DRAW!**

Shootout day dawned with each manufacturer allowed to show off its respective system the way it wanted them heard, including choice of amps, racks and specific processor settings. Later, Great Lakes patched in its own racks.

In initial testing, Robison and crew walked the room, listening to individual groups of boxes, evaluating their dynamics, smoothness, and they like, and also how each reacted both with-



*Robison doing vocal evaluation, SM58 in hand.*

in the room and to different console and processor adjustments. Test source material included a diverse assortment of musical tracks, from Tower of Power to James Taylor to Earth Wind & Fire and several others. Robison tested vocal intelligibility and reproduction as he walked around the room with a Shure SM58 in hand.

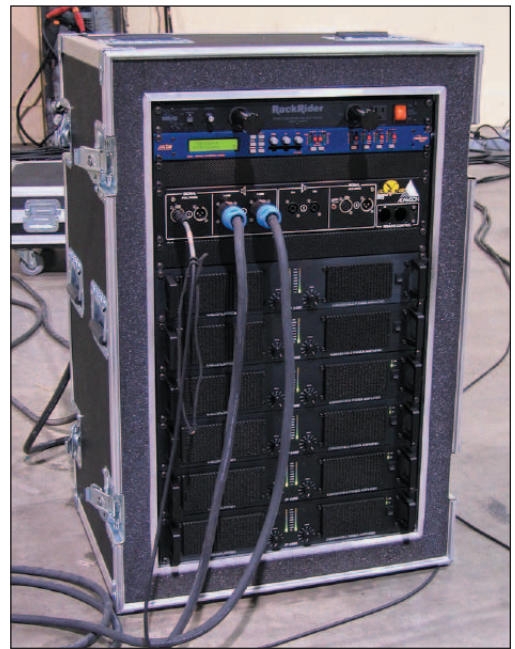
Meanwhile, Cliff Fuller, systems engineer for Great Lakes, used his SIA SMAART-Live rig to evaluate what was happening with each system from a more clinical data perspective. He was also saving and storing this data, for later evaluation by the team.

"I'm a 'seat-of-the-pants' type of sound guy," Robison notes. "I use RTAs, know how they work, have 'pinked' rooms and etc. But I also don't know a lot about measurement, and frankly, I don't want to know. We have others on staff that know it very well, and they share their input. I want to know how it sounds. What are my ears and fingers on the knobs telling me when I'm mixing?"

And on it went for several hours. Bursts of demo, serious evaluation, and then break time to walk outside and digest. After a couple of hours, I comment to Robison that all three systems seem to be performing very well indeed, that coverage is smooth, full, solid and dynamic throughout the listening area. Intelligibility seems quite commensurate as well – all statements with which he enthusiastically concurs. So, tough choice – would it be Martin Audio?

Great Lakes wasn't tipping its hand. In fact, the final decision wouldn't be made for at least a week, after the team had a chance to get some perspective, compare notes and fully discuss every aspect of what they'd experienced.

"I'm sure there are some things, as we get further away from it, that I would have done differently, but that's the way it goes," Robison tells me as I prepare to depart. "We don't have this type of opportunity very



*One of the Lab.Gruppen amp and XTA DSP racks used during portions of the demo.*

often, and in fact, I don't know how many people doing this work for a living get this type of opportunity. It's very fortunate for us that the manufacturers have set this up and provided A-line staff for it. They're making it as good as possible.

"I feel this has been fair and equitable to all parties, and they've certainly all been impressive," he concludes. "After 18 years, we'll likely survive anything, but at the same time, we're talking huge dollars and this is critical to our success. So, we're going to analyze it, probably to death, compare notes, and make the decision."

So who won? Well, about two weeks after the event, Robison was kind enough to call and let me know. But – invoking editor's prerogative, I'm not gonna flat-out tell you.

This shootout was so well done and well supported that no one deserved to "lose." I can honestly say that another sound company might have come to a different conclusion, and they wouldn't have been disappointed.

So, curious readers... You can find the answer contained somewhere else in this issue of *Live Sound*. Happy hunting! ■

*Keith Clark is editor of Live Sound and can be reached at [kclark@livesoundint.com](mailto:kclark@livesoundint.com). He sincerely thanks Great Lakes Sound & Lighting, as well as the manufacturers involved, for allowing him access to this event.*