Chapter Two: Ready For The Road

In the months before Jim Fackert and I built the first Grand Funk touring lighting system, two seminal events helped shape my future career in lighting design. At the Shea Stadium show, Chip Monck gave me my first lesson in cueing followspots; he taught me how to set up the gear, how to speak slowly, call by numbers and so on ... all fairly standard stuff today. But the most important bit I saw Chip do - and one that I incorporated as a matter of habit - was to hold a pre-show production meeting. He got the spot operators together about an hour before the show, and would arrive carrying a package of pre-gelled Super Trouper frames, so the operators didn't have to do that. He would meet the guys, shake their hands, and then ask some important questions. This simple exercise really helped me out over the next six years of touring. Chip would ask, “Which one of you guys have the most experience?” and “do any of you not have any experience?” He could then assign the operators based on that information, so you'd have the two most experienced guys on the two most active followspots. If you had a couple beginners, you'd put them on spots focused on the drummers. And on the rare occasions that you'd find somebody stoned or drinking, and/or with a cocky attitude, you could fix that before the show.

Next, I had an opportunity to work with the Belkin brothers. They were promoters from Cleveland who had booked shows for Grand Funk, and asked me to participate in a James Gang comeback tour. They had purchased a small lighting system, and the guy who built it was coming up from New York to do a few rehearsals, but wasn't able to go out on the road with them. They asked if I was interested, and I said ‘absolutely’, not telling them that I didn't really know anything about lighting. I went to the rehearsal in a small theatre in Cleveland, and was introduced to Bob See, the man behind the lighting system. Bob used 16 PARs and had constructed 16' scaffolding out of aluminum tubing triangles ... you'd stand them up vertically and mount eight PARs at the top of each scaffold to crosslight the stage. The lighting board was offstage opposite the monitor mixer.

The Skirpan dimming system that Bob used encompassed twelve 2.4K dimmers - we ultimately built something quite similar for Grand Funk. We used short snoot PARs, and the color filters were Roscolene gel - it wasn't at all like the polyester we use today that is more heat resistant, so they would burn through after one or two shows. He two'fered the eight PARs on each scaffold back to the dimmers. Bob said he'd do the first show with me, so on the way to the first gig I asked him a lot of questions, and he patiently taught me the basics of stage lighting. I confessed that I didn't really know a whole lot about it, so he explained PAR cans, fresnels and lekos and how they were used, the history of stage lighting, the different kinds of lenses and lamps, etc. So I really downloaded Stage Lighting Basics 101 from Bob. I remain truly grateful for that opportunity. Bob also showed me how to use dimmers, which has really become a lost art - where you accent the dynamics of the music not only with color change but also with intensity. When bump buttons were invented, some LDs forgot about dimmers, but I got really used to riding the control handles. As a song would start I would bring them to 75 or 80%, and had a little room to bring them up for accents and things. When bump and flash buttons were introduced I never relied on them much; I thought in a lot of shows the art of dimming and crossfading had been forgotten.

After that tour Grand Funk Railroad gave us the green light to build our own lighting system. My roommate Jim Fackert was the tour electrician and also worked as resident backline guru on projects such as Craig Frost's acrylce B3 and Mark Farner's amps. Jim had been researching electrical and mechanical systems for lighting application, and had come up with some truly innovative ideas on how this system could be made powerful, portable and easy to set up. We were sold on Skirpan dimmers, and it made sense to have Bob See supply our first control system - a 2-scene 18 channel console. We were on our way!

NEXT MONTH: CHAPTER THREE - BUILDING GRANK FUNK'S LIGHTSHOW