

An A.P. Security guard, clearly bemused at the reception he's getting from the front row.



Photographs by Anna Morgan

# wiltshire festival

Mark Cunningham reports from the west of England where one of the country's fastest-growing summer festivals delivered an impressive mix of classical and pop to bridge the generation gap...

established 10 years ago by the local council, Motorola and the GWR broadcasting group, the Wiltshire Festival in Swindon has grown substantially in terms of ticket sales and quality of artists since its production management was taken over in 1994 by Andy Cotton of TAO Productions.

This year, more than 26,000 people of all ages attended the festival's two events — a Classical Spectacular and a 'poptastic' Party In The Park starring Atomic Kitten, Louise, Kenny Thomas, Aswad, AI, Blue, Dane Bowers, '80s hitmakers Go West and a sure-fire star of the future, Sheryl Ryan, whose vocal confidence and stage presence belied the fact that she is a mere 12 years old.

"The acts have become bigger," commented Andy Cotton. "You need to know you can rely on a certain amount of ticket sales before committing to spend tens of thousands of pounds on a headliner. We look towards cultivating a family atmosphere by not only choosing the best pop acts available to us, but also some artists who the parents will enjoy. So as

well as booking Atomic Kitten, we create a balance by having Go West and Aswad, the perennial festival favourites.

"The great thing about the presence of families is that the crowd tends to be self-policed. Since we've been running the festival we have only ever recorded 15 arrests, which have been drink-related."

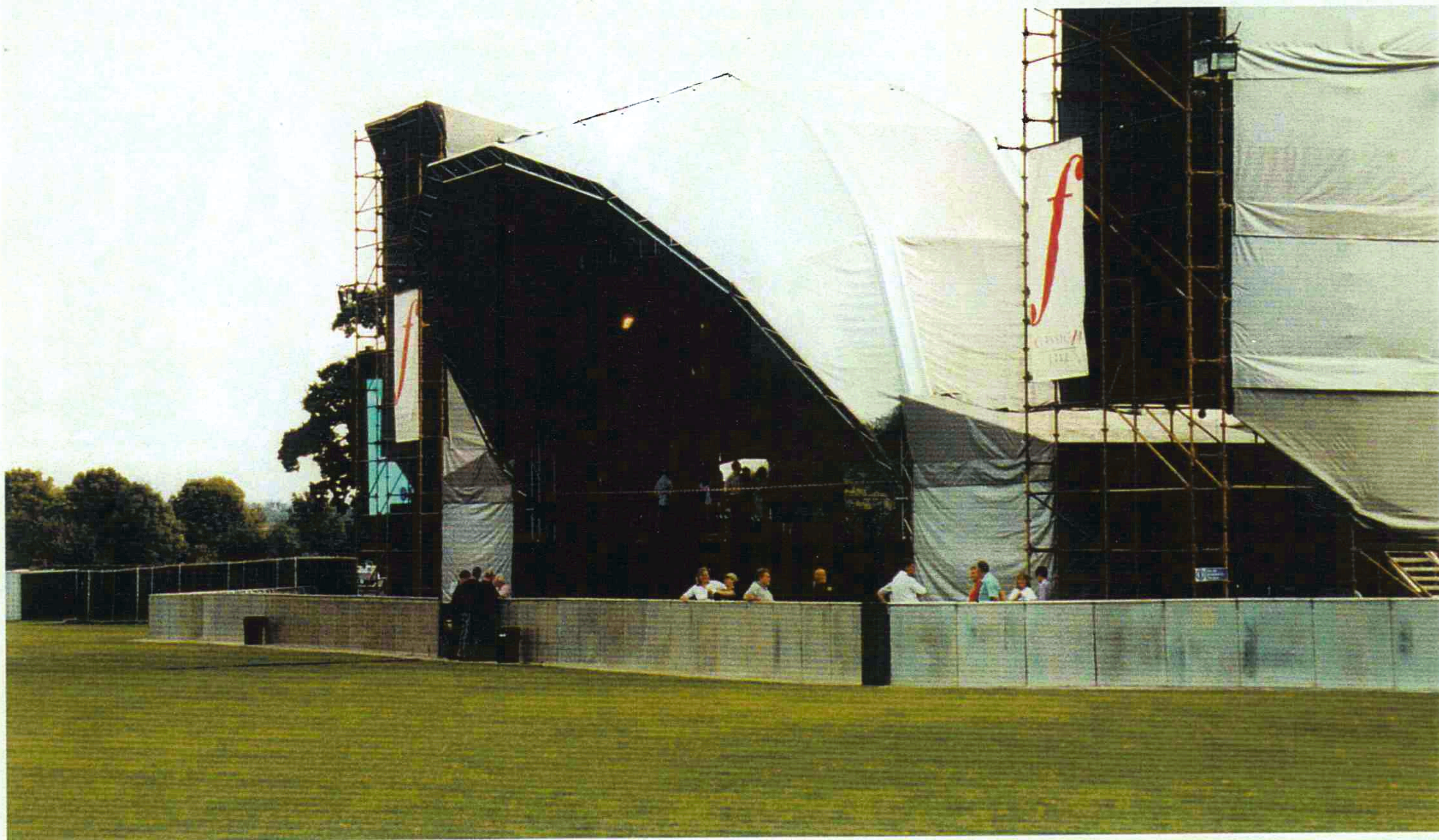
Cotton is a man for whom loyalty is a priority virtue, and this is demonstrated by his retention of most of his key suppliers. "I've used Fineline for 12 years," he said. "You get to know the people and quality of service immediately, and because I run anything up to 18 festivals a year, it gives me good bargaining power when it comes to 'bulk purchasing' from these suppliers. I think a lot of them appreciate that we benefit from a strong continuation of work, so when we say there is an opportunity for a certain amount of shows, nine times out of 10, we will get them."

New to the event was a single 28 square metre LED video display at stage right from ScreenHire (via OBI One), and an interesting communications system

development from Catapult which Cotton put to the test. "We wanted to see Catapult's new fibre optic communications system working in a real-life application, so we invited Richard Young from the company to the festival. It allowed us to have telephones wherever we wanted them with direct dialling to any point, which is very handy for linking FOH to monitors, and from emergency control to police control, to keep radios down to a minimum.

"You can also have dataports at all points, giving you internal e-mail. If you have a major emergency, the noise of the event does not prevent communication because you hit a button and a message appears on computer monitors all over the site, including the FOH tower. We can instantly cut over the PA system with a DAT. The costing is reasonable enough for this festival, but it can be geared to any size of event. That is very encouraging for me because I can't go to a client and ask for £10,000 for an all-singing, all-dancing comms system, but this is in the very low thousands and it is a conversation I can have with clients.





The festival site played host to a visit from representatives from the Cabinet Office and event industry professionals — see boxout.

"I believe it is a wonderful development. If it stays cost-effective it will probably be on most events I run from now on. When you have a lost child crisis it can often tie up a radio channel for five minutes or more, but this system will deal with it in a timely, organised manner, ensuring that everyone who needs to know about it has all the information immediately, as well as the audience who will see a message on the video display."

Interestingly, most of the calls to the control room at the end of the Friday night Classical Spectacular appeared to be about walkie-talkie radio batteries running out!

#### FINE LIGHTING

2001 marked the sixth year of lighting company Fineline's involvement in the Wiltshire Festival — an association which began quietly with the supply of lasers from sister firm Illuminatum and grew to the point where both parties are now responsible for the entire lighting requirements, both on-stage and around the site.

Fineline principal Darren Wring explained: "This event started off in a much smaller part of the site and stayed there for a couple of years, ending up in its current location two years ago. It's kept moving around as the increasing audiences have created a demand for more space. We've managed to make the show look a little different every year as a result."

The scale of production has increased to follow suit, in terms of budgets and stage dimensions. "From my point of view it's an easy gig because the

production management and infrastructure is so well-organised," observed Wring. "We are very busy every summer with about 18-20 festivals, and the Wiltshire Festival is probably the most enjoyable to work on because of the organisational aspects. I think it's all down to Andy Cotton — his personality is what makes this happen. The brief we get for lighting is 'put some lights in, and do it your way'. There are no specs or special artist requirements — we are left to come up with whatever we deem appropriate according to the budget."

Wring continued: "This year, Five were booked to perform and we had no information other than a request for five followspots. When they cancelled and no other artist wanted followspots, we simply left them in the warehouse and saved the festival some money on the hire costs."

Omnipresent during the festival season, Serious Structures provided staging. Wring paid tribute: "Their stages are very reliable — the only pain is that because you are dealing with an arch you are limited in terms of what you can do with a lighting design. They are more difficult than a regular box shape. That said, they are inherently waterproof and more stable, so the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. They are almost a victim of their own success — they are everywhere in the summer."

"When we are booked to supply the lighting for a 45 foot Orbit stage, we know exactly what to expect. So despite the restrictions of the arch, we are fully prepared, and the only criteria will be how deep the stage will be, how many bays, and then we are off."

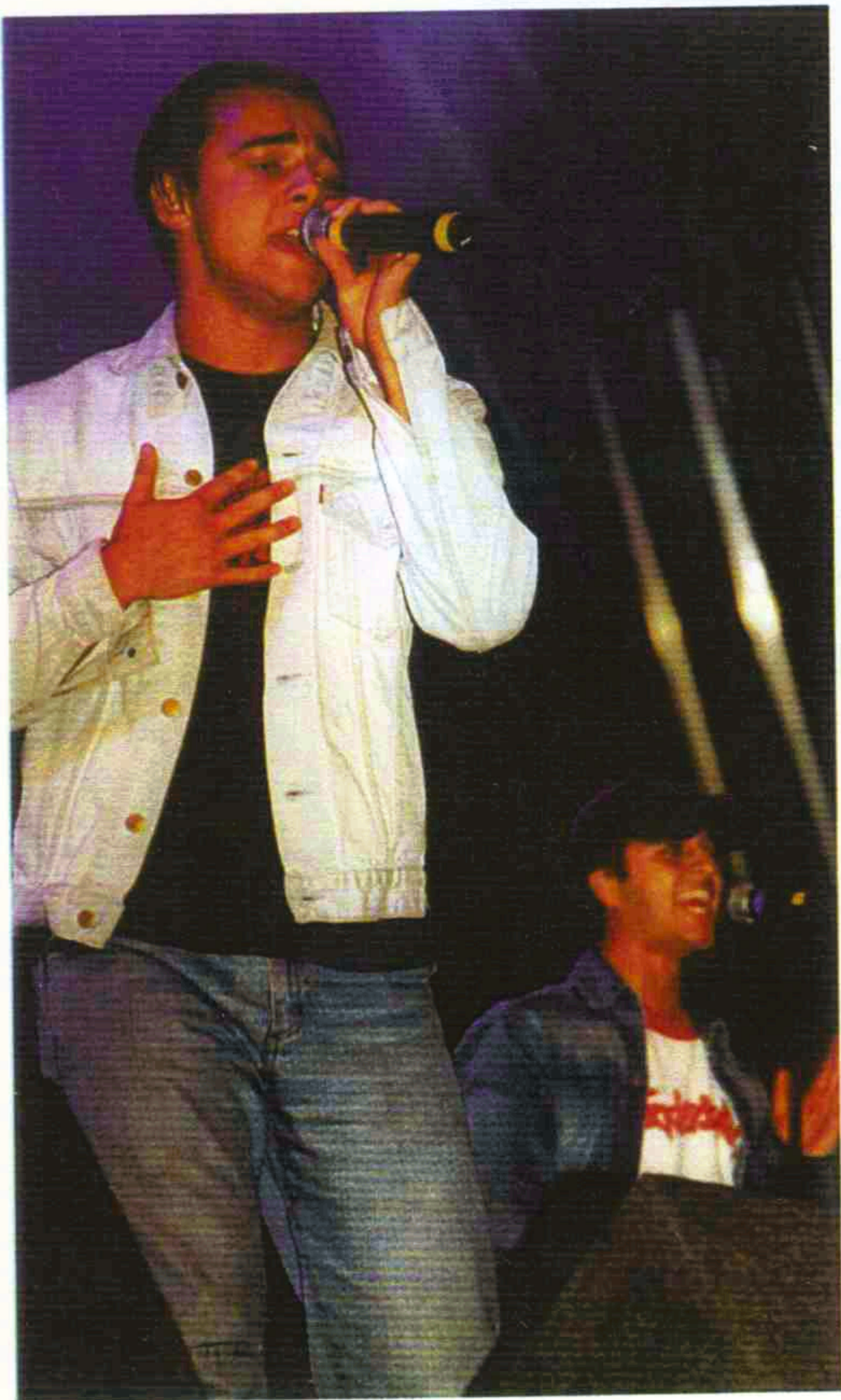
Fineline's crew included LD/Operator Nick Ayres, Steve Walsh on rigging, Kez on dimmers, Dave Harris on search lights, and Dan 'The Man' who took charge of the orchestra's illuminated music stands on the classical night. Meanwhile, Wring handled the management of five artics through his other firm Wring's Transport.

The lighting was to have featured a completely new Vari\*Lite rig this year, but Wring was disappointed that it could not be supplied. Instead, the Avo Sapphire-controlled rig majored in Martin moving fixtures including MAC 600 washlights, Atomic DMX strobes and Martin Pro 2000 smoke machines. Other kit included Clay Paky Golden Scan HPE profiles, 300 Par cans and ACLs, and Le Maitre Star Hazers. In addition to Tomcat trussing, Fineline also supplied all the CM Lodestar motors including those used by Skan PA. destar motors including those used by Skan PA.

#### SOUND 'AUDITION'

Like Fineline, Skan PA works on several outdoor events for Andy Cotton every year, and replaced Capital Sound Hire as Wiltshire's audio supplier three years ago. Skan's standard stock product is Turbosound Floodlight, but Wiltshire saw the company testing Meyer Sound's M3D line array system which was being used in conjunction with Funktion One festival subs and Floodlight near fills and delays. The system included a loudspeaker developed specifically for Skan by Turbosound — a high/mid Floodlight derivative on the top row of the delays which extends the throw capability of Floodlight by around 25%.





Left: Al stepped in to replace the original headlining act, Five.  
Right: Supermodel-turned-pop-star Caprice and her dance entourage making a statement about lasagne.

Skan's Chris Fitch explained: "We have a bit of an issue where we do big shows in open fields which require a longer throw. Floodlight is more than adequate on our indoor shows — it's still a great arena system, although companies with longer-throw systems might want to tell you otherwise.

"We're now looking at buying a long throw system which is why we are looking at M3D. It's the first system we've looked at seriously and it's been organised for us by Autograph Sales who also handle Lab Gruppen amplification, which we already use.

"I don't think we're going to jump in straight away although my first reaction is that M3D does exactly what Meyer claim. On the build day we ran the system without delays. The back of the site is 220 metres away from the front of the stage and it was clear that we could have run the gig without delays. It sounded fantastic when Go West

played, really cracking. It's very neutral sounding. I'm not certain that the dispersion is what it should be; the throw is definitely there though. Tonally, it will take some getting used to after years of listening to blue boxes. Ultimately it's not about what I think of it, it's about whether I can rent it to my clients, many of whom have stayed very loyal to us since we bought Skan from Pete Howard."

Fitch continued: "We are aware of Sound Hire, Cap Sound and Canegreen's acceptance of M3D. It is a substantial investment of around £250,000, and I'm in the process of working out whether that is realistic for us, given the amount of work we could do with it. My initial thought is that there are many large events we could do with M3D on a regular basis, and do away with the need for delays. That's an important consideration in some cases where an event site is hilly or wet, making truck access difficult."

## Wiltshire Festival — Key Production Crew & Suppliers:

Event Producer: TAO Productions • Festival Director: Andy Cotton • Stage Manager: Chris Fitch • Festival Controller: Mike Hicks • Lighting Director: Nick Ayres • Diablo Operator: Darren Wring • FOH Engineer: Andy Shillitoe • Monitor Engineer: Matt Napier • ASM: Richard Young • Safety Manager: Simon James • AV Director: Kevin Watts • Electrician: Steve Hollingsworth • Security Manager: Tommy Michaels • Medical Manager: Kevin Hitchens • VIP Manager: Mel Gibbons • Arena Manager: Terangi Maeve/John Wallis • Gates Manager: Danny Small/Tony Ellis • Artists Liaison: Nicky Small/Libby Alderson • Backstage Managers: Jason Neville/Graham Jones • Lighting: Finline • Sound: Skan PA • Staging: Serious Structures • Power: Showpower • Video Screens: OBI One • Communications: Audiolink & Catapult • Security: A.P. Security • Medical: Wiltshire Ambulance Authority • Catering: Gourmet Girls • Marquees: Classic • Toilets: Wessington • Trucking: Wring's Transport

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TAO Productions' Andy Cotton in good company with Louise and (centre) Atomic Kitten. Far right: Darren Wring of lighting supplier Fineline.

FOH Engineer Andy Shillitoe (operating a brand new Midas Heritage 2000), monitor mixer Matt Napier (Midas XL3) and Jock Bain were amongst the Skan PA crew running a single line system, as opposed to the two-line regime of the previous year. "We're back to one line system because the order of the acts has been organised such that a playback act will follow a live or semi-live act, giving us time to prepare for the more demanding sets," said Fitch. "It's a passive line system — I don't believe in active ones! It's another expense that although might make sense from an audio point of view, probably doesn't reap financial

rewards. So we're stoically passive!"

One of the most refreshing aspects of the Wiltshire Festival had to be the positioning of the VIP hospitality marquee which, instead of being backstage as on most other events, was out in the real world. Andy Cotton gave his reasoning: "I appreciate that there are sponsors, corporates, record companies, and all these people who want to come to these events, but a backstage area is a working area and it can be dangerous. It has been known for some people to stick their fingers into dimmer racks, and I don't want the responsibility of dealing with the fallout

from that!"

"If people want to come behind the stage to meet someone, there's no reason why they can't be escorted, but I now make it a rule that in general, only working personnel have backstage access. It's not in anyone's interests to have any Tom, Dick or Harry wandering around to their heart's content. By having the VIP enclosure out in the arena, where they are wined and dined to a high quality, the guests actually SEE the show and don't spend the entire day schmoozing backstage in a marquee. That has to be a positive thing!"

## The Cabinet Office Visit

In addition to the entertainment, the 2001 Wiltshire Festival offered a unique and valuable opportunity for local authorities, government officials, security companies and event promoters to experience for themselves exactly what happens behind the scenes at an outdoor event, particularly when it comes to health and safety matters.

Representatives from the Home Office (now known as the Cabinet Office) and the world of emergency planning were invited to Swindon's DeVere Hotel to take part in seminars hosted by Andy Cotton, either side of the two festival events. Many of the festival's contractors, including Pat Carr of A.P. Security and Chris Fitch of Skan PA, gave talks on the various aspects of their roles.

As Cotton explained, the officials were encouraged to attend the concerts as 'punters', and asked to queue for entry along with the general public. "This was important because I insisted they had the true public festival experience," said Cotton. "When they produce things like the Event Guides, they are geared very much to V, Glastonbury and Reading, and although that makes sense to some extent, it rules out the large number of regional festivals like this, which deal with 20-30,000 audiences. I wanted them to experience what it entails to visit an event that was much more common in terms of content and infrastructure.

"When I did the Easingwold course, I was shocked at the amount of delegates who licence events but have never actually seen a big stage. It's very difficult to learn about our industry from a book; you have to experience it for real. The biggest surprise for the course organisers was sitting backstage on the Sunday, they couldn't understand the amount of pressure coming from the artists, and that's a big part of any gig. Also the fact that there's more vehicular movement backstage than there probably is in the public car park!"

Many delegates were surprised that the production crew worked as a team with emergency services and licensing bodies. "They seemed to believe that the

authorities are at a festival to simply jump on our backs when something goes wrong, by which time a situation is likely to be irreversible. I would much prefer to be told I'm doing something wrong and have the chance to change it before it becomes an issue. If there was ever a major disaster and there was a court inquiry, all of us behind the scenes would be held accountable to some degree, and it would be great if we were all singing from the same hymn sheet."

Ultimately, Cotton's aim is to ensure that every member of the audience leaves an event safely, and it is to the credit of the Wiltshire team that a fatality was avoided on the night of the Classical show. "On the Friday night, a woman died in the field and was successfully brought back to life. We were told that if she had not been to the Wiltshire Festival, she would have not survived, purely because of the skills we have at our disposal. I must also pay tribute to the A.P. Security team who once again demonstrated their unrivalled skills in terms of sensitive crowd control."

Cotton was keen to destroy a few myths for the benefit of several delegates. "There are still a few cowboys in our industry, but they are outnumbered by true professionals. I have to also point out that there are a few cowboys in government office, too! I never get it totally right, but then Utopia doesn't exist. I do try to get as close as I can to perfection, and I love a challenge.

"I did feel at the start of the Cabinet Office visit that I was looked at like the rich, capitalist bastard who was making a big profit from this festival. I had to remind them that they also do a job, hopefully one that they like, and that they also get paid for their time and effort. If they are not happy with their job and the financial reward, they have the opportunity to change. We abused them for a couple of days and by the end of the visit we'd knocked that attitude out of them!"

Following the success of the visit, Julia Fogarty of the Cabinet Office approached Andy Cotton to give a lecture on multi-agency co-operation which was due to take place at the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning Unit College, Easingwold, on October 23.