

Attack of the Clones

By: Ben M. Rogers

Counterfeit products and the live event production industry: What can be done?

Lighting design, like all artistic fields, has at its heart the desire to create and innovate. As with any artistic discipline so aligned with technical function, the instruments we use are essential to the delivery of our finished product. As such, a symbiotic relationship between manufacturer and designer is critical to mutual success and, as a dedicated follower of innovation, I look for products that expand the range of possibility in my work. Of course, whether innovation betters an existing product or opens up a new world of possibilities, manufacturers need their products to not only sell, but ultimately deliver, a return on the investment required to bring them to market in the first place. So with the rise of more and more counterfeit product in the industry, I want to try and address the potential long- and short-term problems this presents.

In the music industry, income has shifted from music sales to concert ticket sales and merchandising—predominantly as a result of file-sharing and piracy, coupled with the low returns from online music sales and streaming content providers. While this has seen an end to traditional income streams from record sales, it has given a great boost to the live music industry: With more artists needing to be on the road, there's more work for those who deliver their productions. However, this also means that artists are looking for far greater returns on live shows, as this has now become part of their principal income.

Contrast this rise in production with the global economic downturn and it's easy to understand why cut-

backs in production budgets, the onus on green touring ideology, smaller touring packages, and such are all contributing to a much wider variation in supply networks for equipment sourcing. On the road, technical departments and designers are often required to be more flexible accommodating frequent changes in inventory, while local suppliers are pushed to deliver first-class production at rock-bottom prices.

The supply chain for lighting technologies, like so many other product lines, almost invariably involves components sourced from the Far East, and it is from this territory, where copyright infringement is far more complex to address legally, that much of the counterfeit product comes. But before we go finger-pointing solely in

clones of first-class product as the market for replica football shirts and designer handbags. But cloning product is only worthwhile when there is a product to copy. If the prevalence of cloned product continues, then it is only a matter of time before the true innovators of our industry, unable to recoup their investment in research and development, find themselves scaling down or even being pushed out of business altogether—while we designers are left without new product to enhance our productions.

Clone versus “generic” product

The same lamp and LED-source technologies have been adopted by numerous manufactures since theatrical lighting started. From the ACL to Philips Platinum lamps, many of our light sources were developed for mass production outside of entertainment lighting. While some of these

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this direction, it is important to remember that any sales opportunity is based on supply and demand: Wherever there is a demand for cheaper goods, we are going to find companies willing to produce it.

After a huge rise in the past few years, the counterfeit product market for lighting is as overflowing with

sources have patents and exclusive deals attached, we have also seen many products from different manufacturers built along the same lines, but without direct infringement of copyright. In many cases, each variation between manufacturers delivers small, but significant, differences unique to their brand: While compar-

isons are, of course, made, the choice is accepted, as there are marked differences between the products other than price.

The term “generic” is often mis-used. It literally means “of a type,” but it is all too often used to refer to specific branded products, because people tend to use the term “generic” when they mean “conventional” (as opposed to “intelligent”) fixtures. ETC’s Source Four Profile, for example, should never be described as a “generic” product: There are many other profile luminaires—without any easily traceable heritage—which are designed to do a similar job, within certain limits, and to my mind these products fall within the “generic” category rather than counterfeit.

What I want to address here are lighting products that actually purport to be the same as, or trade on the name of, a product owned by another manufacturer, without licensing or similar being agreed for use. These are the clones or counterfeits that represent a real threat to the future of the industry unless steps are taken against them. It’s not just the manufacturers who stand to lose out if the black market for cloned product grows further.

Case study

The idea for this article began when I booked some Clay Paky Sharpys via a local fixer for a show in the UAE, and was presented with a set of “Sharpys”—some badged with the authentic Sharpys logo, and others of a brand I’d never heard of. The casing of these other fixtures was identical to the iconic product made by Clay Paky and I was informed by the rental supplier that these were “the same thing—just cheaper.”

Firstly, I insisted that they take them away, saying I expected to see the real thing, as ordered, and that I really didn’t want to support anyone using such a blatant cloned product. However, after that, the client insisted

tion	Photo	Parameter	Uni
Copy 00W t With n		Voltage: AC100-240V 50/60 Hz Bulb: Phillip MSD Platinum 5R 3-lens optical group power: 189W Color temperature: 8,000 K Luminous flux: 7,950 lm Average life: 2,000 hours Zoom: from zero to 3.8° Light output at 20 meters (65 feet): 59,760 lux Color wheel: replaceable color wheel with 14 colors + open , Gobo wheel: replaceable gobo wheel with 17 fixed gobos + open High speed, rainbow effect Prism : 8-facet prism Mechanical dimmer: PAN = 540° TILT = 250° Maximum speeds: PAN = 2.45 sec TILT = 1.30 sec Resolution: PAN = 2.11° PAN FINE = 0.008° TILT= 0.98° TILT FINE = 0.004° DMX 512 control channels DMX protocol signal: DMX 512 Display: Graphic LCD backlit b/w Display Pan/Tilt Resolution: 16 bit Movement control: vectorial DMX signal connection: 3 and 5 pole XLR input and output With Ethernet connection With Storage battery for LCD screen	

A so-called “original copy” for sale online.

that I use them, as no alternative was available at short notice and he wanted them in the show. So, reluctantly, I conceded—as much out of curiosity as anything else—and here’s what I can tell you about these particular units . . .

Hands-on with a clone: Are they any good?

In the case of this particular product, not only did it look outwardly identical, but the DMX personality was also identical to the Clay Paky version. In use, the beam was good, the optics solid and sharp, and the gobo patterns excellent. But then they should be, because Clay Paky designed them.

That was, however, where the similarities ended. With further use, it quickly became clear that the stepper motors were too slow to deliver the speed and punch of the original unit and I had two of them swapped out—within two hours—for tilt and calibra-

tion issues. The color dichroics were average and certainly not up to the standard of the authentic Clay Paky units. DMX input in this case was three-pin only. The menu buttons didn’t respond well unless hit hard. I had three lamp errors and several strike failures within four hours of reasonable indoor use.

Sadly, you’ve probably heard this story before and often. The simple truth is that these “identical” products sourced from another “manufacturer” are not the same. They may have the same exterior finish and claim much of the same technical specifications, but they are usually built to a substantially different budget point. The manufacturer can make them so affordable because he doesn’t have to see a return on his R&D investment, or deliver technical support and after-sales backup to the same degree, if any at all.

It’s easy to be apathetic about this. We’ve long accepted that music



One of the two units on this page is contributing to the industry; the other is bleeding it dry.

“sharing” is commonplace in the market and that cheap clothes and mass-produced value foods are a natural evolution supporting market demands. But the equipment we operate is not mainstream. The technologies for live production are the fashion equivalent of haute couture, crafted for a select few by the very best engineers in the world and presented at the bleeding edge of creativity and innovation. Creating these technologies is not a cheap process.

It’s one thing to consider the poor performance issues of counterfeit products, but what happens when they do actually perform to standard? I was presented on another gig



recently with another set of counterfeit Sharpys that boasted the exact same specifications as the real thing. Had I not actually looked at the unit to check what it was, I would have easily accepted it to be the real thing. For further research, I contacted the Chinese manufacturer about the product and was presented with the following response:

“Our ORIGINAL VERSION SHARPY is totally same configuration as Clay Paky Sharpby, and could use together with original Clay Paky Sharpby, we are the only factory who has this technology in China now.”

They also sent me a large pdf con-

engine is running at a comfortable level at all times but has the power to push when needed. But drive the car at high speed all the time and you’ll soon see wear and tear in excess of the expected life span. This optimum level is much the same with LEDs. As Simon Gasch, from Elation Professional, puts it, “Our LEDs are actually rated lower than the manufacturer-published amount to allow for the heavy demands placed on them in a theatrical environment. Simply quoting the manufacturer’s figures would give us a high spec on paper, but not one that translates into sustained real-world use.”

“I’ve been making it clear on production riders and specifications that clones are not acceptable. But this will take support from artists and management as much as our industry. Does an artist want a smaller light show because the designer refuses to use all the rig? Probably not. But do they want people ripping off their music as well?”

taining photos of all the components and assembly—showing that this is the same product inside and out as the authentic product from Clay Paky. We may laugh at the audacity of this—our social media portals are awash with images of “dodgy” product—but this is not a matter to be taken lightly by anyone in the technical event production industry.

So what is the danger of these units?

There have been plenty of horror stories about units catching fire, parts dropping off, and more, but one imagines these are the extremes. With the budget clones, the weaknesses are obvious when in use—underpowered motors mean slow movement and sluggish color changes.

For LEDs, it’s useful to consider a car analogy: Almost all engines are overpowered for the limitations of normal road use; this means the

It’s easier to copy specifications on paper than on the product: I’ve even been sent original manufacturer’s manuals as reference for the function and use of cloned product. The real danger to the industry goes beyond components—the reason that we have such a successful and growing industry is because of innovation. For a company to start as a small home-grown project and evolve into a huge multinational operation requires not only talent but also financial input. From all the millions of pounds invested in product development, only a select few ideas will make it to fruition, and, with the limited market of our industry, the return on investment for the manufacturers can be a lengthy process.

Just as the designer has a passion for the delivery of a show, so do the creators of the original product. If you’ve been fortunate enough to have the chance to visit the factories of Clay Paky, Robe, Martin

Professional, Philips Vari-Lite, or any of the leading brands, you'll know the dynamism and integrity, the attention to detail, and integration of cutting-edge technologies that they bring to their craft. Good design is nothing without function.

Affirmative action

The Sharpy is, of course, just one example of a cloned product, but from consoles to fixtures, dimmers, and infrastructure, very few success stories in the industry are free from the threat of the counterfeiters, as companies on the fringes try to capitalize on the market.

What action can be taken to curb the rise in counterfeit product? It goes without saying that many leading manufacturers are being forced to invest heavily in protecting their patents and take action against infringements. But as designers and technical production specialists, what can we do? Personally, I've been making it clear on production riders and specifications that clones are not acceptable. But this will take support from artists and management as much as our industry. Does an artist want a smaller light show because the designer refuses to use all the rig? Probably not. But do they want people ripping off their music as well?

Resistance is not futile, but it does require a combined effort and commitment. The manufacturers with proper R&D (that's "research and development," not "receive and duplicate") deserve our respect and collaboration; after all, we need them as much as they need us.

It can be hard to maintain integrity when faced with the very real situations of limited opportunities—and the desire to keep earning a living—but please join me in supporting original product manufacturers. 📡

Ben M. Rogers is a freelance lighting and visual designer and joins the panel for the PLASA Awards for Innovation again this year (@designforlive).