



# Going out with a bang

Live shows that mix formal speeches and rock and roll are not that usual. Nor's holding an event in Libya. **Geny Caloisi** and Bob Geldof both managed to avoid the ricochets

'**THE SHOW MUST** go on'. That's an old phrase that many people on the a-v industry are familiar with, but how far should they take it?

I've been to one of the strangest and most galvanizing destinations for an a-v full show that was, quite literally, explosive.

Last month, when I found myself in the middle of Benghazi, Libya, with no passport or confirmed return ticket, I started wondering how many camels my family could get in exchange for me – and what would they do with them?

However, that's a myth. People in Libya are friendly and eager to fit in with the Western world. Their language, culture and their concept of time-keeping might be different, but new markets are worth investigating – and they are already some brave people leading the way.

The event I went to was the annual public address of Seif Gadaffi, held on August 20 in a square in Benghazi – the size of 11 football pitches – which attracted over 60,000 people. It was designed and produced, at very short notice, by RS Live.

## THE BACKGROUND

Libya has been under the mandate of Colonel Gadaffi for 38 years. The country went from being an Italian colony to become the United Kingdom of Libya in 1949, with a monarchy heading the country. The discovery of significant

oil reserves in 1959 and the subsequent income from petroleum sales enabled one of the world's poorest nations to establish an extremely wealthy state. Although oil drastically improved the Libyan government's finances, popular resentment began to build over the increased concentration of the nation's wealth in the hands of King Idris and the national elite. This discontent continued to mount with the rise of Nasserism and Arab nationalism throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

On September 1, 1969, a small group of military officers led by then 28-year-old army officer Muammar Abu Minyar al-Gadaffi staged a non-bloody *coup d'état* against King Idris. Revolutionary officers abolished the monarchy and proclaimed the new Libyan Arab Republic. Gadaffi was, and is to this day, referred to as the 'Brother Leader and Guide of the Revolution' in government statements and the official press.

The date is significant, because both the build up to September 1 and the whole month of September are full of celebrations, and it is the time when changes to the country's running are proposed.

Since 2006, Seif Al Islam Muammar Al Gadaffi, the second son of Colonel Gadaffi and president of the Gadaffi Foundation, has chosen August 20th as his day to address his people. Seif, who is referred to as 'The Principal', is seen by the general public as his father's natural successor, although the system in Libya is not hereditary.

**Top: Not your average UK rock festival, but the crowd in Benghazi was celebrating after the VIP speeches were over**





The Gadaffi development Foundation, established in 1998, deals with many very important issues for Libya, including drug control, human rights, the Society for the Underprivileged and Captives (including children with HIV), a Society for the Brothers in the South (of Africa) and the Mining Society.

Educated in the London School of Economics, Seif Gadaffi is actively working to improve the country's image in the Western world. This year, for his second general address on August 20, he wanted to provide a Western style show for his people to enjoy.

After his speech opening the event, Gadaffi he wanted an attractive, engaging show. When consulted, RSLive director Paul West said: 'It has to be a music festival.'

The headliner of this show had to be someone interested and involved with Africa. Bob Geldof was enthusiastic about the idea and came on board. The rest – aerial artists, fireworks, a laser show and a paragliders display would round off the spectacle, which was to be broadcast live to the nation's TVs and to a giant screen set up in a central square in Libya's capital, Tripoli.

#### THE BUILD UP

'Libya had never seen anything like this before', says West. One of the reasons for that is because the kind a-v equipment used for an event of this calibre doesn't exist in Libya. Although it has big oil reserves, it has been secluded internationally due to events like Lockerbie and the recent incarceration of Bulgarian nurses (who have now been released).

So with three weeks notice, RSLive had to arrange and ship everything that it needed to use on the show.

The fact that the event took place in the festival season meant that some of the equipment wasn't available in the UK and had to be flown in from locations across Europe. 'We managed to get the show off the ground in three weeks,' comments West, 'but it was a real rush, and I wouldn't want to be labelled as a company that does shows of this stature in three weeks. More time would have saved lots of headaches.'

A total of 30 containers carrying everything from LED screens and speakers to lights and the stage itself where

flown into the country over five days using a Russian Antonov 124 cargo plane, provided by the Libyan client. It's quite handy to have one of those at one's disposal.

#### ON SITE

The list of a-v equipment shipped to Libya was more than the rig a Madonna tour carries around, says West.

Rock-it Cargo took care of the transport of equipment from Stansted airport in the UK to Libya. (a mammoth task made more complex by delivery delays, which cut RS Live's set up time in half).

By Sunday August 19 the enormous stage provided by ESS, used only once before for an Elton John gig, was ready with its nine truss elements fitted with 220 moving lights, 500 conventional lights and special effects. Designer Ian Fogden was in charge of the overall look of the stage, the accompanying screens and the arches at the sides.

#### WHAT HAPPENED ON THE DAY?

Having rehearsed with the artists the night before, everyone working with RSLive was ready to rock. The show was scheduled to start at 6pm and the doors opened to the public at 3pm. The government had promoted the event on TV and by sending a text message to every single mobile phone in Libya.

But the number of people that were going to turn up was anybody's guess. More than 40,000 chairs were distributed around the enormous site, high security was put in place by the army and everyone coming in and out of the site was being scanned and searched.

Meanwhile, I was doing some last-minute shopping, but it wasn't the sort you would expect. I went shopping for fire extinguishers, a gazebo to protect some of the broadcast equipment that was overheating under the sun, a plastic tube to inflate the helium balloons and even went to pick up a last minute specially designed lectern for Seif's speech. Buying these kind of things in markets and with none existent Arabic language was a challenge. The most exciting piece of shopping I've ever done?

The crowds were trickling in adorned with green scarf and wrist bands, the colour of the Libyan flag, and taking their seats. Many were also holding posters with the image

**Libyan crowds were so enthusiastic as to cause mayhem and the appearance of rioting – which meant that Bob Geldof didn't perform his full scheduled session. But both the artists and the production house want to go back to finish the show!**

'AERIAL ARTISTS, FIREWORKS, AND A LASER SHOW WERE PART OF THE SPECTACLE, WHICH WAS BROADCAST LIVE TO THE NATION'S TVs AND



of Colonel Gaddafi.

However, things then started to go wrong. The paragon's show, a beautiful aerial dance, had to be suspended because of the unexpected presence of army helicopters. Then at around 6pm, after the crowd had been patiently waiting under the blazing sun, some unrest started in an area to the right of the stage. To calm the masses, the army

starting shooting in the air.

All 150 people working with RSLive on the show ran to back stage and an emergency meeting was called to decide whether the 'show was going to go on' or not. Everybody bravely agreed on doing it.

A military band played while we all waited for Seif Gaddafi's appearance, three hours later than planned.

Dressed in an austere grey suit, Gaddafi thanked his people for their cheers and proceeded to give his message. The event was supposed to be a non political address, however, the head of the Gaddafi Association, after listing the good work it had done and the even better plans it has for the future, also proposed to create a constitution for the country.

His words were welcomed by the public and the message was finished with a fireworks display. Gaddafi and the VIP guests then left the gathering and the army gave way, allowing the audience to approach the stage, on which beautiful acrobats in balloons and on silks hanging from the stage's rigs left Libyan's jaws open in delight. That was followed by the laser show, where the green lights created an immersive 3D experience at the rhythm of powerful music.

A popular local TV star was the compere for the night. She welcomed Bob Geldof and the band to the stage and the legendary rock star started his show. The army was watching the people's moves closely from the stage and enthusiasm grew amongst the crowd, but it was confused with a spark of violence. Which apparently got out of hand.

As a consequence, after Geldof's second song, everybody working with RSLive evacuated the site. The band still had guitars hanging from their necks. Everything not vital was left behind, including the front of house controls and computers used for the show. Even a wallet was left there in the rush.

## SUPPLIERS AND CREW

**LIGHTING COMPANY TV** Elements provided the equipment and lighting designers Mike Townsend and Dave Bryant did the programming on site, using a Jands T4 Vista lighting board running 16 universes.

Audio, designed by Marcus Hyde, was handled by Delta Sound, which used eight 120 v-dosc line array speakers, a DigicoD5 desk, a Yamaha PM5D and analogue boards.

'We recreated in a third world country the kind of show control that would have been used in central London' points out Jill Fieldhouse, the show's executive producer.

Edwin Shirley Staging (ESS) provided the main cantilever stage with additional rigging, towers, hoists and control from Ken Nock of Blackout. 'They were both great crews,' says Fieldhouse, adding that 'they had a very difficult job with the "manana" syndrome of the local suppliers.'

The laser show was designed and managed by show specialist LM Productions. The lasers and all mains distribution — two 40w Yag Excalibur laser systems and four 10w diode lasers — were from EMF Technology.

PSP of Birmingham project managed and provided two 30ft videowalls and one 20ft videowall and ix cameras — one on a jib, one on a crane, one on a dolly, one handheld and two FOH on tripods.

The whole show was vision mixed and directed by John Steer. The microwave link and OB was provided by Libya Television, which also took the live feed directly from the show.

But not everything went smoothly. The generators, which had been requested to be 'silent', were supplied by the client on site. When the first load was tested, RSLive had to have the generators moved more than 50m so that they would not drown out the music from the show. 'They sounded like a squadron of super jets taking off,' says West.

The rigging company Pinnacle sent a group of nice strong Kiwis — Rhys, Mark, James and Brad — to help setting everything up.

[www.tvelements.com](http://www.tvelements.com)  
[www.deltasound.co.uk](http://www.deltasound.co.uk)



## LESSONS LEARNED

The following day, when the crew went back to assess the damage and pack up to return to England, it found that everything had been left untouched. Even the forgotten wallet, containing cards that were already cancelled, was waiting there.

Due to the earlier gunfire incident, (which according to local people I spoke to was quite normal), a show that would have been a great experience for Libya was left truncated.

Not knowing the public, their language and culture had meant that enthusiasm was confused with rioting.

'98 per cent of the people involved in the show want to go back and do it properly,' says West. 'If we do it again, we already know what things would be done differently, including doing it with more time — not three weeks.'

'We would still insist on having the payment beforehand and we would also request a more accurate description of what they wanted, and how it could be scheduled. But we want to go back and give Libyans the chance to experience a professionally produced live show.'

Doors are ajar in Libya, whose people want to be like the populations in the west and to belong to the international community.

The country's oil reserves position the country in a very favourable light for foreign investment, Libya has a rich history and a long Mediterranean coast. In the next 10 years, it's predicted that Libya will become bigger and more thriving than Dubai.

The a-v industry only has to go there and dare to get in on the act. □