

Getting to know the Technical Team at the GrandWest Grand Arena in Cape Town



Marc Kirby and Stuart Ramage with Duncan Riley (centre) from DWR Distribution.

Newly qualified technicians who are starting their careers in the entertainment industry may feel a bit disappointed when they finally land their first jobs. Often, they have followed a dream and enrolled to study lighting design or audio engineering, and instead of being placed behind a 96-channel audio desk or top-end lighting console, they're rolling cables and loading trucks – mere gaffers surviving on minimum wage with minimal sleep. If that describes you, don't worry, you're on the right track!

Meet Stuart Ramage

"To me, it's about how you were brought up in the industry, where you started and who you started with," says Stuart Ramage, who has been resident at the GrandWest Casino and Entertainment World for the past twenty

years.

Stuart discovered a love for lighting and audio when he was in grade nine, at Wynberg Boys' High School in Cape Town. In his spare time, he joined Crew U, a company that offered students the opportunity to work on events and his first show was an Iron Maiden concert hosted at the Good Hope Centre in 1995. Stuart proceeded to work on at least twenty concerts while still at school.

In 1994, Crew U was started by Steve Olivier and Martin Meyers, with thanks to Micky Lehr, Roddy Quinn and Attie van Wyk, and was a company that specialised in allowing young people to work as part-time crew members for the entertainment industry. "It was for guys who wanted to get into the industry, and you would start at the bottom," Stuart recalls. "Whenever there was a gig, you'd jump in, push boxes and load out afterwards. I've loaded Pantech trucks on cold winter nights in the pouring rain. It was freezing, but I never gave up!"

When Stuart and a couple of friends put on a dance party at Wynberg Boys' High School, instead of hiring the services of the usual DJ, they got a local company to supply audio, which included six Nexo PS15s aside and four JBL MTL2 aside, which Stuart recalls, literally, shook the building. "That's when I fell in love with sound," said Stuart. "I suddenly knew what I wanted to do, and I've done it ever since."

Six months after matriculating, with the support of his mom and dad (a muso), Stuart joined Crew U (now known as All Access Crew) permanently and was subcontracted as a sound engineer to the Roxy Revue Bar, which was the original entertainment venue at Grand West. According to Stuart, a huge perk of the job was being able to take on additional freelance work, which ensured a stable income and versatile working experiences. He adds that working as an audio engineer for Flat Stanley for about seven years was a great highlight.

In 2016, Stuart moved across to the GrandWest Grand Arena, a multi-purpose venue with a seating capacity of up to 5,000 people or 7,000 people standing. The Grand Arena is a popular venue for local and international artists and bands, as well as large-scale events, launches and banquets.

"This was a whole new ball game for me but, because of the experience I'd had working with Crew U, it wasn't too daunting. I was a bit nervous at first because I was previously involved with sound and not putting up motors and trussing. However, I learnt from my colleague Marc Kirby, and in fact, continue to learn from him. I like the challenge of the job. Every day is different and with every show that I mix, I learn something new. I wouldn't still be doing this if I wasn't continually growing."

Stuart's role includes day-to-day maintenance, prepping the venue for upcoming shows and assisting wherever he can. "When it comes to shows, either Marc or I will be the system tech if a production has its own engineers. If not, I'll mix Front of House and Marc will do the monitors."

It's a small team but a good one. "There are four of us in the venue, and even though outside technical companies come in to set up, we still make things happen. Because we know the venue so well we always advise what's going to work and what won't."

With a deep love for music, working in the venue has enabled Stuart to enjoy many fantastic shows. Another Iron Maiden concert, a couple of years ago, blew his mind, while he loved seeing the rock artists like Miles Kennedy, Live, Collective Soul and Glenn Hughes.

When youngsters wanting to join the industry approach Stuart for advice he is always forthcoming. "I recommend that they get in touch with rental companies like Gearhouse, Ultra Events and MGG. I advise them to start pushing boxes. And don't think you can just walk in the door and say you've studied and go straight to the desk at the age of 22! It's all about growing up, getting experience and then sharing your knowledge with others."

Today, one of his greatest rewards is being able to work alongside individuals he looked up to as a youngster,

people like Johan Griesel and Revil Baselga. “Who would have thought, fifteen years ago, that I’d be sitting next to Griesel and he should turn to me and say to me, ‘You should be mixing the show.’”

Enter Marc Kirby

Marc Kirby, a sound technician at GrandWest, has been with the company for eleven years. “I started my career operating a sound console for my church so, in my mind, it was never a question what I would do once I finished school. My path just led to sound. I attended the Cape Music Institute, where I specialised in live and studio work. I then successfully interviewed for a position at the GrandWest, where I’ve been ever since.”

Marc says, “If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life. I love making people happy by giving them what they want to hear. I enjoy troubleshooting, because today something may work and tomorrow not at all. For me, it’s best to make sure that everything works every day. The GrandWest is known as a great venue, and our technical team like to hold up our side of the bargain. I love what I do every day that I get to do it. It’s a demanding industry, with no time for hobbies, but making time for family keeps me going.”

The GrandWest is a high-profile venue, and often plays hosts to some of the biggest names in the entertainment industry. However, Marc acknowledges that every artist who is performing on stage is just a normal person doing a job. He tries not to get swept away by the fanfare. He fondly recalls playing table tennis with Michael Bublé!”

Both Stuart and Marc are technicians that are at the pinnacle of their careers and enjoy working with some of the best gear in the world, for some of the highest profile artists. However, they both started off young, eager and unassuming. If you have aspirations to reach these heights in your career, stay humble, learn as much as you can from your seniors, and roll your cable to the best of your ability, every day. This is the example set by the technical team at the GrandWest, and a great one for any young aspiring technician to follow.