



'I was told I would never work in the industry again'

Stefan Sargent

Molinare: Ampex VPR1 video editing suite in 1978

SOHO: PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

RAISING THE TECHNOLOGY STAKES

Taking the leap to adopt new technology resulted in Molinare having a run-in with the ACTT union, which could have resulted in the closure of one of Soho's oldest post houses, says **Stefan Sargent**



After shooting a video for a flight simulator firm in Salt Lake City in 1975, I visited one of the companies involved in the shoot – Compact Video in Burbank. It was a revelation. I had worked with OB firm Trilion on a similar project in London, but where it used giant, three-lens cameras, Compact had lightweight shoulder-mounted Norelco PCP-90s. While Trilion had tank-sized 2-inch quad recorders, Compact had small, battery-powered Ampex VR-3000s. And while Trilion's editing facility was just two engineers in a machine room, Compact's edit suite had Californian Redwood walls, Eames chairs and plush leather seating.

I returned to London determined to build something similar in Soho. We found an empty building in Foubert's Place at £1 per sq ft and began to move out of Broadwick Street, base of the original Molinare sound studios.

A few months later, at the International Broadcasting Convention, I saw Ampex's new video recorder, the 1-inch VPR-1A. I ordered three of the £40,000 machines. At a stroke, Compact Video, Trilion, The Moving Picture Company, TVi, Goldcrest, Keith Ewart and ITN's facilities were out of date, and their 2-inch quad recorders obsolete; 1-inch helical tape was the way to go.

At the time, I had no idea that mine was Ampex's only order for its VPR-1A. But it didn't go down well with the Association of Cinematograph Television and allied Technicians (ACTT) union, which refused to sanction the technology and told the ITV stations not to touch anything produced by it.

ACTT general secretary Alan Sapper told me I should have consulted the union before daring to buy new technology. I said that if I couldn't use my video facilities, Molinare would probably go bust and I would have no option but to sue the union. I was told I would never work in the industry again.

A court order forcing the ACTT to send us the names and home addresses of their executives was mistakenly thought of as a request for full document disclosure, and the next day, delivered by courier to our barrister's office was a large file with all of the ACTT/Molinare correspondence. It was a gold mine.

The gem was a letter from the union to the management of rival firms asking whether they would lose business if Molinare was permitted to use 1-inch tape and new technology. There were replies from my competitors saying "keep Molinare black". The ACTT had blown it. It soon agreed to all of our demands; the technology was approved for use, all Molinare staff could join the union and there would be no reprisals. Returning to Molinare, our receptionist handed me a box. Inside was a chocolate cake with a handwritten note: From Kerry, Jane, Max and the folks at LWT. Congratulations. Well done.

➤ *Film-maker Stefan Sargent founded Molinare in 1973*