

By Jeff Stiles

DAKOTAN FINDS SOUL IN THE MACHINE

As far back as Jeff Engen can remember he has always been captivated by music.

"I remember listening to American Top 40 with Casey Kasem when I was in grade school and thinking how cool

it would be if I could do something like that someday," the Brookings, S.D., native recalls. "I used to practice introducing and backing up songs on my bedroom stereo until I would get them just right."

Needless to say, when Engen entered seventh grade—way back in 1980—he started doing school dances with his family's huge home stereo system. And by the time he reached high school, he knew he would have a future in the music industry. The rest is history.

"When I was 16 I started working for another local DJ company and learned a great deal about music and equipment," he explains. "Two years later

the owner of the company decided he was going to move to Colorado and close the business, so he offered to sell me some equipment at a reasonable price if I wanted to continue things."

Engen says it took him about five seconds for him to decide to accept that business offer, and after naming his modi-



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fied venture The Dance Machine he was ready to start booking gigs of his own.

One of the first things Engen did was devise a creative marketing plan. Partnering with a local radio station, The Dance Machine was able to pair the station's call letters with their company name to receive free advertising and referrals. The strategy worked. By 1995 Jeff had expanded to four DJ systems, added karaoke to pick up extra cash during the week from local bars, and even opened a retail music store that propelled The Dance Machine into a full-time venture for both Engen



and his wife, Cris.

Nowadays, Engen claims there are two things that make his company stand out in the eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota market. "First of all, our attention to detail is so important," he says. "Asking lots of questions and finding out what our clients really want has been a huge part of our success. Learning what our clients expect of us not only helps us do a better job at their event, but it also makes our clients feel more relaxed and trusting of our services."

Secondly, Engen created what he terms his "Videodance System," a gigantic sound, light and video show unheard of in the high school, college and wedding markets of his area.

Using a 12-foot video projection screen (and sometimes two), 20 feet of drop truss loaded with intelligent lighting, color changers, strobes, snow machines, bubble

machines and a live interactive camera—and combining it with a live interactive camera feed—The Dance Ma-

chine easily woos its crowds.

"Face it, who doesn't like to see themselves on a giant TV?" asks Engen. The Videodance System includes four Electro-Voice QRx212 tops, four E-V QRx218 subs, four American DJ Accu Spot 250 IIs, eight MBT Color Changers, two ADJ Mega



Strobes, two Martin Discovery lights, a Martin Hazer, two ADJ Raiders, four ADJ Sparkles, an ADJ Color Sweep, two Antari S100 snow machines, two ADJ Bubble Blast machines, Sanyo PLC-XP46 4100-lumens LCD projectors, Da-Lite Fast-Fold rear-projection screens, a Videonics video mixer, three Denon DN-V210 DVD players, three QSC PLX Series power amps, a dbx Driverack processor and more.

"We also use our video screen at weddings for the 'Through the Years' video presentations," explains Engen. "It's just one less thing the bride and groom have to worry about. I actually think the **video portion of this business is going to continue to grow and expand** opportunities for DJs in all types of markets. Doing video is not for everyone, though, because doing it right requires a pretty good investment in equipment and requires a lot more work to run an event smoothly."

When it comes to prices, The Dance Machine's fees range from \$550 (for a small unit suitable for small receptions and class reunions) to \$995-\$1,500 for their deluxe video package. "Our prices are in the upper tier for this region," Engen admits. "However, I have always felt we give our customers a lot more for their money than some other companies do."

After two decades in this profession, Engen says he has absolutely no regrets. Business is steady, his clients are thrilled and he always finds fun on the weekends. "I never get bored, because at every event there are new people with new musical tastes presenting a new challenge," he says. "Can I get them to dance and have a good time? Well, when I do there's no better feeling."