

ROCK - and roll

Rock-it Cargo keeps broadening its scope of high-octane project logistics, writes **Ian Putzger**.

When Paul Martins left MNX Global Logistics last year to join concert logistics specialist Rock-it Cargo, in a way it was a return to his roots. Before he embarked on a career in logistics his focus had been on music, a journey that began in his childhood and took him to the New England Conservatory and a stint with the Boston Opera Company as a trumpet player, besides numerous performances and gigs with bands.

His other passion was aviation, which led him into the air cargo business. While he was working for UPS Airlines, Rock-it first came up on his radar, as the music logistics specialist would charter UPS freighters at weekends. It marked the beginning of a friendship with Rock-it founder David Bernstein, who handed over

the President and CEO mantle last summer to Martins and became company Chairman.

In his previous role at the helm of MNX, Martins was used to high-speed logistics. The company specialises in time-critical movement of urgent healthcare shipments like organs, bio-pharmaceuticals and radiotherapy products, which require top speed and precision. Rock music events like Elton John's farewell tour or an Asian tour of U2 are not a matter of life and death, but the logistics around them have a similar intensity. Everything is dictated by the need to have all pieces in place for the moment when the lights go on over the stage.

"Failure is not an option," asserts Martins.

At the same time, though, it is always lurking along the route. Inevitably there are

hiccoughs along the way. The schedule of a Rolling Stones tour was thrown into disarray when Mick Jagger suffered a medical problem. The band decided to go on with the tour, but the calendar became extremely tight, necessitating shifting a lot of the transportation to faster options.

"The show must go on, so we have to make sure we have an option B if option A doesn't work, an option C - and an option D," remarks Martins.

All this requires personnel who blend precision with a high degree of flexibility and ample enthusiasm for what they are doing. "Our people have to be well trained and passionate," he admits.

Challenges of the big tour

Live performances are occurring thick and fast. "Last year was incredible. We had a convergence of a lot of big tours," recalls Martins. He adds that, according to projections from PricewaterhouseCoopers, the tour market will continue to grow at a rate of 3.5% for the next few years.

He notes also that the importance of concert tours has undergone a fundamental change. "In the past, performers went on tour to support an album, which is where they made the highest returns, whereas now they go into the studio to support the tour and the merchandise they sell on the tour. Audiences want to see them live. They want to see the whole show, with all the lights, the pyrotechnics, the bands behind them. It's no longer what they can do in the studio," he reveals.

As a result, the amount of equipment shipped to the concert venues has grown exponentially. For gigs relating to Taylor Swift's Reputation Stadium Tour in 2018, two An-124 freighters were deployed to carry staging equipment between airports in Australia, New Zealand and Japan. The logistics called for uplift of 635 tonnes within 36 hours from Brisbane to Auckland, which required six An-124 flights on the sector, followed by three flights from New Zealand to Tokyo.

The singer's world tour last year required the equivalent of



A not atypical tour scene, as event equipment on the ramp awaits the loading process



six B747 freighters. According to Martins, a typical tour involves two B747 freighters plus commercial lift on scheduled flights. "Bigger is better. People have come to expect this," he remarks.

Sometimes the timing allows for a mix of ocean containers and commercial airfreight, and sometimes it's a combination of charter and scheduled lift. When it comes to airline selection, the type of aircraft the organisation flies is a key factor, but their flexibility and processes, as well as which market segments they serve, also come under scrutiny. Ultimately, the relationship should be a partnership based on solid understanding. "They know and understand your requirements, how you work, they know the criticality of the markets we serve," adds Martins.

A growing operation

Last October the company announced a significant incremental investment in Triple M Entertainment Logistics, a logistics provider to live event shippers based in

Antwerp. In the wake of the deal, the Belgian forwarder became a member of the CargoLive Logistics family, a subsidiary of Rock-it.

In the main, management is looking for organic growth and continues to work with partners it has been collaborating with for years. In part, the investment in Belgium is a response to Brexit, as Rock-it's main European base is in London, where it has multiple facilities.

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Paul Martins, President and CEO, Rock-it Cargo

"In anticipation of unforeseen Brexit challenges, strengthening our presence on the continent makes pragmatic business sense," Martins commented when the deal was announced.

Rock-it itself underwent a change in ownership in August of 2018, when private equity firm ATL Partners acquired a majority stake in the logistics company. ATL is targeting the aerospace, transportation and logistics sectors. Its investment portfolio includes Pilot Freight Services and has included aircraft leasing firm Sky Leasing.

"We believe that by partnering with ATL, who know and understand our core logistics solutions well, we can accelerate growth by capturing more opportunities in our existing end markets and aggressively pursue adjacent markets through organic initiatives and strategic acquisitions," commented Bernstein at the time.

For his part, Martins has been looking to broaden Rock-it's capabilities. Last year the company set up its own in-house charter group. On average, Rock-it executes 250-300 wide-body charters in a year, but this move also aims beyond its own needs, offering charter brokerage for third parties.

Over the years the company has diversified beyond rock and pop music to a number of other fields. Besides the logical expansion to other music acts, like classical concerts, it moved into stage and theatre productions, from Broadway acts and plays in London to opera performances in San Francisco. It has also counted Cirque du Soleil among its clients for some years. Film and broadcast has been another area for recent expansion.

"We are currently moving all the broadcast equipment for the Australian Open to Melbourne," says Martin, by way of example.

This sporting life

Sports events represent a huge market for the firm, something that offers lots of room to grow. It has organised the logistics of National Football League games in Europe, it will handle the World Endurance event this year and has been involved in Formula One logistics in collaboration with DHL.

"Sports is becoming a big part of our business," states Martins. "The end is the same: getting the equipment there at the right

time, making sure that the products arrive in the right physical and financial condition."

Rock-it has even moved into project work in the energy sector, which is managed from its office in Houston. "We're not looking to be the next Panalpina. We're not going after large customers with RFQs," he stresses. Most of this work has been for jobs that require bespoke solutions and a quick response, such as moving generators to a disaster area.

"You never want to stray too far from your core competence. We are a specialised, niche, critical logistics provider. We don't do small parcels and we're not going to get into final mile e-commerce," he maintains.

One of the objectives for 2020 is to reflect the range of the company's activities better in its brand image. The

FOUR DECADES OF ROCK

During its 40 years of operation, Rock-it has grown to 32 locations around 12 countries, and musters over 400 employees globally. It currently has offices across South America, around Europe, in Australia, Japan and in China.

Rock-it moniker does not portray the size and scope of the group accurately, according to Martins.

The name certainly does not trigger associations with classic cars, but the company has a division called Cosdel International Transportation that is very active in that arena. Last autumn it moved 447 valuable vehicles with a combined insurance value of US\$122m from the US and Canada to Saudi Arabia for an exhibition and sales auction that invited bids from a global audience. The project required 250 ocean containers, with the first batch of cars sailing in early September 2019.

Nor does the relentless drive towards ever more elaborate shows and the associated amount of equipment and decor to be shipped from one venue to the next signal much thought about sustainable logistics. However, this is very much on the company's radar.

In December Dietl International, the group's specialist in shipping artwork, moved art from galleries in Germany, Switzerland, France and the UK to Miami for an exhibition. In total it transported 167 tonnes for the event, which included a B747 charter. The project created 644 tonnes of carbon dioxide. To offset this, the company worked with Sustainable Travel International and purchased carbon credits in support of an environmental programme in Brazil.

"In the art world, this has become a hot topic," observed Fritz Dietl, President of the art logistics specialist. "However, for it to work, we need to be able to offer cost-effective green solutions. Galleries have such small profit margins that it has to make sense for them, or they won't buy in."

This is rather a lot to convey beyond the punchy Rock-it brand – but it cannot be overlooked. 🌍

Life would be a lot simpler if concert equipment was of a standard size - but it isn't

