

From Dylan to the Blues

Chicago '95: A reflection on ten years as a visitor to MUG/MTA meetings

by Rob Bowran

Flying into San Diego in 1986 to gain my first experience of the M community in North America, it dawned on me that I was a day late to experience one of the most significant cultural events of the decade—the return of Bob Dylan; on this occasion I recall it was after his mysterious motor cycle accident. On that glorious Southern Californian evening, we flew over the stadium as the great man took to the stage after an absence for so long; to miss such a significant event by so small a margin was galling. Consolation came from meeting famous Mumpsters for the first time; well, famous to me anyway!

Ten years later history repeated itself when, on arriving in Chicago, I discovered that again I was a few hours too late for a major cultural event; not yet another return by Dylan, but this time an opportunity to broaden my musical horizons at the Chicago Blues Festival. Consolation on this occasion came in the form of meeting old friends and enjoying their company and conversation, as well as the opportunity to visit a selection of blues clubs during the week—although, while recovering from jetlag over a couple of beers, I would rather have avoided trying to explain the intricacies of the “Irish problem” to a Texan who had been in the bar for too long.

Were these two failures to take advantage of the local musical scene, separated by 10 years of regular attendance at meetings, balanced by the benefits gained from participating in the major annual event for our technology?

I use the phrase “our technology” advisedly; because it seems to sum up the core culture of the M community to date. John Dvorak, in response to a question in the debate he chaired, answered with another question: What other technology has so many devoted advocates? In light of the news announced in Chicago, that next year the meeting will be linked with Database and Client/Server World, does this year’s meeting signal an end to “our technology” and “the M Community” as we know it?

As someone who first came face to face with M in 1975—MUMPS 4 on a PDP 11/05—first as a commissioner of a system, then as a user, and later as a developer and supplier of application software, with a temporary diversion to distribute products in Europe for the fondly remembered DataTree, I have experienced the business from all points of view. Incidentally, in that time I have never written one line of M code, and even today would not know where to start; is there anyone else in the M community who can boast of this achievement? Having now come out, I feel free from the burden of pretending to understand the \$this and \$that talk that all closet devotees have to endure.

In many ways, Chicago '95 was very like San Diego '86. In both cases the program and exhibits concentrated on software. This is perhaps a strange observation given that M is nothing if it's not software. But it is pertinent because, often in the intervening period, the emphasis has been on hardware to the extent that in some years the whole event seems to have been dominated by hardware manufacturers; who remembers DG, IBM, HP, Motorola, Tandem, Texas Instruments, and the very memorable hot but short burst from Sequoia? And, ever present until this year, the faithful Digital. In retrospect, and with the benefit of hindsight, this emphasis for so long on hardware, and the race to port to yet another machine, must be seen to have held back the development and advance of M as a software development environment.

The observation that John Dvorak raised in his keynote presentation this year was almost a throw-away line, that Pick, dBase and M, were all introduced at much the same time: Pick being marketed as an operating system, dBase as a database, and M as a language. Which is the most successful? If they had been promoted with each others' functions, would this have resulted in a different balance in the marketplace? He did not offer an answer, but the tenor of his comment indicated a view that this might well have been the case. As M moves into association with Database World, perhaps it will come to be seen in its true light and the tide will turn.

John Dvorak means nothing to those of us who reside in the old world; however, he made what was perhaps the most stimulating, and certainly amusing, keynote presentation

within my ten years of attendance. Mind you, without looking at the old programs, I'd be hard pressed to remember who the others were, never mind what their message was. The most notable was the venerable Senator in Washington. (Or was he a Congressman? The difference is a bit blurred from over here.) Dvorak will certainly be remembered, because I will be waiting expectantly to see if his conspiracy theory comes to pass. (For those who were not there, the outline of Dvorak's theory is: "Intel inside" will become "Intel outside" by acquisition or introduction of their own system software—Intel is said to have a long—standing secret project. Developing software—Intel will bundle software and hardware and use their dominance of the processor and motherboard market to reduce Microsoft to the status of an "ordinary company" and drive the "independent" PC manufacturers out of business, thus achieving total dominance of the world computer market. In reducing a 40 minute presentation in this way, much of the subtlety and nuance is lost, but as I recall it, this is a fair precis of Dvorak's theory.)

To a visitor from Europe, Dvorak's wide—ranging observations on the software world in which we all make our living are original and, in many cases, very telling. Some particularly pertinent ones are: The dawning age of the "post—relational database", and the popularity of systems is directly proportional to their perceived "coolness." M is as secure a software technology as any, and this is likely to remain so, greatly helped by it not being taught in academic institutions. What heresy to de—bunk conventional wisdom, but how refreshing to hear an outsider say it to such an audience.

What else of Chicago?

- Those who feared that competition between vendors was a thing of the past can sleep soundly again. Not only has Extensio emerged as X—TENSION to offer a new version for the pony—tail and sandals contingent to test their favorite benchmark, but InterSystems and Micronetics have some real competing products. While the former deals with the not inconsiderable issue of digesting the entree of DSM so swiftly after the start of DTM, the latter has taken the opportunity to introduce some impressive products and seems to have regained corporate confidence. This must be good for the technology and for users.
- The balance of the discussion groups seems to have shifted. It is a pity that the emphasis now seems to be so much on product presentation rather than the sessions being an opportunity for debate on matters of common interest. Product presentations are clearly of value so perhaps they should have a separate identity in the program, leaving discussion groups to be more product neutral with a greater emphasis on user and application issues.

- The user group meetings, that used to be very lively and well attended affairs, are now tame by comparison and attract a consequently small audience. This is perhaps because the InterSystems developers' conference in Orlando, and the Micronetics touring roadshows, provide alternative venues for users to question their suppliers. Perhaps also it is a sign of growing maturity in that it is no longer necessary for users to vote on their favorite enhancement, or to use the meeting as a forum for public criticism of their suppliers.
- It's good to see some benign dictatorship replacing tedious democracy in the Business Meeting. The announcement of next year's venue was in stark contrast to the name change issue with its extended debate that consumed our energies for so long, diverting us from the real issues. Surely this approach must be beneficial; after all, Boards are elected to lead organizations. There was still a hint of defensiveness about the decision, so if the move is successful, let us hope this will bring more confidence and assertiveness in the future.
- A rather ordinary hotel on the edge of one of the least welcoming airports, in a nondescript suburb, is perhaps not the best place to hold a convention and expect a lot of people to turn up. It's only two years ago that the Washington meeting, and before that New Orleans, Orlando, and even Phoenix, were reported as attracting more than twice as many delegates. Whilst appreciating that pleasing everyone with the choice of venue is difficult, Reno followed by Chicago O'Hare are not the greatest attractions and must have contributed to the reduced numbers attending. There were certainly many fewer Europeans and others from outside the USA.

One of the incentives for a Brit to attend, is the opportunity to experience real summer weather and stay over from the meeting to enjoy a holiday. The great Peter Beaman reports that the March weather in Boston can be a bit unpredictable, just like home!

- Notwithstanding the lower attendance, the general spirit and level of optimism amongst delegates from all walks of life seemed very high.
- Vendors have to present an optimistic face, it's part of the rules, but perhaps the restructuring brought about by the various mergers and acquisitions over the recent years is starting to bring about benefits for all, especially the general level and concentration of investment in the technology.
- The Blues clubs were terrific! (And the CTA @ \$1.50 to downtown Chicago was a revelation to those of us from the UK where public transport is so expensive.)

What of the future? There is undoubtedly going to be continuing change brought upon us by the software industry at large. As highlighted by John Dvorak, M has occupied an enviable and stable niche for 20 years or more, to a great extent isolated from the turbulent mainstream. There are too many pressures for this comfortable position to be sustained without effort. So change will come: the issue is whether it will be forced upon us or we will willingly bring it about ourselves.

The rather cozy club or community we have all enjoyed for so long is having to adopt new rules of admission, and being associated with the Database and Client/Server World event next year is part of that. But there are big benefits in retaining some of the qualities that are part of our heritage, not least is communication with the thousands of M devotees around the world. Like any club member, we like to mix with our own kind, and one of the benefits of membership of MTA is to be able to enjoy that. The annual meeting is the best mechanism available. If by joining the wider world we lose that clubbiness, then one of the unique advantages we have over other software technologies will be lost. That will be a great pity and I suspect, if it happens, the MTA will fade away.

Although vendors still target the meeting to introduce their new products and services, as noted above, there are now competing events at which users can learn about these. If the annual meeting is to keep its significant place in the calendar (for those who can only budget for one meeting, Orlando in February sounds more attractive than Boston in March or O'Hare in June) it surely must promote the activities which complement, rather than compete with, the vendors. One of the great benefits of attendance must be the opportunity to expand knowledge beyond commercially available information. Education, discussion, technical and application papers, and yes, the all important social activities, all fall into this category.

Changing the venue to a more general but relevant event must be the right move, however, it is important that the real camaraderie and common interest benefits of members of the MTA be preserved. After all, we like getting together with soul mates to swap stories and discuss experiences, and yes, complain about how the rest of the world has got it all wrong. To a great extent that is why we are members.

And as for my ten years of visiting MUG—NA and latterly MTA—NA meetings, has it been worth it? Overall there is no doubt, but with the changes brought upon us, particularly the alternative means of keeping in touch with vendor activities and the benefits from improved communications technology, the benefits of attending will have to be judged on how the program adapts to the circumstances of today.

As an attendee from overseas, two things about the meetings have always been a minor disappointment. The first is that applications outside the healthcare field get such little recognition. On a world—wide basis, and certainly in Europe, M is used very widely in industry and commerce, arguably more so than in healthcare. Although healthcare is clearly a very important factor in the prosperity of M Technology, its dominance can detract from the greater acceptance of M in the broader world making life just that much harder for those of us who trade principally outside the medical profession. My second disappointment is the lack of an international flavour to any major aspect of the meeting. Whilst accepting that it is, of course, a meeting of the North American Association, it is also unquestionably the major meeting for the technology in the world each year, and this is reflected in the number of overseas visitors who attend. If the Gartner Group analysis is at all accurate, at least half of the M business is outside the USA, and it is perhaps surprising that this is not generally reflected in the program.

Will I be back in Boston? (The great Bob Seager celebrated his return to Boston on arguably the best live rock album ever recorded.) I hope so, if only to meet up again with old friends and to hear views which are expressed for reasons other than commercial gain. The commercial case for a company based in Europe is not as strong as it used to be. (I'll also need a promise of protection from Texans who want to discuss politics after being in the bar too long, at least until I've recovered from the flight.)

I'll also need advance notice of all musical events so that I don't arrive too late, yet again! ■

Rob Bowran is Marketing Director of CDS Computer Design Systems Ltd., a leading supplier of M Application Software and Services in the UK. He has been involved with M systems since 1975, and an active participant in MUG and MTA for more than 10 years. He is currently on the Board of MTA-UK & Ireland.
