

Solar Battle of the Bands

The PV industry is ready to rock, literally



SunPower's band »DC / AC« performs at the Solar Battle of the Bands

This year's Intersolar North America conference and exhibition in San Francisco, California, was not just about making deals and gaining an edge over the competition. Attendees let go of business concerns for an evening during the Solar Battle of the Bands, a sold-out party at which five company-formed bands wowed the solar industry with their musical prowess. The popular event may become an annual tradition.

The 111 Minna club in downtown San Francisco, California, is pulsing with electricity. A capacity crowd of 500 solar industry professionals is jammed onto the dance floor, getting down to a rockin' live performance of the Rolling Stones' number, »Miss You.« Sporting an orange T-shirt and bathed in a red and blue glow from the stage lights, Jack West, founder of photovoltaic (PV) mounting system manufacturer Zep Solar Inc., gets into the groove while playing an eight-string guitar. He shares the stage with Zep CEO Mike Mishovsky and Vice President of Marketing Daniel Flanigan, who are both caressing their guitars and dancing to the beat.

At stage right, the Zepettes – Zep Solar staffers and back-up singers Christina Manansala, Liz Mead and Ashley Apel – perform synchronized gyrations, all decked out in skimpy, sparkly garb.

At the center of this festival for the ears and eyes is Daniel East, a Zep Solar applications engineering technician and the band's lead singer, writhing in black leather pants, a studded leather belt and a skin-tight black T-shirt. Channeling Mick Jagger and perhaps a touch of George Michael as well, East wagged his butt with rock-star confidence as he belted the song's first line: »I've been holding out so long, I've been sleeping all alone...« An infectious jubilation permeated the crowd.



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Jack West of Zep Solar plays an eight-string guitar at the Solar Battle of the Bands. He built the instrument himself.

This was one of the many great moments at the sold-out Solar Battle of the Bands party during the Intersolar North America conference and exhibition in July. While officially billed as a networking event, the 7-hour extravaganza was clearly much more than that, featuring live band performances from employees of Zep Solar, PV manufacturer SunPower Corp., solar installer SolarCity, mounting system manufacturer Quick Mount PV, and residential lease provider Sungevity Inc., along with an open bar and T-shirts for sale. Audience members voted for their favorite bands.

The Solar Battle of the Bands transcended the cutthroat competition for attention that dominates solar trade fairs like Intersolar. Companies at such events do whatever they can to grab visitors' eyes, whether that includes hiring scantily clad models, incorporating designer furniture into exhibition booths or offering free beer. The solar music festival was a rare occasion when competitors could come together simply to have a good time. And what a rockin' good time it was.

A new solar industry tradition?

The Solar Battle of the Bands was conceived when staff from Zep Solar and Quick Mount met at a party during

last year's Solar Power International conference and exhibition in Los Angeles, California. Johan Alfsen, international training manager for Quick Mount and bassist for a rock band called Wave Array, ran with the idea. He organized the event with just one rule: at least 50 percent of each participating band had to work together at a solar company. Remarkably, in the weeks preceding the event, when word of the party spread around the industry, an overabundance of solar bands stepped forward, and Alfsen had to turn down five groups.

Yes, the event was technically a »battle,« and the audience did choose a winner: SolarCity. But the spirit of the gathering was truly noncompetitive. After the audience vote, band members from Zep Solar, SolarCity and QuickMount jumped on stage together for some improvisational jamming. Alfsen plans to make the party an annual event at Intersolar North America. Given the success of this year's party, though, he may have to figure out a way to narrow down the plethora of solar bands that will likely come out of the woodwork for the 2012 event. Mishovsky knows that it may not be so easy to get his band back on stage next year. »You will have to submit your tape, and there will be a committee,« he says and laughs.

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