

Rock & Roll; Lighting as a Performance

Text: Kevan Shaw

In all the fields of lighting design Rock & Roll concert lighting is the one area where the lighting designer becomes a performance artist. In many ways the lighting designer taking his place behind the lighting board is doing the same thing and experiencing many of the same feelings as the musicians. At its finest the changes of lighting follow the mood and timing of the music to perfection, elicit the same emotions in the audience that the mood and lyric of the music, enhancing and reinforcing the performance on stage, inseparable from it part of the experience of the concert.

It is impossible to say when Rock and Roll became a distinct style of lighting, during the late fifties and early sixties concerts were part of the variety or vaudeville circuit, lit by house electricians often with little more than the three colour battens overhead with the standing front of house lights and follow-spots. In most venues of this period control was still by mechanically controlled resistance dimmers where even gentle changes required feats of gymnastics. Dynamics as we have known them for the past 20 years were impossible until the development of reliable portable thyristor dimmers in the late sixties. Simultaneously the PAR64 lamp became available allowing for strong colours, bright light and distinct beams, all the hallmarks of Rock and Roll as we know it.



Simple Minds

The third piece of the jigsaw is the structure required to support the lighting. Here the business borrowed heavily from the construction industry in the USA taking the portable lifting equipment such as the Genie, Superlift and Vermette from the air conditioning installation business, picking up duct tape along the way renaming it gaffer's tape. Early trusses were radio masts on their sides. Of course these systems rapidly developed and became specialised to the industry.

The mid seventies saw many of today's standards established. In railway arches in Dulwich, Showlites developed standardised cabling and patching systems based on Socapex connectors, a former chicken cage manufacturer in Pershore produced standardised welded aluminium truss and lightweight aluminium Par cans all bearing the name Thomas, a former tower crane engineer began producing a welded truss sections with systemised corner blocks under the name Telestage, in Ealing Avolites were building dimmers for their own use and, back in Dulwich, matrix memory lighting desks were being manufactured under the Alderham brand name, one of the technicians later to become the technical director of Celco. All these technical advances served to aid the delivery of bigger and more complex shows in the one night stand format of Rock and Roll.

This period also saw the development of distinct rock & roll lighting styles. Certainly, through the seventies, there were distinct transatlantic differences. In the USA the union control over stage work led to a simple style of stage lighting with extensive and complex use of spotlights for highlighting accents and solos, colours were frequently less saturated being closely related to the Vaudeville tradition. In the UK where the touring designer had much more control and hands on involvement in the building and focusing of the rig from day to day a more dramatic approach was the rule. Some major names in lighting design today became established at this time, Patrick Woodruff and Jonathan Smeeton to name but two.

Today's Rock and Roll designers have come from many disparate backgrounds and have developed their own philosophies and styles. I started at university operating a house rig in the days before bands carried their own lighting on the university circuit. We had variable reluctance (reactor) dimmers, the fastest change being in the order of a second and a half, we had no opportunity to learn the music before the show and a rig of 500W spots and fresnels, in retrospect we probably added little but visibility and colour to acts such as Focus, Curved Air, Steeleye Span and ELO. The occasional trips to big concerts such as Yes or Emerson Lake and Palmer were an inspirational revelation to me. Professional involvement in this magic became my goal on leaving university and after a year of working for club acts I fetched up at Showlites just at the point of the developments mentioned above, exciting times!

In my design work I have always identified particular goals for each show, sometimes these have originated with the artist at other times they have formed part of the initial design pitch. It has always been my aim to enhance rather than overwhelm the act, my desire for dramatic representation taking me a long way down the track of theatrical lighting design.



Tours are frequently mounted to support sales of a particular recording, I always try to incorporate some element of artwork or basic concept in the design, for instance for Lynx in 1981 (see above) I recreated the album sleeve artwork in a tableaux vivant revealed by opening curtains at the start of the show.



In 1995 for Jethro Tull's "Roots to Branches" tour the truss took the form of a techno tree (see above) revealed during the title song. There are key dramatic moments in any performance the first sight of the 'star' being one.



For Steve Hackett in 1978 the haunting opening chord of the show saw him silhouetted by revolving beams of light (see above), some 5 years before the advent of the Varilite this was accomplished with a Japanese theatre effects projector and gobo. Moving an audience with lighting gives me the greatest buzz, eliciting a spontaneous 'OOOH' from three or four thousand punters is a truly empowering experience. It is often the critical timing of a simple effect that is the trigger for this response.



XTC

It is easy for designers today to become overwhelmed with the available technology. Audiences can be moved by the simplest of effects, a crucially timed, precisely focussed fan of aircraft lamps can have much greater impact than a Mexican wave of colour changing moving lights. Audiences only see the final effect and are largely unaware of it's method of creation or delivery, designers must remember that and avoid the temptation to specify and use equipment for the sake of fashion.

I must admit to having an abhorrence of lighting the audience as a run of the mill effect. Four eight-lites blasting out from a moody backlit scene on a key chord in a song can punch the highlight home to the audience magnificently, moving lights giving a poor simulation of disco lighting intermittently throughout a song does nothing but take attention away from the stage where it should be focussed.



Jethro Tull

The use of colour is also a key stylistic device. Different designers naturally prefer to use colours in different ways, my preference is for simple colour combinations or single colours and changing between different lamps in the same combinations, some of these combinations of opposite colours can make the stage move! Other designers use more complex palettes creating single washes from many shades of the same colour or creating rainbow-like fans. Total lack of colour can present a wonderful design challenge. I was faced with this as the brief for Ultravox 'Set Movements' tour in 1984.



Ultravox

The challenge was to provide the dramatic variety of changes usually provided by colour. I used many different lantern types (see above) to create varieties of beam, I designed gobos to provide distinct patterns that still passed a lot of light and created a truss structure that gave a wide range of mounting positions for lights. Finally I used follow-spots from one side only, one upstage and one downstage. I selected theatre units that had shutter sets so I had the option of creating vertical and horizontal sheets and beams of light in addition to the usual circle and finally a gobo to create a moving breakup (see below). This armoury of white light gave every bit as much dramatic impact as a massive rig of pars in colour but with a totally unique look.



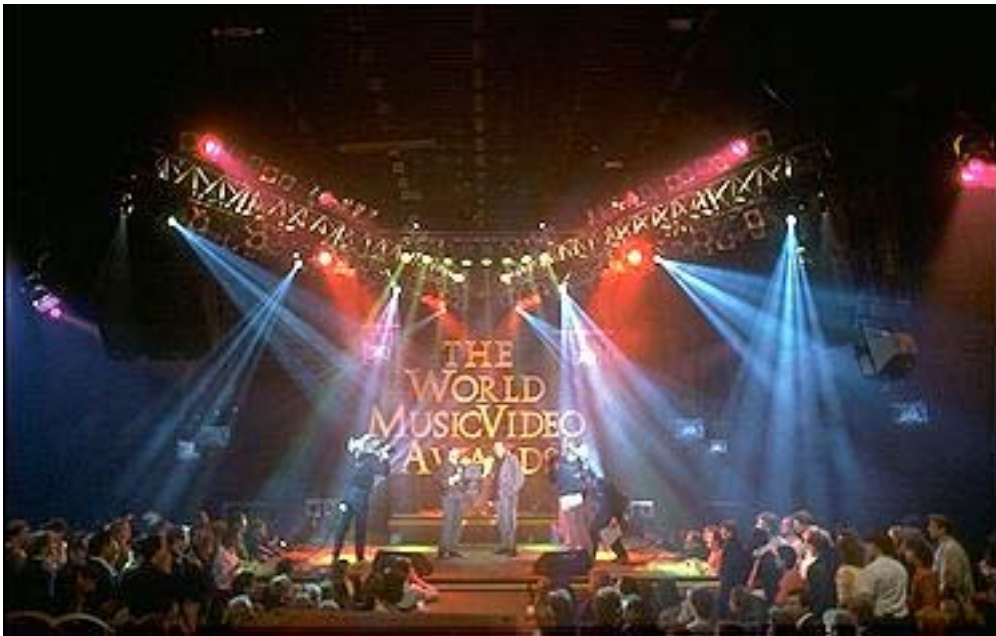
Ultravox



Ultravox

A key element in successful design is understanding the equipment you are using and thinking how it may be extended to achieve the design goals. For the [Ian Anderson 'Divinities' tour](#) in 1995 we had restricted budget, restricted set up time, limited truck space and small stages. The solution to achieving my design aims was to use highly complex moving lights, Cyberlites, to fulfil the function of many different instrument types, profiles, gobo projectors, cyclites and washlites. Moving cues were used only once at the end of the show thereby giving the extra impact at this key moment.

Rock and Roll equipment and techniques have found application in many other areas, some surprising, others not so. In TV the boom in the music video business in the early 80's brought the techniques to the attention of television lighting directors.



Light Entertainment (see above) unsurprisingly grasped the ideas and equipment, more surprisingly one of the early adopters was BBC's 'Songs of Praise' a religious programme broadcast from different local churches every week, lit by par cans hung from trusses in the late 70's! Rock and Roll has also swept into the theatre especially the musical. From the moving lights and Rock and Roll lighting board in Starlight Express through the seminal "Time" with the first Varilites™ in the West End to Welsh National Opera's Avolites desk and dimmers the influence has become pervasive.

Finally, totally outside the theatre, exterior lighting has even adopted rock and roll technology and design. At its most outrageous [the volcano at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas](#) is largely lit by Par64 lamps and controlled by an ETC desk, and now Varilite as a company a true son of Rock and Roll,

are creating a range of fittings specifically for architectural lighting under the name Irideon, and yours truly is insinuating good old Rock & Roll by little bits into Museum Displays!

Kevan Shaw, February 1996

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