

Jonathan Smeeton

LORD OF LIGHT

JERRY GILBERT'S CELEBRATED CHRONICLE SERIES CONTINUES WITH A TWO-PART EXPLORATION OF THE LIFE AND CAREER OF LIGHTING DESIGN VISIONARY JONATHAN SMEETON

PART ONE: THE LEGEND OF LIQUID LEN

On March 8 2009, Hawkwind surrogate, The Hawklords were set to turn back the clock 35 years and play a one-off reunion in honour of the late English graphic artist, Barney Bubbles.

Fittingly, this would be a *Space Ritual* 2009 show, inspired by Bubbles' artwork for the original 1973 album and Robert Calvert's space-rock opera show, with a nod to the artist's bleak monochromatic concept for the Hawklords' *25 Years On* production later in

the decade.

Equally appropriate was the fact that the extravaganza was being promoted by John Curd, whose Head Records label had enshrined the whole spirit of what was taking place around Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove nearly 40 years ago; which is where this story begins.

According to Wikipedia, "The *Space Ritual* show [of December 1972] attempted to create a full audio-visual-cerebral experience, representing themes developed by Barney Bubbles and Robert Calvert entwining the fantasy of Starfarers in suspended animation travelling through time and space with the concept of the music of the

spheres." In other words, a lunar safari.

The ringmaster in this travelling circus (or 'Hawkestra'), which included sci-fi writer Michael Moorcock and the body-painted, curvaceous and entirely naked 'exotic dancer' Stacia [Blake], was one of the first real celebrity lightshows, Liquid Len & The Lensmen.

As a music journalist, I attended many Sunday afternoon Roundhouse Implosions (the name coined by promoter John Curd, Caroline Coon and DJ Jeff Dexter) back in the day, diving into the brutal immersion tank created by Len's battery of unregulated strobes and 1000W projectors.

For me, that throbbing, pulsating juggernaut in the psychotropic/psychedelic Roundhouse rotunda, mixed with Bubbles' gothic sci-fi graphics and fascist symbolism, remains indelible. Whether you were acid-charged or not (and many were), by the time this band of hippy vagabonds had launched into their third number you'd swear you were seeing orbs of light.

Subjected to this relentless blitz the band didn't seem so much galactic warriors teetering on the edge of the astral plain, as crash test dummies.

It was probably too much to expect that Hawkwind co-founder Nik Turner — in attempting to recreate the zeitgeist 35 years on — would be able to lure the cosmic lightlords back into the fray, despite promoter John Curd billing an appearance by 'Liquid Len & The Lensmen' on the posters. But the promoter knew the patina of a reformed Hawks (the Wind or Lord version) would be too irresistible a prospect for many of their old fans.

In fact the legendary LD (real name Jonathan Smeeton, who for many years has been domiciled in the States) had agreed to rent his name for the occasion. Would he be making an avatar-like appearance perhaps? Nik Turner confirmed not. "The Hawklords' lighting will be tailored to the Liquid Len & The Lensmen blue-print," he said, "with Jonathan Smeeton's guidance, collaboration and blessing. Expect the unexpected."

Suffice it to say that Smeeton had agreed to cede his once famous stage name, "since I haven't used it since *Reading...*". This was a reference to the *Reading Festival* of 1975 when he formally quit the band, along with Stacia. However, Hawks fans still harboured hope that the great man would be controlling the whole enterprise via robots from his Fortress of Solitude at Leipers Fork, 25 miles outside of Nashville.

RE-DISCOVERING 'LEN'

The gravitational pull to track down Jonathan Smeeton gathered momentum after I stumbled into Nik 'Thunder Rider' Turner, the band's original sax player, at a Charisma Records reunion in Soho shortly before Christmas.

Three months ago I knew nothing about the Roundhouse event but the seed was still germinating after TPI editor Mark Cunningham, with righteous indignation, asked why Chronicle hadn't yet devoted a chapter to this scion of light. So instead we're devoting two.

Then I discovered one of my chums, Paul Gorman had just produced a biography on Barney, who tragically took his own life in 1983, and all the cosmic energy seemed to coalesce.

Smeeton's early experimental work — with Hawkwind and before — had a major influence in shaping modern lighting design. Harnessing technological innovation to his artistic vision, today his creativity remains in high demand, not only in concert touring, but the worlds of film, architecture and lecturing.

I can't pretend to have seen Jon Smeeton prior to that Roundhouse experience and have only met him in person once — a chance encounter on the stand of LSD at [probably] the 1992 *LDI Show* in Dallas. And as for famous early '70s lightshow, the only other I can recall was Joe's Lights, who were resident at London's Rainbow Theatre, and also became the light artists for the 1972 *Bickershaw Festival*.

ANCIENT OF DAYS

Jonathan Smeeton's story begins at the legendary UFO club in 1967, two years before I arrived in London to join Melody Maker and became inducted into London's



Top: Hawkwind performing in the early '70s, with (middle) 'exotic dancer' Stacia. Above: The *Space Ritual* album.

Below: Nik Turner in all his space-rock glory.



landmark venue, Smeeton also worked Friday all-nighters at UFO. "When UFO moved from the Blarney Club in Tottenham Court Road to the much larger Roundhouse [in Chalk Farm] lightshows were recruited to fill the extra screen space... and there we were."

He soon supersized his rig. Lighting artillery back in 1967 consisted of "just lots of Aldis projectors — usually, three per screen. Little by little, I acquired more and more projectors to fill more and more screen space. We all got paid

by the projector so the more, the merrier!"

W10 (Ladbroke Grove) and W11 (Portobello Road) musical *demi-monde*. This was the holy grail of free festivals, featuring 'People's Bands' (think Pink Fairies, Quintessence, Deviants) and influential management like Doug Smith's Clearwater Productions (Hawkwind's management) and Blackhill Enterprises' Peter Jenner and Andrew King (Pink Floyd's original managers).

I had experienced Dantalian's Chariot's spectacular psychedelic launch at the *National Jazz & Blues Festival* in Windsor, but nothing had quite prepared me for the Hawkwind experience several years later.

The emerging creative spirit at that time was largely incubated in the incendiary womb of the art schools (Farnham, Hornsey, Kingston-upon-Thames, etc) — all hotbeds of social unrest. It was while at art school that Smeeton built his first lightshow, which he would use at UFO and Electric Garden (later Middle Earth), featuring three 1000W projectors.

But these inventions had less to do with any 'art school movement' than a simple fiscal imperative. "It was sheer lack of money — it was 1967 and I needed a summer job. I found Middle Earth, a hippy night club about to open in Covent Garden who needed someone to run their lightshow... which meant fixing their projectors, learning how to boil ink and stay up all weekend long.

"Middle Earth is where it started for me. I just walked through the door, asked for a job and, became the lightshow guy... just like that!" In keeping with the idiomatic nomenclature of the day, he called his lightshow The Ultradelic Alchemists.

Apart from all-night weekend stints at the

"It's a play on words — 'Liquid Lens'. Little did I suspect the name would haunt me for the rest of my days!..."

produced particularly good cloud effects. I also used the Strand 'Tubular Ripple' effect, which I still, on occasion, use to this day."

SOCIAL NETWORK

Living in Ladbroke Grove, Smeeton knew Nik Turner, who would often convince him to turn up for their free shows with Andy Dunkley DJ'ing. Turner was at the centre of the social network in W10 and W11 — London's own little Haight Ashbury.

He spent his time sleeping on the floor of Barney Bubbles, who was artistic director of *Frenz* magazine, or dossing at the Clearwater offices with future Hawkwind DikMik, while by day delivering silk screens for the Family Dog shop, who sold hippie/psychedelic accoutrements in Blenheim Street. "I think I then moved in with [Robert] Calvert and we formed a bit of a commune."

Starting as Hawkwind's roadie, once Turner had picked up his sax he was immediately drafted into the original line-up, and while Dave Brock was the front-man, he became the glue that held the whole thing together.

Smeeton, meanwhile, was continuing to tour. But after losing his stage equipment in the legendary 1971 Montreux Casino fire whilst working with Zappa, he was formally invited by Hawkwind to form the new lightshow prior to the *Space Ritual* tour.

"I had heard about him and knew he was working a lot for Blackhill Enterprises and doing quite a lot of Island acts," remembers Turner. He was always busy. He developed a style of multiple projection and had about 20 with a different image in each — like cartoon butterflies and so on.

"Ultimately I approached him about doing lighting for us because we had no regular lighting person and we were getting big for our boots. Up until then I think we used whatever lighting happened to be at the gig."

As psych bands started to attract audiences way beyond the scope of London clubs it was Smeeton's ability to provide ground-breaking stadium-sized shows, using mainly slides rather than kinetic wheels, which would attract the attention.

"Around the same time, supergroups arrived and so did the 1000W PAR 64 light along with the first trusses [usually crude antenna truss]. Everybody wanted big, and they paid well too. But I chose the Hawkwind route and the experience has served me well."

Although Hawkwind manager, Doug Smith's memory is sketchy, Smeeton's own recollection of the metamorphosis [into Liquid Len] was that the manager had wanted a name to put on the bill: 'Lights by.....'.

"It's a play on words, 'Liquid Lens' — plus I think I was reading a [space opera] book called 'The Lensmen' at the time. Of course I was thinking it had to be 'Someone & the Somebodies'. A dig at Motown perhaps? Little did I suspect the name would haunt me for the rest

Right: Turner meets with fellow 'art rocker' Arthur Brown; the official flyer for the Hawklords' Space Ritual 2009 memorial to Barney Bubbles at the Roundhouse.

of my days!"

So were there actually any 'Lensmen'? Well yes, of course. The wingmen originally comprised biologist, 'Molton Mick' Mike Hart (who later became a veterinary haematologist), 'Astral Al' Alan Day, John Perrin and John Lee. "But later, as Hawkwind became more committed to touring and travelling to the USA more often, the permanent core became myself, John Lee and John Perrin; Mike and Alan both had proper jobs."

With John Lee contributing his 17cwt van to become Britain's first lightshow 'roadie', they hauled a 20-projector show around the increasingly large venues, to meet increasing demand after Hawkwind's 'Silver Machine' had gone to No.2 in the singles chart... and the money started to flow.

What a farrago the collective represented. Liquid Len was expected to animate a scenscape comprising an exotic dancer, a poet, sci-fi writer Michael Moorcock, the audio generator work of Dik Mik and graphic sets of Barney Bubbles. Small wonder he added a pinch of nitroglycerine to the mix.

REVOLUTIONARY

The 1972 *Space Ritual* tour had been a landmark, but by 1974, as they embarked on the second of their three US tours in 12 months, most of the slide material had been replaced and new concepts evolved, with the band threatening to spiral out of control in the face of ever more revolutionary equipment.

From a content perspective there was little of Bubbles' work. The main providers were Sally Vaughan, who had been responsible for the first sets of animation slides for the Traffic show back in '70, Nick Milner, plus leading sci-fi artist David Hardy, who contributed a fund of 'spacescape' slides.

There was, in fact, very little integration whatsoever among the creatives, Smeeton remembers: "The band were the band, the lightshow was the lightshow; I don't think we ever projected any of Barney's art other than the Hawkwind double-headed Hawk logo.

"We both lived in the Ladbroke Grove area in London so we saw a lot of each other. Things were discussed in normal conversation, but we never really sat down and had a production meeting."

TPI

Photography: The TPI Archive, Laurie Lewis and courtesy of Jonathan Smeeton With acknowledgements to the Starfarer website www.starfarer.net

Paul Gorman's book, 'Reasons To Be Cheerful: The Life and Work of Barney Bubbles, is published by Adelita

Jonathan Smeeton's website: www.robotsforpeace.com

**NEXT MONTH:
A NEW LIFE IN AMERICA**

