



LORD OF LIGHT

part two

THE CONCLUSION OF JERRY GILBERT'S EXPLORATION OF THE LIFE AND CAREER OF LIGHTING DESIGNER JONATHAN SMEETON

A NEW LIFE IN AMERICA

Although Jonathan Smeeton collaborated little with Hawkwind's visionary graphic designer Barney Bubbles during the early *Space Ritual* days, they did work consciously and co-operatively on developing the visuals for the 1978 Hawklords tour, after the LD had briefly returned to the offshoot band several years later.

"Yes, I came back for the Hawklords, which seemed a good idea at the time, but Hawkwind [by then] was at a new level of madness!" recalls Smeeton. "That really was the only time Barney

and I ever deliberately sat down and discussed the design. He produced a lot of film footage to be incorporated into the show and we discussed screen placement and structures — and the timing and such."

It was to be projected on screens suspended in scaffold towers, surrounded by lights. "I finally perfected that scaffold tower design concept for the Thompson Twins in the mid-'80s... minus the film loops," he remembers.

On tour, Smeeton generally roomed with his old friend, Hawkwind co-founder Nik Turner. "This was probably because we shared fairly quiet lifestyles," says Turner improbably.

But one incident in Nashville in 1973 was to become a defining paradigm in the Hawkwind hagiography. Turner takes up the story. "We played a concert in this club and the local promoter also managed a lot of porn houses. Afterwards we were hanging out in the manager's office when these hillbillies rode in on choppers. They had this tetra-hydro-cannabinol (THC) — which is the essential component of cannabis — in crystal form. When you snort it, it turns you to rubber — it was outrageous."

From there they went to a skating rink when suddenly the roof started shaking. "It was like, everyone lie down on the floor, there's a tornado

Below: Classic 1970s Hawkwind.



happening. Comet Kohoutek was also in the cycle and you didn't know if you were actually experiencing it or whether it was part of the trip. When we got back to the hotel half the roof was gone and all the windows had been blown out of the cars and the water sucked off the swimming pool."

Once again life seemed to be imitating art, and although it induced a positive vibe, the chemical world seemed to have mutated with the cosmological, Turner describing it like a scene from Polanski's 'Repulsion'.

This is a classic Hawkwind anecdote. "It was the same as Jonathan's lightshows," says Turner. "You just couldn't detach it from your own reality."

Smeeton was forever experimenting with new effects, Turner remembers. "Like the rainbow strobe he developed, using primary colours and sequentially operated to produce rainbow effects — it was fantastic!" His only regret, perhaps, is that Smeeton hadn't perfected the art of transmuting this, alchemically, into ingestible form.

However, even this may be somewhat surprising when one considers that the occupation given on Smeeton's passport (according to Hawkwind manager, Doug Smith) was 'inventor'.

"In the early days, Jon and I spent a lot of time smoking ganja and had lots of crazy ideas," says Smith. One of them was called 'Crowd Control'. "We planned to have lots of little robots like obstacles on the ground; they would be filled with some very heavy weights and

patrol the audience — and when people got silly they would start nudging their legs.

"Jonathan was very into drawing and developing things — but there was a humorously wicked side. Dave Brock wanted to see how many people he could freak out — at one point there was a lot of repetitive music in the early shows and we used strobes heavily and watched the number of people being carried out."

Before Health & Safety restricted the flash rate of strobes to four flashes a second, anyone with photosensitive epilepsy could find that the rapid frequency of stroboscopes triggered a seizure.

Hawkwind were not alone in this regard. Paul Brett from Elmer Gantry's Velvet Opera remembers their band being plastered all over the national press after colleges and universities banned their use of strobes, following the overzealousness by their LD Ron Harwood. "Strobe lighting has a dangerous hypnotic effect upon audiences, particularly on girls," ran the article.

After the royalties from 'Silver Machine', gave Hawkwind more money to play with, the lighting was placed more in Smeeton's hands and presented properly on stage. "We had monkey rigs with PAR 64s and we started building the footlights," Smith recalls.

Another member of Hawkwind's band of technical support gypsies and creatives, Gerry Fitzgerald remembers all kinds of ideas that had to be aborted for technical space reasons — a collapsible 32' eagle for the *Space Ritual* tour being one that would have seriously interfered

with Smeeton's projection. Other stillborn ideas were the attempt to pump dry ice downwards as a projection screen — but after a similar attempt at the Farnborough Air Display ended in explosion, it was mothballed.

"There was also the escapade with soap flakes," says Fitzgerald. "A couple of roadies with a big box of Lux soap flakes were to be dribbled down and picked up by Jonathan's UV and strobes. But at the Rainbow, there were these two big fans and by the side of the stage the mains switch for the fans. All a roadie needed to do was kick it and accidentally switch it on."

"Without a doubt I enjoyed my Hawkwind reputation for a long time afterwards..."

Sure enough that is precisely what happened — and as the soap flakes were gently drifting down these huge fans kicked in on full power, sending the soap flakes into turbo mode (unwittingly creating the first audience blinders perhaps?) "But no-one seemed to bother," said Fitzgerald, "they just felt that... well, it was Hawkwind."

THE MIDDLE STAGES

In August 1975, Hawkwind had headlined on the first night of the *Reading Festival*, which proved to be their last gig with Jonathan Smeeton. His work with the band would lead him to even greater things although the

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Below, from top: Peter Gabriel in 1982; Miles Davis; Wham!-era George Michael; Lou Reed; Yoko Ono; The Thompson Twins on Top Of The Pops.



immediate aftermath was hardly creative.

The music industry was arriving at a fork in the road — disco was spiralling off in one direction, punk in the other, with the spectre of the ‘supergroups’ and prog-rockers hovering over it all. Ironically, I was working in the indie band hotbed of West London in 1976 — a stone’s throw from the old Clearwater offices — but about to launch a disco magazine!

“Punk had a total disregard for everything, and the staple for supergroups was just huge rigs for no other reason than being bigger than the previous rig,” states Smeeton.

By 1982, Gail Colson, manager of former Genesis frontman, Peter Gabriel, had recruited Smeeton, which provided him with a baptism for the new Vari*Lite — launched by Showco the previous year on Genesis’ *Abacab* tour.

Smeeton used 16 VL1 heads on the Gabriel tour. “It was a very big deal at the time, me being an independent and Vari-Lite being so incredibly secretive about everything. For a short time Vari-Lite had the monopoly on ‘new’.”

Colson had been one of most understatedly powerful women in the music business when I worked at Charisma Records between 1974-76 (at a time when the company also owned ZigZag Magazine).

Although Tony Stratton Smith had started the label she was unquestionably the power behind the throne. By the late 1970s, however, Charisma’s best years were behind them, and Hawkwind’s arrival on to the label in 1976 helped to galvanise it and keep its prog-rock roster alive.

A 10-year collaboration with Gabriel was followed by stints for Smeeton with Paul Simon, Journey and the Thompson Twins. “Without a doubt I enjoyed my Hawkwind reputation for a long time afterwards,” he acknowledges.

With Gabriel at the helm, Genesis had earlier immortalised Jonathan ‘Liquid Len’ Smeeton in their song ‘The Battle Of Epping Forest’ in the lyric ‘His friend, Liquid Len by name, of wine, women and Wandsworth fame’.

One could speculate that Hawkwind’s 1972 ‘Lord Of Light’ might also have been a nod in his direction.

Since then, Smeeton’s creative vision has resulted in some of the most original stage productions in today’s music and TV business — a legacy of the expertise he gained working with video at BBC Television Centre in London.

“Just getting into the BBC was breaking barriers back then,” he says. “‘Top Of The Pops’ was run by a load of old conservatives who had never recovered from the massive and rapid change in ‘pop music’. They still thought Muriel Young was cool and that kids should watch more ‘Blue Peter!’”

His good fortune was that Pete Drummond, a popular BBC radio DJ (who along with John Peel was championing the new counter-culture), lived upstairs from him. The long-time presenter of ‘Radio 1 In Concert’, Drummond had just become the anchor man for the new late-night BBC2 programme ‘Disco 2’.

“Pete got me the gig of projecting lightshows to accompany the record review segment,” Smeeton recalls. “Soon I was lighting the live act segment before the programme became ‘The Old Grey Whistle Test’. Finally, ‘Top Of The Pops’ recruited us to flash their lights, by which time it was truly old hat! But I did learn to light for TV, sufficiently to be ready for the MTV video explosion.”

Smeeton had already enjoyed a particularly busy video-

making period in the ‘80s with progressive visual artist Peter Gabriel and The Thompson Twins, Wham! and, later, the solo George Michael — which all proved to be heavy MTV fodder. He also produced notable touring lightshows for Yoko Ono, Lou Reed, Miles Davis and eventually Def Leppard, immediately prior to relocating to the States.

This filmic experience became invaluable with the advent of MTV and artists’ needs for both promotional and feature-length concert videos. Thus Smeeton had moved to the L.A. forest of Topanga Canyon, in order to be close to the muse.

“Everybody suddenly was making videos. As most of it was still being shot on 35mm film, Hollywood became a hot spot for shooting short-form video. At this time a lot of commercial film makers got on board and produced some very fine mini movies. There was also quite a lot of money to be made so it attracted some very talented people.”

ARCHITECTURAL

During the ‘90s, Smeeton also found himself lighting many architectural interiors and exteriors “where the brief called for lighting to create mood, drama, a sense of the extraordinary.”

His first foray into architectural lighting had been way back in 1984, after being contacted by Rusty Brutsché, chairman and CEO of Vari-Lite in Dallas. “He asked me to light a building to demonstrate the effect of moving lights on walls of glass and stainless steel. Since then I’ve lit quite few buildings, mostly in a novelty fashion, not truly architectural. But music is still my core business — Nashville is a clue!”

This has now been his home for the past 20 years. “When one has spent so much time touring a place or visiting the same place over and over, it’s hard to say precisely when one moved [to the States],” he states enigmatically. “This time around? I have lived here since the late ‘80s. I particularly like life in the USA. It’s near my place of work — namely, the rest of the world.”

His route to the deep south had taken him from Topanga Canyon to the beautiful Russian River, in the northern part of California, and finally a rambling ranch in Tennessee. Clearly, Smeeton likes Big Country... which is about as cosmically removed from the imbroglio of Ladbroke Grove as it gets.

Surrounded by so much beauty it’s little surprise that in his modern work regime global itineraries have become a thing of the past. “I don’t go touring anymore; I send robots and machines and clever young people who think it’s fun to live on a bus and be away for months on end.”

In fact he spends as little time as possible working. “Over the summer I teach around 30 people over about four weeks — beginners mostly. And designs can be done in days or weeks. In total I must work 10 weeks a year.”

WORKING IN THE INDUSTRY

In the 1990s, Smeeton was also a regular on the industry trade fair circuit, mostly designing exhibition lightshows for Martin Professional. “At a time when I was looking for an alternative to Vari-Lite I found Martin, or rather they found me.

“They then asked me to design their trade-show stands and lightshows for SIB [Rimini], PLASA and LDI. It was all rather good fun — creating lightshows for the sake of lightshows — but they also produce some pretty fine equipment.”

As production designer to some of the greatest

Below: Country starlet Taylor Swift, for whom Smeeton is currently production designer.



names in music he has always seen explaining complex lighting techniques to lighting directors as part of the job. Thus, the obvious extension to this was to start his own school, offering regular workshops.

At the same time he has also dived headlong into the world of light/video convergence and content lighting to create multimedia, pixel-driven shows. In fact, he is currently working on a multi-media event called *In Search of Space* (the ghost of Hawkwind still haunting him) — along with a couple of stage play productions.

"The wheel has turned full circle for me," he muses. "I've never had a difficult time getting anything on the screen, the hard part is getting the right thing on the screen at the right time."

As he completes his fourth decade in the business, Jonathan Smeeton continues to show how in demand he is from the emerging generation, by pulling a contract that should have made him as happy as a clam.

When I was in Florida last Christmas, the FM airwaves

were dominated by the songs of beautiful 20-year old country singer, Taylor Swift. She has subsequently crossed over into mainstream and mega-stardom, and is currently on tour... with Smeeton as her production designer and director of creativity.

And so the road, it seems, goes on forever. If Liquid Len & The Lensmen had provided the platform for the launch of an outstanding career in lighting invention, what had it been that characterised those early lightshows to make them so special?

"Me," came the unequivocal answer. "And the totally free rein Hawkwind allowed me; plus, of course, Douglas Smith who really held it all together and believed it could all happen."

TPI

Photography: The TPI Archive, BBC and courtesy of Jonathan Smeeton • with acknowledgements to 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

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