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DESCRIPTION:	INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ALLEN ON THE LIGHT SURGEONS' STYLE, TECHNIQUES AND THE ART OF VJING
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► Synchronised in sound: music and visuals working together in harmony.





Gone are the days when VJs took a backseat to DJs, the visual experience is now more vital than ever...

# ANIMATION & THE VJ ART

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At face value the term VJ would suggest something pretty straightforward. However, there is a lot more to it than you might first think. One might place VJs in the same box as DJs, as they manipulate videos much in the same way as a DJ mixes and cuts records, fades, scratches and samples using various techniques and equipment. For this less-than-transparent art a more complex term than VJ is required. Chris Allen founder and director of hugely respected, world-famous VJ outfit The Light Surgeons explains.

"I think VJing today has become a very square box: it's video, it's people running stuff off a laptop through a video projector onto a screen which I think, personally, is a bit boring. I don't really call myself a VJ."

The term 'Audio Visual Architects' is a label that Chris and his contemporaries at The Light Surgeons prefer to use.

"The Light Surgeons as an organisation has been running for over ten years and its work spans so many different things from print, photography, installation, working with big bands and doing our own arts projects. It crosses so many different elements it's really

hard to narrow it down and, obviously, VJing is something that has been pioneered by us, maybe unconsciously when we started out."

Chris made his initial foray into the world of VJing as a result of listening to his brother's hip-hop records and accompanying him to car boot sales in a quest to find rare groove records. Instead of trying to compete with his brother, Chris "used to

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buy old cinefilms and started collecting little projectors".

In 1992, the brothers started playing in The Garden Club in Covent Garden.

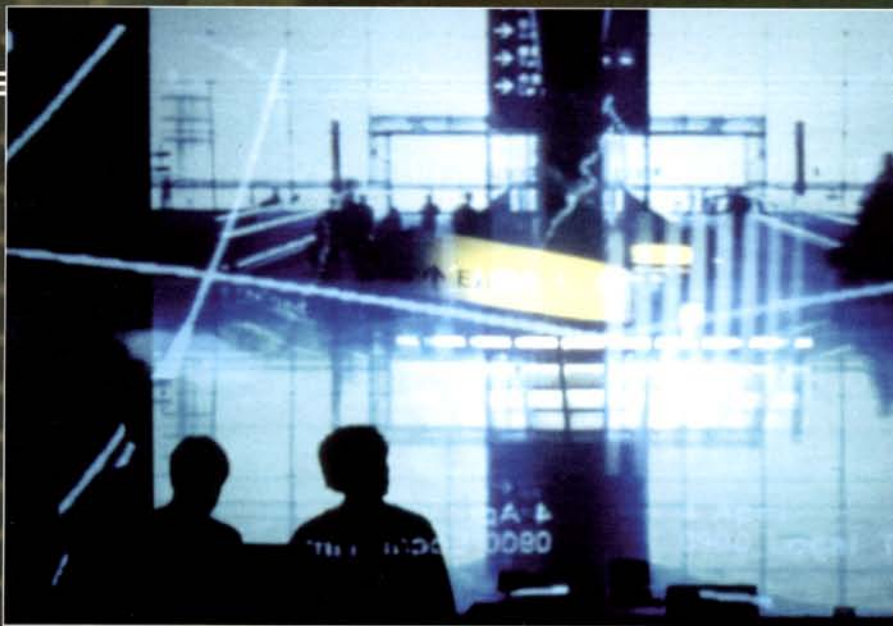
"I started projecting slide photographs of the old funk records that he was playing and that is how I started doing visuals," says Chris. "I started adding film to it and began college soon after that. I was doing graphic design so I was transferring some of my sketch books and

graphic design work into it and it took off from there."

Beginning with "second-hand, redundant equipment like slide projectors and old Super 8 projectors," The Light Surgeons' early shows were "very retro indeed". Chris elaborates, "There were huge collages of projectors using leaps and lots of graphics that we had shot on high-contrast reversal films so all the images overlaid and meshed together."

Today, The Light Surgeons have gone on to use a number of projection sources in their performances. Their set-up, as described by Chris, is much like that of a theatre with "a screen at the back of the stage and a gauze screen at the front of the stage, which is an old theatre trick to reveal scenes on stage. We use a lot of black in our footage so you can see through it and its layers." They also use, "a number of different video sources, slide projectors, photography on slide and sequences of slide with 16mm film and old loops that we have had for years, so we really create a collage which sits in the space of the stage and things pop out from the back of the stage to the front... Nowadays with our new shows, everything is synchronised so the music is represented visually."





▲ Smoke and mirrors: The Light Surgeons combine modern technology with old theatre tricks to create layers and a sense of visual illusion which sits in and moves around the stage.

When asked about VJing software, Chris's passion for content over what the latest technology can enable on a laptop is immediately addressed. He warns: "The technology is very seductive and it's very quick to make something but what does it mean? Simplicity – you can say a lot with very little."

The Light Surgeons use DVJs, a combination of VDMX programme and a DVD that Pioneer have released which is based on a record player. Chris explains: "You can pop a DVD in there and then you can scratch video and audio and put key points in."

Chris also names ArKaos and Motion Dive as other popular pieces of VJing software and it is the commercial availability of such products that hints at the sheer diversity of the art.

"I can't reiterate how much of a conversion to people coming from different backgrounds this area is," says Allen. "You have people from an architectural background who have studied building, people from an engineering background who have learnt 3D packages getting into using it as well, so it is really a diverse medium."

The eclectic range of people getting involved in VJing doesn't stop there as today's club culture has also made an impact on its popularity.

"I guess clubs have become a bit more commercial these days and the whole '90s phenomenon of big super star DJs has long gone. You have got a resurgence of performance again, which I think is really good. There are lots of young bands and a plethora of people with laptops and desktop video. YouTube has just opened it up to be a whole lot more accessible for a wider audience," says Chris.

Just how much the umbrella term of VJing has moved on from Chris's memories of "ultraviolet painted banners and backdrops in the early '90s" is exemplified in The Light Surgeons' latest audio visual commission. Going by the name of True Fiction, Allen explains how they "worked with 25 different unsigned musicians from New York". He continues, "[We] constructed the whole piece out of that. We recorded documentary material so it can incorporate film-making, music-making and motion graphics. It is really a synthesis – or a nexus – to bring all these things together and explore the medium outside of the normal way of looking at it."

The project demonstrates exactly why such an eclectic mix of people are drawn to the art of VJing: it simply cannot be put into a box with just one defining label. **IMAGINE**



▲ FEATURE

▲ The Light Surgeons throwing shapes.