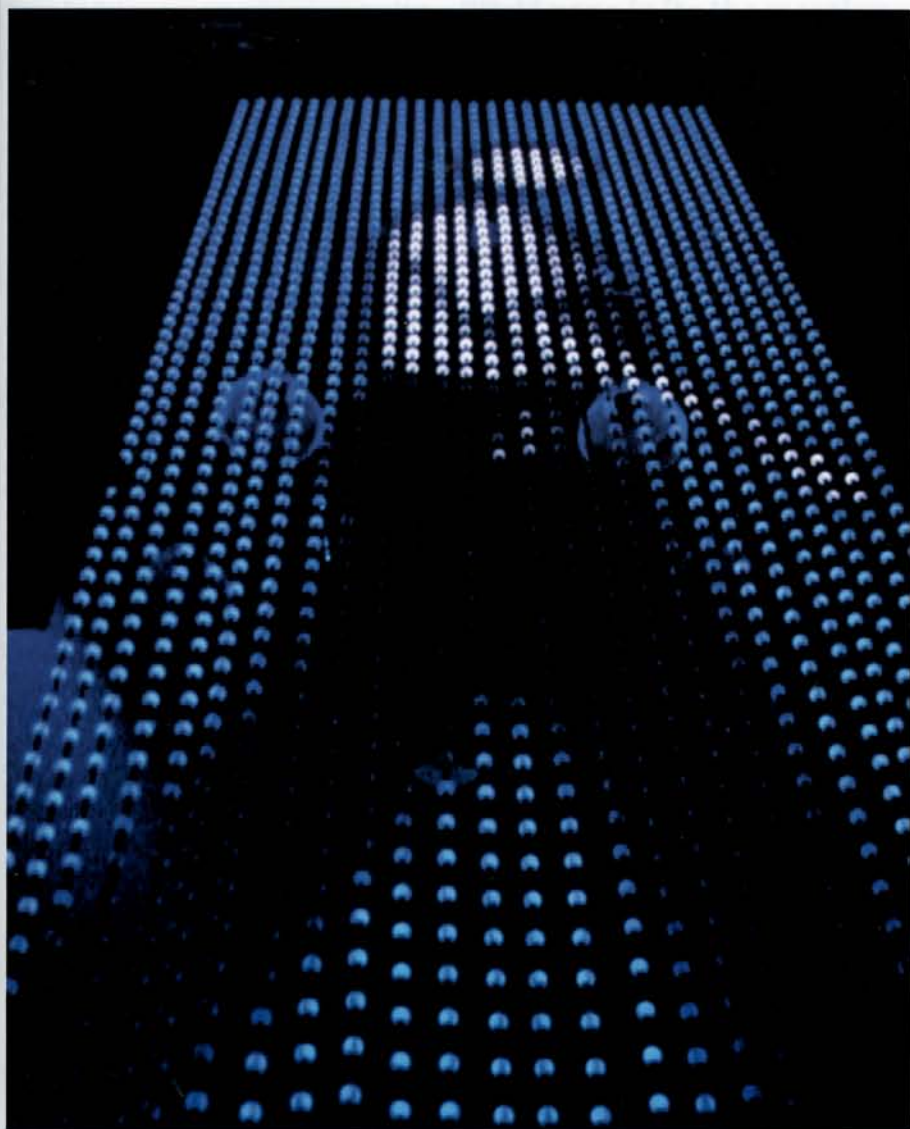




PUBLICATION:	PROMO MAGAZINE
COUNTRY:	UK
DATE:	MAY 2005

DESCRIPTION:	ARTICLE ABOUT WILLIE WILLIAMS AND UVA TOUR VISUALS FOR U2 VERITGO TOUR. TOP VISUAL ARTISTS TLS
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Walking tall:
Julian Opie's film
for *Sometimes You
Can't Make It On
Your Own* (left);
the LED curtains in
full effect (above)

WILLIE WILLIAMS/UVA **SCALING NEW** **HEIGHTS**

U2 live creative genius Willie Williams has stepped beyond the boundaries of video for their Vertigo tour, enlisting visual artists UVA for an awe-inspiring LED show. David Knight reports on the complex process leading up to the first night

Late February, 2005: in a charmingly antiquated office building near London Bridge, a group of young men hunch over laptops in an atmosphere of intense studiousness. You could call it an ironic hush, considering what they are working on. This is the home of UVA - which stands for United Visual Artists - and they are absorbed in a project which will find fruition, in just over a month's time, in a blaze of colour, light, and most certainly noise...

UVA are working on both the visual design and content for U2's Vertigo tour, which is due to begin in about a month's time. They are working closely with legendary U2 tour creative director Willie Williams, and the brief is nothing if not challenging: to maintain the Irish rock band's reputation as leaders in the field of live concert visuals. For that reason, the following weeks are about to prove to be massive learning curve for this young multi-disciplinary collective.

UVA are Matt Clark, Chris Bird and Ash Nehru, an alliance of art director, technical director and software designer. In the past two years or so they have conceived some highly innovative projects in music, fashion and art. These include the stage shows for Massive Attack's tours of 2003 and 2004 and Basement Jaxx, and fashion shows for Hamish Morrow, even an installation in a London members' club, Kabaret's Prophecy.

Their work is innovative primarily because their favourite media of expression is not the camera or the TV screen, but the computer screen and LED technology. Their real medium for live visuals is not video, but light itself. "We like to be quite sculptural with our work," says Clark, referring to their inventive use of LED in its ever-more variable forms. "Until recently much of what we do wasn't feasible." For example their work for Massive Attack, on their last tour, had evolved into one giant line of lo-res LEDs stretched behind the band.

And, being LED, it is entirely non-video based. "It's designing with light - even though we are not traditional lighting designers," says Bird.

"A lot of it could be thought of as computer graphics," adds Nehru. "We look at the screen as a computer screen, not a video screen." And, crucially, UVA have themselves developed the necessary software - a real-time rendering system called Dragonfly - to support their ideas.

Hence the interest of Willie Williams - the man who effectively introduced video and multi-media interaction to major live concert events when he masterminded Zoo TV, the stunning concept behind U2's tour of 1992-93, and rewrote the rulebook on rock'n'roll concert visuals so effectively, it took years for the rest of rock to catch up. Now Williams is planning to get ahead of the pack once more.



How the U2 team came together

Willie Williams

Williams has been involved with U2 since the early Eighties, becoming lighting director on their 1983 War tour. As the band's popularity grew, so did his role within their touring organisation, eventually becoming the band's tour designer, where he won particular acclaim for his work on the groundbreaking Zoo TV tour in 1992/93.

As well as his work with U2, Williams has been involved with tours by The Rolling Stones, REM, Oasis and David Bowie, for whom he helped to create the multimedia Sound And Vision retrospective tour.

In the world of performance art, he has designed for Montreal dance company La La La Human Steps and is currently working with the Kronos Quartet and NASA on Sun Rings, using audio material collected from space by the Voyager space stations.

Williams has received many awards for his work, including an Entertainment Design



EDDY award in 2001, for excellence in live event design.

Regarding the conception of the design of the current U2 tour, Williams says the circular motif associated with the band's recent big hit single was a factor.

"The [circular] shape is Bono's idea – in a way it resembles vertigo," he says. But this was also a kind of aesthetic justification for repeating a successful feature of U2's previous tour: the circular runway on which the U2 singer could perform and commune with the audience.

"We had a long discussion about whether we'd have the enclosure

again," says Williams. "But it's so perfect. It seemed not doing it on principle seemed daft. They own that now."

UVA

UVA's Matt Clark and Chris Bird first met and worked together on a Leftfield tour in 2000, but their partnership was established properly, and with instant acclaim, with Massive Attack's world tour in 2003. The addition of computer whizz Ash Nehru gave them a formidable range of complementary skills: design and software are brought together to create memorable live experiences.

The distinctiveness of

the Massive Attack visual show was that there was no video. Instead pure digital information, from binary code to chemical formulae, were transmitted onto LED screens. Furthermore, it was flexible and immediate. Due to UVA's own, specially developed delivery system, information could be uploaded and displayed in real time, so that headlines from that day's newspapers could be incorporated into the evening show. In short, this was a computer-driven as opposed to a video-driven system.

Since then, UVA's portfolio has quickly grown – by no means constituting just live music visuals, but also fashion shows, art installations, even exclusive bars.

The design aspect of UVA's work has also started to make an impact in music videos – UVA recently created the on-screen lighting framework for Kylie Minogue's hit video for I Believe In You.

"I wanted to get away from video content – which everyone is doing now," he says. "So when I started this one, I sort of assumed it wouldn't be a video show." Williams is also there in the UVA offices, carefully overseeing the young team's progress, and (as we speak) eyeing a three-dimensional computer model of his designs for the first indoor phase of the Vertigo tour.

Once again, it is a ground-breaking set-up. Williams has already been busy developing the hardware for the tour, working closely with equally eminent stage designer Mark Fisher. The virtual version of his design is on the screen: a round stage, a larger circular runway, which encloses part of the audience space, and perhaps most intriguingly, a huge curtain, hung behind the stage. It is quickly apparent, from the lights and visuals that pulse through UVA's computer model, that all of these elements – the floor, the runway, and the curtain – contain LED technology. The curtain, it transpires, will be composed of huge LED globes.

Williams is no stranger to LED himself. After Zoo TV – the tour that he says, "rewrote the book on everything" – he introduced LED into the live environment on the band's next, even more extravagantly staged tour, Popmart.

"For Popmart we had the largest video screen ever, and we put LED on the map," he says. "In many

'Seeing the potential for LED, I felt like reclaiming the territory and moving it up a notch'

ways it was the height of the madness. So afterwards I moved away from all that, but seeing the potential for where LED hasn't gone yet – it's such a great medium – I felt like reclaiming the territory and moving it up a notch."

Williams was alerted to UVA by Sam Pattinson, his producer on other major Williams-directed tours, including The Rolling Stones and Aerosmith, who is now with onedotzero as head of production of its consultancy division, onedotzero industries. "It was the first time I was able to exploit the unique onedotzero network. This allowed me to show Willie a huge variety of work from around the world," Pattinson tells me later. "As he wanted to avoid using conventional video, it was clear that UVA were the perfect creative partner."

At this stage, UVA are experimenting with their ideas for content, and perfecting a new version of their own custom-built technology. For U2 they have developed their most powerful version of their

Dragonfly software, dubbed D3. "Every big client we've had we've decided to rewrite our software," says Nehru. "First of all we can show the lighting director what our show will look like in essence." Hence the 'working' 3D model of Williams' stage design. But its primary function will hopefully be more significant: to act as the delivery system for all the visuals in the show.

UVA are being understandably reticent about their ideas for content. However, Chris Bird hints that some of them "touch on ideas of surveillance – not telling people that they're being videoed..." But at this point it is by no means certain that these ideas will survive to opening night. There will be various other film-makers, artists and animators submitting material for consideration by Williams, including the likes of Run Wrake and Catherine Owens – who have both contributed to previous U2 tours – and Ed Holdsworth and artist Julian Opie. And by no means all the songs performed live will be accompanied by visuals.

The current level of intensity is about to increase exponentially – in two days everyone will set off for Vancouver, Canada, where the proper stage show rehearsals will begin. Some big decisions are about to get made. "The way it works is you get to rehearsals and you find out if things work," says Williams. "It tends to be very reactive rather than



CUTTING IT LIVE...

A selection of the top artists currently working in live visuals

Spiralling success: the outer runway is edged with some 6,000 LEDs

Dick Carruthers

Carruthers is probably best known as a director of live DVDs – and not without reason. He is the man behind *Led Zeppelin Live*, the most successful music DVD ever. However, he is also a master of live visuals and has worked some of the biggest names in the live arena, including Oasis, the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart. Carruthers got into directing through his work as a video technician, getting his break on the *Take That Hometown* video at Manchester's G-Mex arena. In 1997 he worked as video director on The Rolling Stones' *Bridges to Babylon* tour and it was at this point that he began to supervise screen visuals.

His best-known work came just two years later, at Oasis' Wembley Stadium gig: three giant screens showed separate images, recorded and live, which worked together, culminating in the visuals for *Live Forever*, where quotations from John Lennon drifted from left and right screens into the centre, eventually forming a portrait of the man himself.

Carruthers believes that it is a "golden age" for live visuals. "There are companies exploding and lots of young visual artists coming through," he says. "It's a growing area and I am proud to have been a part of it."

The Light Surgeons

Formed by Chris Allen and Andy Flywheel in 1995, Light Surgeons have toured internationally with artists such as Propellerheads, Unkle and Cornershop, for whom the duo provided live visuals on their ill-fated US tour with Oasis.

Although they are currently moving away from providing visuals for other artists in

proactive. [U2] will tell you things they like and don't like. You get a feel of what's missing and what's going to work well. [You judge] whether we need, say, more moody pieces."

For this reason, it is the creative director who compiles the initial set list for the show, not U2. "It's much more important for me to know the set at this stage than them," says Williams. "It sounds like an impossible task, but really six songs you know will be in there, and few songs from the new album, which leaves six to eight songs left over. I will write a list to give a show structure. That usually gets an immediate reaction from the band – 'I'm not playing that!', that kind of thing. But it has the function of getting us heading in the right direction. Until rehearsals they won't know what will work for them – but I'm pleased from where we're starting."

Fast forward approximately five weeks, and U2's *Vertigo* show is now on the road, to highly favourable reviews: it's generally regarded a well-judged development on the band's previous back-to-basics *Elevation* tour. There is repeated comment in the press of the setting, particularly the curtain of lights behind the band. For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* writes of "the dazzling technology of movable lighting tapestries hanging from above the musicians and the brilliant stagecraft of the runway through the middle of the house".

A lot has happened in the past few weeks. As UVA's Matt Clark says, "On a show of this size and complexity it goes without saying that the challenges are wide ranging. The show has a large spectrum of visual style – lighting, video from other artists, and our real-time digital work. It all created a

final look I don't think we could have predicted."

Clark is back in London, Chris Bird has taken himself off on holiday, while group programmer Ash Nehru is still with the tour. The reason? From a content/creative level UVA have (more or less) done their bit. But their role on the delivery of the visuals demands Nehru's continued presence.

Clark gives some indication of the enormity of the task when they arrived in Vancouver for rehearsals: that outer runway, which Bono uses to commune with his fans, was edged with with around 6,000 LEDs; the LED curtain, the centrepiece of the visual elements, was actually seven curtains – in effect, giant strings of LED pearls. "All of this was prototype kit, and when it arrived in the arena, there was some available software to drive it, but not quite what we needed for the show," he says. "So there we are: challenge number one – write some new software to test and fire off this huge light array which was going to be the visual centrepiece."

And it worked. UVA's bespoke system came through to drive the light curtains, floor, and the video – and there is still video on the *Vertigo* tour. "In effect you can run a QuickTime through the LED set-ups," says producer Sam Pattinson. "This is a major progression from simply using lights, which would be limited in colour and movement." In other

'The show has a big spectrum of visual style – lighting, video from other artists, and our real-time digital work'

words, it is a big breakthrough – not only for UVA, but possibly for the whole future of live visuals.

At the same time UVA clearly had to quickly come to terms with a situation where they were not in creative control as in other projects. Unquestionably this meant learning to deal with the rough as well as the smooth. "We're not really used to working in an environment where there are so many people involved on a creative level, so quickly you adapt to be more ready to collaborate and take on board other people's views," says Clark.

"The most exciting thing was to have had the U2 visuals production team work alongside and then adopt our bespoke system to drive the video, light curtains, and floor. That was a great achievement," he continues. "The most disappointing thing was that we had so much amazing new content, mostly technology-driven – but beautiful, real-time stuff that hasn't really been done before. That just ended up on the cutting-room floor."

Among the work that made the show is Run Wreke's animation of an F-15 fighter plane, which makes a sudden appearance during the performance of *Bullet The Blue Sky*; Ed Holdsworth's material for *City Of Blinding Lights*; there is even design student James Medcraft's piece, gleaned from a competition organised by onedotzero, which accompanies *Zoo Station*; and, artist Julian Opie's *Walking Man* film, which is displayed when the band play *Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own*.

Unsurprisingly more work was commissioned than could actually be used, so some of UVA's proposals were knocked back. But UVA's main content contribution has become a real highlight of the show: the surveillance sequence, as hinted at by

favour of making their own short films, they have done work for the current U2 tour and keep their enthusiasm for the field.

"For us it was and is an art form, free of the dogma of TV, free of the restrictions of the art gallery and very directly related to the music," says Allen.

Spencer Leven

Leven broke into the world of live visuals with his involvement in The Streets' recent 10 Rounds tour. This mammoth undertaking involved videos for every track played, visuals to link tracks, a live text message system and eight cameras, including a "Brandycam" strapped to a bottle of Mike Skinner's favourite tipple.

Leven didn't have to look too far for his break - Mike Skinner is his cousin - but the success of the tour has led to further work with the Mitchell Brothers' live shows, as well as directing the new Kano video.

Lynn Fox

Members Patrick Chen, Bastian Glassner and Christian McKenzie met while studying architecture at University College London. While completing their final studies the trio started to work for General Lighting & Power and they were made partners in January 2001.

In October 2001 they quit the company to concentrate on music videos, completing their directorial debut three months later with FC Kahuna's Hayling.

After making videos for Björk's Nature is Ancient and Oceania, they were asked to create visuals for several songs in her recent world tour, including her performance at the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics. They have since gone on to make tour projections for Incubus.

Phantom

After graduating from St Martin's, where he studied fashion design, Phantom worked as a freelance art director/designer within the world of music and clubs.

While working on design for house wunderkind Mylo, he started to dabble in computer visuals. Consequently, when Mylo got booked for some live dates, Phantom offered to do some visuals that would tie in with the rest of the artwork.

"I have always thought of music and visuals or music and design as being very closely related," he says. "Most people like to visualise sounds and, as a projectionist, VJ or designer, your job is to do that for them. If it's done properly you can really achieve what the music is doing on both levels."

Adam Smith

Smith founded Vegetable Vision in 1990 in partnership with Noah Clark. While the pair provided psychedelic visuals for many of the larger dance events of the early Nineties, they are probably best known for their pioneering work on The Chemical Brothers' live shows, which the Dallas



Masters of the visuals game: Dick Carruthers' work for Oasis; Type2error's Hope Of The States graphics; the Light Surgeons' documentary style

Morning News once compared to Matisse and Picasso doing animation for MTV. Now working solo, Smith continues to work on visual material for Chemical Brothers tours, as well as live events by The Streets and U2's Elevation tour.

However, Smith is now probably better known as an all-round film-maker, of short films, documentaries, and music videos such as his series for Goldie Lookin' Chain and the controversial clip for The Streets' Blinded By The Lights.

Type2error

The rise of Type2error, aka Matt Simonds



and Ed Emmerson, is inextricably linked to Hope Of The States.

In the summer of 2002 the duo began making projections for the band, after Matt had designed some of their demo sleeves. This culminated in a specially made projection show for the band's gig at the Borderline in Sept 2002. When HOTS signed to Sony, T2E were kept on as the band's designers, working on promos and records sleeves as well as the live side.

Although the duo continue to make projections for the HOTS live shows, they have now sublet the touring duties to a friend.

Bird back in February, during the performance of One. In it, a surveillance camera picks up on one audience member, and gradually zooms back into thousands, making up a grid that then becomes the live video image of the band, constructed up from members of the audience.

"On the Basement Jaxx tour we did a video piece where we treated the band's heads like pixels that made up a bigger picture of the band members using a live manipulation technique," says Clark. "So you started looking at one or two faces, and then gradually they become a constituent part of a bigger image. We showed Willie this and talked about our ideas for doing this using audience members, then he really pinned down this concept of 'surveillance' as it works now.

"Technically the piece is quite involved, with live cameras installed around the arena, along with the video of the band, feeding our software which builds the composite image. It was great to see Ash bring that all together in the rehearsals. The first night we saw it working in a show was a great moment. Paul McGuinness [U2's manager] was really excited, shaking all our hands in his typically exuberant manner."

Not only that, but the One performance becomes Bono's opportunity to harness technology supplied by UVA and others, to a greater purpose: the singer's campaign to get 1m Americans to put their names on a petition, which will be presented to the US Congress asking for more dedicated aid for Africa. At this point, he asks the audience to text their names in. The texts are processed, in Singapore, courtesy of Sun Microsystems, and sent back to the venue, then put through an application designed by UVA which

'They adopted our bespoke system to drive the video, light curtains, and floor. That was a great achievement'

animates the names onto the main screen. The whole process takes 4.5 seconds.

Willie Williams, speaking to *Promo* directly from the Vertigo tour, expressed satisfaction with how things were progressing - but both he and Clark emphasise, the business of making the U2 show happen is always a fluid, ongoing process. Things can change, and probably will, because as the creative director points out, you never really know if its going to work until you're doing it for real.

"I never get to see what it'll actually look like until it's all hanging in the first venue, at which point it's rather too late for major changes," he says. "It takes a lot of imagination, instinct and wishful thinking to create imagery for a screen you've never seen. But it's been relatively straightforward, especially from the band's point of view. Usually the first month or so of a tour is fairly traumatic, but by the time we were two shows in it felt like we'd been on the road for weeks. I'm not sure why this is. I'd hate to think we were getting good at it."

Clearly the rave reviews have helped. "This show looks so effortless and is so focused that even the most hardened cynics appear to be giving us a break," he notes, while intimating that UVA's contribution has also been significant. "Having finally got the hang of the UVA control system it is

wonderful being able to use the LED in the stage as a paint palette. Most days I find myself playing and futzing with the floor, to try new ideas and really get tight co-ordination with the lighting. I am also really enjoying the surveillance cameras and have future plans for those."

Back in London, UVA's Clark reflects on an incredible experience. "Our job was to be one of many supporting artists to Willie's vision, and to bring our unique skills to bear on the show. We really feel we did that," he says.

"I think our main achievement on this tour, besides our creative input, was to create an environment where Willie and Smasher (the technical director of video) could begin building their vision on the fly, rather than having to rely solely on pre-recorded video, giving an opportunity to begin to mix lighting and video as a whole entity through one interface, with our software. That feels really great, like you are a real fundamental building block of this whole thing."

After all, this ultimately is all about providing the right framework for U2.

"Watching the show on the first night of the tour was kind of surreal," reflects Clark. "We'd been sitting front of house with the band up there playing away quite seriously for a good week or so, and it just becomes part of your everyday environment."

"But when it's showtime the band really play at a different level, it was great on that first night to be reminded that really they are the main attraction - one of the greatest ever rock bands and still really playing at the top of their game."

UVA are performing their first live VJ set at the onedotzero festival on June 4