



PUBLICATION:	WAX
COUNTRY:	UK
DATE:	APRIL 2001
DESCRIPTION:	INTERVIEW WITH THE LIGHT SURGEONS AND REVIEW OF "DOWN AND OUT EP"



Globe-trotting sense scientists The Light Surgeons are best known for illuminating club nights like Fabric and The Boutique, but that is just one colour of their creative rainbow, which bridges the gap between dancefloor and art house.

OPEN ART SURGERY

James Lavelle and DJ Shadow slam in a twisting, filtered remix of Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', and Fabric's main room goes wild. The floorboards wobble and shift from the blast of the brutal sub-woofers below. Shiny, happy revellers bounce around the dancefloor, the stage, the upstairs bar and every space in between. Suddenly a giant wall, the focal point of the entire club, explodes in electric blues and whites. Images scream into the foreground and slip away, seamlessly mixing, matching and merging, connecting industrial and cultural themes. Cars speed down freeways, fighter plane blueprints blink in and out of focus, and crisp electronic readouts twitch in time to the music. In the corner of that wall crackle three words: **'The Light Surgeons'**.

The Light Surgeons have three core

members, having experienced a few line-up changes since their inauguration three years ago. **Chris Allen**, founder member, is the most outspoken of the three. As we sit in their Shoreditch studio, he is the last to join the circle, busying himself with phone calls, cups of tea, hot snacks and long roll-ups. Smart, sharp and amicable – like the others – Chris was initially trained in graphics. He's 26 and combines an almost visionary enthusiasm with the realism of experience.

The Light Surgeons project started off at London weekly **Sunday Best** before moving on to the legendary **Blue Note**, where they worked on pretty much all of the main nights. **Metalheadz, Mo Wax, Ninja Tune** and **Wall Of Sound** were among the Surgeons' resident projects. Thematically, these events tie in with Chris' musical heritage – while not a purist, he acknowledges hip hop, jazz and

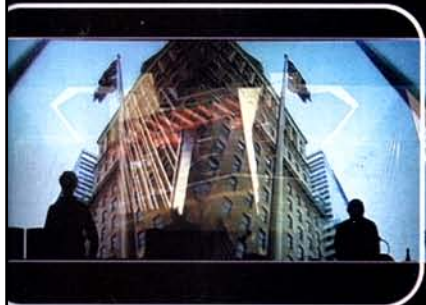
funk as being the spark to his musical fire. This street beat background had a profound and direct effect on The Light Surgeon's technique.

"We're not the first to do what we're doing," he says, "but stylistically we definitely were unique. I liked what **Vegetable Vision** did technically but I'm not into those ravey, flashy strobe visuals – we have an attitude that is about pushing a medium forward, not mystifying it. If someone's got a really amazing rare funk record they often won't tell the other DJs what it is. That's an understandable but unhealthy approach."

In The Spotlight

This 'share and share alike' mentality was applied to popular culture in the same way that hip hop had used its musical predecessors. Using everything from cult

Words: JOE CURTIS



films to instruction manuals, The Light Surgeons took the sample-based music aesthetic and applied it to the visual experience. This innovation got them a lot of press at the time, most notably in *The Face*, *SleazeNation*, and even *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. Numerous lighting crews took this fresh attitude on board, cementing The Light Surgeons' importance to the scene. They went on to perform cosmetic surgery on live acts like **The Sneaker Pimps**, **The Propellerheads**, **Corner Shop**, **Unkle**, **Roni Size** and **The Scratch Perverts**, as well as collectives such as Brighton's **Big Beat Boutique**.

James Price joined the Surgeons during this period. He's a real still-waters-running-deep kind of a character, softly spoken and very relaxed, but just as enthusiastic as the other members. His background is in fine art, but his perceptions and definitions of the medium began to shift while he was studying in Newcastle. "I got drawn to what I'm doing here by getting involved in the free party scene with all-too-poor visuals most of the time," he says. "I also moved from painting into using computers to get a layered effect. There's no reason why it can't be as involved or as meaningful an art form as painting."

Chris, as usual, is a little more blunt: "If you put our work in a gallery it would piss all over a lot of what's in there."

His comment is hyperbolic, but it reflects the Surgeons' concerns about the stigma that still seems to apply to 'visuals'. "Quite a few promoters are shocked by the budgets," says James. "When you're doing a club night, you have to set up, pack down, and work all night. The promoter will still expect to pay less for you than they give a DJ who plays a two-hour set."

We can't put the promoters in the dog house too much for this attitude – it's safe to say that DJs put more bums on seats than lighting crews. But it is indicative of the detailed pecking order that sound and vision slide into. The Surgeons explain that **Gilles Peterson** didn't want their services when he was playing. "Gilles is one of my favourite DJs," smiles Chris, "but he just likes playing in a dark club. That's fair, I completely understand that."

Such situations have a positive flipside, though. "A lot of people are amazed at how much we can enhance their performance," says James. Let's be fair, apart from a few

notable exceptions (**Groove Armada** and **Underground Resistance** spring to mind), dance music in the flesh doesn't entertain the eyes on anything like the scale it exercises the ears. What the Surgeons try to do is help with that element of theatre, citing sources like shadow shows and Elizabethan board-creaking as central influences on their eye candy.

Life On Film

Cut to the Onedotzero digital film festival in Stockholm. An international who's who of multimedia creativity looks intently at a pitch-black projection screen. Sounds emanate from the muffled darkness – traffic, car horns, conversation, weather, each disappearing as quickly as they came. A heavy, lazy break rattles across the room, followed by moody analogue bass noises. On screen, colours slowly build into collages of popular culture. Digital spirals shine onto a central whirlpool that spits out everything from architectural carousels to a comatose **Lou Reed**.

A man's voice slips from the speakers, telling his story: "I've lost everything I got. I'm from Bronx New York... I'm out here without a pot to piss in. You trust somebody, and they play you like a violin." At that moment, word, music and image coincide – heart-rending violin strings soar above the bass noises while a collage of faces pebbledashes the fabric. It's minimal **Moby** without the didactics, or perhaps **Portishead** without the homogeneity. Whatever it is, it's breaking new ground.

Music has always been an important part of the Surgeons' work. A recent international tour saw them work as performers in their own right under the moniker **AV-OP**. Central to that show was original music: **Jude Greenaway** (aka **Scanone**) is the newest recruit to the Surgeons. He's 26 and as modest and eloquent as the others. Trained in graphics, film and animation, he's been DJing for 10 years and making his own music for two. His efforts are now feeding into the collective to great effect. He describes his influences as originating in '89 hardcore, then moving into drum 'n' bass. From there the tempo has slowed a little into electro-related and hip hop-influenced breaks.

Today, despite being indoors, he's dressed in a heavy coat, big hat and wry smile. Maybe he's just sensitive: the music he's been making would certainly corroborate that theory. As with all the best music, it's difficult to

pigeonhole – in terms of beats it ranges from breaks and trip hop to electro and tougher sounds. Tight basslines wobble under reverberating drums and subtle melodies. But the most striking thing about the tunes is the fact that they involve narrative. Running over the top of the breaks and cuts are interviews recorded on the road. Three of the tunes are being given a limited release as a three-tracker, the 'Down and Out EP', due out in April.

The first tune, 'So You Know', charts the fortunes of a man waiting for a work permit in Vegas and begging in the interim. The music behind mixes a warm bassline and koto with a jazzy break. The second track, 'Penny In My Pocket', is the strongest on the EP – the interviewee is truly, soundly impoverished, and the relationship between words and music is seamlessly symbiotic. The final tune, '186,000 MPS' is more upbeat, a lunatic rambling about black holes and interstellar travel. The subject rabbits over a more perky electro break, and there is even a Start-Trek-style pitch slide in the middle of the track.

The Light Surgeons are not leaving their club roots. Their tunes are a breath of fresh air, that rare music that allows itself to make a clear observation. "I've always been fascinated with abstract stuff, ambiguous stuff, letting people reading into it what they will," Chris admits. "But it's much more challenging to actually say something. Everything is becoming so internet and TV based, so one-on-one (or one-on-none), that people want to go out and have a group experience, hear other peoples' stories, raise some questions."

Don't cringe – while the speakers run through the big themes of love, loss and human nature, the tone is observational, not Citizen-Smith style finger wagging. The boys are moving from being DJ wallpaper to genre-stomping creatives. A lot of people have seen the Light – but to understand it you have to listen, too.

The Light Surgeons present 'Down and Out EP' by Scanone is released on Make It Better Recordings on April 18. They operate at Fabric Live once a month – call 020 7490 0444 to check details. AV-OP will be performing as part of the Onedotzero festival at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts on April 27 (0207 930 0493)

SCANONE

