



HEAD LIGHTS
by the
babylonian pigpen
call DOUG 528 4391



LET THERE BE LIGHT

ALASDAIR C MITCHELL salutes The Fallen Angels' in-house light show guru DOUG McCULLOUGH, who, in the process, gained accolades for his own psychedelic art

"The first time I saw a full psychedelic light show was in the summer of 1967 at The Ambassador Theatre in Washington, DC. It was fantastic! A group of light show artists from San Francisco had been hired to set up an elaborate light show at this huge old-style movie theatre. All the seats had been removed and a stage had been created where the movie screen used to be. White cloth had been draped around the stage and extended out around the sidewalls. The ceiling was super high so the available screen area for projections was enormous. There was a large balcony where all of the light show equipment was set up to front project on this huge wrap-around screen. All kinds of projected images were playing simultaneously – superimposed on top of each other. I remember thinking how cool this was... and that I immediately understood exactly how it was being done. From the time I was in elementary school, I had always been the kid who would be given the task of running film or slide projectors so I had an innate grasp of the technical aspects. "I started doing impromptu light shows for my friends. We'd be at a party at someone's house, and just turn off the lights and start creating psychedelic lighting effects on the ceiling along with music that we liked (like Spirit, Buffalo Springfield, The Doors, etc). At this time I would use a single slide projector with abstract coloured 35mm slides to reflect off of a small pad of mirrors that I could hold in my hands and control the motion with the music (imagine taking the small square mirrors off of a mirrored ball and gluing them onto a foam rubber pad). I began to develop techniques which allowed me to visually interpret the music with a surprisingly high degree of control. It was like playing along with the music in light and colour. But it was just something I would do for fun, to entertain friends. However, some of the basic techniques that I developed were a precursor to the more sophisticated visuals that I was later able to achieve with laser scanning."In high school I attended St. Stephens college preparatory school. I grew tired of the types of bands that were being hired for our school dances, and to remedy the situation I joined the student organisation that selected bands – it was actually called The Hop Committee! So in '68 I was able to persuade other members of the committee to hire a particularly good band called December's Children (who were somewhat modelled after The Fallen Angels and even covered some of their songs in their sets). After deciding on the band, the next question was how to decorate for this dance. I brought up the idea of having a psychedelic light show, but all of our funds were going to the band. I offered to create a light show for free as long as I could use various projectors at the school. I remember everyone being astonished at my offer with expressions like 'Do you really think you can do this?' My confident nature won out, and we started planning. From the science department I got two overhead projectors – one for liquids and one for large op-art transparencies that could be moved by hand with the music. I also got four 35mm slide projectors and one 16mm movie projector. Since we were steeped in the prevailing anti-Establishment politics that prevailed during those turbulent times, I chose a tongue-in-cheek name for our light show, namely The Babylonian Pigpen. This weird name was inspired by a book by a radical black leader Eldridge Cleaver, titled Soul On Ice, where he described Washington DC as 'the pigpen of Babylon'. Thus The Babylonian Pigpen Light Show was born!The actual show with December's Children was a big success. People were amazed with what we had done. The band members came back and asked us to perform with them at upcoming gigs. One of the students at the show put me in touch with his older brother who promoted dances at a local church that featured bands like The Fallen Angels. So the work started flowing. We started doing shows, first with projectors that we would rent from local audio-visual companies and then with our own equipment which we would purchase with the meagre proceeds (I think we were getting \$50-60 a night). In '68 we were asked to do a church dance with The Fallen Angels. At first I flatly refused, saying that our light show just wasn't up to the level of their music. I always tried to have the visuals in our shows go with the music so that we complimented what the band was doing. But I had so much respect for The Fallen Angels that I didn't want to do anything that was less than what their music demanded. Nevertheless, the other members of the light show (who were all my best friends at school) were finally able to talk me into doing the gig. "Although the show didn't meet my own artistic standards, it was extremely successful with the audience. And most importantly, Jack Lauritsen came back after the show and told me how much the band was impressed with the way that our projections actually followed their music. Jack handed me his business card and told me about a gig that they were playing for an anti-war rally in downtown DC and to give the event organiser a call about doing a light show with The Fallen Angels. WOW! As you might imagine, I was elated!"We changed our name to The Babylonian PigPen Light Obbligato to distinguish our shows from the run-of-the-mill psychedelic light shows that were cropping up all over. And we began performing a lot of shows with The Fallen Angels at local concerts and dances. We used to work up special imagery just for their shows, like creating custom slides to introduce each band member. And of course, we had a special 'feel' for their music so that we could precisely follow abrupt changes in their songs (like 'Look At The Wind' or 'Signed DC'). This was a great time, and it lasted up until the Fall of '69 when all of us in The Babylonian Pigpen headed off in different directions to start college. Coincidentally, The Fallen Angels were to break up soon thereafter. I came back to town for their show at a Georgetown rock club called The Emergency. It was a great performance, but sad because the band had no future bookings beyond it. Little did I know that would be their last gig.

"In Winter of '70 I managed to persuade the student committee at my college to book a concert featuring my light show and a top-notch band from Washington, DC who I had worked with many times. This band was Claude Jones, a spin-off from The Reekers – the original Hangmen (of 'What A Girl Can't Do' fame). I had really wanted to book The Fallen Angels, but since they weren't available, I picked the next best band."In '72 I performed a live light show at The Smithsonian Institute as part of an 'Expanded Cinema' programme. The show was quite advanced in its use of quadrasonic sound – mixing between recordings and a live performance by Jack Bryant. At first he was reluctant to perform on his own, but eventually he grew more comfortable with the idea. I put together a very eclectic soundtrack with the natural sounds of birds, Gabor Szabo, The Mahavishnu Orchestra, Santana, Spirit, yogic meditation breathing, and four original songs by Jack which he performed live at the event. The show was extremely well received by a very sophisticated audience who were there solely to experience the art. The tickets were \$15 or \$25 which was a very high admission in those days; we got a \$100 honorarium."This whole light show was conceived to visually interpret the music, giving me the opportunity to craft imagery specifically for each of Jack's songs. 'When A Child Is Born' featured an innocent baby surrounded by a multi-image collage of urban life. 'Life Is A Round' featured intricate mandalas. 'And When Your Time Has Come' featured a multi-image treatment of classical artwork (such as Gustave Dore's drawings for 'Paradise Lost' by John Milton), and finally, 'Heavenly Seas' featured cloud-like imagery intermixed with amorphous lumia effects. "One of those in attendance was the producer of The Washington Theatre Group who operated a fairly renowned theatre in DC. He liked our performance so much that he booked us for a month-long run during the Summer of '73. However, since we were performing almost every night, Jack's songs were played from tape for those shows.

"Being exposed to The Fallen Angels was a great inspiration for me. I think that The Beatles really revolutionised pop culture by somehow setting the example for personal creative expression. It was no longer just the domain of a select group of artists and performers but something that was available to everyone."The Fallen Angels were an example of just how creative contemporaries of mine could be. They were from the same neighbourhood, so to speak. Seeing them create and perform really empowered me to follow my own creative vision of expressing music with light."

For more on Doug's pioneering adventures in light and sound, visit www.lasershowdesign.com