

U2 - 360°

Willie Williams: The Visionary

Interview by Steve Moles

The August-September issue of L&SI will feature a major review of U2's 360° tour, which our touring reporter Steve Moles visited at venue No. 3 of the tour, the Stade de France, Paris. Following his visit, he spoke with Willie Williams – the leading creative force behind U2's live show designs since the early 1980s, and one of the world's most sought-after lighting and set designers – to get his view of this remarkable production . . .

Steve Moles: Let me preface these questions by saying that Mark Fisher, Frederic Opsomer and Jake Berry between them have given me a good overview of the evolution of this show, from a stated desire to play stadiums in the round, through the Theme building at LAX, to where you are now. They all cite you for the original concepts and as motive force.



Willie Williams

Willie Williams: All good, though it should be said that the goal of playing in the round wasn't a brief from the band. My primary goal for this tour was to move U2 on from the "big video backdrop" which they pioneered from ZooTV / Pop onwards, and has now become the biggest cliché in live performance today. The trouble is though, having thrown away the most powerful tool you have, what do you replace it with? A painted backdrop? Hardly. When I thought about the backdrop being a grandstand full of excited punters, it started to feel like this might be a way forward.

SM: This production is a sum of parts; as your role is so pivotal to the resultant whole, could you comment on the contributions made by each of the various suppliers. Specifically Barco/Innovative Design, PRG, Stageco, Tait Towers, Brilliant Stages and XL Video?

WW: Barco/Innovative Design - Frederic Opsomer has been crucial to my LED design work since PopMart. My relationship with him has allowed the realisation of some truly new and interesting propositions, from the PopMart screen to the George Michael 'Ski Slope' to Mi-Sphere and so on. It was Frederic who sought out Chuck Hoberman and proposed that we incorporate an expanding LED screen into the show.

PRG have provided a solid foundation which has allowed me to design the lighting system with confidence, knowing it will be taken care of worldwide. The arrival of the "Icon II" as I choose to call it, was a happy coincidence (more on this later).

Stageco, Tait and Brilliant were appointed to their various tasks by Mark Fisher and have each excelled. Hedwig [de Meyer, of Stageco] was very helpful early on in giving me confidence that this wasn't just a lunatic fantasy on my part.

XL's major contribution has been, once again, to provide a new financial model for how these ambitious and highly expensive custom LED screens can be made. Any vendor can provide cameras and switching, but XL's financial investment is what has made this possible.

SM: You elected to use just one moving light, the Bad Boy, for the stage. Was this a case of the right product appearing at the right time, or did you approach PRG directly knowing they were working on a successor to Icon?

WW: It happened largely because it was an appropriate product which came along at exactly the right time. It's usually sensible not to put all your eggs in the basket of a first generation new product (though I seem to have made a habit of doing so video-wise), so I did the research and came out convinced that (aside from having a name so embarrassing that I won't ever say it) this unit stood as good a chance of winning as you're ever likely to have.

The brightness was the main appeal, providing the chance that it might be bright enough not only to wash a stadium but to create readable gobo textures onto a stadium audience. I also liked the fact that it is a very specific fixture. It was created with an application in mind and all the elements of the fixture work towards that - i.e. large-scale events, probably outdoors. It isn't overrun with extraneous features or fiddly bits that might need additional maintenance. It's a 21st century VL2 / Icon, without ideas above its station.

SM: Large amounts of your lighting resources were used for architectural functions. It's easy to visualise how a Big Lite would perform atop the structure, we've seen what these lights are capable of outdoors many times, but gauging the impact of instruments such as the DWEs and the ripple lights Dave Smith made for you is a different matter: No-one has ever used them in such an application before; shining through from the cigar to penetrate the expanded screen, or just directly into space above the structure; this was high impact stuff. How do you model for that?

WW: I suppose the only yardstick is experience. That said, as far as the "Icon II" was concerned, I did want to see an outdoor demonstration before being convinced that this would do the job. Rather enigmatically, Robin Wain managed to borrow Wembley Stadium for a night, so we set up some fixtures - one of everything and six Icons - to see how they held up. We were getting



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quite a good stadium wash out of the six fixtures, so I figured with 200 we should be OK.

The same comparisons are impossible with custom fixtures, but the same principle applies - think about what you know works and extrapolate from there. The first version of the ripple drum was a 4K Xenon, which I looked at but didn't feel would cut it, so we went up to 6K. Would I have preferred a 12K? Yes of course, but ultimately you have to find the point on the graph where functionality, tourability and budget collide.

SM: Pixel cluster LEDs in the stage decks, and the LEDs within the Polyps: what make are the former and justify your selection? Did Tommy Voeten of 1212-Studio develop the U2BE specifically for this show? If yes what were your criteria?

WW: The LED clusters were custom-made, but this was largely a factor of cost and suitability. Nothing already in existence was bright enough and the right shape to fit in the polyps, so Frederic bit the bullet and had them manufactured in the space of about a month. The stage LEDs are more marker lights than a big effect. We really did the LED stage ring look to death on the last tour, so this was really just a nod to show we cared. Mostly it came down to budget again.

SM: Winky [a.k.a. James Fairorth of Tait Towers] explained how changes and additions, large and small (Large - the completion of the B stage ring: Small - the umbrellas, the window slit for Dallas) have been made since the start of rehearsals. That to me is part of the rehearsal process, it's not your or Mark's role to try and predict how a back line crewman might wish to customise his environment, or how a playing area will impact on the band as they adjust to it. You can't micro manage within the context of something so huge. Do you establish contingency planning for such things with your client? And is the ability to respond quickly and willingly to such things an expectation you have of a set builder?

WW: I learned a long time ago that whereas the creation of a lighting or set designer is necessarily different from one show to the next, many departments involved in a production thrive on consistency. It is completely normal to see identical sound systems on many different tours, but to see an identical stage set would raise eyebrows. Consequently, a decent set or lighting designer needs to be flexible and expect to reinvent the wheel every time and it can come as a shock to find that not everyone on the tour finds it easy to cope with change. Far from designing with easy contingency in mind, I have long found that producing a highly integrated design with an unassailable aesthetic is the best defence against erosion by over-zealous production managers, accountants, carpenters etc. Extraneous frilly bits become the first port of call for attack by the assorted forces of darkness.

I usually wear a button bearing the legend "Less is More" which I appreciate might suggest a certain irony under current circumstances, but it really is my M.O. even today. When you look at the design of the 360 show, or PopMart, or George Michael, of course they are huge, complex productions but at the same time they are in essence very simple. If you wanted to lop a bit off to save money or make load out easier, you'd be hard pressed to find an easy target.

On the current U2 tour there were some minor rehearsal changes, but in reality it only took the backline techs a couple of days to settle in. Seeing it on paper they had been very concerned at effectively being behind the band as their task is exceptionally complex, but the reality is working well and they have been extremely positive. It was the robustness of the design which kept it safe from potential alteration due to pre-match nerves until everyone had had a chance to see it for real and understand how it all worked. The biggest imposition was the arrival of the umbrellas, but even these have eventually proved to be a big hit with the gents in underworld - it's not often that the deployment of rain-protection gets a standing ovation from the crowd.

SM: Tom Krueger does a fine job, and I like the style; but I know from past interviews that you have strong ideas on video content and live feeds. Give your reasons for Tom's presence?

WW: Due to the constraints of touring budgets and the lack of attention given to the task, live concert iMag can often end up looking like 70s television. An understanding of rock touring and the eye of a great live director rarely coexist in the same human being, so in 2001, I experimented with dispensing with the role of director. Instead I just took feeds from four cameras, one for each band member, and relayed them continuously to four separate screens above, in black and white. Essentially, I put the engineering rack on display rather than having an expensive person put it through expensive equipment to make it look less interesting.

I really thought I'd found the future and that this is how I'd do iMag for U2 forever, but taking it out again in 2005 it already seemed like the idea had run out of gas to some extent. We got away with it, but I knew that next time round we'd need to find someone to take the ball and run with it. Happily, Tom Krueger appeared in our lives when he was the DoP for the U23D movie. He had a fresh take on shooting a live rock show and more importantly I could see he had the complete trust of the band when it came to making them look good on screen.

Via a lengthy process of lies, deception and broken promises, I managed to persuade Tom to come on tour with us and I have been absolutely delighted with the result. He and Stefaan Desmedt ("Smasher") have found a process between the two of them which is producing extraordinary camera pictures and, better yet, I know that I would not have been able to achieve this by myself. Sometimes the style is actively at odds with the 'rules' that we have developed over the years as to how best to shoot U2, but it is really working and bringing a new energy to the screen.

SM: You are passionate about the screen; you and I exchanged emails about the LED screen cul-de-sac around the time of the Led Zep reunion. Courtesy of Fred Opsomer you have a new platform that transcends that particular conundrum - it's visually light years beyond the cliché screen and band formula. In your own words, what does the screen (mechanical) and its pixel system (video) offer you in creative terms?

WW: The screen on the 360 tour offers the opportunity to create a huge visual 'object' in the centre of the performance area, which is a hybrid of physical staging, lighting, video content and camera pictures. Some of the time it is hard to figure out exactly what you are looking at, as there are also LEDs on the inside surface of the screen and lights contained within.

SM: Apologies - I was so dazzled by the production as a whole I paid scant attention to video content. Beyond the obvious Desmond Tutu statement, the International Space Station dialogue (was that your idea?), and Aung San Suu Kyi, the only thing I noticed was the clock/time references between songs. Who produced all the content for you, and what's your thinking behind it?

WW: I'm delighted to hear you say that you don't remember much specific video content as it has been my express goal to create a show which moves away from making a centrepiece of this now very clichéd form. The 'statement' pieces come from the band, usually from Bono, though the Aung San Suu Kyi protest was Edge's idea. There's a new segue piece which situates Sunday Bloody Sunday firmly in Iran, the idea for which again came from Bono. The clocks are mine and are just there to raise an abstract question. The idea may become more specific or it may go away altogether. These days I find myself much more interested in questions without answers, and indeed answers without questions.

SM: This is a band unafraid to step into new territory. How lucky you are. How do they express their excitement and enthusiasm for such a venture?

WW: U2's restlessness is one of their greatest assets and it is a trait I share with them. They just wouldn't be able to see the point of going to all the trouble of touring a show which wasn't entirely new and ground-breaking. I have to say that I sympathise, and on some tours we've done better at this than others. It might seem like a daunting task to have to reinvent the wheel every time but it certainly beats the alternative. As Bono is fond of saying, "It's easy to be average."

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