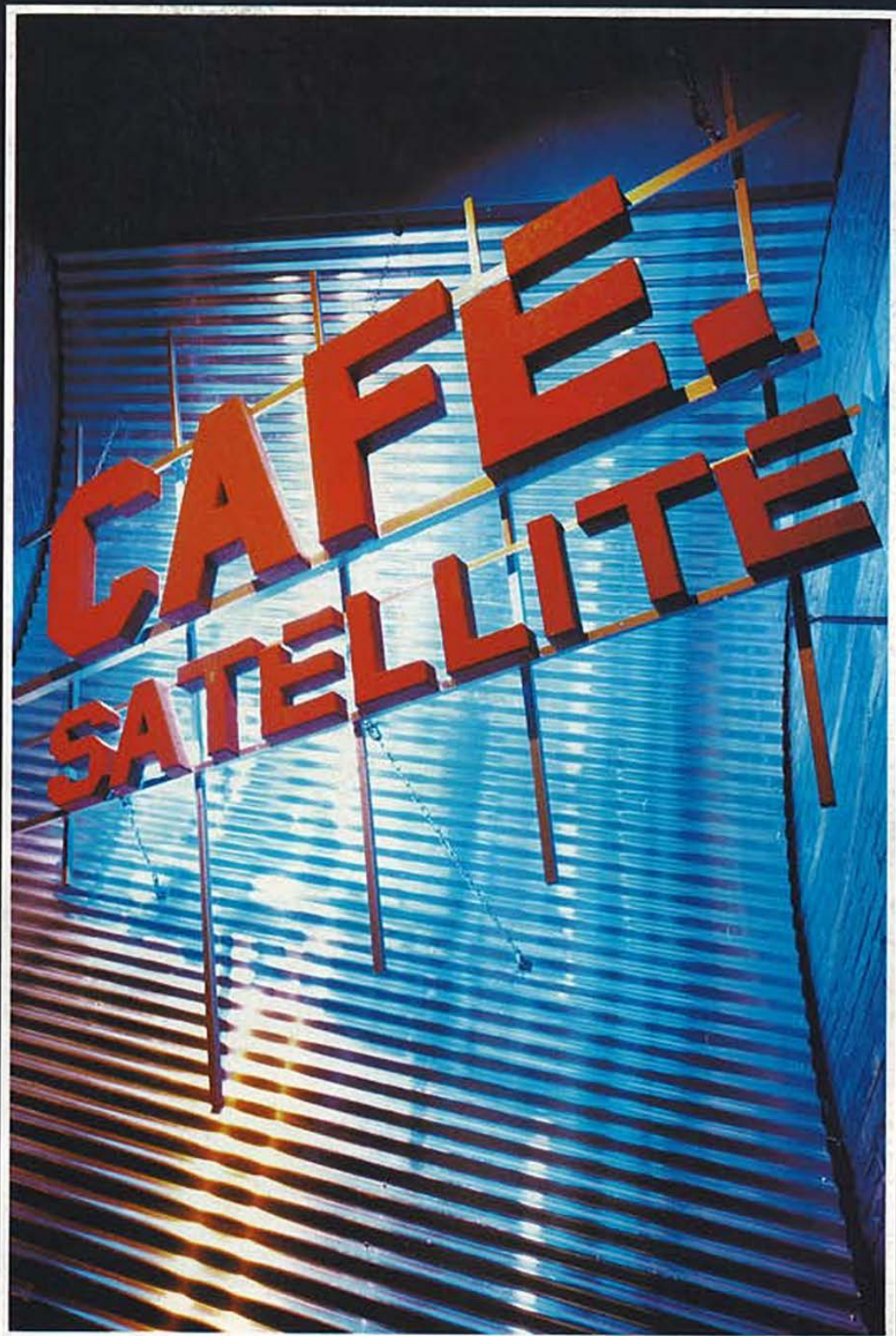


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Cafe Satellite - the latest in London's entertainment - see feature this issue.



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Meteorolites' Macroscopics

John Offord visits Meteorolites Productions' Stevenage base and talks to Ronan Willson.

Ronan Willson - the man behind Meteorolites Productions - has an intrinsic love of equipment. "I still go on the road and have a hands-on attitude," he said. In truth, that is something of an understatement. What he really loves to do, and his real forté, is to create and bring into full working action those massive, intriguingly designed and highly dramatic sets and lighting rigs that are part and parcel of major rock and heavy metal tours.

And when he gets down to describing a set, he fully enjoys explaining how all its various and complicated elements work, and where they fit into the scheme of things as far as the show itself is concerned.

The story of Meteorolites, alias Ronan Willson, is another of those fairly regular scenarios in the lighting and sound business - of growth from the garage workshop to a major operation. But along the way, every tale has its highly individual characteristics, and the Meteorolites route from its disco beginning to six-figure world-touring production sets and other allied business is as interesting and exciting as any.

Ronan Willson started "dabbling" in the business when he arranged disco gigs at his college. "Quite simply, whilst having plans for art school and picking up extra A levels, I needed money and did some work for the local student unions. We became a support act for many of their events, and I found I could actually earn my living fairly easily," he explained.

From providing a couple of mics, the activity expanded to the provision of a complete package of equipment and actually running events. A few months down the line and his stock of equipment was also earning income from hire.

Concurrently he was also working part-time for a company in the electronics field - who rather appropriately manufactured noise measurement equipment! "I remember how I used to count how many weeks I had to work to earn enough to buy my first sound-to-light unit from Pulsar," he said.

AC/DC Stage Set

The original set was first used for AC/DC's US Summer Tour in 1986, but it has been substantially modified and re-designed for the group's forthcoming World Tour.

It comprises a series of connected walkways and ramps of various heights standing on 13 perspex pillars. Built into the set are four elevators and a number of highly dramatic special effects - but you'll have to see a show to find out what they are! A dressing room area is built in, as is all the back-line equipment, which is therefore all invisible to the audience.

The set requires a stage of 64' x 44' excluding the downstage thrust and crowd barrier which adds a further 10 feet to the front. All sections clip together for rapid assembly, and when dismantled pack into 13 'meatracks' and six flight cases requiring 70 feet of truck space - about 1½ artics.

On the road there will be a three-man crew to assemble the set and operate the special effects.



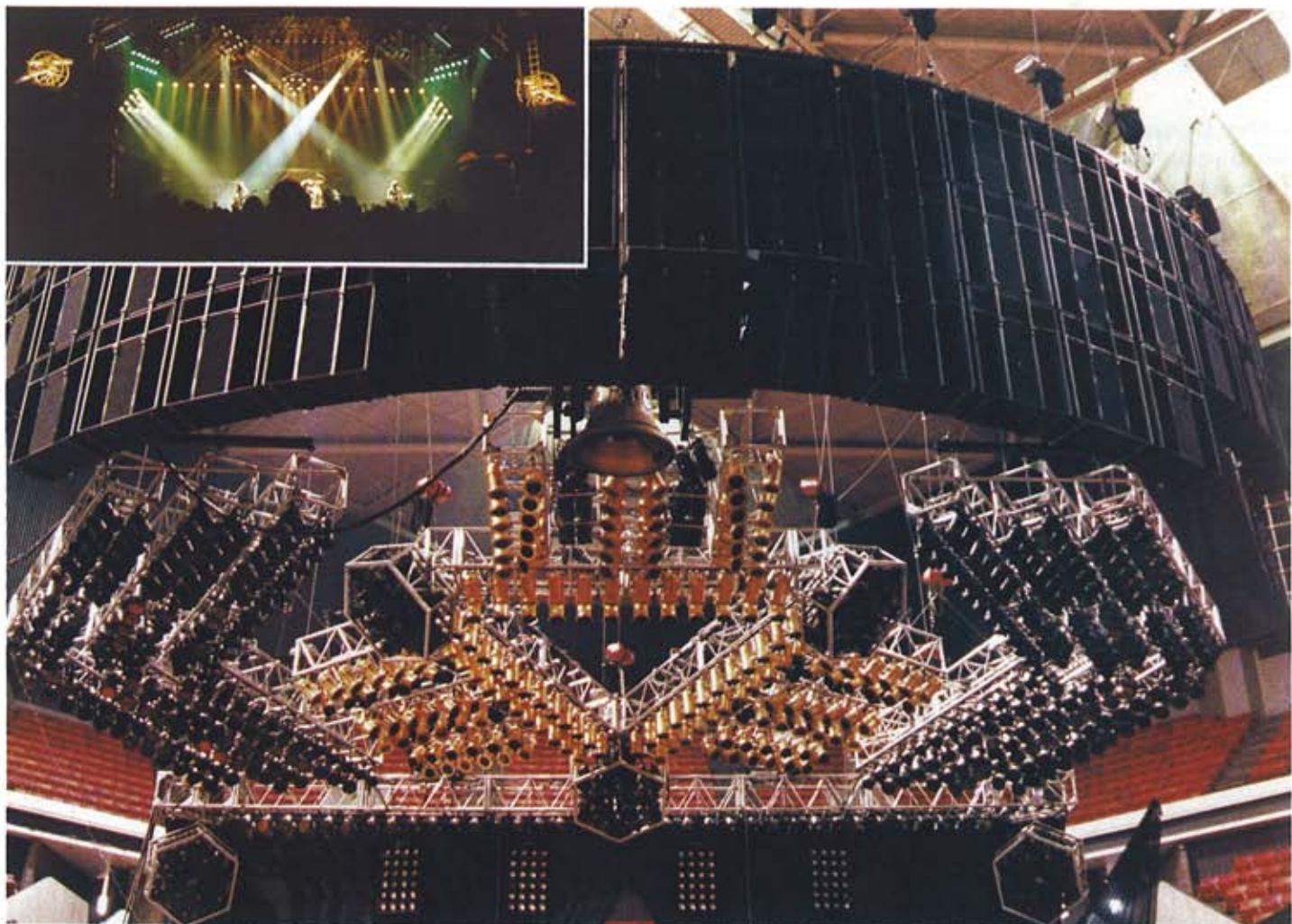
'Judas Priest' at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1980.



Ronan Willson (left) with Tony Panico and a model of the set for AC/DC (see story, left).



The elaborate and pioneering rig for Iron Maiden during construction in a rented warehouse in 1983. The rig had its own ground support gantry, just visible in this picture.



The rig for AC/DC's 1983 North American Tour in 1983 pictured at the Omni in Atlanta. The 1000-lamp structure included five hexagonal 'pattern pods', each containing 12 Par 64's and 24 Par 36's, which could be illuminated in various formats. Inset picture shows the concert in action.



'Monsters of Rock' in action at Castle Donnington in 1984 with an 1800-lamp rig that required over one megawatt of power. Pictured below is the eight-foot long model of the set.



Having decided lighting rather than sound would be the area he would concentrate on, a decision also influenced by the capital costs involved, Meteorlites set out into the pro field. Via several lock-up garages, ten years ago at the age of 23 Ronan Willson rented a shop unit, and the business took on a "presentability". They've moved twice since then, and in mid-1988 the company will move into its recently purchased freehold premises - a 15,500 square foot complex in the heart of Stevenage's high-tech industrial area.

The background to the strength of the operation has come from two main areas: a major stock-holding of rigging and lighting equipment, and a very close and inspired relationship with design and presentation. Cleverly progressing the two together has seen the establishment of Meteorlites as a major force in the industry. Equipment held is valued at well over £1m, and major projects undertaken involve design, production and logistic knowledge of the highest order.

"When I was 25 I found I was becoming exposed to a wider front," Ronan explained. "Heavy metal lighting was just beginning, and from small club work I moved on to gigs in America, and at this time I became lighting designer for Judas Priest. I think I was the first person to take out a moving system - and an all-silver system."

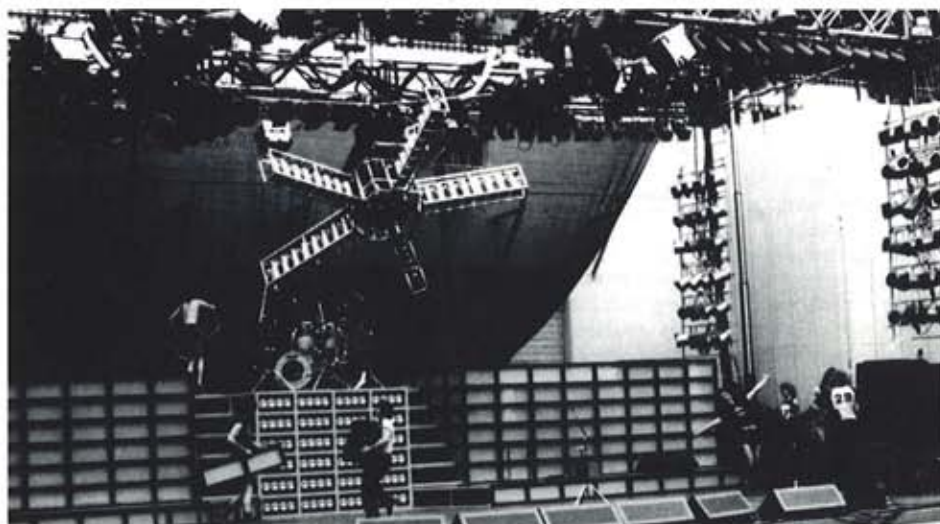
The major development of the Company happened in the later seventies, with an ebb and flow of business across the heavy metal, rock and concert spectrum. "Judas Priest wanted me to go full-time on the road, but I wanted to develop the Company. Iron Maiden were the first group to have my input on this new basis, in 1981.



The Montreux Rock Festival, 1987. Meteorlites have supplied the lighting equipment for this event for the past four years.

"We were still a small company, just four people, with crew and specialist help hired in as necessary. We set up a welding shop to build sets. They were experimental times, and we had an awful lot of small clients - what we called three-tonner tours. In those days a 300-lamp system was a big rig, and now everybody wants them!"

The growth of the operation over the last five years has been phenomenal, and international. Ten permanent staff look after Meteorlites Productions' operation in the UK, whilst a sister operation in the United States, based at Hagerstown near Washington DC, has a duplicate hire stock of lighting control and equipment so that international tours can be organised from either base. Meteorlites Productions 'Limited' and 'Inc' look after all rental and production business, while a new company, Modern-world Lighting, was set up just 12 months ago to take advantage of the experience accumulated, and to look after direct sales of



Building the set for the 1981 US Tour of Judas Priest in the San Diego Amphi-Theater. The drum rise featured 96 aircraft landing lights which could be pattern sequenced, and the moving 'star' effect pulsed to the music beat.



Iron Maiden in rehearsal at Brixton Academy in 1983. (see also picture page 24)



Frankie Goes to Hollywood at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1986.



Part of Meteorlites' extensive storage area - soon to be expanded when the company moves into its new 15,500 square foot industrial and office complex.

materials and systems across the complete lighting spectrum. It is based with Meteorlites in Stevenage.

Ronan Willson's and his team's design skills are probably best known from the work produced for AC/DC since 1983. The sets are landmarks of engineering skill and theatrical surprise. Every set out of the Meteorlites' stable is constructed in modular format to fit trucks and containers, and capable of being repeatedly set up and moved on to major venues world-wide - no matter how intricate the construction. And they are all fully built and set up at the time of first manufacture to ensure everything fits exactly when it comes to the actual concerts.

"We are one of only four or five companies who have the necessary expertise on both sides of the Atlantic, and we've tried to cut out a high quality brand of equipment and service. It means we don't get all jobs, but I feel it puts us into a particular class, and we have a consistent pattern of clients who repeat business," said Ronan Willson.

Gradually the branding of the operation as a heavy metal outfit is being eliminated as they have moved towards middle-of-the-road clients, and an increasing involvement with television has emphasised the trend.

"Our TV involvement began in 1983 when we introduced rock and roll formats to the BBC. We supplied frames, racks and trusses, complete with lamps. Now there's quite

furious competition. Some we win - some we don't."

Equipment has also been supplied for shows such as the 'Late, Late Breakfast Show', 'The Old Grey Whistle Test' and 'Wogan'. "We've also played a large part in bridging the outside broadcast gap between TV and rock lighting, and we've got a bit of a taste for that! Our involvement with Seaside Special from Jersey this summer was a good example of how we've developed into this area of the business," said Ronan Willson.

Meteorlites' latest television project has been 'Meltdown' for Thames TV, where they've taken a fully fledged moving rock system and put it into a studio situation. "Our approach means TV companies can save on rentals with rigs, but we've also had to ensure we haven't trodden on other people's toes, and that we have met all the necessary safety requirements. We are also members of the Society of Television Lighting Designers."

The Company's range of regular work involves everything from major industrial theatre and product launches and across the whole field of concert presentation to television lighting for events like the annual Montreux Rock Festival where they have supplied lighting equipment regularly for the last four years.

Meteorlites is a compact totally family owned and fully independent company in a



Preparing part of the set for AC/DC's coming tour of Europe and Australia.

field where the majority of the competition is in the form of publicly quoted organisations. "It means we are very flexible," explained Ronan Willson, "and we are not tied to particular products. We will provide whatever it takes for a production - the best for the job."

Obviously the hire stock centres on their massive range of rigging and hoists, and they have been instrumental in the design of products - particularly many items now manufactured by James Thomas Engineering. "As a company we were able to road test the prototypes," said Ronan Willson.

Taking it to the final degree of involvement, Ronan Willson has his own miniature 'meccano set' of Thomas Trussing to play with when the next major tour hits the drawing board. It's indicative of the personal involvement that is put into the Company's projects.

As with all successful and expanding businesses, the major problem is often one of time. "At least one day a week I spend looking after the US operation, and an awful lot of my time is now pure business. The big problem is organising how my time is used."

"I now consider going on the road as a bit of a holiday. I can concentrate on just the job in hand and forget business for a while."

Which is probably why he's excited about looking after AC/DC in Australia next year as part of its coming world tour, while back at Stevenage the Company will start to fill up that 15,500 square feet of space...

Key staff at Meteorlites in the UK include **Tony Panico**, operations manager, who oversees all daily operations, and **Tony Slee** who looks after client contact and co-ordination of production. Sales manager is **John Jackson**. Vice-president of the US operation is **Dizzy Gosnell**.

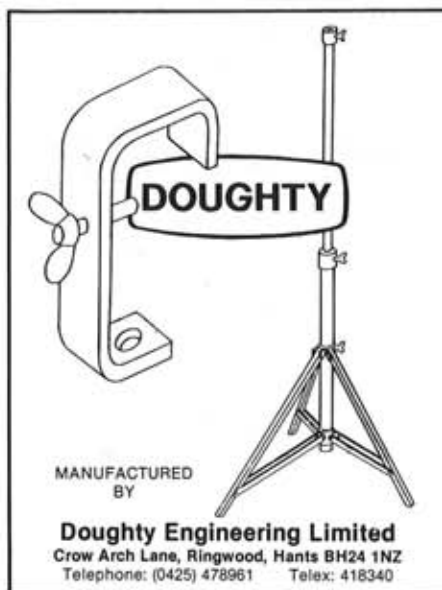


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