

TEMPO-FEEL MOOD

Interview with Mike “OZ” Owen at Elstree Studio (November 12, 2009)

Ei (E): Your name has OZ in between Mike and Owen, so they write Mike “OZ” Owen. How did it start like this? Is it the middle name?

Mike (M): No it’s a nickname from when I was at school. It’s an English thing.

E: Where did you go to school?

M: In Birmingham.

E: Birmingham is where you’re born.

M: In Birmingham, when you are a kid, everybody shortens your second name to one syllable with a Z at the end. If you are Gary its Gaz, or if it’s Bary its Baz, and for some reason everybody calls you by your second name. So, Owen just got shortened to OZ.

E: Right. I thought because your lighting work is magic, so the people call you as the magician’s name. (laughter)

M: No, no, no, nothing likes that. My first tour had a very big crew and there were five Mikes. So, everybody was going like Mike! And then what? What? What? What? There’s five people. We had to go back to our nicknames so I said, “Oh I’m OZ.” That stayed from then. So, that stayed from then.

E: Does the people call you Mike in Japan?

M: Well, in Japan, they don’t. The Japanese are very respectful, I think.

E: We call you Mike-san ...

M: I don’t think Japanese people understand nicknames? It is not an insult or anything, it’s just for fun, you know, nobody call me the nickname. I know the Japanese are very formal. So, that’s okay.

E: Your title is “lighting programmer.” But, when you work with

Masataka-san, your job is maybe more than lighting programmer?

M: I tend to have more active part in the creative process than some traditional programmers might do. You know, the people give each other job titles in this business, but there is no formality to it. It's always difficult to explain what everybody does. That's the interesting thing.

E: I wrote you about how I grow up with going Yuming concerts that you had worked as the lighting programmer. I spent so many years with your work, and I was kind of hypnotized. When I came to New York, the first thing I wanted to do was try to find the education for lighting designer, but I couldn't find it. Was there like a school for lighting production?

M: No, not at all. I'm the generation where there were no schools. I had an e-mail recently from somebody saying I'm taking a degree in Lighting programming. A degree? I'm very old fashioned, so part of me thinks that, even though I didn't reply to this e-mail, well, don't waste your time! This is something you can't learn in a classroom. When I started in the business there were no schools. There were no courses, no media. Now, there are colleges, media schools.

E: What did you study in Birmingham?

M: I went to the Sussex University in Brighton, I was studying physics and math. I started doing lighting there. When I was at school, I did art in my own time. I wanted to go to university. I was kind of good at science, but when I got to the university I thought I'm not really interested in Science anymore. I carry on because I can get a degree, but that's where I started doing lighting. Somebody owned a bar on the university campus, and it had a lot of broken down lighting equipment. A few of us started to use and play with. That's how I started.

E: I saw the concert at Budokan in 1990. Was that your first job in Japan? That's three years after you started Vari-Lite company.

M: That was my first job with Yumi. But, I'd been to Japan before for Paul McCartney.

E: Aha, you were like twenty-five or twenty-six.

M: Maybe even younger, I remember ... (laughter) Yes, Gates of Heaven Tour we did. We rehearsed in Otsu Studio for a long time in the good old days, where we had a month of rehearsals.

E: So how exactly work with Masataka-san? Maybe we can be specific to Transit Tour, for instance.

M: The great thing about working on Yumi's shows is, and the most important thing about any projects I am working with, is that the idea is really strong. That's the starting point. It's like making the movies. When there's a good movie, afterwards the people go "Ah! I want to make a good movie." all we got to do is getting those people. Sometimes, you can get exactly the same people as you in a different project. But if the idea isn't there, they can't make a good movie. So, that's the starting point I mean to always seek. There are so many songs with so many themes. We build from these.

E: Especially for the latest album, did Masataka-san give you the basic color scheme? "Okay, we like to use nostalgic color, or amber color, or yellow."

M: No, he never does usually mention colors. I think he doesn't need to do that because that's restrictive.

E: I was looking up YouTube of Transit Tour and often in an important scene, there are this yellow color comes from time to time. That color's not the starting point?

M: That's not from Manta (Masataka),

E: That's not the starting point?

M: No, not at all, that's very much later. The starting point for Transit was the set design. It had elements in it. Kind of obvious. There was an airplane, spaceship, and I started think well okay there's something going on here. I started to get a little bit of the music and, and then the name of the Tour, which is Transit, and so right from the beginning before I even went to Japan and talked to Manta. It was knowing his thematic idea, way of working, it was obvious it was about travel. The great thing about Manta's ideas is they allow a lots of freedom so when its about travel and transport, so that could be travel not only in space but in time so that's where the nostalgia comes. There's a lot of different possibilities.

E: How long were you actually in Japan for Transit Tour?

M: I was there for two or maybe three weeks.

E: Three weeks before you meet with Masataka-san or do you have a

meeting on Skype before?

M: It is Hayashi-san, who's the lighting designer, really handles all the pre-production. He puts in place the design from the meetings. My part is when I arrive in Japan, I start building the details in the music and in the song structure.

E: Do you know the song in the middle of the concert called "Jiyu e no Tsubasa"?

M: I always get the English translation and my memory is terrible.

E: "Wings to Freedom", you made the lighting on high above, make them slice shape, kind of look like an airplane wing. That sort of specific idea is your work?

M: Yes. When I heard that the theme was Transit and Transport, I try to think of different ways for the lighting effects to suggest movement, travel and transport, moving in time or moving in space. Its kind of funny but sometimes I'm not sure the audience really gets that, but for me it doesn't matter. Manta and I like the effects that are closely linked to the mood and fit the music but also have a traveling kind of feeling to it.

E: The atmosphere generated in each scene was really good.

M: That's very closely related to the music, the feel of the music and the tempo of the music. I think if anything, that's how I bring my creativity to the programming of the lighting, through the right pace and the right mood.

E: Is it easier because you've worked with them for a long time?

M: Its always easier when you find a process and a team of people.

E: And a strong theme.

M: That's the most important thing always, on any project, that the idea and theme is strong. If they understand where you are going, then everybody can do their job and become part of the process. You wouldn't believe how often that doesn't happen and then everyone goes off in different directions and it all falls apart. That's why Yumi's shows are so successful. Everyone one understands the driving theme even though Manta leaves a lot of freedom. He doesn't have to explain everything precisely, he wants the freedom to discover possibilities.

E: I think in Yumi's shows the lighting really stands out. Especially in the Transit Tour the lighting seemed very artfully matched with the music.

M: I hope not too much. Sometimes after a show we are all very happy and sometimes we think it could have been better.

E: How could it have been better?

M: Sometimes it's just my personal taste. But for the Transit Tour I think we nailed it. And I'm sure you'd like to know what the process to nailing it is, but like I've said, it's difficult to explain. Sometimes it's just luck, there has to be a large element of luck. But the theme is really good at creating a lot of possibilities for movement. Manta has lots of different ideas for the shows, some shows start very quiet then build up to a big finish and sometimes it's the opposite way around. Transit has lots of big songs at the beginning and then in the second half, very quiet so the audience can listen to lyrics and ballads. That's a strong idea and a very brave idea but it worked beautifully. So it's just a show that worked very well in the end.

E: Maybe that's why I have an impression of lighting in my memory. For instance, the song about comets. How do you make this kind of shining star lighting?

M: It's just a glass on the surface with a cut design so the light comes through the holes. Lighting these days is getting brighter and stronger, so that's a very bright light in there with tiny beams coming out.

E: You also have to coordinate with a video light source even though that's another person's work?

M: Normally, but these days the technology allows us to run everything together and that's really important.

E: Actually I was curious about how to deal with the balance between lighting department and video departments.

M: It started by being different departments and this is when you need a good director. Often departments will just work separately and it's the director who brings them together. But these days...

E: Here is the image of flexiscreen from B'z show in 2008. The screen is actually three dimensionally moving.

M: I programmed the arena version.

E: Did you work on this show?

M: Yeah, if it's the arena version. The images are actually driven from the lighting desk. We have these things called media servers now. This contains all the images but is controlled from the lighting desk controls. Those color cues work together with video and light.

E: And you also control structural movements of screen?

M: Oh no, we haven't got that far yet. That was a very complex movement.

E: Was this the first time that screen are moving, or kind of bending?

M: Yeah that was the first time anywhere.

E: Here's another image. This is not LCD but the one from Cold Play. The screen is actually shaped as a sphere. It seems like a similar idea with flexiscreen.

M: I think that might even be a media server. Create a projection on a sphere, that's just a 3-D technology problem. The technology exists, to do that from the lighting desk also. I'm doing a show right now that's a two-layer projection, a curtain at the back and a scrim in the center so it's a 3-D projection idea that's technologically very complex. A difficult problem to solve but we solved it. I run both the images and the lighting and the whole picture changes together, so the video and the lighting are all part of the same picture. In a way, this is obvious. If you are in the audience looking at the stage, then of course they're part of the same picture. But, actually it's taken a long time for the technology to enable you to treat it that way. In Transit Tour, we had projectors for a few songs. They were added later in the process because most of that show had still pictures, paintings in the background. I wasn't sure how it was going to work to have moving images as well but if you pick the right song to do it in and the right idea, that works.

E: Was that projectors behind the screen? Vertically positioned.

M: It's a moving light with a projector inside so you can project it anywhere.

E: Will it become more complex in the near future?

M: Well the technology is always improving.

E: As the technology advances the stage design follows?

M: To be honest, I think there is still a lot of work to do. There is still a big change needed in everybody's understanding of what we do in a show. There is still too much of everybody working separately and just figuring out how to make the technology work is a big job and then sometimes you can lose sight of what you're using the technology for because your brain is full of the technology and nobody's really looking at the picture. The next step is in the pre-visualization. We can now program without the real stage, we can program in a computer simulation. Even now it's not great but for the last ten years it's been useless but slowly it's become more realistic so the creative process can happen. The rehearsals are always very difficult, there's never enough time, the venues expensive, the equipments expensive, but if you can remove all that in a computer in a comfortable room, that's the next stage of where the business is going.

E: Going back a little bit in time. When you left Vari-Lite, there you got more freedom in terms of what you do or how you do in the stage production? Regarding to how each department works separately.

M: I talked about this with the Japanese crew because being a freelancer in Japan is very unusual. Everybody in Japan works for a company so it's very difficult to understand, but in England everybody is freelance. Nobody works for a company for very long in this business. In the end you always need freedom.

E: You were in the minority in the beginning because you worked full-time at the company (from 1987 - 1995).

M: Yes a very big minority. Vari-Lite was a new company then, it needed full-time people because it was new technology. It needed a strong basis of people to make the equipment work because it was all very new. But after a while the freelance system takes over and the people who gained the expertise in using the equipment go freelance. I found I was just working too hard because it's a dysfunctional business. This business will let you work yourself to death. This business is full of people who have nervous breakdowns, go crazy, get into drugs and there's nobody stopping that. In England you have to pull back and go right, I have to get control of this myself. So I can chose to have a gap here or if I don't want to do a project ...

E: Because I've been to only Yuming Concerts, the stage designer in my mind is always Mark Fisher, and the lighting programmer is you. Is there any other stage designer, or lighting programmer in the field who is as active as you? For instance, Mark Fisher is working almost all shows around the world!

M: (Laughter) He sets up a fantastic organization. I'm always envious to, because of his office full of people.

E: But also, some people call you "guru" ... You must have certain authority by working very long time.

M: Perhaps, perhaps. I'm little bit crazy too. I never try to analyze why suddenly I find doing lighting, because I started off as a clue guy just fixing the lights and putting the lights up. As soon as behind the desk, I was started to think, I was awkward normally verbally, but when I got a lighting desk, oh, this is the language I understand. Actually I can do this, it is a combination of technology and art. I like music, and kind of like tempo-feel mood, all of things about music, and find the way of programming to fit that. It's like if you are writer, if you are good at writing, start writing, people says, "Oh this is good!" But I am not like that at all, but when I'm started to do the light, I got that feeling. I thought this is something I can do. Crazy comes when I probably do too much, when I work too hard. This show I'm doing now, I work for 20 hours a day. But, I can't compromise, I can't stop and go, oh this would do, that would do. I got to go through whole process of trying, and if it doesn't work I sit for an hour, keep trying something comes to fit, and okay now we can go. That's a long process. It's art. These days, I'm trying to do less and less. I'm trying to work very little actually. It's exhausting.

E: How frequent do you want to work, ideally?

M: I was saying that, but actually I am retired now. I come out of retirement to do the show now. I like to look that way. If I do 10 project a year, 6 months maximum to work, 6 months off. Or, 4 or 5 project year would be great. But then, the question of choosing. Some project is long, some are short. If I can choose good one I like, I like to do less.

E: I hope you can work with Yuming forever.

M: Oh yeah I hope so too. You know as I say it's a great process out there to work with Yumi. Normally in this business, sometimes if it doesn't go well, it really doesn't go well. Yumi's never goes really badly. Nothing, not even close (to the bad). I might say, well I am not

really sure about this one. But if, it's a great show still but its just you know, but I often say, you know most artists in most productions would just fire everybody at some point, and if they want to try something new, you got to fire everybody basically and get whole new people. But in a way, you know, because Manta's ideas are so strong and so perhaps he feels he doesn't need to fire everybody, he's getting the results he wants. The team is working very well together and always has done, why not go on forever, yeah. It's up to Yumi in the end, and Manta. It always amazed me that they did as many shows as they do, they are doing a tour and an album every year, that's tough.

E: I mean now they are in their fifties, they are more like you, less working. I think that's good too.

M: Yes, absolutely. And I think the latest album... another thing that's good about Transit, I think from what I heard, the latest album is very successful. So everything came together, the audience is very happy to be involved in something that was successful, and audience always is.

E: By the way, what do you think of this "Piccadilly Circus," the song from the latest album as an English man?

M: What do I think about it?

E: Because you are from here.

M: Oh, I mean Yumings shows always have, that's the interesting thing visually also, there is a lot of different world influences, lots of different visual references, and musical references from all over the world. Different cultures, different musical styles. It was fun, I, we had fun with that.

E: (Looking the clock) Just, maybe almost, almost the interview is over ...

M: I should get going. Where is your train station? When are you going?

E: Its at twelve, a cab will pick me up.

M: If you want, the studio I am working in now, the security is very bad, if you want to walk up with me and have a look.

E: Oh, yeah, that would be great.

M: You can stand in the back, or have a look. Feel free, if you want to

leave, just go ahead.

(starting to walk)

M: It's a 20-minute walk. You don't have any luggage or anything... I need the fresh air and my exercise every day.

E: Yes.

M: I like to walk. Sometimes Yumi and Manta knew me. They bought me a bicycle. We used to do shows at Zushi and I had a bicycle there to go to and from.

E: She wrote somewhere that you always go to work by bicycle.

M: Yeah. (laughter) Because this probably is the job: You're sitting behind your desk all day and my body starts to fall apart. I need to get exercise every day.

E: I only went to Zushi in 1997.

M: Oh yeah?

E: Were you working?

M: I can't remember when I did... I can't remember which...

E: You only did in 2002... last one and the one before last one maybe?

M: No, I think I've done more. I did more than two. I don't quite remember. I sort of designed one of them.

E: Designed?

M: That was a long while ago. I sort of designed ...

E: The set?

M: ... the set, kind of.

E: Do you go like ... where will you be inspired... where does the idea come from? Not only to you, but I mean concepts for you to work. Do you see like be a contemporary art or any art?

M: Well, actually, I see what you mean - no, not at all. They're terrible, really. I don't like art. (Laughter)

E: Oh, thank you, thank you. (Laughter)

M: I hate to say that but sometimes it's terrible. I know it's a strange thing. I don't like museums. I don't like art galleries. I don't like ... they're always so cold, quiet buildings. My idea of art is walking around in Paris or something. I like walking around in the streets.

E: Right.

M: That's my... and I like where I live. We're in Brighton. I live by the sea. Because the weather in England is crazy. Every day the sky is different. That's kind of my...

E: Natural lights.

M: Yeah, yeah. Although the lighting we do is never natural. There's nothing natural about it. I'm not trying to reproduce anything like that. It's a very different... It's difficult to say where the inspiration comes from. I mean, I have very strong feelings about things like colour for example - especially.

E: From the beginning?

M: Hmm, that's actually... at the beginning I don't think I was very good at that. I just ... I used to use the colours very randomly. But now I use them ... I like to think... I chose them very carefully and trying to be very strong. Like saying what you would mean with yellow. I guess that's ... That's kind of obvious. There's a bit of sunshine occasionally and things like that. And Yellow Rolls Royce and ...

E: Yeah, that's the kind of yellow you use, you know. Slightly different yellow. Sensitive.

M: Yeah, what was the Spanish Standing song ...

E: Oh, yeah - "Bueno Adios".

M: Oh yeah, that's it. I remember that was kind of the amber, yellow, warm and ...

E: Yeah, kind of oranges, with patterns.

M: With a sunny kind of ...

E: You know, I went to Dancing Sun Tour more than ten times. It was such fun to watch a centre stage from every direction.

M: It's actually ... to be honest, that centre stage idea was actually quite difficult because there's no scenery. So, you can't put up anything. So the picture has to be all ... it's just spice and I guess the lights have to do things. And sometimes I find that quite hard actually. I don't really like... It's one thing of grown less fond of. Like, just lights doing things. I don't know... sometimes separate from the show or something. But then it's almost... another one. At the end we thought: "Oh, that was a difficult problem to do a circular stage." But we did a good job at the end ... everyone is happy with that. It seems to work. Mark Fisher designed... it was...technically a very difficult job to design a set with so... the supports were very small I remember on that. It was all supported from the floor but not with big white columns getting in the audiences way. It was engineered very cleverly.

E: I just saw the U2 stage design also done by Mark Fisher.

M: That's taking that to the next level. That's huge.

E: The design is more unstable looking, more exciting.

M: Yeah, exactly. That's his thing. I guess that's what he is trying to achieve. That it looks impossible.

(Phone ringing)

M: Hi Mike. Morning. (...) Yeah. (...) Stop. Oh, is it still flickery? I thought, I thought they replaced (...) oh. But it should have been replaced (...) yeah, if you got it up, if you got it up just grab the layer, grab the layer that it caught on and find the speed parameter, and one of the buttons next to ... That it says stop ... Awesome. I am actually on my way right now anyway ...

E: Did you yourself make a DVD for Dancing Sun Tour?

M: Sometimes when I want to make a DVD at a show, it's sometimes very hard work actually. To trying to capture the feeling of it. I am always disappointed in the results - you know.

E: Yes, yes. Me too.

M: That's another interesting thing ... actually I have to say, B'z concert at the Monster's Garage... It was a nice live show. But also, the live DVD was very good, the director had a lot of energy. And for a live

DVD I thought it was very good! It has a lot of energy in it, and a lot of. It wasn't very good in showing the lighting at all or showing the stage, but you know. It was the tour before the one you showed me the pictures of. (B'z in 2007) Oh that's – you should look at that! That's actually, – Hayashi actually likes that one too. It doesn't show the lights very well, but it shows the energy of the show very well.

E: I came to NY 10 years ago in 1998. Until then, I only listen to Yuming. So, I never listened B'z, even they are the Japanese band. But I will check the DVD.

M: That was a fan show. Next one was no fan at all. Very Painful.

E: Because of new tech staff?

M: No, because of the director. There wasn't a strong idea. Nobody drive it. If there was an idea, I didn't understand it. Sometimes although I am a part of creative process, the creative team designs the show first place. They have to be able to tell me what the direction is. I can't work for nothing. Sometimes I work from nothing for a lot of show. Quite often they don't work very well.

E: Do you teach? Are you sometimes invited from the school for lighting degree?

M: Not yet. I actually thought, in my retirement, that's possibility. But, I am not good with the large group of people talking. To be honest, I would rather ride bicycle along the beach, forget all about it. One day, if I find the way. I know Manta, he involved with the school, he teaches. Ayami-san, my clue chief on the show, he teaches too. I like that he's teaching. All about the interesting things in this business could be taught. Could be interesting for kids.

E: What you've done by you is only available in these DVDs, you know?

M: My mother goes mad because I don't take photograph neither. I'm happy of time and memory of our things, and if those memories fade, that's fine. I don't feel the need to have souvenirs all the time.

E: I mean, not for you, but for us ...

M: Exactly. My problem is I don't have many souvenirs. I couldn't show the people very much. I think that's the problem even if I teach, these are difficult to show somebody. They just don't get the feeling. Only way you get that is doing it for real.

E: Do you usually live in London?

M: I live in Brighton. It's two hours from here. One hour to London. On the south coast by the sea. That was another thing about for the reason to go to freelance. If I stay work for Vari-lite, I would have to come and live in London, I really didn't want to do that. I really wanted to stay in Brighton. Keep traveling every day is really hard.

E: If you have 10 projects a year, you have to travel almost once a month. You call it the ideal?

M: Maybe 10 projects are too many. I never counted. Some project is quite short, like couple days. Traveling part, I like it, but not too much. I love traveling to Japan, but the flights kill me.

E: I wish they could freeze us while we are traveling.

M: I love New York too. I often go to New York just by my own too. Although I haven't been there long time. It's, like I said, it's art to me, walking around. I like all Central Park things, downtown, just walking around.

E: Which part do you like in Japan? Mostly you go to Yokohama, Tokyo, or sometimes countryside for rehearsals?

M: I wish we did more countryside more. I like countryside more than town ... (arriving the film studio) so, I apologize in advance if they won't let you in, and normally the security this side is very bad ...