

Kenvin Lyman: Jammin' Over the Rainbow

(1942 – 2011)

by Frank McEntire

*Art is the honey of human experience
gathered on the wings of sacrifice and hard work.*

~ Kenvin Lyman

It was 1968. The Jerry Abrams Headlights light show came to Salt Lake City with Buffalo Springfield. The crew needed a place to stay, and local junior high school art teacher, Kenvin Lyman, offered his place.

“I was amazed by those guys while they tested their equipment and used my walls and ceilings as projection screens,” Lyman recalled during a visit I had with him several years ago. What the Abrams crew saw as playful “psychedelic effects,” Lyman viewed as an alternative art form—using primary light in a Newtonian manner as a mode of expression.

“I’ve always had a high creative metabolism. Finding a dynamic media that could combine my interests in science and art literally electrified me. It was a paradigm shift,” he said. That is when Lyman’s life as an independent artist started to take shape.

In the Light Booth

Developing this alternative art form prompted Lyman to cofound two touring light shows, the Flash and Edison with Mikel Covey, and later, Rainbow Jam with Richard Taylor.

*In my first light show, with my partners Mikel Covey and Harvey Warnke, we attempted to lift the light show out of the “Dark Ages” by creating a central control system ... We only partly succeeded because we hadn’t yet developed a keyboard to control projectors or pushed the graphic system to a higher level. Both of those problems had to wait to be solved in my next light show experience—Rainbow Jam. Flash and Edison made some important technical contributions to light shows and did some exciting shows, including the legendary band Steppenwolf at the Terrace Ballroom in Salt Lake City and Jethro Tull at the Fillmore West in San Francisco.**

* NOTE: All indented, italicized quotes are taken from the writings of Kenvin Lyman. The quotes (with a few grammatical changes for publication), along with rich illustrations and other information, are found at www.theutahkid.com or <http://www.facebook.com/#!/utahkid>. Other quotes are from interviews I had with him in January and February 1999 for an article, “Pixel Perfect,” published the following month in *Salt Lake Magazine*.

According to Lyman, Rainbow Jam “reinvented the light show.” It also reinvented him as an artist. His light show years included performances with The Grateful Dead, Santana, Ike and Tina Turner, Bo Diddley, and many others. Rainbow Jam also performed experimental light shows at Salt Lake’s Hansen Planetarium in the early 1970s.

Without realizing it we had invented a silent musical instrument. Flash and Edison, the first light show I worked on, attempted to carry the light show to the “next” level both aesthetically and technically at which it partially succeeded. Rainbow Jam, the second light show I worked on, built on that success and carried it much closer to that level.

Part of computer graphics’ important “right-brain aesthetics,” Lyman told me, “evolved from these light shows, especially Rainbow Jam, and its discoveries and systematic applications of optical effects and backlighting.” What Lyman called the “left-brain science” of computer graphics, came out of the university environment, with substantive contributions from the University of Utah. “We hung out with the early software innovators at the university and at Evans & Sutherland. These associations helped inform the technical aspects of our work and eventually became part of the molecular structure of computer graphics.”

Christopher W. Baker, a researcher who has written extensively about the history of computer graphics, said Lyman and Taylor created “a look that had a powerful influence on the direction of computer graphics. This look inspired both the programmers writing computer graphics software and the artists using that software to imitate the look.”

The “look” was primarily based on innovative technological and artistic uses of a technique called “backlit art.” Baker credits Lyman and Taylor for being “the first visionaries” to “explore the process systematically even though some methods for producing backlit imagery had been previously tested” by others. Baker described their light show work as “visual music in real time.” Their visual techniques were eventually adopted by the print, broadcast, and film industries. Although not yet given credit in the published history of computer graphics, Lyman’s and Taylor’s new imagery provided a model for developing new visual effects in print and film, such as the glowing sabers in the first *Star Wars*.

According to Baker, their “iridescent halo effects and rainbow diffraction patterns greatly altered the direction of advertising imagery and influenced the field of computer graphics to adopt its surreal lighting techniques.” By the late ‘70s, “with this new imagery as a guide, the left- and right-brained tributaries started to converge.” Their work also shows the impact art and artists have on technology and how the computer is both tool and medium.

The partners eventually went in different directions. Taylor moved to Los Angeles in 1971 to pursue graduate work and then to make TV ads and movies with Robert Abel and Associates, one of the most influential studios in the visual effects industry. Many of Rainbow Jam’s

innovations, especially those using primary light techniques, were quickly adopted by Abel and his team. Taylor's influence on the visual effects (and now gaming) industry out of California can't be underestimated.

Lyman stayed in Utah and formed Dazzleland Studios, where I first met him. He served a prestigious international clientele for the next ten years. His vast business portfolio included television commercials, feature films, and covers for albums, compact discs, magazines, and books. His concert posters, as well as those designed by Taylor, were popular in their day and now collectables (http://saltlakeconcertposters.blogspot.com/2010_09_01_archive.html).

Rainbow Jam had a cult-like effect on visual media in the Seventies and Eighties. "Painting with Light" as we called it in Rainbow Jam, became "Painting with Light on Ektachrome" at Dazzleland Studios and Robert Abel and Associates in Hollywood. Dazzleland was my studio in Salt Lake City and produced work for Print Advertising and Experimental Art. It was the only studio that created images exclusively for the print industry using the "backlit" techniques that sprang from Rainbow Jam.

Robert Abel and Associates, where Richard worked after the Rainbow Jam Days, produced mostly television graphics and commercials. Their influence on the new genre of Science Fiction films, starting with Star Wars, was profound. Their influence spread into the motion picture industry.

In both film and print these Rainbow Jam-influenced techniques became the models for the next generation of digitally-based production techniques. In the motion picture industry, "Optical Effects" became "Digital Effects." In the world of print, "Optical Compositing" became "Image Processing Software," such as Photoshop. The Disney cult classic, Tron, on which Richard was the Effects Director, is another example of the Rainbow Jam Effect. Richard put it very simply: "Tron was Rainbow Jam on film."

... During the Seventies and Eighties, Rainbow Jam's influence was everywhere: on television, in the movies, magazines, posters, on billboards, album covers and much more and it continues to this day and most likely will into the future. For a sixties light show, Rainbow Jam truly made its mark.

Lyman continued to produce commercial and independent work until his death on February 6, 2011, the result of a fall at his home in Salt Lake City's Avenues. His obituary is here <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/saltlaketribune/obituary.aspx?n=kenvin-lyman&pid=148454270> and profiles here <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/home/51214294-76/lyman-art-kenvin-taylor.html.csp> and <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/blogsbitebybite/51213435-60/lyman-kenvin-lake-organic.html.csp>

In the Archives

Lyman organized and directed the International Computer Graphics Archive (ICGA), a nonprofit organization. He was also custodian of ICGA's treasury of materials, "the most comprehensive historical collection of computer graphic arts material in the world," he said at the time. While at the Art Institute, Lyman curated the industry's first computer graphics retrospective, "An Elegant Merging," which traveled to the Salt Lake Art Center. In 1996, Lyman, with colleagues April Greiman, Chris Baker, and Richard Childers, produced "Infinite Illusions," a CD-ROM disk containing images from the collection.

The fate of the ICGA collection, comprised of works on paper and digital items that languished for years in a barn on the family's Spring Lake farm, but now safely archived in Salt Lake City, is a tale yet to be told.

In the Kitchen

In the late 1980s, Lyman moved to Missouri to direct the Computer Graphics Center at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he taught advanced animation, illustration, and experimental imaging. He also collaborated with performance artist John Cage—on stage and in the kitchen as Cage's personal chef.

Lyman was an expert chef, an innovator and a champion re-inventor of Utah family heritage dishes. He insisted on fresh ingredients, such as--

... crushed melons, table grapes, pears, peaches, field mint, root vegetables ... raspberries, blackberries, fall radishes, winter squash, grain corn, wild mushrooms and late tomatoes.

He and his wife, Sofia Angasa, grew organic vegetables, spices, and fruits in their backyard garden. Home winemaking was added to their passionate food-related endeavors in recent years. Just last November, Lyman analyzed the behavior of one of his favorite summer-season plants, the cucumber, which--

loves to twine around corn. It's as if they have lived together in their evolutionary past and enjoy each other's company

Lyman has worked on a cookbook since 1998—actually more of a personal history with over 200 manipulated photographic illustrations interwoven with family background and 120 kitchen-tested recipes, many from his Mormon pioneer heritage. This colorful celebration of food, life, and art was about ready for publication at his death. Regarding what he termed "the final phase" of his "food book," he stated that--

Perhaps I should say "we" since I am being helped by book designers, editors, reps, printers, publicists etc.

(In his November 19, 2010 Facebook posting, Lyman also updated the reader about the status of another significant project, the final phase of a music CD by his UK2 Band, a work made “from scratch—original with deep American roots.” For more information, go to http://www.sonicbids.com/epk/epk.aspx?epk_id=237518)

In the Pi Machine

Lyman’s national fine arts legacy is found in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, L.A. County, and Whitney museums. A few examples in Utah are in collaborations with such dance companies as Ririe-Woodbury and Utah Performing Dance Company and murals at Gastronomy, Inc., Utah Valley University, and Uintah Basin Applied Technology Center using holography, computer graphics, acrylic, neon, and metal.

The “Pi Machine” in the downtown Salt Lake City Gallivan Center, was a popular public art piece, a two-year collaboration with Sofia Angkasa and Kazuo Matsubayashi completed in 1999 for the city’s First Night New Year’s celebration. The site has since been converted to commercial space and all that remains of the project is Pi etched in glass.

In typical fantastical Lyman fashion, “Pi Machine” included six installations featuring kinetic mobiles, incandescent lights, projection equipment, and rotating modular wheels embedded with prisms, diffraction gratings, and colored gels that interacted with slides of Lyman’s 240 original computer-drawn images. These interactive components created infinite visual variables. “You could stand in front of this installation for ten years and not see the exact same image twice,” Lyman told me at the time of its installation.

Lyman’s infinity machines were, he said, metaphors for life. As a fitting remembrance of his life of 68 years, Lyman told me that “nothing in the universe repeats. Infinity machines are everywhere. Each of us is an infinity machine, never repeating any given moment, experience, or expression.”

*God, I am such a hopeless romantic.
In a short few months I'll be 70
and still behaving like a young bohemian,
flying across the desert sky,
silhouetted against the flaming evening spectacle,
flailing wildly to the cosmic heart beat playing at 78 RPM
on the Universal juke box of life.
YowZa!*

~ Kenvin Lyman
(Posted on Facebook October 26, 2010)

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