Almost five months to the month before the Health & Safety Executive published its long-overdue PM19 Guidance Note — covering the safe use of lasers in the entertainment industry as they migrated towards first generation nightclubs — The Who introduced the effect on a large scale in a UK venue for the first time, at the unlikely Granby Halls, Leicester, on October 18 1975.

Roger Searle, who worked with The Who between 1967-86, and was then their lighting technician along with Tony Hartam, remembers the show featuring "just a single Spectra Physics 164 argon laser with no laser table — perched on a box at the back of the stage.

"Water was fed from a garden hose, power via a few yards of flex that we had borrowed... with John Wolff holding the diffraction grating in between finger and thumb."

The magic word "laser" had been tossed over and the local authorities were informed that it could not capture the intensity of the laser images created by Dr. Elia Garmire — only a projection of these effects with a laser could generate this excitement.

Garmire, Dryer and Dale Pelton formed Laser Images Inc. using the incipient technology of X/Y scanning, to perform the first Laserman Show at the Griffith Observatory in Hollywood in November 1973. The early Laserman shows were described as "a mixture of non-representational coloured modulated abstract and cyclic effects, with optical effects, created by luma and chroma line sweep generation".

The shows were choreographed to recorded music and the laser portion was performed live by the laserist. They typically took place in planetariums as side field projections formed an effective background. By the time it arrived at the London Planetarium in 1977, The Who’s development — under John Wolff’s supervision — was already into overdrive.

**REVOLUTION**

John ‘Wiggy’ Wolff, who today runs Synucleate UK for former showca president Jack Calmes (who sold Wolff his first laser) seems the last likely person to have started the laser revolution.

As an unconstructed roadie for The Who he quickly found himself at the zeitgeist of late ’60s London hedonism, converging after hours on the Spangle Club. “If you want to know what’s going on this town,” someone advised me on my first rock’n’roll road trip to Los Angeles in 1972, “just ask the drivers... they know everything.”

Wolff, a band driver first and foremost — and he does know pretty much everything. Certainly about the late ’60s, as evident from the first two hours of our interview which centered around some of the japes, pranks and stunts redolent of that era, many involving the late Keith Moon, before we got down to the serious business of coherent light.

Wolff, who had already boasted the first real lightshow in rock’n’roll, had first seen lasers in use with Led Zeppelin at Earls Court in May 1975. However, seeing Steve Jander, Showco’s chief laser tech, nursing the laser to about 500-750mW output at Earls Court, two years on, Wolff was immediately energized. The Who needed to get into lasers... on a large scale.

The popular story is that Showco president Jack Calmes told The Who their first laser — a US$36,000 purchase that Wolff would use spectacularly on ‘Who’s Got Fooled Again’. But one technician, Gery Letch, already part of the sound team that helped build The Who’s Ramport Studios in Battersea, before going on to become one of the UK’s leading laserists, remembers it somewhat differently — and that the laser was in part settlement of a debt owed to the band by the service company.

“‘The feeling I got at Earls Court was that here was a big show with one of my favourite bands and that was the best effect I had seen in a long time,” remembers Wolff. “But 1W or less was a toy. The only way to get a bright laser was with a big cheap argon.”

Enter American light artist Rick Lefrak, who at the time was resident in London. "Rick and his girlfriend knocked on my door and said I hear you are looking for a laser... we can hire you ours."

In fact, they had been called in after Wolff had seen one of their promotional flyers advertising lasers and holograms.

Lefrak, who originally came to the UK in ’69 as a lighting designer for a New York dance company, and ended up at the Roundhouse, can lay claim to bringing the lasers to The Who and was present on the first few tours.

His “girlfriend” was British Guiana born Alope — a hard-nosed business partner. They formed the Lasercorp, which specialised in very precise laser control consoles and mobile casing cases (to Wolff’s designs) for shows around 1974-75.

Two pivotal members of the team, Neil Invin and John Carr, helped Wolff assemble his own coloured laser equipment and Wolff later employed both directly along with Bernie Hunt from Ramport Studios who handled all the heavy electrical installations. They were to become key personnel in the running of The Who’s shows.

“Woo stood around for a freehold,” says Wolff. “I found a social centre in Battersea advertised as a church hall and when I finally found the church (as I believed it was) I knocked on the minister’s door and said ‘I have come to buy your church’. He smiled benevolently and told me where to find the real church hall... around the corner in Thessaly Road."

“After the excitement of thinking I had found a great place in his new church, I was full of misgivings when I saw the state of the actual building on offer. But in 1973, £15,000 for a freehold in Battersea was still a snip, we needed something urgent and Townshend said this would make a great studio [with Bobby Pridden ensuring that the sound system passed muster]."

Anecdotally, Wolff also recalls seeing lasers on to nearby Battersea Power Station when Pink Floyd’s iconic pisc was being photographed for the Animals album in December ‘76. “We threatened to burn a hole in the pig.”

**EXPERIMENTING**

Another significant year was 1974 — the year The Who bought Shepperton and Wolff started experimenting with holograms (more of which next month).

One of the Shepperton-based engineering companies who assisted was Dave Watson’s CBL Developments, which specialised in very precise motors controls for the film business and was soon making all Ramport’s automatic heads, control consoles and mobile casing cases (to Wolff’s designs) for shows around 1974-75.

Below: The Who at Bill Graham’s Winterland in 1976; Keith Moon watches Wiggy fire a laser in the board room at Shepperton; Roger Dalby bathes in laser light during ‘Won’t Get Fooled Again’.

“1W or less was a toy. The only way to get a bright laser was with a big 4W green argon...”
There was no stopping us now. We were getting the best show reviews ever...