Message from the President

By Ivan Dryer

As your new president, I first want to thank you for giving me the opportunity of serving ILDA, and to pledge my best efforts to further its aims and expand its influence and membership. The outside world needs to know more about us and what it is that we are about.

Next, I want to thank the outgoing President, Dick Sandhaus, for the excellent work he did on our behalf for the last year. Dick was an articulate, witty and effective leader. I feel fortunate that Dick and fellow incumbent, Joanne McCullough, will be joining me and the other new Board members, Steve Heminover and Bob Yazell, to help us over the rough spots and maintain continuity.

I’d like to give thanks now for the help I know I’ll receive over the course of this year from ILDA’s wonderful Executive Director, Barbara Inatsugu. Just the brief time I have been interacting with Barbara has seeded a growing appreciation of her administrative skills and devotion to the organization. She is the President’s indispensable right arm.

During this year of my stewardship I hope to see ILDA grow and continue to mature. I hope also to see greater recognition of our craft and art. More publications should become aware of what we’re doing. The Public Awareness Committee and I hope to make some inroads in the next months. Your entries in the awards competition could provide an excellent pool of images that, with your permission (and with your source credit) could become a stock image library for promoting the industry.

In addition to spreading the word about ILDA (watch for the September issue of Laser Focus World), I’d like to see us address some important matters confronting our industry. One issue is safety regulations. Are they impeding the growth of U.S. companies, as one trade magazine recently suggested? At this November’s general meeting we will have a lengthy session dealing with this question.

Another issue is that of music rights: who owes what to whom for music in laser shows and displays? This has long been a gray area, and at another session in November we will have someone on hand to help us sharpen this fuzzy landscape. We are also actively building on the momentum initiated last November and are encouraging the participation of more planetariums as both users and producers of laser shows. This appeal is being made at planetarium conferences and in publications.

A major concern of mine is how we are perceived and treated by the outside world. Like Rodney Dangerfield, I believe we don’t get enough respect in the marketplace—laser effects are usually lowest on the producer’s list. I think our fees have always been generally lower than those for other graphics technologies (e.g., computer animation), especially considering equipment investment, the fragility of our “light bulb,” and the growing level of software sophistication involved.

Some of our clients often do not consider “laser people” to occupy a lofty position in their vendor hierarchy (have I put it delicately enough?). Perhaps much of the foregoing can be laid at our doors and is a product of the earlier immaturity of our industry. But I think most of that is behind us and that our job is to continue to act as professionally as we know how while providing the highest quality service. Then I think our collective image will improve to match the increasingly high level of our laser imagery.

Finally, a word about who we are. As purveyors of craft and art we are first craftsmen and artists. I like to think that most of us who have come to use lasers for a living haven’t done so just because it’s profitable, or just because it can be glamorous, or just because the technology is exciting. Instead, I like to think that those pure colors dazzled our imaginations and struck some chord within us that left us helpless to resist, so that we follow those colors in spite of the hardships and disappointments. We are fortunate to be making a living at what we love.
Ron Hays: Reflections on a Light-Filled Life

Multimedia Pioneer Brought 
Visions of Light to Life, 
"Star Wars" Concerts Leave 
Lasting Legacy

By Ivan Dryer

Ron Hays, an Emmy Award win-
ning artist who pioneered multi-
media displays that combined music, 
lasers and special effects, died this April in Marina del Rey, Calif. A memorial 
was held for Hays, who had AIDS, at 
the Dickson Art Center at UCLA on 
Sunday, May 5. It would have been his 
46th birthday.

I first met Ron Hays in 1976 at an 
event called "Laser Day" held at the 
Charles Hayden Planetarium in Bos-
ton. The purpose of the gathering was 
to showcase the wares—and, it turned 
out, the philosophies—of several la-
er/visual artists vying for a contract at the Planetarium. In his brief talk 
that day, Ron stressed, as he always 
did thereafter, artistry. The most in-
credible technology, he said, is worth-
less unless used in the service of an 
aesthetic principle, a devotion to 
craftsmanship, an insistence on qual-
ity. All of us were in rapt attention. 
The hallmarks of any meeting with 
Ron were his eloquence, humor, and a 
genuine, unforced charisma.

Shortly afterward, Ron introduced 
his first major film work, "Prelude and 
Liebestod." It is one of the seminal 
expressions of visual music and still, I 
think, one of the most powerful. He 
showed me the "book" in which he 
story-boarded the entire piece before a 
frame was shot. He told me he had 
locked himself away for months at 
MIT where he was a fellow at the 
Institute for Advanced Visual Studies. 
Ron received a grant to finance the 
production and persuaded Leonard 
Bernstein to record the score with the 
New York Philharmonic. He then 
came to Hollywood and searched out 
the best effects artists he could find. 
Following the book, he converted his 
vision to film. He oversaw its editing 
and transfer to video. It was shown on 
national television. It became a staple of 
festivals and libraries. It's one of my 
fondest possessions.

In the late seventies Ron produced 
what were probably the first large-scale 
multimedia events: the "Star Wars" 
concerts with lasers and large-screen 
video at the Hollywood Bowl and else-
where. Ron fulfilled an aspiration 
shared by many laser artists: 50,000 
people were being mesmerized by a 
multimedia display set to classical mu-
sic. Alexander Scriabin, the composer 
who dreamed of such events at the turn 
of the century, would have been very 
proud.

Scriabin would have beamed at 
what was perhaps Ron's greatest tri-
umph—a massive 1985 event for over 
500,000 people on the Ben Franklin 
Parkway in Philadelphia. Giant images 
covered the facade of the Philadelphia 
Art Museum. A row of searchlights 
miles long formed a canopy over the 
Parkway leading to the museum while 
lasers located in several locations 
danced among an intense fireworks 
display set to music from a full sym-
phony orchestra.

The same grand panache got Ron's 
ideas into the '84 Olympics closing 
ceremony and into many films and 
television programs. He had plans a 
models for the largest-ever sympho-
tour with visual effects. And he 
put on a show to permanently showcase h 
hart, an idea we shared and pitched 
more than once. We had often di 
cussed working together, and I d 
regret that it never came to be.

One time in my living room, after 
airing some monumental scheme, I 
blurted out that I thought I understood 
the message of "Prelude." Its "prota-
ognist" is a mysterious white sphere that 
is seen several times spinning serenely 
among splashes of color and form. The 
music climaxes and the sphere is trans-
muted into an intricate and prismatic 
mandala. I suggested, perhaps too 
boldly, that the sphere represented an 
individual soul or consciousness that is 
transfigured in death. Ron merely 
smiled. I may have imagined that he 
nodded.

That was a long time ago. We 
were ripe with dreams and ambition. 
Everything seemed possible. Every-
thing that is, except this. This has 
removed, from our sight at least, one 
of the great lights of our generation. 
"But surely," some might say, "new 
one will appear and the darkness will 
be temporary." We can hope so. Still, 
I wonder if we'll see a light like that 
ever again.

The Ron Hays Memorial fund has been 
established at Freeman Hospital 
Foundation, 333 No. Prairie Ave., Inglewood, CA 
90301.
Lasers and Planetariums: Day One

By Ivan Dryer, President

Audience of Two Launches
World’s Longest Running Planetarium Laser Show

I saw a laser for the first time in November of 1970 in a lab at Caltech. Dr. Elsa Garmire showed me what the laser could do with a piece of crumpled mylar and a translucent plastic disc. Although I came to the lab to make a film of her laser art, I instead made a decision that changed my life: I decided then and there to approach a former employer, Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, about doing a laser and music show in their planetarium.

Two weeks later, I was giving a demonstration for observatory officials. It consisted of a single laser and a motorized “mylar wheel” projecting a red luminia against the planetarium’s starfield. We put on a classical album and sat down for a few minutes. The minutes went on and soon we turned the album over and stared transfixed for another half hour watching this writhing scarlet organism suspended somewhere beneath the stars. Everyone was inspired by this simplest of laser displays, but not enough to bring in outsiders. Not yet.

100 Invitations, Two Replies

In June of 1973 we arranged for a more ambitious demonstration at Caltech using a 1-watt krypton laser loaned to us by Spectra-Physics. We sent out over 100 invitations for the demonstration of our new four-color technology (including home-made scanners). Only two people showed up: the new director and associate director of Griffith Observatory! They liked what they saw and decided it was worth a test.

And so, on Nov. 19, 1973, the world’s first planetarium laser show, Laserium, lit up Griffith Observatory’s 75-foot dome. It seemed unlikely to be an auspicious beginning; the projector was completed at 5:30 am and the only promotion was a brief appearance on a local morning show. The first night, however, we had two half-full houses (about 300 each show). By the end of our trial run of four Monday nights, the second show on Dec. 10 turned away about 500 people. The observatory’s director was moved by our success. He gave us the green light to continue the performances. The result: nearly two decades of continuous laser shows.

Uneasy Marriage

Planetarium laser shows have now been seen by millions of people and play continuously in dozens of cities around the world. Last year, ILDA established the Committee on Planetariums and Science Centers to, among other things, strengthen a marriage of planetarium and laser professionals that has been uneasy from the beginning. But that seems to be changing: laser shows are becoming an integral part of the agendas of more and more planetariums, large and small. And I believe ILDA is playing a major role in the increased comfort level on the part of the planetariums towards those formerly suspect “laser intruders.” Planetariums now tend to interact with laser vendors in the same fashion as their other suppliers—as professionals engaged in a mutually beneficial transaction.

The funny thing is, this enterprise was begun by individuals less interested in business than in aesthetic expression. The fact that it could make real money came as a surprise. Now that an atmosphere of glasnost appears to exist between our two communities, the basis of our relationship is primarily economic. I would urge more of our planetarium and science center colleagues—as well as our own membership—to consider the genuine cultural and artistic contributions being made by laser artists around the world. I believe that the artistry of our performances supersedes the technology in lasting importance.

What follows are excerpts from an essay I wrote in 1971 to argue the case for the first shows at Griffith Observatory. I still feel the same way today.

“The most powerful communicative, and therefore educative, forces in history have been the cinema and television. With the expansion of screen size, improvements in sound reproduction as well as advances in technique, the film medium has become in itself a greater spectacle than any story it is used to convey.

“And giant three-dimensional displays by laser holography may be less than a decade away. The trend is toward a total environment to surround the viewer with the presentation and thus totally involve him.

“The planetarium has been doing just that sort of thing for years. It has not only vividly communicated objective scientific facts, but programs such as those at Griffith Observatory have provided a subjective experience of things and places that cannot yet be experienced in person.

Other Worldly Experience

“Hundreds of thousands of people rode to the moon from there on their imaginations before Neil Armstrong even conceived he would do it. This mental teleportation to other worlds has to be called art.

“It is nothing more nor less than involving people with ideas and feelings that are bigger than and far beyond their day-to-day concerns. That, we think, is the highest form of education. And that is the same kind of thing we propose to do—to not only entertain but to stimulate and perhaps even inspire the viewer to states of mind that are beyond his normal routine and thus, hopefully, to make him richer for the experience.

“Nothing should be more evident in the last half of the 20th Century than that we must restore technology to the human uses of helping us live more comfortably and more meaningfully. And nothing could now be more important than its use in art to rekindle wonder and delight in the midst of our darkest anxieties.”