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## INDUSTRY PROFILE



### Jeff Ravitz

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By Jane Cohen and Bob Grossweiner

Emmy Award-winning lighting designer Jeff Ravitz is the founder and a principal lighting designer of Visual Terrain, an international design firm serving the television, architectural and entertainment markets based in Van Nuys, Calif., with an East Coast office in Woodbury, Conn. His turn-around moment came after seeing the Grateful Dead in concert in Chicago in 1973 -- the first act he had seen with a full blown lighting system and design.

Jeff

has

designed lighting for nearly every kind of environment, including TV newsrooms, concert tours, themed entertainment venues, casinos, retail, restaurants and corporate meetings. Today, he focuses on live televised events and studio-based productions, including televised concert performances, comedy specials, game shows, talks shows, award shows, and any other kind of live entertainment being captured for TV broadcast, DVDs and webcasts.

The breadth of his work has been captured on television specials and national tours for Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Ringo Starr, and Styx, as well as broadcasts and DVDs for Beyonce, Usher, Rush, Willie Nelson, Dr. Wayne Dyer, Roger Waters, The Doobie Brothers, Jimmy Buffett, Shania Twain, Etta James and many others.

Comedy specials include Bill Maher, Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, Larry The Cable Guy, Roseanne Barr, Bill Engvall, Ron White, and Henry Rollins. Film audiences have seen Jeff's work in the *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), for which he designed specialty lighting. Jeff also designed the lighting for Paramount's feature release, *Heart Of Gold*, starring Neil Young, and has designed several ice show specials for CBS and Fox featuring Kristi Yamaguchi, Brian Boitano and Tara Lipinski.

Studio-based productions include *The Christopher Lowell Show*, *Strange Universe Tonight*, the ABC sitcom, *Sons & Daughters*, as well as several infomercials, game shows, videos and pilots; themed entertainment projects include *The Artist's Journey*, a ride-film at the Experience Music Project in Seattle.

His webcast designs for AOL and MSN include The Black Eyed Peas, Maroon 5, Dave Matthews, Rod Stewart, among others.

So how did it all start for this lighting designer virtuoso?

"As a kid I went to a lot of Broadway shows, and lighting design mystified and fascinated me," says Jeff. "All those lights hanging everywhere at odd angles, I could never figure out how it all resulted in the beautiful images I saw onstage. So I began to read about it and try to dig deeper. My high school had about 20 lights, and all our shows looked flat and dull. So when I got to Northwestern University to study theatre, I gravitated to lighting just to satisfy my curiosity about how it was done. My eye just loved interesting, well designed lighting, and I couldn't get enough of it. I've never been much of a drawing artist, so lighting was the first outlet I found for myself that allowed for visual self-expression.

Following college, Jeff founded a theatre company with a friend, and in addition to producing and acting, he was the default lighting designer.

"I began doing theatre around Chicago, but I also had a turn-around moment after seeing the Grateful Dead in concert," he reminisces. "They were the first act I had seen with a full blown lighting system and design. Everyone else used just follow spots and oil projections--or less. I became transfixed with the bold streaks of color and cues."

Trained to make lighting be invisible onstage, in contrast, the Dead concert was "in-your-face explodingly visual lighting, so I started looking for work in live music," he explains. "I found a guy in Chicago who had just released an album on Columbia Records and was touring clubs and colleges: Bill Quateman. I toured with 6 fresnels and two ellipsoidals left over from my theatre troupe, plus a console I made out of household dimmers installed inside an old suitcase. It was the time of my life. That job ultimately introduced me to Styx when we opened for them. They offered me a job, and we went on to produce

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**daily part**  
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some of the best known theatrical rock shows of the 70s and 80s."

The genesis of the idea of a lighting design firm came when Jeff found himself at the point in his career when it started to make sense to have more separation between his home life and work activities.

"It was too easy to allow work to spill over into my private life, and I wanted to see if I could enhance the quality of both work and living by creating environments more unique to both," says Jeff. "I began looking around town for office space. Like most free-lance designers, I worked out of my house, and therefore had minimal overhead. Nevertheless, it was time to enter a new phase so I put the word out to my friends that I was looking for a space to rent.

"My good friend, Joe Tawil of GAM Products, suggested I talk to Jim Moody, who had also mentioned he was looking for an office closer to Paramount, where he was spending a lot of time," Jeff continues. "Jim and I had been close friends and idea swappers from way back so we immediately agreed to find a good space and split costs. As we got deeper into the process, we decided to upgrade our operations and experiment with a more businesslike model: hire an office manager, buy some office equipment and consolidate many of the day-to-day tasks we had in common.

Before they knew it, Jeff and Moody had created a real design firm, albeit small. "We both were quite busy," he explains, "and it just made sense to go ahead and give ourselves the tools to be as productive as possible. A lawyer friend clinched it by recommending that we incorporate to take advantage of the liability protection and tax benefits. Before long, we were hiring interns and young designers to expand our reach and to service more clients than just the two of us ever could have on our own.

However, in 2002, Moody left the firm to "follow a dream and re-invent himself once again, to become the head of the technical theatre program at LA City College," informs Jeff. "Jim has always taught one class or another ever since I've known him. He loves to expound on his vast knowledge, as his many published books can attest. He's almost finished with his PhD and totally loves the new phase of his career."

Today, Visual Terrain is a second-generation model of Moody Ravitz Design Partners, the firm Jeff and Moody co-founded in 1991. In 1995, when another lighting designer and friend Dawn Hollingsworth joined to help build their architectural practice, the firm became Moody Ravitz Hollingsworth Design Partners inc. In 2000, Lisa Passamonte Green joined, which motivated another name change to Visual Terrain, Inc.

Jeff has been the recipient of numerous awards: a Primetime Emmy for the Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band special, Live In New York City on HBO (released 2001; shot 2000), and the 2005 and 2006 Los Angeles Emmys for El Grito de Mexico for Univision. He was previously nominated for an Emmy for Cher...Live At The Mirage (1991).

He received a fifth Emmy nomination for his design of Carols By Candlelight, a holiday special in 2002. His 2006 design for the award show Salute To Teachers, was nominated for a Pacific Southwest Emmy. Jeff has also been honored with three Telly Awards and two Aurora Awards for television designs.

In addition to his Emmys, Jeff's peers honored him when he was named Lighting Designer of the Year in Performance Magazine's 1987 Readers Poll for his work on the Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band and Bryan Adams tours.

Within the industry, Jeff is an active member of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, United Scenic Artists, Local #829, International Cinematographers Guild, IATSE Local #600 (director of photography) and the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America.

#### **How have you changed as a lighting designer over the years?**

I always believed in less is more, but the trends of the 80s really resulted in a more is more approach. I've worked hard to get back to basics and have become much more interested in cinematic styles of lighting. It has taken me 'til now to really get my eye to see deeper into the many techniques and paths to achieving those styles. Also, since I began to specialize in lighting for the camera, I've begun to see compositionally and my eye immediately analyzes the entire frame for balance, shadow and dimensionality in a way I never did when I was lighting only for the live audience.

My years lighting architectural projects helped with that as well. I began to see every surface and its role in the overall picture. As a designer for music, I've become much more visually expressive of the emotions and feel of the music with fewer cues. I hope I continue to evolve. As I look back on where I was when I started, I see that I was always heading in this direction, and it's been a long and satisfying journey.

#### **Of all the environments you have designed -- TV, film, concert tours, award shows and corporate-- which is the most challenging?**

Television I'm not really a film director of photography, per se, so I can't really comment on that, despite having had some interesting experiences on features. TV incorporates all the other areas you mention but has the one extra requirement of needing to be correct for the camera--especially the kind of TV that I do, which is live entertainment for TV. The producers want all the theatricality of a live show, but it must be right for broadcast. The networks may actually reject a project if it doesn't comply with their standards, which are not only aesthetically grounded but also somewhat mathematical and scientific. I've long believed that a show designed properly for TV can also be completely satisfying to the live audience, but a show that's designed only with the live audience in mind may not work at all for the camera, and, by extension, the TV audience.

#### **Piece of lighting technology you can't live without**

Automated lighting fixtures are indispensable, not only for the excitement they add to a show, but for the variety and ease of covering so many bases with fewer lights and less physical labor. I frequently do shoots and shows that are defined very sketchily in advance of the show day. With automated fixtures I can correct a multitude of sins with the push of a button if I've hung the lights in a flexible arrangement.

#### **What's the most elaborate lighting design you have been involved with?**

You might think it's one of the huge football stadium-sized rock shows, and they are elaborate, for sure. Lights everywhere. But, last year I designed a PBS TV show featuring an Irish chorale group, Anuna, performing in a 100-year-old church in Cleveland. It was not only elaborate, but it pushed the bounds of resourcefulness thanks to the great team I had working with me. The

performance found its way into every crevice and corner of the sanctuary. We had lights tucked into every little space to make the church itself look beautiful and dramatic, to say nothing of the many lights we had for the purpose of lighting the show theatrically and for the camera. It was a back breaker, but it worked.

#### **What makes a good lighting designer?**

First, you need to have the eye. You have to understand how light affects shapes and surfaces and to recognize when it works and doesn't. One must possess and exercise creative judgment: all those ideas about how light works have to be applied appropriately. Artistic composition, just like a painter uses, is essential. You must have thorough understanding of the tools of the trade and the extensive science and technology of today's entertainment lighting equipment. Of course, you need a sense of theatrical timing, and the psychological and emotional effects of color.

#### **How involved are the acts/clients you work with in the lighting design process?**

It varies a lot. Some clients want to be very involved far into pre-production. Others just want to throw out some ideas, but then they leave you alone. Some get involved only after the entire project has already designed been because we couldn't get input from them when it could've helped. And then there are those clients that just want to perform, and they're happy with anything you give them as long as it doesn't break the budget or prompt criticism from their friends and family.

#### **How has the lighting industry changed in the past five years?**

Of course, the technology just continues to advance exponentially. Existing equipment is improved for reliability, efficiency and features. More and more manufacturers are jumping on the bandwagon. There are so many more choices and options for a designer, nowadays. It's often hard to perceive the difference from one brand to another. The biggest buzz is in the emergence of the LED technology. They've found their way into every aspect of life from home lighting to flashlights to car taillights, dashboard displays and traffic signals. The theatrical lighting manufacturers are working with the LED lamp manufacturers to incorporate LEDs in different colors into all kinds of stage lights from broad stage washes to spotlights. They're still very limited, but in a short time they've become a multi-billion dollar addition to our arsenal of tools.

With all the many types of lights, and the growing size of shows, the designer has become a lighting "producer" of sorts. It's not unusual to have two consoles operating different types of lights. Three and four consoles are normal on big awards shows. The team includes a lighting programmer, who is skilled at inputting commands to the automated fixtures, other console operators, a head technician and the crew, a lighting director calling spot cues, etc. So the designer has become a conductor of many different elements that are woven together to result in the final design. It's only going to get bigger, believe me.

#### **First concert attended**

The Critters in 1968 at South River High School in New Jersey. Lighting equipment: two follow spots...period; Second concert--much more consequential--Grateful Dead in 1973 at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. Lighting Equipment: Full lighting system of PAR64s and lekos. Turned my life around. I can still remember the look of that show today.

#### **First concert worked**

Bill Quateman, a tremendously talented singer-songwriter from Chicago, on a 1974 college and club tour promoting his second Columbia album. I was the lighting designer, lighting crew, drum tech and took my turn driving the truck.

#### **First industry job**

If you don't count stage managing, acting and lighting summer stock and dinner theatre, then the Bill Quateman job would be my first for the music industry.

#### **Career highlights**

There have been quite a few, fortunately for me. I was truly in heaven on that Quateman tour, setting up and running my little system of 6 fresnels and 2 lekos on my homemade suitcase lighting console. Later, working for Styx and fully realizing that I was making a viable living by creating shows, painting with colored light and bopping to great music, was a moment of true gratitude for everything that had brought me to that point. Next, being with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band at the moment of his graduation from cult star to mega superstar and sharing a little in that excitement. Years later, I'd have to say winning the Primetime Emmy Award was a rocket trip to euphoria! It certainly validated my style and approach and years of hard work by a jury of my peers. It also pointed me in a direction that has been extremely satisfying--designing for television.

#### **Career disappointment**

Wow, that's a tough one. I really, really wanted to design the Jackson Victory Tour back in 1984. I felt that show would have been perfect for me, and I pursued it to the point of flying to California and camping out on his tour director's front steps in Beverly Hills. I was ultimately interviewed and was told I was a close second. The Springsteen job came shortly thereafter so I only had a few seconds to lick my wounds before heading off on a great, career shaping adventure.

The other major frustration has been not being able to find a way to make my living while traveling less. I haven't toured in years, but I still work more than 50 percent of the time away from my home base.

#### **Greatest challenge**

Each phase of my career has been a personal reinvention of myself. When I began working in concert touring, there was so much equipment and procedural uniqueness to it, I needed to quickly master those things while being acutely aware that I was doing it on someone else's dime. When I began working in television, the feeling was the same. The shows were populated with talented, accomplished professionals, and I felt like a newbie, just feeling my way through and striving to do a great job for the people that had hired me, who had so much at stake. Finally, starting our business, Visual Terrain. With other people somewhat dependent upon me and my partners for their livelihood, I felt a sense of responsibility that, in ways, surpassed that of providing for my own family.

#### **Best business decision**

Starting the design firm, as scary as it was, began my journey to expand myself beyond my personal boundaries.

#### **Best advice you received**

Hmmm, maybe it was not to use ice cubes in France. But, more seriously, I've

had at least three great mentors: Neil Quateman, the production manager on my first job, George Travis, Springsteen's tour manager, and Jim Moody. They all taught by example and have had a huge influence on me. They always exemplified high standards but also incredible people skills. That has really helped. They showed that giving people the chance to do their best for you is the surest way to get the best. They also told me to not sweat the small stuff and to pick my battles very carefully. I've really always gotten a lot from the people around me, and I owe a lot to my mentors for caring enough to share their wisdom.

**Best advice to offer**

Do everything you can to learn more about your craft. Latch onto the people who can teach you. Make friends. Have high standards. Always endeavor to be polite, cool-headed, just serious enough, just silly enough, extra helpful and genuinely responsive to your clients' needs. And, please have a life outside the business.

**Mistakes that you've learned from**

They can generally be traced back to not being adequately prepared. Whether that was not thoroughly studying the materials--music, staging and performance details--before designing, programming or running a show or not truly giving a design or light plot my fullest thought.

I've also tripped over my own feet by losing my cool. I've learned that it absolutely never helps a troubled situation, but it does almost always make it worse. I've learned to think things through, give other people the benefit of the doubt, and when I must move forward into a problem, to do it with the most respect for others as is possible in the circumstances.

**Most memorable industry experience**

The first story that comes to mind relates to a strange calamity that occurred in my 20s while working on a local show in Chicago. We were doing a fashion show at a local banquet facility on Memorial Day. There were no stagehands, and I was lighting designer, crew and electrician. I'd no experience tying in a power hookup for the rental equipment, and there were no modern Cam Locks--only these weird clamps called Tricos. I attached the feeder cables, one at a time, to the bare copper buss bars in the kitchen power box, with the power main still on while wearing a pair of Playtex gloves for protection. As the last cable touched the live power terminal, flames shot straight up through the cables from every place that a cable looped over itself. We were amazed to be alive and not have blown up the building, and I had to run the lights by plugging and unplugging them on cue from a wall outlet power strip.

But, aside from that, not to overstate it, but winning the Emmy is certainly a strong memory.

**What friends would be surprised to learn about you**

Not much. I'm pretty much what you see is what you get--maybe that I acted in 12 educational videos for nursing students, playing everything from an attorney, to a patient, to an indignant relative whose dad was misdiagnosed.

**Industry pet peeve**

When I first got into the music industry from the theatre, co-workers always said, "close enough for rock and roll." I hated that because my theatre training programmed me to never stop stretching for perfection.

**Office paraphernalia**

I've mementoes and artifacts from many memorable tours, TV shows and other productions. I have some nice artwork, family photos, plaques and awards. I used to have a pair of ragged but glittery platform shoes worn by Peter Criss, Kiss's drummer. I grabbed them as he was tossing them into the trash one night after a show we had done in 1975. I ended up donating them to a school auction.

**If I wasn't doing this, I would be...**

?a chef.

**Industry mentors**

In no particular order: Jim Moody, George Travis, Neil Quateman, Bill Klages, Bob Dickinson, Alan Branton, Larry Jordan, James Young, Dennis DeYoung and Bruce Springsteen. They have all led by example to help me develop my creative style and how I communicate with people. I've spent a lot of time talking artistic philosophy with many of my mentors, or I have closely observed their work and incorporated it into what I believe is my own personal approach.

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