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A&C



Lance Gordon's liquid light backdrop, featured at a Joe Russo's Almost Dead show on November 8 last year.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAY BLANKSBURG

Otherworldly

The Mad Alchemy Liquid Light Show is an acid trip for your eyes

Sixties- and '70s-styled liquid light shows have seen

a recent revival, along with a wave of psychedelic and garage rock bands, and no one may be more prepared for the colorful onslaught than Lance Gordon.

Gordon, the Mad Alchemist, is an originator of psychedelic liquid light projections. The 65-year-old has played with iterations of the Grateful Dead, garage rock pioneer Roky Erickson, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Tower of Power and John Lee Hooker. His Mad Alchemy Liquid Light Show has been featured at the Fillmore in San Francisco and the Fox Theater in Oakland, at Harlow's in Sacramento and the Odd Fellows Hall in Auburn. He's slated to play Placerville's Hangtown Music Festival in October, and returns for his third year on Colorado's expansive Red Rocks Amphitheater lineup in summer 2019. The show is also a staple at the Chapel, a San Francisco's cult-band venue, with an upcoming reunion scheduled for April 19 and 20 with Erickson.

Liquid light shows have their roots in the '60s and '70s Bay Area psychedelic ballroom scene. Gordon began in Danville circa 1971, when many bands cut their teeth playing concerts at high schools. He was a drummer and photographer and liked to draw.

"I started out because it was a narrative of the time," Gordon told SN&R. "I was a kid in junior high; and freshman and sophomore year, I was

drumming in funky bands. But as soon as I saw my first light show, I was hooked."

Back then, Gordon used as many as 30 carousel slide projectors, along with 16-millimeter loop projectors, to produce a montage of images, usually on high-contrast film.

His "21st century liquid light show" uses modern LED video and mixers. Cameras in overhead projectors face down onto sandwiched glass clock faces, which hold a mixture of mineral oil, rubbing alcohol, dye and transparent ink. The artists essentially "play" the plates by spinning and moving them, creating the projected designs. Through a process called "keying," they layer the images in real time, resulting in a vibrant, spinning, undulating, seemingly organic compilation of color that can envelope a venue the size of Harlow's, or illuminate a pavilion the size of Red Rocks.

Because the designs are formed to live bands, a sense of rhythm and knowledge of music is necessary to "play" well, Gordon says.

"They're really like a rhythm watercolor," he says. "You have the oil that wants to stay together, and you have the alcohol that wants to blow it apart. We are creating and manipulating, using that natural process in the art."

The psych rock scene provides ample opportunity for him to play with newer bands such as Australia's King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard, Japan's Kikagaku Moyo and California favorites including White Fence and Dead Meadow.

From his Lincoln home, Gordon teaches young psych rockers his techniques. He met his video technician, Dominic Cota, 29, of San Francisco, at the Chapel during a Mad Alchemy show with the English band Toy five years ago. Gordon taught Cota how to project with plates, and he considers Cota an expert second only to himself.

"Lance and I are, like, partners," Cota says. "I've put a lot of time in."

Gordon says he hopes to take his show international. With his return to light shows after a long hiatus and a career in architectural photography, and the rebirth of psych rock, he's at a serendipitous crossroads.

"It's like this whole light show was meant to be," he says. "When you look at the fact that I got back into light shows right around the same time that the whole new psych movement started happening, it's eerie, very eerie." □

Check out the Mad Alchemy Liquid Light Show with Roky Erickson April 19 and 20 at the Chapel in San Francisco. Show is sold out, but there are resale tickets online. Shows start at 9pm. Visit madalchemy.net.