



Drumm's beat: tripping the lights fantastic

By Joan Boram
special writer

ARETHA FRANKLIN, please call Mel Drumm! Give him just one more chance!

A few years ago, when Drumm was programming laser shows for Cranbrook, he took a phone call.

"Hi, this is Aretha Franklin."

"Oh, sure, and this is the Pope."

But wait, it really was Aretha Franklin, and she had heard about Mel Drumm and his wonderful laser creations, and could he please do a light show for one of her performances?

"I was just too busy, and I had to say no," Drumm says ruefully. "And she never called back."

DRUMM, MANAGER of Image Engineering's Troy office, has had lots of show business experience since joining the Boston-based company's only branch when it opened in 1986.

The highlights of his tenure at the company include the grand opening of the Palace of Auburn Hills, the opening of the "new" Cobo Convention Center for the Detroit Auto Show, and the grand opening of the Bradley Center, Milwaukee's version of the Palace. And, of course, Meadow Brook.

"Meadow Brook was the first music festival in the country to present a laser show with a symphonic-type orchestra," Drumm said. "This is our seventh year at Meadow Brook, and it's everyone's favorite assignment: We actually fight over who's going to do it. The staff there is wonderful — it's the highlight of our year."

THE LASER show always attracts a huge crowd. Last year more than 10,000 people attended the laser show's two evening performances. It's especially popular with families and parties, because the show is actually seen to greater advantage from the hill.

This year will be extra-special: For the first time, the laser show will be combined with J.P. Barnett's "real" cannon fire during Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." Since lasers require darkness for maximum dramatic effect, the program will begin at 8:30 p.m. Aug. 25 and 26.

"When I was in high school," Drumm says, "I wanted to be a lighting designer, but it seemed too impractical, so I graduated from college with a degree in computer science."

My first job was at Cranbrook, where I developed laser shows and taught physics. While at Cranbrook, I came in contact with Image Engineering.

THEY ARE very professional and

were very helpful to us at Cranbrook, so when they decided to open an office here, I joined them."

Drumm is still involved with Cranbrook's shows and sometimes teaches seminars there to anyone who wants to learn about laser technology.

A laser show is an entertainment using light. There are two basic varieties of laser shows:

- Graphic images, pictures. For example, computer graphics set to music, as when Darth Vader is depicted during the music from "Star Wars." Or, computer animation brings laser graphics to life with luminous images that appear to float in space.

- Atmospheric effects, into, over and around the audience. These effects can put a canopy of light over one person or 100,000 people. A product can be surrounded with a glowing tunnel, a story can be punctuated with blazing beams.

A LASER is produced by a light bulb — a very expensive light bulb. Costing from \$6,000 to \$30,000, they last 2,000-3,000 hours. Bulbs are very delicate and break very easily. It's impossible to insure them.

For surgery or precision steel cutting, the bulb has a much higher wattage, and the light is focused into a smaller beam through a series of lenses.

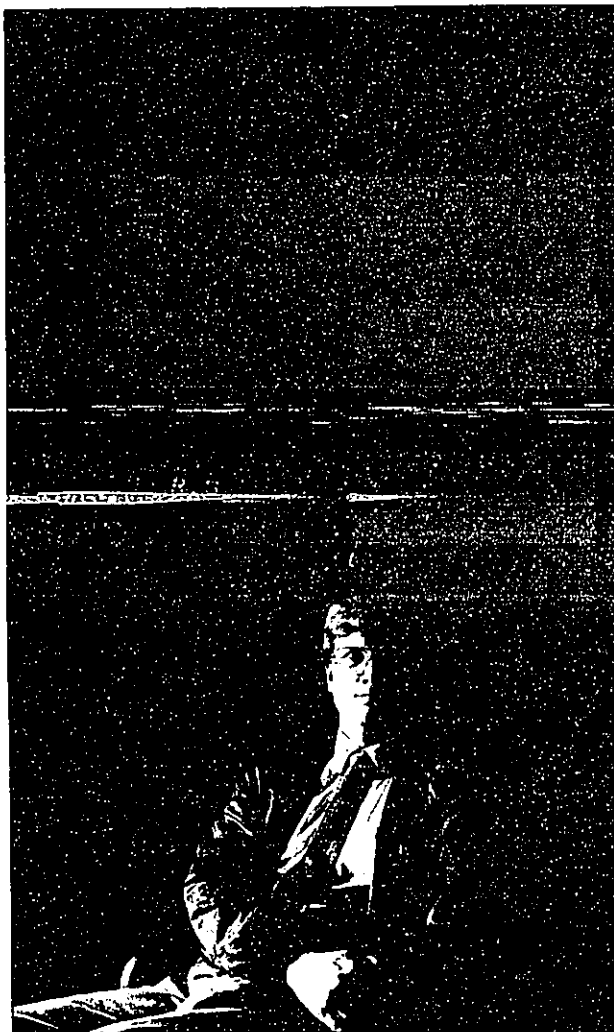
"The industry is growing by 30 percent a year. We have lots of competition, but many of them don't stay in business very long, because the overhead is so high."

Image Engineering is doing much better than it had anticipated in its Detroit office, but it had assumed that most of its Detroit events would be automotive-related. However, while it has done work for all of the major auto companies in the area, special events have been the major source of business.

"WE HAVE TO TURN people away for the major holidays, especially the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve. It's like a church where everybody wants to get married the second Sunday in June at 10 a.m."

"Sometimes people think we're just playing hard to get when we turn them down, but we can only put on seven shows at any particular time — there is a crew of two-three people per show, and that's it. It's strictly first come, first served."

Spring is a quiet season for the Detroit office, but crew members are kept busy by the parent firm in Boston, which produces 80 percent of the laser shows for corporate meetings in the United States.



Mel Drumm
a favorite assignment

JIM RIDER/staff photographer

Image Engineering staged laser shows for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, and unveiling of the rededicated Statue of Liberty in 1986.

FOLLOWING MEADOW Brook's lead, the Boston Pops, the Cincinnati Symphony, and the Concord Jazz

Festival are among the musical events that feature laser shows.

How about rock shows? "Most rock groups have their own laser crew that travels with them, but we wouldn't be anxious to get into that type of show."

But he sure would like to hear from Aretha Franklin.