

I, ME, MYSELF



"I love the beautiful aspect of Arab culture whereby children are made the first priority," says Laith Maass with his two youngest children, Tala, 2, and Karim, 1.

Maass appeal

FORGET DAVID COPPERFIELD AND DAVID BLAINE. The new master of illusion isn't even a magician. **Lorraine Chandler** discovers how Dubai-based Laith Maass convinced over 100 million people that they were seeing Madonna live (when in reality she was a virtual image). Photos by **Megan Hirons**

There was something unique about the first few minutes of Madonna's performance at this year's Grammy awards. As more than 100 million people worldwide watched her sing with the Gorillaz on stage, the real Madonna was backstage having a cool drink.

The images of her and the members of the animated band were created by a unique 3D technology invented by Dubai-based Laith Maass and his company, Event Works.

The Eyeliner system, based on the older Dr Pepper's Ghost technology, uses specially developed foil to reflect images from high-definition video projectors, creating a result so good that viewers can't believe that what they're seeing is not actually there.

The system consists of a truss box and stage, while proprietary software creates the startling images.

The 42-year-old German has spent over half a million euros (more than Dh237.3 million) patenting this unique technology in 34 countries. It wasn't easy for him to get that money together, but from the moment he saw the system in operation, he knew he had something special.

"Everyone who has seen it has been amazed," Maass says.

In fact, only three weeks after filing the patent, he got an unexpected visitor

when Hollywood movie mogul Steven Spielberg turned up at his door, offering to buy the technology for \$1 million (about Dh3.68 million). Spielberg's offer was followed by overtures from Disneyland, David Copperfield and fellow magicians Siegfried and Roy.

"When a guy like Spielberg comes to you personally, you know you are on to something big," he says, smiling. Maass didn't sell it to anyone; instead, he went on to patent it internationally.

"I suggested that I could work with Spielberg and the others to use the technology, but if they couldn't buy it, they didn't want to work with me, so it was tough for me to fund all this patenting," he says. "In each country, you have to pay translation and lawyer fees. I think it's so unfair on normal people who have great ideas, because the only way they can afford to invent things is by selling the patent to some big company."

It was sometimes risky filing the patent, as expensive challenges could be taken to court. In Munich, a competitor filed a court case, but never turned up in court, which vindicated

Maass's case.

Still, Maass hasn't done too badly. He's had a turnover of euro 20 million (about Dh94.93 million) in the seven years since he invented the Eyeliner system. He used the stunning technology to great effect at prestigious Audi and BMW launches and also for a cardiology tour around Europe, which presented a giant, pulsating heart on stage, with the lecturer able to walk through the heart as he spoke. Afterwards, he told Maass that it was the first time that no one had fallen asleep during his talks.

Maass left school at 18 and joined the Bundesanstalt für Strassenwesen (BAST), a Cologne-based government department responsible for street construction works. He worked there for three-and-a-half years, training as a radio/television mechanic for two years

and in electronic devices for a year.

His sister's friend, Alf, worked in show business and when Maass was 20, Alf asked him to help make an electronic device for a show. Maass helped install it and set it up for a Stuttgart concert with 4,000 people. A laser show, it had to be worked

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manually. He laughs now, and points out what a big deal laser shows were 20 years ago, before audiences became spoiled with laser and fireworks extravaganzas.

"People were clapping and saying 'ooh' and 'aah' every time they saw a new effect and I can remember thinking, 'Yes, this is my life,'" he says.

At 21, he left BAST and worked as a freelancer for laser companies, including Kinetics and Cats Laser Show. When a discotheque closed down, he bought its laser equipment to set up his own company. He took out a



EVENT WORKS

30,000 Deutsche marks (about Dh71,800) loan and opened Krypton Laser Works. I tease him about whether the company was named after the fictitious element in *Superman*. He agrees he's a fan but adds that Krypton can also mean a fascination with what you can't see. "You can see the laser beam and that has an interesting emotional effect," he explains.

Maass's Cologne-based company built the first polarised laser projector in the world and produced the first polarised laser 3D show for the launch of the Mazda Xedos 6 in Germany 15 years ago.

"People loved it and that gave me a real kick. Then I made a show for an insurance company, with 10,000 people in the audience. We glued paper 3D glasses under the chairs, but by the time the show [started], thousands had already discarded or broken their glasses. I started thinking about creating a 3D show that would work without glasses," he says.

Maass went to the European patent

office in Munich to look up optical patents and that's where he found the Dr Pepper's Ghost patent (1913). This was a very simple technique that used a piece of glass tilted at 45 degrees. When an actor stood in front of it, the projection made him appear as a ghost.

Maass decided he could improve on this idea and set out to search for a company to manufacture a specific type of foil with a width of four metres. He spent 18 months working on the idea and using different sizes. The original Dr Pepper's Ghost produced small projections but Maass wanted to

Bringing animation alive ... The Gorillaz, the virtual band, was projected on stage at the 2005 MTV Europe Awards using Laith Maass's Eyeliner system. Maass is planning a worldwide tour with the animated band.

make large-scale ones. He started experimenting with everyday items, such as a cigarette pack or a soft drink can, until he could show them revolving as 4 metre x 4 metre incarnations. Because of the high resolution, the images looked amazing and Maass bagged his first client. Austrian artist Andre Heller used the technology for his installation at the Swarovski museum in Innsbruck in 1999 - a piece of art showing crystals flying around, which still stands there today.

Maass knew he had what he wanted and went on to patent the Eyeliner system internationally. His biggest installation was at the Expo 2000 in Germany when he created an exhibit on mobility, measuring 76 x 8 metres, that displayed a variety of moving trains, cars and other vehicles.

In 2001, he came to Dubai, after falling in love with the beautiful woman who was to become his wife. He set up an event management company, Event Works, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I'm the only inventor in my family. I think my greatest gift is that I see things and think about changing them for the better. That's how I have developed in my career. When I go to an event and see a problem, I'm able to change it in two minutes. We had an event in a Kuwait hotel once, and the ceiling height was 20 cm lower than it should have been, but it took me just a couple of minutes to see how I could change it by adjusting the trussing. Similarly, I had an event in Abu Dhabi. Just a couple of hours beforehand, the light desk stopped working, but I was able to rectify the mistake in time.

I lived my own life from the time I was about 12, and no one really interfered with my choices. I had a liberal upbringing, particularly because I was the youngest. I left home at 18.

I've never read a book in my life, although my mother practically devours them. I find books are too subjective. Yet I think I'd like to write a book one day, since I've had so many interesting experiences.

I had to trust my instincts when I was working on the Eyeliner system. As an inventor, you start from nothing. You don't really know what you're doing; you just have to keep testing different things. It took me six months before I got anywhere. No one reinvents the wheel. You just have to look at how you can bring together different elements to make things nicer.

ME

Me and my upbringing:

My mother, Susan, has a degree in chemical engineering. She came from East Germany, but in 1957, she visited an aunt in Cologne and that's when she met my dad, Alfred, who was a metal worker with Ford at the time.

My dad was very traditional, as I am now too, and wanted my mum to stay at home with the children, despite the fact that she could have earned a lot more than him. (In our neighbourhood, all the women stayed at home.) She's really very intelligent so she didn't want to do that, but now she thinks it was the right decision.

My dad never really felt happy that my mum was more qualified than him

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so when he was 55 he went back and completed a civil engineering degree in bridge construction, as he was by then working in that field.

My father had a tough life, because he grew up during the Second World War and started work at 13. The [military] wanted him to fight in Russia and he had to run away from them. My mother's father, despite being a Protestant minister, was forced to fight in the war and died. My father has never seen the point of shooting people. He got my brother and me to do our service with the fire brigade, instead of doing military service.

My father built a simple hut 200km from our Cologne home and we used to drive up there whenever we could; on weekends and every holiday. It was a bit like Norway and very beautiful. We had no electricity and my mother used to wash the clothes by hand in a small river nearby.

My father loved fishing and used to spend the whole day at the river. About 10 years ago, I told him that he was very lucky he had a wife who had allowed him to do that!

My parents taught us how to live, how to be straight, fair and honest. They worked well as a team. We didn't have any luxuries but we had a beautiful childhood, especially growing

up in the forest and listening to the silence of the night.

Me and making ends meet:

We didn't have much money growing up. We were poor financially but gained our riches in experience. I have a brother, Wolfgang, and a sister, Ute, and it was a struggle for my parents to look after us all. I remember we ate pasta with ketchup three or four times a week.

Dad used to repair cars after work to earn some extra money, so we didn't see him much during the week. As soon as I was old enough, I got work washing cars and working part-time in a supermarket. I remember being 6 and everyone had a bike except me. That got me thinking, so I saved hard and at the age of 15, I was able to buy a motorbike. When I was 18, I bought my own car, a Renault.

Me and my wife:

In 1998, I set up a company called Musion. [At that stage] I had been married 13 years to a German lady, Martina and had two children, Lukas and Robin. [However, we later separated.]

In 2001, I came to Dubai for the

ME AND THE DAY AT THE BANK:

When I was starting to patent the Eyeliner system in around 1999, I applied to the bank for a loan of about 100,000 Deutsche marks (about Dh239,330).

The lady working in the bank, Frau Ruth Janecke, believed in me and signed the

application without getting further approval. She was like a mum to me. Because of that, she lost her position and they put her in a desk job.

Without that loan, my progress would have been so much slower.

I felt really bad about her job, so I gave her a holiday to the Maldives with her brother. We're still in contact a couple of times a year.

launch of the BMW 7 Series at the Burj Al Arab. I was sitting 100 metres up in a truss [on the stage] when I saw Dalia and instantly realised I had to marry her. She was the event manager for the Burj Al Arab at the time.

Over the following two months, I flew between Dubai and Germany and we got engaged only seven months after meeting. My ex-wife, Martina, was upset but we remained good friends.

Meanwhile, I decided to embrace Islam and took the name Laith Maass. [Prior to this, my name was Uwe]. We got married in a Jordanian-style wedding, as Dalia's mother is Jordanian. I closed my company in Germany, which was tough as I had to let some people go. It was a new life for me.

Dalia is a very kind and honest person. She's a very pure person, which fascinates me just as much as her beauty. She is a good mother and a good cook. While she speaks Arabic to our two children, I speak in German.

Me and my children:

I have two older children, Lukas, 16, and Robin, 12, who live in Germany. We have a beautiful relationship and they visit every single holiday. My two younger children are Tala, 2, and Karim, 1. All the children love each other, and my wife is very busy when my two older boys are here too.

I love the Arab culture's emphasis whereby children are made the first priority.

Me and Event Works:

Dalia and I set up Event Works in 2001.



Love at first sight ... Laith Maass and his wife, Dalia, whom he first saw at an event at the Burj Al Arab.

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She was able to advise me on a lot of the technicalities and worked full-time until Tala came along. Even now, I don't want her to get rusty, so she keeps a check on many aspects of the business.

We have a turnover of about Euro 1 million (about Dh4.75 million) a year and we are [doing a lot of good business] abroad.

In February this year, we really made the Eyeliner system well known through the Grammys.

We now have plans to do a worldwide tour with the Gorillaz. We're also in negotiations with Shakira and Dido to use the system on tour.

The good thing about working here is that if you have a nice idea but it doesn't fit into the budget, [UAE businesses] will increase the budget to include it. I also like the way you can shake hands on deals here.

I totally trust that honesty. I also think clients appreciate the fact that I am working with my own hands, not just directing things from a chair.

MYSELF

What spurs people on to come up with new inventions, such as the Eyeliner system?

I think inventors are looking for a way of doing things better. But it's sad not to have more time for that. I work 18 hours a day, but I wish there were 36 hours in every day.

There can be confusion between illusion and reality, but can an image ever truly capture an artiste performing live?

It's funny because people really do think it's real and often ask to speak to the person afterwards. But, still, for a show, the singer needs to be able to react to the audience.

But by using the Eyeliner system, you could have one concert at the same time around the world. I think we will do that one day.

With inventions like yours, can we trust our eyes any longer? Can we differentiate between reality and illusion?

Even when you're watching the news on TV, you don't know what's real any

more. There are people who still question the filmage of landing on the moon, because you just can't tell what's real and what's not. That's something you have to accept about living in our times, but one consolation is that if aliens ever land on earth, we probably won't be too surprised or scared to see them!

Is reality what we can see, or is there more to it than that?

Reality is what you can see, feel, hear, smell and taste. If you can't do all these things, then you can't really be sure that it's real.

Should we approach life with a trustful or sceptical attitude?

We have a couple of sayings in Germany: 'Lies have short legs' and 'The truth lasts longer'. Even if you have bad experiences in life, that shouldn't make you give up your belief in trust.

You have good and bad everywhere, but I still believe in the goodness in humans. ■