



BEHIND THE SCENES

Light

SOURCE

Since 2012, visual artist and animation duo **Wolves** have been running at the intersection of art, music and technology, elevating your favourite musician's live gig to a higher plane. As their work goes worldwide, this is what the big picture, from where **Joshua D'Mello** and **Jash Reen** stand, looks like

WORDS: NIDHI GUPTA. IMAGE: RISHABH CHADHA (PORTRAITS)





Mariah Carey's  
Caution World  
Tour in 2019

“**T**his,” says Jash Reen, yanking the collar of his black tee to reveal “500” tattooed in thick lettering under his collarbone, “was to mark the 500 straight games of *Mortal Kombat* that Josh beat me at.” The co-founder of Wolves Visuals is trying to put a finer point on evident fanaticism. On a Monday evening, I’ve walked into the animation and live visuals studio’s HQ in suburban Mumbai, where four of the eight-member team are sat in front of giant computers and mocking up content for upcoming gigs: a new music festival in Mumbai and Latin popstar Bad Bunny’s gig at the Pornhub Awards among them. His “silent” partner, Joshua D’Mello, has gone home for the night; but Reen, just back from a weekend in Delhi where he worked on YouTube’s Straight Up Punjab gig, is in his office, catching a break with a game of *Mortal Kombat*.

“Gaming is where our love for animation stems from,” he continues. “Right now, we’re just so happy doing this, I don’t even know what we want to do next.” Behind Reen’s long-haired, lanky frame is a floor-to-ceiling backlit glass case with figures of dragons and Avengers, monsters and mutants, and the entire cast of *Star Wars* – a toy chest built over their many international trips and a recent visit to the San Diego Comic-Con. “We’d probably never consider making stuff for films, but if we can give back to worlds like that... That’d be cool.”

It figures that seven years after setting up their studio, Reen now talks of working with NetherRealm – a legend among game builders – as if it’s a bucket list item, not a far-out fantasy. Since 2012, when they started peddling their craft as visual jockeys, they’ve worked tirelessly to channel their endless love for sci-fi, videogames and fantasy to keep things fresh at live music stages everywhere from Las Vegas to Korea.

“VJing is a lot like DJing, you take the cool stuff that already exists and mix it up to create new meaning,” he says. “Of course, it takes a lot of skill and talent to make the kind of sets that match the BPM and take the crowd from zero to, well, where they do. But I think the real fun is in sitting down and creating the source of those inspirations. We’ve always wanted to build a new world, a unique environment for every stage or artist we’ve worked with.”



Jash Reen and  
Joshua D’Mello

What live visuals can add to a live music experience – that “see music, hear art” vibe – has been noted at least since one Joshua White started dropping coloured ink on projector slides in East NYC clubs in the late 1960s, to give Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix company (and “acid trip” new meaning). But the VJ or visual artist’s skills turned necessary once the EDM boom began globally around 2009. And now, as an artist’s live tours have taken precedence over album sales/number of times a single’s been streamed as the main source of revenue, it’s a gold rush for visual artists and stage designers.

In their initial years, Mumbai’s indie music scene was Wolves’ playground: gigs at blueFrog, electronica weekends like Krunk’s Bass Camp, Sanaya Ardeshir aka Sandunes’ first tour. It was all terribly, endearingly DIY: Stacking shoeboxes into lego like towers; cutting cardboard by hand; muling props from venue to venue and city to city. They’d stumbled upon 3D projection mapping – the technique of casting abstract visuals on uneven physical surfaces – while it was still a novelty, and they took it absolutely everywhere.

Soon, festivals like NH7 Weekender and Sunburn became essential items on any culture-lover’s calendar, and they all needed better, newer, slicker stages year after year to bolster their star-studded lineups. For DJ Snake’s 2015 Sunburn City tour, for instance, Reen remembers creating the Imperial Guard stage, a 32-foot mech fortress animated purely with LED panels.

Wolves’ real breakthrough came from within this scene – with the first (and only) Electric Daisy Carnival in India in 2016. For the smaller Circuit Grounds stage with a focus on dubstep, Wolves dialled it up with the LED content, building a glitchy, stroby, futuristic stage. It caught the eye of Forrest Hunt, executive producer at Insomniac, the company that produces EDC, among a host of other EDM festivals.

“Forrest just walked over to us and asked if we had US visas,” remembers Reen. “I guess he saw that we were pretty hands-on during the entire show. We never →

just sit back and leave everything to play on loop. We are constantly performing live, as much as the DJs and musicians out there. I guess he saw someone falling into the same genre that he likes, ie, dubstep, and he wanted that same level of proactivity for his shows.”

Since then, Wolves have worked at multiple editions of EDC Vegas and Korea (the Bassrush stage is their domain); other Insomniac properties like Beyond Wonderland; and gone on a bus tour with Flux Pavilion. While EDM and dubstep are still “peak genre” in the US, Wolves have dabbled in hip-hop and pop too. Today, they run with some of the biggest companies in the world – Vita Motus and Exite Labs among them – to work on shows with artists like Swae Lee, Kid Cudi, Die Antwoord, Mariah Carey and Shakira.

For Shakira’s latest El Dorado tour, Reen recalls “doing five songs, and another company called Sila Sveta was also involved for some of the other songs. But I heard that she asked each of the companies involved to give her a version for each song. If she said that she wanted a certain song to have the colour yellow, you’d think that was easy; but it had to be a very specific shade of dirty yellow, the way she saw the colour. Or if she said trees, we had to figure out that particular tree that pertains to a specific childhood memory.”

On home turf too, Wolves are seeing artists get more involved in production. At the Straight Up Punjab concert, “each artist had his own creative idea – Raftaar wanted to do a bunch of fun stuff, so did Badshah. Each one wanted to top the other. It was just about getting the vibe of each artist and creating an environment for them.”

Shakira's  
El Dorado  
Tour in 2019



“Raftaar’s trying to level with the underground rap game and we realised that he’s into gaming, probably as much as us.” So they created an installation where a pair of LED screens stood like an open book, mirrored post-apocalyptic cityscapes playing on both, one soaked through with a cold icy blue light, the other set ablaze. Ever so often, something fell from the sky like a bomb, while Raftaar performed his infamous diss track “Sheikh Chilli”.

**B**adshah, on the other hand, wanted to “just flip it all on its head.” As the beat to “Mercy” dropped and he stepped out of the dark, a *Sesame Street*-style cartoon film began to play on the screen behind him, full of rainbows and green pastures and cutesy monsters: a one-eyed pink one, a furry green one, a giant red one.

“Badshah’s really interesting because he’s looking at what’s happening abroad and wants to bring some of that to his audience in India. It’d be cool to take these songs that play on the radio all the time and make them a bit more interactive.” So, Wolves have taken a subscription to a software called Notch (their mainstays are Resolume and Octane), which is already being used by artists like Billie Eilish and Swae Lee. “It takes the feed of the artist or a pre-recorded video and you can use it to do stuff live. You can set the artist on fire, have them burst into particles – things like that. It’d be cool to do something with Badshah on it.”

Does it matter that their craft and work remains ephemeral in nature? “Certainly we would like to be able to create more experiential stuff that stays, and makes a difference.” It’s where the urge to work with videogame companies stems from; and why they’d get excited about the prospect of, say, “re-inventing the visual experience” of a real-world place.

“In Las Vegas, Josh and I always stay on Freemont Street, where all kinds of tourists land up and, well, do stupid shit,” Reen says. “Now Xite Labs has got the contract to remodel it, and they’ve come to us. We’re thinking of creating this huge labyrinth-like musical device on a screen that’d pump stuff out to the rest of the street. It’s going to be there for like, six or seven years. To make something visually compelling enough so it has sticking power – that’s the endgame for us.”

WORDS: NIDHI GUPTA