

EDM

The Man Behind Amon Tobin's Jaw-Dropping Live Show

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Emma Gutteridge

A trippy scene from Amon Tobin's show

When experimental electronic producer Amon Tobin takes the stage at the Greek Theatre tomorrow, his audience will barely be able to see him. He'll be ensconced inside a massive, 2.5-ton structure made up of white, interlocking cubes, stacked Tetris-like atop one another.

A sci-fi kaleidoscope of 3D-rendered video projections will play across the structure's oddly shaped surface as Tobin unleashes the crunchy, experimental tracks from his latest album on Ninja Tune, *ISAM*.

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When the audience can glimpse him inside the structure, they'll realize that he's wearing a full spacesuit. "I had this idea to have sections of the show where I appear as a computer render and switch to being there in person," Tobin explains via email. "I had to make sure I was always wearing the same thing for it to make sense. So that turned into wearing a spacesuit both in the motion capture and on stage for consistency."

It's all part of a growing trend in live electronic music seeking to improve upon the stage presence of someone hunched over a mixer and laptop. Instead, there's a movement toward eye-popping visuals that were once only seen at large-scale rock concerts. In fact, one of the companies behind Tobin's show, V Squared Labs, built its reputation designing concert visuals for the likes of Korn, Beyonce and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

V Squared founder Vello Virkhaus also works with big-name EDM clients including Skrillex, Infected Mushroom and Electric Daisy Carnival. He got his start VJing at raves 20 years ago, projecting slide shows and 16mm film loops over the DJ booth.

The budget and technology for EDM shows has grown exponentially since those low-tech early days. "Electronic has expanded enough that there's not a lot of requests coming from rock 'n' roll," Virkhaus says, sipping strong coffee in the little North Hollywood house that serves as one of two V Squared workspaces. He's happy to focus on his first love, noting that V Squared's EDM projects are typically "far more innovative" than the rock and pop shows. "And the people are a little friendlier. So yeah, my heart is definitely in the electronic side of it."

Tobin's *ISAM* show debuted last year, touring internationally and making SoCal stops at the Fonda Theatre and the Sahara Tent at Coachella. After Coachella, Tobin, Virkhaus and their production team realized they needed to retool the spectacle for larger venues. The resulting incarnation features a larger structure and, according to Virkhaus, "about 50 percent new content" in the projections, which are precisely mapped and calibrated to the 45-degree angles of the cubes to create the show's dazzling 3D effects. "You're putting the virtual view of what you would see exactly on top of the physical piece," he explains. It's the Tupac hologram writ large.

As much as Virkhaus can geek out over all the gear needed to create and run these visuals ("32 computers were barely cutting it!"), he's even more enthusiastic about some of the new creative elements--particularly a sequence he and Tobin collaborated on with the design studio Leviathan, which he describes as "somewhere between the Brothers Quay type of organic, stop-motion mechanical pieces and Aphex Twin's *drukQs*" album cover.

"You get introduced to the [space] ship itself," Virkhaus explains. Tobin "goes into a hypersleep nightmare...his head shows up floating in a jar. That one's a huge departure."

For Tobin, the over-the-top visuals add another dimension to his dark, atmospheric music, and free him from any need for forced showmanship. "I never really interact with the audience, cube or no cube, to be honest," he says. "There are a limited amount of stage antics you can apply to electronic music performance."

The only downside to the whole endeavor? Dressing up like a dubstep astronaut every night. "I just have to get that bloody suit cleaned soon."