





The new art of pop promos

By directly connecting artist and audience, the internet has shattered traditional constraints on musical creativity. *Computer Arts* explores how pop videos have evolved in response

WORDS: MARK PENFOLD ILLUSTRATION: SERIAL CUT

In the quarter-century since the phenomenon exploded on MTV, the visual culture of music videos has been a recurring cycle of original and artistic highs followed by hackneyed and predictable lows. Although the growth of the internet threw traditional record companies into turmoil, so much so that they are still struggling to adapt, it has given musicians and video artists alike endless new ways to make a name for themselves and bring their talents to an audience. Bands as big as Radiohead and the Arctic Monkeys have found that a decent home computer and an internet connection can achieve what once required a million-dollar recording studio, a phalanx of sound engineers and a marketing budget approaching the size of the Isle of Wight.

The listening public have their own revolution going on. The democratisation of music is happening whether the major labels think it's a good idea or not. The ubiquity of mp3 players and music-playing mobile phones means we can soundtrack our lives as never before, and a generation has grown up believing that music is something you get for free through sharing files on peer-to-peer networks. The focus has moved away from the music business and returned to the music itself, and quite naturally the videos that interpret and accompany it.

The result is a new model for the creation and consumption of music, which doesn't necessarily involve multinationals (except for Google, of course). "The unsigned bands phenomenon is amazing," says Caroline Bottomley, founder of the Radar Festival, an international competition for new ☒



ABOVE: A cut-up animation pop promo by Jamie Raap and Henrik Mauler for German group Funkstörung's *The Zoo*



ABOVE: *D.A.N.C.E.* Directed by Jonas & François, this clever promo for French electro-outfit Justice was an internet phenomenon that onedotzero picked up for its wavelength video strand in 2007

directors of music videos. This new breed of musician is providing graphic artists with something to get their teeth into. "The film-maker can do a bit of A&R themselves, a bit of talent-spotting, then offer to do a promo," explains Bottomley.

Directors like Michel Gondry and Chris Cunningham elevated music videos to the status of art, and the new generation look to these pioneers for their inspiration. James Medcraft of the collective UnitedVisualArtists says, "I've always felt that the best videos are the ones created on a minimal budget, by people who are so passionate and attached to a concept that they'll stop at nothing to get it done."

Having taken this philosophy to heart, designers, illustrators and animators are making their cut-price creations available for mass consumption, uploading them to video sites such as YouTube and waiting

for the world to pay attention. "I wouldn't have got anywhere near where I am now if it wasn't for YouTube and MySpace," observes David Wilson, whose low-on-cost, high-on-creativity work for bands like the New York City-based Yeah Yeah Yeahs has put him on the road towards a career as a director with access to budgets in six digits.

However, there's a problem – the business model has yet to really take hold. Here and there, bands are trying to make a go of it without labels. Radiohead's Thom Yorke is a tireless champion of young graphic talent. Such progressive thinking means it should come as no surprise that the group's latest album *In Rainbows* has been made available via

takes off then we can expect to see a huge boom in independent video production. The artists are ready and waiting – there's an entire army of them itching to get their teeth into a proper brief.

NEW MODEL ARMY

How do we know there's an army? Well, if you want to go way back, ask Shane Walter. The founder and creative director of onedotzero has been searching out the best new talent for more than a decade. According to him, there's always been plenty of people toiling away, editing and animating. "Talent will rise to the top," he says. But they have to carry on working, and others have to see their work.

What's missing from that equation is sustainability. Radar, which only kicked off last year, took six tracks from three record labels and asked entrants to produce a promo for their choice of track. From a pool that is almost exclusively based in the UK, the contest attracted more than 200 videos. Extrapolate this to the rest of the MTV-watching world and give it a bit of a push, and the numbers could be enormous – and all for no money. What's sorely needed is the development of a supportive infrastructure that will keep these budding directors from starving.

It's not like there's no audience. Los Angeles-based OK Go had 23 million people download their home-made promo

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JAMES MEDCRAFT, UVA

digital download with the customer deciding how much to pay.

Around 40 per cent have chosen to make a donation, with the average in the region of £3, according to one report. Nevertheless if the Radiohead model



ABOVE: Jonathan Hopkins' comedy caper for Four Tet's *A Joy* tells a tale of man vs bear



ABOVE: Ben Adam's mixture of fantasy and comic-book horror had a budget of £50 yet saw him named the Warp Records Best Music Video Director at the Radar Festival in 2007

for *Here It Goes Again* – essentially a video of the band on jogging machines. “People seem to be appreciating clever concepts over eye candy and green-screen graphics,” notes Australian motion-graphics designer Stephen Watkins. “The push from high-end glossy 3D graphics to a more hands-on, concept-focused approach has opened the door for many smaller studios to take on work which would have previously been out of reach.”

WHEN WONKINESS WORKS

The videos these young designers are putting together have a decidedly hand-made feel, dictated at least partly by the restricted budget. But fate has conspired to make the illustrative, slightly wonky style of graphics a fashionable one. “I can’t use actors, hire lights and equipment, or source locations,” explains Wilson. “But if I draw it all, it might be very labour-intensive, but I have the freedom to do what I want.”

This happy set of circumstances won’t prevail forever. Bottomley warns, “From the point of view of style and taste, there will at some point be a backlash against the low-budget feel.” The economics of the situation dictate that there’s always

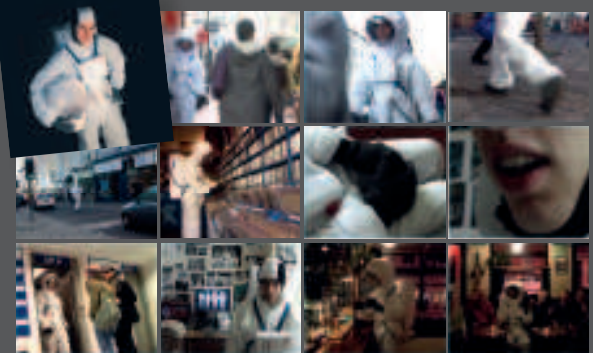
going to be a market for creativity on a shoestring, but there’s something to be said for the contribution greater funding could play – imagine a field supporting as many motion-graphics artists as there are graphic designers.

A certain level of hardship is a good thing. It drives artists to take creative risks and to avoid generic devices. In the longer term, though, capitalising on the talent that’s out there will depend on the wide adoption of a new financial solution. And the benefits from an alliance between the creators of the music and the artists behind the videos would be more than financial. Medcraft says, “From working more closely with band members, I’ve found ideas and creative possibilities emerge that would not have otherwise.”

“Technology has hit a point where to stand out you must be creative with it.” That’s the opinion of Scott Evans, who won D&AD’s Student of the Year Award for 2007 with his video for Yorke’s single *The Clock*, and he hits the nail right on the head. The ability to twiddle a few knobs in *After Effects* is no longer enough; people are used to what that can do. The viewing public respond more than anything to totally new ideas. **arts**



ABOVE: David Wilson produced this animation for *How Say* by Brighton group Metronomy off his own back



ABOVE: With a very limited budget to draw on, David Wilson, like many up-and-coming directors, relies on a supply of ready wit and good ideas

CASE STUDY: DAVID WILSON

HOW ONE ILLUSTRATOR KICK-STARTED A CAREER IN MUSIC VIDEOS

David Wilson has had quite a year. “I’ve associated my work with so many high-profile bands just through entering competitions and putting my work online. It’s been really good.”

Those bands include New York’s Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Los Angeles-based Dntel, but it all started closer to home with Brighton’s own Metronomy. Ironically, given the way the internet has revolutionised long-distance collaboration, Wilson met the band the old-fashioned way: face to face. He studied at Brighton, went to their performances and they got talking.

Wilson produced a promo for the group’s single *How Say* as a shot in the dark: “I did that off my own back as a uni project and put it online.” The action follows the evolution of communication between two animated figures as their technology gradually alienates them.

The piece is a creative triumph, especially considering that Wilson was studying illustration rather than animation. His work was spotted by the manager of the London-based label Moshi Moshi Records, kicking off a career in music videos in style.

Useful links

www.elev3n.co.uk

www.uva.co.uk

www.davidwilsoncreative.com

www.radarfestival.com

www.onedotzero.com

www.watkins.com.au