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generation music video

CHATting WITH THE FOLKS BEHIND THE MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE'S AWESOME NEW MUSIC VIDEO EXHIBITION

By Elizabeth Thompson



Grizzly Bear: "Ready, Able" (2009). Directed by **Allison Schulnik**. Part of the exhibition "Spectacle: The Music Video" on view at Museum of the Moving Image, April 3-June 16, 2013.

Raise your hand if the video for "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang," TLC's "Waterfalls," -- or, for that matter, any other music video on heavy rotation on MTV in the '80s and '90s -- is seared into your brain, taking up space where a retention for basic algebra or four years of high school Spanish should probably live. The music video, a huge part of youth culture for the MTV Generation (or just about anyone born between 1970 and 1995), is celebrated as art in the new show "Spectacle: The Music Video" at the Museum of the Moving Image, on display now through June 16th. The show features 300 videos by directors including Michel Gondry, Floria Sigismondi, and Spike Jonze, set pieces and artifacts from videos, and other installations that capture the emergence of music videos as an art form. In conjunction with the exhibition, Chris Milk, who's directed videos for artists including Kanye West, Arcade Fire, Beck and Gnarl Barkley, will speak about his work at Vevo and Sonos' Director's Studio series at the museum's Fox Amphitheater. Tickets are free, available first-come, first-served, and the talk begins at 7 p.m.

Below, we speak with the show's co-curators Jonathan Wells and Meg Grey Wells of Flux Creative about the show and the videos they loved as teenagers.

What made you feel like now was the right time to do a music video exhibition?

Jonathan Wells: Both Meg and I are children of the MTV generation. We were teenagers when MTV launched and we've always loved music videos and, professionally, have championed the filmmakers who've gotten their starts in music videos. After so many people left videos for dead when MTV started playing reality programming, there's now been a major music video resurgence in large part thanks to the Internet. Videos are the ideal, bite-sized bit of content for the Internet and mobile devices. We saw the amazing story of Psy's "Gangnam Style" video last year, which is the most-viewed YouTube clip of all time with something like 1.5 billion views.

But this show is not a historical show wherein we say, "This is what music videos were," but more like, "Where did the music video come from?" It didn't begin and end with MTV and videos can be traced back to the 1920s. We're looking at all of music videos' different themes and what's happening with music videos now.

Do you think the Internet has changed how music videos are made? And what goes into them?

Meg Grey Wells: I think the Internet has created a new age for the how the medium is perceived. "Gangnam Style," for example: That video didn't become popular because of the strength of the singer or the strength of the song. If you look historically at MTV, that was the whole purpose of videos. Instead, Psy was using the art form to put himself out there. That video went viral because he used humor toward himself to propel it. And everybody responded to it. As a result of virality, you see a huge surge of remix videos. How many "Call Me Maybe" videos did you see last summer? Or more recently, the "Harlem Shake"? It's a little bit unstoppable, what people are doing with the medium.

And then there's the ever-changing, ever evolving technology of the interactive music video and how that can be used to create video. You can see this in James Frost's video for Radiohead's "House of Cards." He shot Thom Yorke not with a camera but a laser, and you can manipulate that code online. Then there's the Wilderness video for "We Used to Wait" by Arcade Fire, where you can enter in your address and see your house on Google Street View in the video. These are things meant to be experienced on your computer. [Ed note: You can read about Aaron Koblin of Google Creative Lab's Data Arts Team, who worked on both of these videos, in our May 2012 tech feature on Digital Renegades.]

You mentioned videos going all the way back to the '20s. What are some examples you have from back then or other early videos?

JW: There was a video by Bessie Smith from the '20s that is one of the earliest musical shorts in existence. We also have some Betty Boop musical shorts. That's fascinating because one of them composites live action and animation together. That's more of a contemporary technique and it's remarkable that it was in existence then. And then, obviously, there's the iconic Bob Dylan video for "Subterranean Homesick Blues" from D.A. Pennebaker's Don't Look Back. And then we have The Beatles who were extremely influential in everything from straight documentation of a performance, to [clips that showed them] sort of clowning around or that had a more experimental feel.

MGW: Even with [the movie] A Hard Days Night, there's no linear story, but it has the essence of what we now know as a 'music video.' It's very artsy and it jumps from one scene to the other and they break out in song. It's very creative.

JW: Also in the '60s there was also a version of a jukebox called the Scopitone. Basically, inside the jukebox there was a 16 millimeter film projection and you could choose a song and it would play a short film for that song. Then you have pioneers like David Bowie and Devo who were very influential in making early videos in the '70s and early '80s, and then moving into MTV, you start to get stuff like Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" video by Stephen R. Johnson, which is one of the most awarded videos of all time. We actually have one of Stephen's MTV Video Music Awards Moon Men on display in this show.

It seems like New York itself shaped videos and MTV early on. Do you have anything that's New York-centric in the show?

JW: New York was of course very instrumental in launching hip-hop. There was a seminal show in New York that's still on today called Video Music Box and also Yo! MTV Raps, and our show highlights how important these programs were in spreading hip-hop around the U.S., and how it influenced music and fashion. Some of "Spectacle" is a chronological timeline, but the rest of the show looks at choreography and cinematography, controversy and re-mixing in videos.

What else is included in "Spectacle" that we can look forward to?

JW: The exhibition really focuses on things that have transcended time, like Aha's "Take On Me" for instance. You look at that video, which was made without any fancy digital tools, and it's still amazing today. We have the original drawings in the show that have never been seen by the public before this. We have no doubt that people might see the show and say, "Why wasn't my favorite video included?" so there's actually a Vevo lounge where people can pull up their favorite video. There's no way you can have a show where you can include every video that's ever been made and means something to someone. It's not that those videos aren't worthy -- we still appreciate them -- but we're just trying to showcase the artistry behind these [particular] videos that make them an art form.

You mentioned being part of the MTV generation. What are some of the videos that you remember loving as teenagers?

MGW: I was a huge Prince fan and [love] the video for "When Doves Cry." Oh my god, I loved it. I thought Prince was the greatest thing since sliced bread. When I was 13, I actually dyed some of my clothes purple to be like Prince. Michael Jackson was another one; I was just enamored with the "Billy Jean" video.

JW: There was this video by The Art of Noise called "Close (To the Edit)" with a little girl and these guys with chainsaws hacking up a piano, and that just stuck with me. It really was a piece of video art.

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