

From musical afterthoughts
to the scrapheap
of pop culture

Rock videos

Notes toward a morphology

by John Harkness

In the past five years, rock videos have gone from musical after-thoughts designed for exhibition in a few rock clubs (generally as concert footage) to a multi-million-dollar business with its own television stations. In the process, the rock video has become an essential promotional tool for launching a new album or act.

But what is especially interesting about the rock video is that it is at once a new form and an old form with dozens of predecessors. For example, a 1929 short film of Duke Ellington and his orchestra playing "Black and Tan Fantasy" is intercut with a story about the romantic travails of a girl working in the club where they are playing, which, if you change the names, sounds exactly like Elvis Costello's *Every Day I Write The Book* video. Or there is a 1949 film of the great jazz saxophonist Lester Young playing "Jamming the Blues," which is a virtual visual model for The Police's *Every Breath You Take*. And, of course, any number of videos, including Lionel Richie's *All Night Long*, Midnight Star's *No Parking on the Dance Floor*, Michael Jackson's *Beat It*, and George Clinton's *Atomic Dog*, could easily be musical routines lifted from classic Hollywood

musicals. (Indeed there is an irony here in that the visual concept short, once predominantly featuring black musicians in the era when blacks and whites attended separate theatres, has been taken over by whites, and the production number, once pristinely dominated by whites, has become a hallmark of the black music video.)

However, the most important date in the history of rock videos occurred 20 years ago with the release of Richard Lester's two Beatle films, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* The impact of these two films cannot possibly be underrated, because they radically changed the way that rock music was treated in the movies. Before the Beatles, there had been two approaches to rock music in films. The first was that found in rocksploitation films like *Rock Around the Clock*, *Don't Knock the Rock*, *Rock Pretty Baby*; even in the best film of the genre, Frank Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It* (a film that in relation to the rocksploitation genre holds the position that Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* does to the rockumentary films of the late '60s and early '70s). These films would make a stab at a plot, usually involving someone like Tuesday Weld attempting to get a dress for her high-school prom (the actual plot of the 1956 *Rock, Rock, Rock*). Dropped in among the story would be straightforward performances by any number of classic rock acts, including Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddie Cochran, etc. The bands themselves were interchangeable, and only

rarely was there any attempt to relate the songs to the plot or make a presentation memorable in any way (the only one that comes to mind is Jerry Lee Lewis performing the title song for *High School Confidential* from the back of a flatbed truck.)

The other approach was the Elvis movies, which used their star as a traditional movies-star, usually a performer of some sort. While this was occasionally excellent, as in *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole*, it was more often pedestrian, and took little consideration of either Elvis' special qualities as a performer or the specific qualities of rock music.

What the Lester films did was conquer the difficulties of presenting rock-and-roll in a narrative context by ignoring it (when you have a group of musicians playing songs, how do you prevent every number from being a straight-forward performance and still maintain some sort of realistic presentation?). This approach to that Gordian formal knot was breathtakingly liberating. Why not play the song while the members of the band frolic in a field, or have them perform in an utterly impossible situation like the snow-covered slope of a Swiss Alp? The funny thing was that no other director picked up on it until the '70s.

While rock video as a form has only come to prominence in the past five years, and only begun to run to satura-

tion level on home television in the past two years, we can distinguish recognizable rock videos as far back as 10 years ago. (Quick definition of an RV: a short film or videotape made to promote a record and designed to be shown on television. There is some question as to whether the works of performance artist/musicians like Laurie Anderson, Toni Basil and Toronto's Eva Everything should be included, or whether they are actually doing something quite different). In this light, the first concept video (non-performance) may well be Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* (directed by Brian Gowers, one of the most prolific video directors), which dates from 1975.

There were also any number of performance videos from this era, and they tend to stand and fall on the charisma of the performers. While this was the heyday of the big stadium rock-tours, where the best-known acts in rock could play in front of 70,000 people at a time, it was also a time of tremendous stagnation in radio. Virtually the only way that the acts which would become known as the punk and new wave movements could be heard was to bicycle their performance tapes to those few clubs equipped to play them.

One of the most memorable performance clips of the era was a straight concert clip of the Sex Pistols performing *God Save the Queen*, and seeing it today reminds us of two things. First, what an ungodly brilliant performer Johnny Rotten was, and, second, how much popular music has changed in the last decade. The Sex Pistols were un-

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compromisingly crude, brutal and aggressive. Shortly after bass player Sid Vicious committed suicide while awaiting trial for the murder of his girlfriend, graffiti began to appear around New York reading "Sid lives" and "Sid died for our sins" (this last appearing in such unlikely places as the front stairwell of Columbia University's School of the Arts). Looking at this clip of film, one is tempted to rephrase the graffiti to "Sid died so Duran Duran could cavort with anorexic models on the beaches of Sri Lanka." For what happened since the Sex Pistols is evident to anyone with a TV.

What is new about the form is its sudden ubiquity. In Toronto, anyone with a television hooked up to cable can watch rock videos for an hour-and-a-half per day minimum, with a total of more than 35 hours a week. In addition, it is now *de rigueur* for a group to release a video, if not two or three, with an album, which means that all of a sudden there is a great deal of rock video on TV.

There is so much rock video available now that the usual critical backlash has occurred. The Ontario Censor Board wants to cut them. Toronto's leftist magazine, *Fuse*, recently published a two-part article by Lisa Steele attacking their sexism. (A brief note on sexism in rock videos: Yes, there is a lot of it, and this is probably unfortunate. But this is rock-and-roll, damn it! Rock-and-roll is basically about sex, rage and aggression: the beat screams it, the lyrics shout it, and the volume leaves no doubt. Attending a really loud rock concert is rather like being hit in the chest with a sledgehammer for two hours. Lisa Steele would probably be much happier in a world where all pop music was created by people like Joan Armtrading, Joni Mitchell and Bruce Cockburn, and one feels that it is not so much rock videos that she dislikes as rock-and-roll itself.) Rolling Stone ran a long blast at the racist programming policies of the American music video channel, MTV. This was thoroughly justified, because it is an institutional racism that even spills over into their otherwise valuable reference book "MTV's Who's Who in Rock Video," which in its director videographies frequently omits videos created for black artists (specifically Brian Grant's video for Donna Summer and Bob Giraldi's for Lionel Richie, and the breakdance and rap videos from the past two years). Film Comment, in August 1983, ran a 16-page midsection of the MTV aesthetic that led off with a blast from editor Richard Corliss, who called it "the shotgun annulment of character from narrative, the anaesthetizing of violence through chic, the erasing of the past and the triumph of the new." But as Peter Occhiogrosso noted in the *Village Voice* (July 31, 1984), these are exactly the qualities that dominate Corliss' two favorite films of the summer of 1984, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins*.

So I would like to make something very clear: I like rock videos. For someone who does not listen to Top-40 radio, the TV video shows are an invaluable indicator of popular taste. And the best of them are art, though one does have to hunt for them.

The question of the level of artistic achievement in rock videos is a complex one for a number of reasons. The first has to do with their ubiquity. In any given hour of watching rock videos, you

If boss pursuit was an Olympic event, Canada could pick up a gold just by sending the employees of CITY-TV who have had a great deal of practice trying to keep track of Moses Znaimer. "I think he's looking at some promotional material," says one secretary. Well, he was looking at some promotional material, but now he's out in the construction shop behind his Queen Street headquarters going over the new set being constructed to house the VJs for his new pay-TV service, MuchMusic, which will go on air at the end of the summer.

This is not a casual visit to a workshop. "Where's the mike going? Are you going to put that where his feet are? Are you going to put trim on the monitor? Show me the trim."

Somehow, it's hard to imagine William S. Paley running around to check if Dan Rather's mike is in the right place. "Paley," remarks Znaimer, on the move again, back to his office to meet with his publicity director, Nancy Smith, "doesn't have to work for a living."

It's easier to get hold of John Martin, the Englishman who emigrated to Canada in 1969 to work in CBC Current Affairs before coming to Znaimer in 1978 with the idea for The New Music. "It was the first show to program video, three years before MTV." It is, with its mixture of interviews, live performances and new videos, the most widely syndicated show of its kind in Canada, and the six years of library that it began accumulating makes it the flagship of CITY-TV's extensive rock programming.

Martin, as busy as Znaimer with the organization of MuchMusic, is very clear in distinguishing MuchMusic from MTV. "MTV comes from nowhere. (There is a rumour, among those who have watched MTV's eerily disconnected female DJs, that MTV actually broadcasts from Mars.) MuchMusic will definitely come from somewhere. It will be much more personal than MTV, and much broader in its programming. We won't just be playing AOR (album-oriented rock, the standard FM rock format these days) but we'll play reggae, funk, country."

He is also insistent on giving Znaimer credit. "Moses' genius was that when he started CITY-TV, he was the first person to narrowcast in a broadcast market, and in the most competitive market in North America. He made a decision to concentrate on movies, news and music, and it worked."

Znaimer's transit from Take 30 in the '60s to founding CITY-TV and then selling it to CHUM, to the application for the license for MuchMusic

is pretty much the stuff of show business legend in Toronto. If you say the name Moses anywhere on the biz circuit in Toronto, nobody thinks you're talking about the fellow with the beard and the tablets.

If Martin talks about the philosophy of MuchMusic, Znaimer talks candidly about the business of setting up a TV station in the face of the sort of regulation set up by the CRTC.

"In the U.S., music, news, ESPN, whatever, are universally available converter services, but in Canada, by CRTC *diktat*, they are pay.

"We based our proposal on universal converter availability, and there would have been 2 1/2 to three million homes who would have been able to receive it. What has never been understood here is that in the U.S., the growth engine for cable was pay, but in Canada, the impetus for cable fifteen years ago was the U.S. signal. We're taking a heavily cabled country and trying to make it buy new, expensive systems. That was the trouble with the movie pay services.

"When we didn't get universal access, we filed MuchMusic II, where we predicted 150,000 subscribers in our first year. The problem we face is that, in a pay system, you must make a certain choice, and that is about the artificial price structure. We will have a price structure that places a higher cost on the hardware than on the signal. People thought the movie channel cost \$16 a month, but it didn't - the channel cost \$9 a month and the box cost \$7. Our service will cost 90¢ a month per subscriber, and the retailer can take advantage of incentives that will get his cost down to 60¢. We have to be able to separate out the cost of the box from the cost of the signal.

"We expect to spend \$4-5 million

over the next three years, with about half that total going in the first six to eight months on capital costs and advertising.

"This will be a good thing for the record industry in Canada, and for the people who make videos. The biggest problem the record companies have is rotation, and there's no point in investing in a video unless the use justifies the cost. Once you get out of Toronto, your options are very limited. We'll be able to show them acts in Saskatchewan that have never been seen outside of Toronto or B.C.

"By increasing the attention a video can receive, we'll throw more practitioners into the field, because while the cost per minute is high, the total cost is not.

"It appeals to my sense of excellence, because the larger the pool of people working in the industry the more excellence there is. That's why we created the fund for video production (headed by Bernie Finkelstein, president of True North Records) the money in that fund can all be leveraged dollar for dollar.

"If a producer has \$10,000, we can match that, and then they can take money they received from the fund and come to our production facility, though they are not obliged to, and leverage that money again on production costs. Once you have a finished product, you'll be able to get it shown on MuchMusic. We're saying that if you're oriented to selling, and you spend to promote on MuchMusic, we'll match it.

"We'll be ready to go on air with our previews Aug. 15 and to launch right after Labour Day, but if it turns out that the cable operators are slow to tool up, there's certainly no point in going out if no one's watching."

Boss pursuit at CITY-TV



City-TV's John Martin, Nancy Smith and Moses Znaimer

can see ten to 15 videos with no control on your own part. They are pre-selected. Therefore, anyone who watches a lot of rock video will see a lot of crap. Now you can also see a lot of crap while watching movies, reading books, or watching other television programming. Very little winnowing takes place. Yet even the most dedicated movie critic feels no

compulsion to go out and catch all the teen sex comedies, or all the dead babysitter horror movies, or cheap action-pictures that seemed to have oozed, rather than be released, into the theatres. In other words, the selection process for the other art forms is already at work.

So the attentive viewer will quickly see most of the new rock videos, and

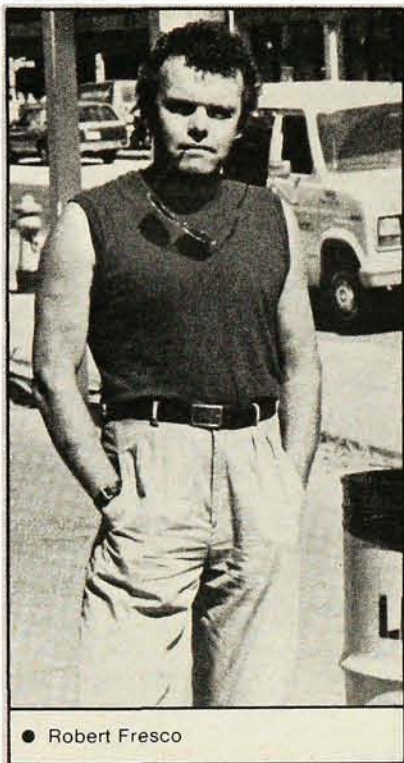
here Sturgeon's Law comes into effect (Theodore Sturgeon, the great speculative fiction writer whose works include "Microcosmic God", "More Than Human", and "Some of Your Blood", was once asked why he wrote in his genre since "90% of it is crap." His response, a masterpiece of concision, was "90% of everything is crap.") And the reaction of

The commercial compromise

"Can we survive on rock videos? No. I end up freelancing, doing commercials and being d.o.p. for other peoples videos." Robert Fresco is fast rising as one of Canada's leading rock and music video directors, and his videos have been among the most high-profile in the competitive and insular Toronto music scene, including Parachute Club's *Rise Up* and *Boy's Club*, M + M's *Black Stations White Stations*, and Pukka Orchestra's *Listen to the Radio*. Coming up on his schedule are repeat engagements with Pukka Orchestra and M + M, new videos for the Vancouver band Chilliwack, and a shot at reshaping the image of the slumping hard rock ensemble Toronto.

His initial procedure in the production of a rock video is simple. "First I listen to the song. Then I try to read between the lines and come up with obscure images and concepts. Then I go to the artist for approval."

Of course, that is not the end. "Martha (Johnson) and Mark (Ganes) were very precise with the sort of images they wanted for *Black Stations White Stations*. For *Rise Up*, I sat down with Lorraine (Segato) and Billy (Bryans) and we set up parameters. They wanted it to be very up, to have lots of activity, and street



● Robert Fresco

photo: John Harkness

people. I tried to find different kinds of dancers, Caribbean, Chinese, black, and set up a kind of Pied Piper thing.

"When it came to cutting it, I did it

pretty well on my own. Working with Lorraine is an advantage, because she's made films, so she understands them. There's a disadvantage for her though, in that she'd like to work more hands-on."

The basic filmmaking unit is four people, known as Pretty Pictures, with Fresco as director, director of photography and editor, and his partner and wife Sharon Lee Chappelle as business manager and producer. In the company with them are Roger Patchette and Doug Harlocher.

Fresco is a creative filmmaker, and the fact that he cannot survive making rock videos ("neither can Quartly - he has to make commercials too") indicates the marginal nature of the industry in Canada. On the Pukka Orchestra video, he says, they lost a lot of the profit when some video effects went a few hundred dollars over budget. The problem, of course, is the lack of ancillary markets for videos - unless you are Duran Duran, not a lot of videos are sold to the paying public, which means that they remain a part of a record's promotional budget - with no consideration that a well-made video in a strong rotation position on the charts can add an awful lot of records to the sales total.

most people when they confront Sturgeon's Law is to scream at the 90% rather than to celebrate the 10%.

The second problem is the dual role of the rock video as both promotional device and art object (they are all art objects, just as all novels are art objects and all movies are art objects. The problem, throughout history, is Sturgeon's Law: there is always more bad art than good). Generally, the video is conceived following the song, and often, there is some bizarre alteration of plans: Rough Trade's *Territorial* video was shot with sets, characters and choreography originally planned for the song *Weapons*. The rock video is also art conceived and created under incredible scheduling pressure and budgetary restrictions: "We're releasing Crib Death's new single in two weeks, and the video has to be ready tomorrow!" Robert Fresco's video for Parachute Club, *Rise Up*, was shot, with a cast of hundreds, in two days on a budget of \$8,000. The rock video is also corporate art, with a welter of *auteurs* on both sides of the camera and any number of non-artistic hands interfering with the final product. For another Fresco video, M + M's beautifully designed *Black Stations White Stations*, he was asked by the record company to highlight band leader Martha Johnson, which meant that they had an unchoreographed bit of Ms. Johnson dancing. Now, Martha Johnson is an excellent singer and a good songwriter, but she is, as a dancer, living proof that the white race has no rhythm, and it spoils the piece. Says Fresco: "We just didn't have the money in the budget to hire a choreographer."

But people forget that this was also

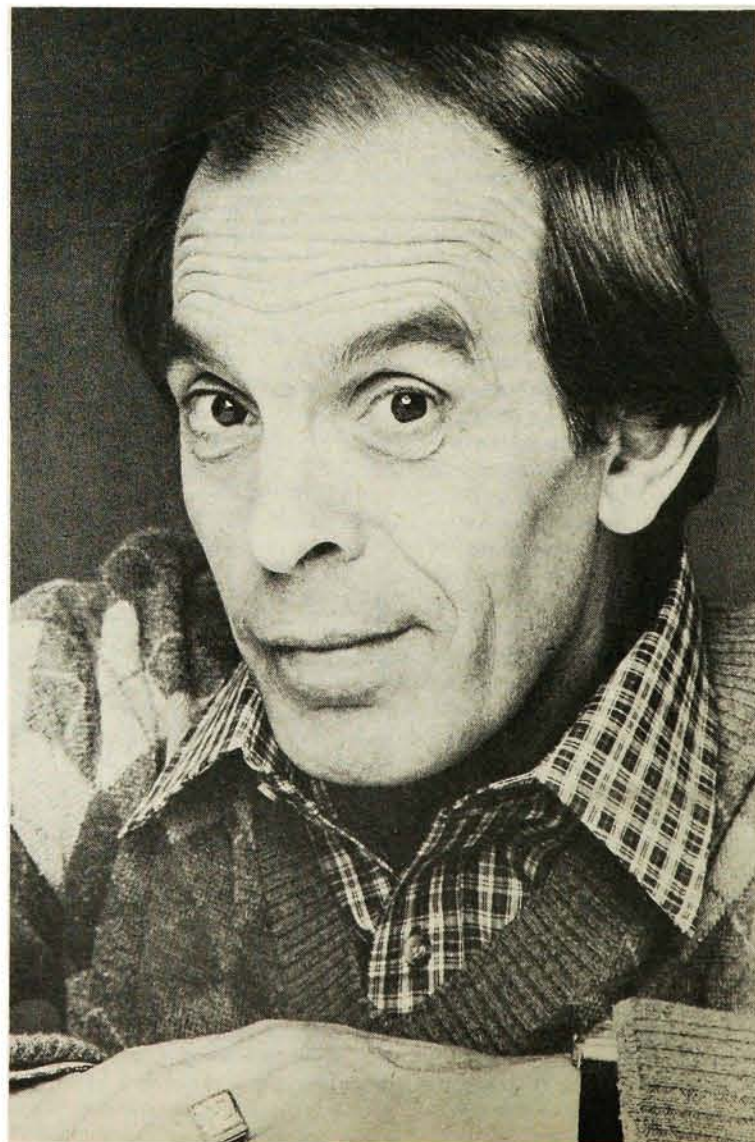
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true of the Hollywood studio system, where those who paid for the movies did not look on what they were doing as art, and never had second thoughts about assigning new writers, firing directors, or ordering new editing of the studio-produced films.

The other element of time-and-budget pressure that is often forgotten is that there are certain advantages to speed. After all, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his masterpiece, "Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde" in three days – and part of his motivation was the hope that he could make a lot of money.

Another problem is the newness of the rock video as a specific form, with the attendant confusion of technology, context and conventions.

Although we call them rock videos, most of them are not: most RVs are shot on film, usually 16mm, and then transferred to tape. The problem with the new video technology is that no one has quite figured out exactly what is unique about it or and what can be done with it. All the innovations we hear about tend either to be things that can be done with film (the Chroma Key background is merely a high-tech process shot, and the ADM and Mirage technologies have yet to prove they can be anything but cute). On the one hand, we have the technology enthusiasts who go on and on about the wonders of the new things that can be done (I like to think of this as the 'Y'know, Anna Karenina would a been a really great book if Tolstoy had had a word processor' approach). On the other hand, given the paucity of actual results we are expected to react the way that Madison the Mermaid does in *Splash* when Allan gives her a nicely wrapped present and she gets all enthused about the box. But, unlike Madison, we know that all the box is is wrapping. The videophiles have yet to prove that there is actually anything in the box.

Any new art form creates its own context and conventions, and during this creative period, uses the popular culture that has preceded it. The movies drew heavily on, among other things, Victorian stage melodrama, Western penny-dreadful novels, and music hall/ vaudeville comedy. Television had the history of movies to draw on, and the pool of Broadway and off-Broadway talent to draw on when it was located in New York (indeed, looking at some of the television from the early '50s is an interesting experience, because there was a fondness on some of the more serious programs, such as *Playhouse 90*, for non-realistic sets, abstractions almost suggestive of the setting rather than the relentlessly representational nature of contemporary television).

Rock video rummages through the scrapheap of popular culture, and this creates a problem for anyone who approaches the conventions of the form in a traditional manner. In an art form which has matured, one can generally pick out recurrent images that share meaning. In almost any *film noir* of the '40s, when the hero walks into a bar and sees an elegant blonde nursing a tall drink, we know that he's in trouble. If the scientist in a horror movie is told "That's impossible! You're mad, absolutely mad to even think it," we can be, pretty sure that he will retire to his lab and whip together a little something that will level the joint.

But rock videos are not a settled genre: while they may grab images from a common vocabulary, and even use the same narrative grammar, the images do not mean the same things

from one video to the next. The dwarves attacking Peter Gabriel in the *Shock the Monkey* video are not the same dwarves threatening the blonde model in Van Halen's *Pretty Woman*, is not the same dwarf playing a lute in Men Without Hats' *Safety Dance*.

Indeed, there is a question whether the image vocabulary that so many videomakers draw on is a vocabulary or just a mess of clichés. Charlie Haas, co-screenwriter with Tim Hunter on *Tex* and *Over the Edge*, wrote an article (in *Film Comment*, August, 1983) on the headsploitation films of the late '60s and early '70s, and included, a song written by a friend of his that "no matter who records it, will be featured instantly on MTV, no matter who records it, because its lyrics incorporate all the heaviest, most meaningful clichés:

Mmm, you know there's a lot of dry ice around my feet, said it's misty, yeah...

I said hey I'm in a laboratory right now,

There are lip prints on the wine glass yeah...

Da da now me and my band, with our hairdos, hey,

We're running around a Third World country

Where poor people are staring at us, yeah...

But, doot doot dah, now we're chasing this anorexic model and there's a wild animal loose

and there's a wild animal loose in the city

Mmm, yeah, and some authority-type people who don't like rock n'roll,

They're wagging their fingers at us, oh yeah...

This is perhaps the most devastatingly precise criticism of the form that has ever been made – it nails, in lines of doggerel, everyone from Michael Jackson's *Billy Jean* to Bryan Adams' *Cuts Like a Knife* to Duran Duran's *Hungry Like the Wolf* to almost any Heavy Metal video to the Stray Cats' *Sexy and Seventeen*.

The problem with the clichés, like the everpopular breaking wineglass, is that they have become clichés without ever passing through the stage of meaning and context – the rock-video imagery exists in a context of no context, because its image bank has been overdrawn by too many bad directors.

There are people who have used the clichés very well (when you use clichés well, they cease to be clichés): ZZ Top turns the elegant model into an avenging angel; Thomas Dolby has converted the authority-type figure into a psychoanalytic father-figure on whom to focus his incomprehension; though nobody has been able to do anything with those damned wineglasses.

At this early point in the development of the form of rock video, it may be more valuable to look at the formal conventions that exist within the form, for they seem to be more highly developed than the imagery. What we need is a morphology of rock videos.

There are approximately a dozen different forms of rock video, which can, for the most part, be laid along a continuum, with the pure, live performance at one extreme and the concept video in which the performer does not appear at the other.

Pure performance: This is a classic rockumentary format as seen in *Woodstock*, *Monterey Pop*, and *The Last Waltz* – the band performs in front of a live audience. This format is heavily favoured by heavy metal bands, in large part because there is no barrier between band and audience: metal, of all the varieties of rock music, is the one that connects most viscerally and directly with its audience. (Metal is virtually the only form of rock with almost no fans among intellectuals, and the only rock form that has drawn the wrath of the Toronto Star entertainment editor, who suggested that their concerts be banned due to the fans' fondness for extreme quantities of stimulants and depressants and their predilection for hurling firecrackers about hockey arenas.)

Indeed, given the brutality of attack that is a feature of most metal bands, there is almost no way to present a song like Judas Priest's *The Number of the Beast* except in performance.

Other artists who benefit from the pure concert format are those with strong personal charisma: David Bowie (*Modern Love*), Prince (*Little Red Corvette*) and Bette Midler (*Beast of Burden*), all come to mind.

The next step along the scale is the **staged performance**. Its chief diffe-

rence is that it substitutes the immediacy of live performance for the greater flexibility of lip-synching. The number of camera angles and superimpositions in a video like Van Halen's *Jump* would be impossible to create in a live performance.

Studio performance: One step closer to artifice, a tape like The Go-Gos' *Head Over Heels* has no illusions about being anything but artificial. The staged performance in a studio always seems slightly incomplete, if only because it seems to be leading up to a concept without ever executing it.

Performance: concept image: This is one of the most popular forms of video, because it allows for a play of the imagination while avoiding the responsibility of narrative. The band performs in an unusual setting, either studio (most of Rob Quarty's videos for Canadian acts, including Platinum Blonde's *Standing in the Dark*, The Spoon's *Nova Heart*, or Coney Hatch's *Shake It*), or natural (both INXS's *Original Sin* and Parachute Club's *Rise Up* are performed in the street).

Concept/Image: performance: This does more than simply shift the terms of the previous category – it moves us into the realm of unrealistic performance. Even in the bare studio performance,



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● Pukka Orchestra



● Platinum Blonde



● M + M

there is the illusion of an actual performance. There's a singer, and a band, and they run through a number as if they were playing (what is actually heard by the performers must be odd – in this age of electronic instrumentation, the only instrument still making any noise in the studio is the drums) but this category, which includes Blue Peter's *Don't Walk Past*, Thomas Dolby's *Hyperactive* and *She Blinded Me With Science*, the bulk

of the Duran Duran videos and Eurythmics' three videos, eliminates the band – the singer sings in a variety of settings, generally dominated by a thematic image. At the simplest level, you have Martha and the Muffins' *Danseparc*, where the band dances in a parc, and Martha Johnson undergoes a vaguely sinister eye examination. On the most complex level, one ends with a stream of consciousness exercises like Thomas

Dolby's *Hyperactive*, the one piece I've seen which belies all the nasty things I said earlier about video technology.

Pure concept: Like its counterpart, the pure narrative video, this is an extremely rare form – perhaps because the average rock star is too egocentric to give up the image of performance. The only one which comes readily to mind is Herbie Hancock's *Rockit* which features almost nothing but robots of various sorts and degrees of completeness interacting in a ramshackle house. It is quite the most disturbing video I've ever seen, and came about in a rather interesting way. Hancock, the noted jazz/funk keyboard artist, became enamoured of the scratching sound created by rap DJ's (scratching is exactly what it sounds like, using the sound of a needle on a manipulated record to turn the record itself into a rhythm instrument). On creating *Rockit*, he went to British video directors Kevin Godley and Lol Creme and asked them to make him a video that would get played on MTV, normally a problem for any black artist not named Michael Jackson. They got around the problem by creating a video in which the artist barely appears, only showing up in brief shots performing on a television in the set. The act of performance is structurally irrelevant.

Performance: narrative: This introduces narrative with realistic performance, with performance dominating. Another rare form, if only because the dominant position of the performance leaves very little time for narrative. The best example is the video for Bette Midler's *Beast of Burden*. Headlines announce Midler's romance with Mick Jagger. He turns up at her dressing room, announcing that the romance is over. She begs him to stay to hear her sing "his song." He agrees. She performs *Beast of Burden* in a concert setting, he joins her onstage. They are reconciled during the song, by dancing together. It is extremely economical, and its economy raises questions about just how much we require of a work for it to qualify as narrative. It is easy to demand a beginning, a middle and an end, but tough to fulfill when you have three minutes and must include a song.

Narrative: performance: This is one of the most popular forms, and has been termed the "mini-movie." Given the intrinsic interest and challenge of narrative, it is unsurprising how many of the best videos are in this category: The Rolling Stones' *Undercover of the Night*, Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, *Beat it*, and (most famously, the fifteen-minute *Thriller*), Duran Duran's *Union of the Snake*, Pat Benatar's *Love Is A Battlefield*. These are rock videos with a beginning, a middle and an end, where the singers become movie stars. Pat Benatar fights with her parents, leaves home, becomes a hooker in the big city, leads a rebellion against her pimp and escapes (those who have seen *Love Is A Battlefield* may wonder exactly what it is the pimp finds threatening: the idea of solidarity among his girls, or the awful choreography?).

Narrative: non-performance: A rare form, again a mini-movie format, exemplified by the ZZ Top trilogy of *Legs*, *Gimme All Your Lovin'*, and *Sharp-Dressed Man*, where the band barely appears, and when they do, it is as passive observers of the story who intervene slightly in the tale of their clean-cut heroes and heroines. Part of this may have to do with the fact that ZZ Top, a classic blues-boogie bar band

from Texas, is an extremely odd-looking group. Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill, their bassist and guitarist, both sport sternum-length beards and wear long, duster-style coats that suggest they just brought a big herd of cattle to Abilene. It may be impossible to come up with a narrative context in which they can function as regular guys. It may, however, be an example of recreating themselves in mystic terms. In the three videos in what has become known as the Eliminator trilogy (from the album where the songs originate), there are sets of common structures and elements. In *Gimme All Your Lovin'*, a young man is working in a gas station somewhere on the Texas flatlands, when a 1932 Ford Coupe, a stylized ZZ painted on the side, rolls in, and these three goddessy models roll out of it, enticing the hero to join them in God knows what delights. He is indecisive. The band, which has been hanging out at the gas station, opens a felt covered box and hands him a key whose chain has the ZZ logo. He goes off with them, and returns, dumped from their car, his boots dropped on the ground beside him. After the car has driven off, he lies under various cars, supposedly fixing them, only to muse, like Parsifal, upon the the sexual Grail he has glimpsed. Suddenly, the coupe passes the station, and he realizes he still has the keys he was given, and so sets off in his pickup truck on what may be a lifelong quest.

Legs and *Sharp-Dressed Man* are almost identical. In each, a nice young person (female in the former, male in the latter) is set upon by a nasty world. The nice girl in *Legs* works in a shoe shop, where the fat owner bullies her, the slimy shoe clerk treats her like dirt, and even the rednecks who inhabit the coffee shop across the way insult her and take advantage of her relative innocence. No one even lets her talk to the nice, clean-cut guy who works in the coffee shop and is subject to the same abuse. There are occasional cuts to the band performing in a parking lot (utterly unrealistic: fuzzy guitars which they occasionally spin while the music continues on the soundtrack; shots that are not integral to anything in the narrative). After being abused one too many times, the girl is visited by the three Valkyries in the '32 Ford coupe. They rescue her from the nasty people she works with, get her a new hairdo and sexier clothes, and then roll into the coffee shop to show the local yokels what real class can do. The band gives the girl the keys, and she and the nice guy drive into the sunset.

Reverse the sex of the leads, and you have a precise description of *Sharp-Dressed Man*, though the setting is a big city nightclub and the hero a valet car parker.

What ZZ Top has done, unlike almost any other group, is to create a specific, self-sufficient mythology around themselves. ZZ Top, with their videos, now have a recognizable world as well as a recognizable sound (rather like a buzz-saw with a backbeat). What is unusual about it is that they have created a self-image that is essentially mystical, rather than the usual stud posings of rock stars – an image that is not unlike the one created by Michael Jackson, as a mythical interceder in human events: stopping the gang war in *Beat It*, defying the best efforts of the detective in *Billie Jean* to photograph him and transforming a bum into a gentleman in the same video, and transforming himself into a werewolf and a ghoul in *Thriller*.

Any performer, if he is any good, creates a mythos about himself, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. What is interesting is that ZZ Top and Michael Jackson have created mythologies that remove them from humanity. The opposite, and most loathsome reversal, of this is attempted by Huey Lewis and the News in their video for The Heart of Rock and Roll. Lewis and his boys are cast as wide-eyed innocents in New York and L.A., confronting spike-haired punk bands on the East Coast and leather-studded heavy metallists in the west, while asserting that "the heart of rock 'n' roll is still beating in the great mid-West where cute blond girls dance with clean-cut guys wearing Pendleton shirts and chinos." Coming from someone as jocky looking as Lewis, this is not surprising: rock videos your parents can love.

The disappearing artist: As far as possible from the live performance video is the video where the artist does not appear. These can be animated stories (Tom Tom Club's *Pleasure of Love*), animated performances (Righeiro's *No Tengo Dinero*), pure narrative (Donald Fagen's *New Frontier*), pure concept (Bruce Springsteen's *Atlantic City*), or, increasingly, movie promotional videos which feature clips from the film but not the performer singing or playing the song. The three videos from Walter Hill's "rock 'n' roll fable," *Streets of Fire*, where Diane Lane and a back-up band perform two songs, *Nowhere Fast* and *Tonight Is What It Means To Be Young*, may be the ultimate in the category. Lane, in the time-honoured Hollywood tradition, is dubbed by another singer. The band that supports her onscreen, however, actually is the band that plays on the soundtrack. The movie song video, is basically a trailer, and thus more heavily a marketing device than a video supporting a record (it does double duty). Ray Parker, Jr.'s video for *Ghostbusters* in some ways is the best example, carrying as it does celebrity endorsements from the likes of John Candy, Chevy Chase, Carly Simon and Teri Garr, all of who appear in choral cameos.

The vignette: An interesting structure that is like narrative, but does not satisfy narrative's demand for resolution, preferring to offer repetitions and variations of a situation. The Rolling Stones' *She Was Hot*, The Cars' *You Might Think*, Rod Stewart's *Infatuation*, and the peculiar, disturbing and quite brilliant Devo videos for *Love Without Anger*, *It's a Beautiful World*, and *Freedom of Choice*. Significantly, all these songs are about romantic/sexual frustration (the chorus of the Stewart song even begins "Oh, no, not again..."), and the denial of narrative pleasure mirrors the story's denial of sexual/romantic fulfillment. — In *You Might Think*, Rick Ocasek pursues a girl relentlessly, and when he finally gets her, they ride in a canoe that sinks beneath the waves.

Dolby's *Hyperactive*, *You Might Think*, or David Bowie's awesomely pretentious *Ashes to Ashes*.

Someone once said that there were two kinds of people in the world, those who divided everything into two kinds of people and those who did not. Being one who does, I'd like to suggest a few dichotomies that someone interested in videos could profitably explore: setting (urban vs. rural), (domestic vs. away from home); style of music (we have already spoken of heavy metal's fondness for concert settings); black artists vs. white artists (I don't want to sound racist, but there is, generally speaking, not only more dancing of all sorts in black videos, but it is better dancing, in part because black popular music tends to be more dance-oriented than white popular music — just try dancing to Black Sabbath); nationality; and sex.

The sexual division is quite interesting, if only because Cyndi Lauper answers Freud's famous question "What do women want?" by singing *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*. This is, in a way, a key, because the videos from female performers are generally lighter than those from men — not less serious, but far less self-important. While Pat Benatar's *Love Is a Battlefield* has the same sort of narrative concentration as Michael Jackson's *Beat It* (they share the director/choreographer team of Bob Giraldi and Michael Peters) and Donna Summer's unbearably moving celebration of the working-class single mother, *She Works Hard for the Money*, is as serious about its subject as John Cougar Mellencamp is in his bonus sub-Springsteen celebrations of Americana, neither performer ever really considers herself as more than a temporary saviour. Benatar may walk away from the 'dance hall,' but one feels that her cohorts head right back up the long staircase. The dance number that ends *She Works Hard* is a momentary respite from the daily grind. When Michael Jackson leads the street gangs in a dance, he gives the definite sense that it could last forever.

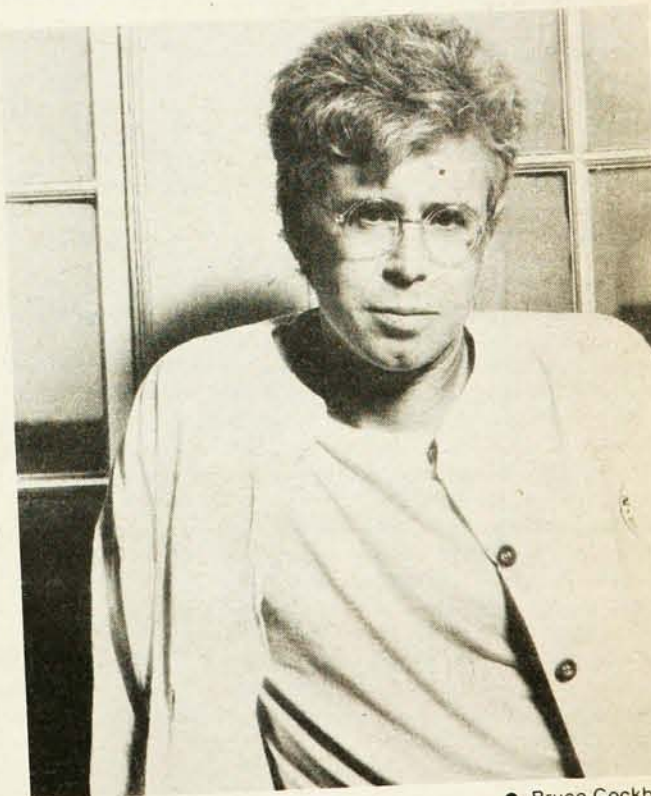
But women do make more funny videos than men, especially if we eliminate the satirists. I can't think of a video by a male rock artist even half as crazed as The Weather Girls' *It's Raining Men*, wherein two large black women discover that they are in the middle of that famous Magritte painting of men raining from the sky — if, that is, Magritte had passed on painting stout Belgian businessmen and concentrated on male strippers from Chippendale's. Bette Midler's *Beast of Burden* (directed by Rock and Roll High School's Alan Arkush) actually gets Mick Jagger to lighten up and look as if he's enjoying himself. When male rockers fantasize, they tend to retreat into fantasies of sex and power. Tracey Ullman, a young woman who seems to have grown up wishing she was Leslie Gore, casts herself and her back-up singers in a variety of '60s 'girlgroup' configurations in *Breakaway*. Much has been made of the lingerie display in Vanity Six's *Nasty Girls* video (one of the groups sponsored by Prince), but no one seems to have noticed the absolute drop-dead indifference that the singers convey, in direct contrast to their rather priapic mentor (admittedly, this deadpan may come naturally — Vanity was D.D. Winters, the model who starred in that classic of Canadian cinema, *Tanya's Island*). The tinker toy McLaren stylings of Pat Wilson's *Bob Girl*, the cheery California perkiness of the Go-Gos, the Pointer Sisters enthu-



● Spoons



● The Parachute Club



● Bruce Cockburn

The problem of rock video is not form — there are many well-developed forms — the problem is the development of content (You in the back row, put your hand down. Yes, you structuralist. I know what you're going to say, and form is not content. You can just go out in the hall and talk to that video-technology enthusiast we threw out earlier.) For it is difficult to think of a dozen videos whose properties could be considered unique to rock videos, as are Thomas

siastic *Jump* (not to be confused with Van Halen's *Jump*) have a lightness to them that one generally doesn't find in the videos of male artists.

Even when women swagger into the heavy metal arena, it is different. The very existence of a band like Girls School — an 11-female British metal band is odd — not only have they got the metal sound down, but when they adopt the look (torn T-shirts, lots of leather, low fore-

heads; a look we might call moron chic) and the behaviour (cruising around in cars picking up cute guys), it is funny because they seem to be enjoying the way they are breaking rock taboos much more than, say, Judas Priest or Def Leppard, who always give the impression of being dourly serious about being heavy metal killers. Joan Jett, in her *I Love Rock and Roll* video has the same rule-breaking glee, and Vancouver's

Head Pins, led by Darby Mills, hit the ultimate in metal response to romantic rejection. Darby's boyfriend leaves her, so she blows up his car. That is funny.

Of course, women can be just as pretentious and deadly as men. Toronto's Dalbello (formerly pop singer Lisa Dal Bello, now looking as if she's been going to a blind makeup man and hairdresser) has a video for *I'm Gonna Get Close to You* that is the last work in chic incoherence. Laura Branigan's video for *Self-Control* (directed by William Friedkin, and it's as if they saw *Cruising* and said "That's the guy for Laura's new video!") wallows in its own weirdly passive ambiguity. Laura, who "lives among the creatures of the night," sees a strange masked man in a club. She follows him into a strange building where a lot of bad dancers in body stockings are writhing around simulating passion. She comes into the room and reclines on a chaise. The mysterious stranger fucks her (sorry, but they don't make love) and leaves. She stares ambiguously into space. Heavy. More than heavy. Positively leaden.

It may have something to do with the socialization process, in that women were never taught that a career was a thing to take seriously and subconsciously rebel, or it may just be that, with immense common sense, women rockers took one look at the deadly seriousness of most men's videos and said "How can anyone take this stuff seriously?" Whatever the reason, women's videos are different from men's, thank goodness.

The issue of national differentiation is quite different, because of the massive amount of cross-cultural fertilization. Steve Barron, best known as the director of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* video, has also done videos for British acts (Human League, Heaven Seventeen, Spandau Ballet) a West Indian performer (Eddie Grant) and Canadian acts (Loverboy, Bryan Adams). Brian Grant has worked for acts as nationally diverse as Dalbello (Canada), Donna Summer (U.S.), and The Stray Cats (American band relocated to England).

But I think we can discern certain qualities in our videos and rock music that are distinctively Canadian. There is, for example, far less overt sexism in our films than in those of American or English bands. This may have something to do with the fact that so many of our bands are led or fronted by women - Toronto, Parachute Club, *Headpins*, M + M, *Rough Trade* (though *Rough Trade*, like David Cronenberg, another important Canadian artist dismissed by the mainstream for years, are *sui generis*).

There is also a certain earnest quality that one finds, particularly in the work of Toronto's more politically oriented bands. Parachute Club's *Rise Up* video looks wonderfully celebratory the first few times you see it, then you start to notice how insanely precise the various elements of the film are in relationship to what we might call Queen Street liberalism: it is set downtown, there are blacks and whites and assorted ethnics, there are breakdancers, there are little children. The same thing happens in M + M's *Black Stations White Stations*, as soon as you realize how goddamned sincere they are about desegregating radio (which is not nearly as much of a problem in Toronto, where there is a lot of reggae on the air, as in the U.S.: this is a situation analogous to the makers of *Not a Love Story* having to go to New York to get the lowdown on pornography).

Both these videos were directed by Bob Fresco (see sidebar), and both are very well-made and strongly conceptualized. *Rise Up* is also something of a production miracle, having been brought in on an \$8,000 budget with a two-day shooting schedule. If a unifying visual concept is the hallmark of Fresco's videos, the earnestness comes and goes - his video for Pukka Orchestra's *Listen to the Radio* is very funny and quite clever.

The earnestness seems to be endemically Canadian. It turns up in another political video, Bruce Cockburn's *Lovers in Dangerous Times*, which is about Central America, features dancers in body stockings writhing in existential anguish as masked evil Uncle Sam figures intimidate them (one wonders if the dancers washed off their makeup and went over to get in a couple of days of writhing on the Laura Branigan video).

It even affects the country's premier metal band, Rush (the only metal band in the world whose lead guitarist wears a tie). *Distant Early Warning* seems to be about impending nuclear war. Subdivisions intercut the band performing with shots of an angst-ridden teenager in the hell of Scarborough. He does not, as he would in an American video, suffer beatings at the hands of leather-clad punks, nor does he become one. Rush raises the issue of Rob Quarty, widely known as the video director for Canada. While doing the rounds of Toronto's small record companies looking at their videos, I became so familiar with the Quarty style that I only needed to see frames of visible lighting and smoke to know I was seeing a Quarty video - he's made them for Rush, The Spoons, Blue Peter, Coney Hatch, Boy's Brigade, Blue Peter and many, many more. Like most directors who rely on a strong and generally repetitive visual signature, he is at his best when he either tones his style way down (as he does in Blue Peter's *Don't Walk Past*) or when he alters it considerably and ventures outside his range (in Corey Hart's *Sunglasses at Night*). The point is not that Quarty has made bad videos - just about everyone does. Given the budgetary and scheduling limitations endemic to the business, that is a normal state (remember Sturgeon's Law?). The point is that he has made good ones. I don't know if they are distinctly Canadian - the way that Fresco's are - but Steve Barron's and Arnold Levine's videos for Loverboy, shot in the California desert, are very Canadian, though the directors are not.

While one can detect Canadian characteristics, it should always be remembered that we are dealing with a cross-cultural phenomenon - an international style has evolved, and Canadian videomakers are as welcome to it as anyone else.

The above notes are meant as a starting point. There are those who say that rock videos are a passing fad, but the same voices said that about rock-and-roll itself, television, and movies. Rock video's problems arise from the fact that it is a very young form (at a comparable point in film history, Griffith had not yet started making his shorts) and it is facing any number of limitations. As long as the pop song is a four-minute unit, it is trapped within that format (Michael Jackson's 15-minute *Thriller* only worked because it completely restructured the song and padded out the narrative), and most of the young filmmakers working in the form are using it as a springboard to features. After all, Steve Barron's appal-

A tale of two DJs

CITY-TV is the pre-eminent station for rock music in Canada, and certainly part of that is due to the presence of its two VJ's, John Majhor and Christopher Ward, the afternoon AM jock and the late-night FM jock. There is probably nobody in closer touch with the popular music audience than the people who do the actual programming, because they're the ones who get calls from the listeners.

Talking to Toronto's pre-eminent VJs to find the answers to some questions about video rock and its audience, I discovered that they have more out of common than their time slots.

Majhor has been a DJ for more than a decade, and currently holds down the evening weeknight slot on CHUM-AM, in addition to hosting CITY-TV's Toronto Rocks live, five afternoons a week.

The all-night weekend spot was Christopher Ward's first music jock job, and in real life he is a songwriter, performer, and has worked with the Second City company. (There is, incidentally, a precedent for this - Chas Lawther, who as Chuck the Security Guard on MTV's *All Night Snow* in Toronto, played a lot of wierd video, musical and otherwise.)

Has music video affected the way that people respond to music?

John Majhor: There's been no effect.

Christopher Ward: Inevitably it has. I ask people, and it seems they conjure up the images from the video when they hear the song. Most people say it enhances the song, but I think it infringes. I would prefer not to have video, because as a songwriter, video seems to me like a commercial.

Can a new band break through without a video?

John Majhor: Yes. It may even be easier without a video, because a video can create an image that may be counter-productive. It's tough to make a black and white statement. If a band is good, they don't need a video. If they're not, it won't help.

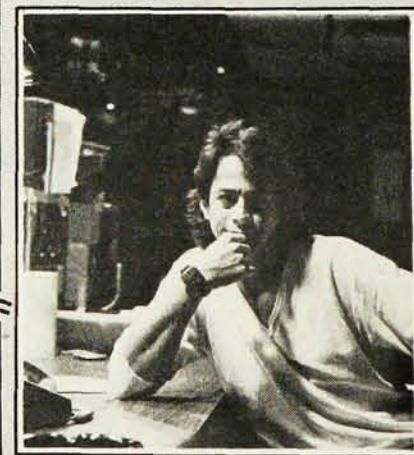
Christopher Ward: That is the saddest aspect of it. It ups the stakes for young bands. For bands that are very visual, it helps, but the money aspect is a roadblock.

Don't you worry that in ten years or so there may be a whole generation of kids who believe that rock-and-roll begins with the rise of the video, in about 1978, and that there's nothing before that?

John Majhor: I think kids just see video as another form - you have live performances, you have radio, and you have video. We get a tremendous response to the old stuff when we go to the schools with the CHUM video history of rock-and-roll, and I get a lot of requests from 10-15-year-old kids for The Beatles.

Christopher Ward: It does worry me, and we could show a lot of the old stuff that's around in the rock-and-roll movies. I like to try and put together sets on the show for a purpose. I'd love to be able to put together a three-song set with a couple of old acts from the '50s and '60s to show where today's music is coming from, but all that stuff is tied up in the movie rights. We were able to show an old Elvis song from one of the movies as a promo for the week of movies we did, and it was great.

John Harkness ●



● John Majhor



● Christopher Ward

photos: John Harkness

ling *Electric Dreams* is already in the theatres, and there are currently another dozen features in various stages of readiness.

It is not an industry that does nothing to hold on to its most talented people (either with financial or aesthetic incentives), and this may be as good a thing as it is bad: while the continuous draining away of talent serves to rob the form of its continuity, it will also guarantee a continuing influx of young, hungry filmmakers, and young filmmakers tend to bring a lot of energy to their work (the

sins of the rock video aesthetic are sins of commission and excess, rarely omission and caution).

It is a form deserving of attention, in part because it is so prevalent, and in part because it is a blast of rudeness amid the quiet good taste and inoffensiveness of mainstream television (it is significant that no network has ever programmed a rock-video show in prime-time). It is also a chunk of instant cultural history, and in 20 years will tell us as much about the 1980s as *Hill Street Blues* or *E.T.*