

SOUND DESIGNER DECISIONS

To Video or Not?

By Craig Chaquico

I was around before there was such a thing as videos. So, I've really seen it from a consumer and as an artist, so my perspectives are from both sides of the fence.

It reminds me of the first video that was ever played on TV - "Video Killed the Radio Star." That really rings true to me because it has changed the way musicians have interacted with their audience. It used to be all about what you sounded like. Then you'd go to a concert and maybe you see Woodstock, you know? That was a video. That was it when I was growing up. You really didn't have this instant access to images of your favorite musicians. I had posters on the wall, and would have died to have videos, but they didn't exist.

When video came out it really did change the way the artist interacts with the audience. It put more emphasis on visuals. When talkies came out, it changed the way people perceived movie stars. Back then a movie star was someone in a silent movie. And then when you heard the dialog that changed the perception of the artist. Then there was the addition of music to enhance film. The idea of a movie soundtrack didn't exist when there were silent movies. And then all of a sudden there were "Talkies" and LATER they had sound tracks that were specifically written for them. Before that they would hire a piano player in the movie theater to play music along with the silent film. I just see the whole thing as an evolution. Now, there are these things called music videos of your favorite artists. I remember when I was listening to Electric Ladyland and I was making up my own videos with my headphones on.

Then there was this thing called MTV and video. It changed the medium. It made video as important, if not more important, than the actual music because people started being drawn to the stylistic factor of what was in the video. What were they wearing? What was their haircut? What were the video techniques that compelled you to watch the video? Which were more than just closing your eyes and listening to the song in the headphones. So, that was a paradigm change. It changed the way an artist reached the audience.

For us, I remember with Jefferson Starship, our first video was a film for a song we did called St. Charles, before there was MTV. Someone decided to put together a short form film with our music in the background and it was for St. Charles, but there was no MTV at the time. It actually debuted at what was known as the Mill Valley Film Festival back in the old days. Then the time came when we were doing some albums and MTV showed up and we happened to have a budget for videos and we were able to do like three or four videos on a fraction of what a budget would be for what would later become a standard music video. So, we got a bunch of videos produced on a shoestring budget that were very effective because at that time MTV didn't HAVE a lot of videos. We were one of the few bands that were making videos and we could do them, and at the time it seemed like they were really expensive to us. But when you saw what videos later became, it wasn't unheard of to spend a \$100K or \$200K on a video, when that's what an album would cost. I never considered myself a movie star or a video star.

And then the whole music video art form turned into a real style. You had Madonna. DURAN DURAN, MICHAEL JACKSON, TALKING HEADS, CINDY LAUPER, PETER GABRIEL, etc... And you had all of these incredibly photogenic, compelling people that were able to create these images and video that surpassed the average guy playing guitar on a record, you know? Now, it had to be a video, and it had to be done like a movie and it really turned into a whole new art form. I wanted to just play music, you know? I was hoping people would just close their eyes and listen to my music like I did, and create their own videos in their heads. But, then it turned into MTV, and budgets for videos became huge and sometimes prohibitive, and an artist could go make an album with their heartfelt music and then their music video would cost more than their album cost. It turned it into a different sort of machine.

I'm not trying to be critical of it at all. It's just, for me, observing the change, I'm now kind of grateful to see it almost creating a full circle where the huge big budget videos maybe aren't as effective as somebody who just goes to their favorite band, records it and puts it up on YouTube and there is no budget; There's not even a record deal. But all of a sudden, this band explodes on YouTube because this simple, inexpensive video touched people in a way that compelled them to want to know more about that artist.

As a fan and as a consumer myself, I've had the same reaction to my favorite artists. Do I like the music, and then do I like how they look when they play it? It's kind of hand-in-hand now with video. Whereas before, it was just... "Do you like the way they sound AND LOOK ON AN ALBUM COVER OR A POSTER? And, if you saw them in concert, did you like their show? There were times when I could be really impressed with a guitar player, like, there was a period of time when Eric Clapton would just stand there and play his guitar at a concert and that was just all I needed - just to hear him. He didn't have to do a "show" in that sense. And now, you know, shows are productions and you would see something like a Michael

Jackson production and it's not just a guy singing. It's all of these other dancers and performers and special effects. So, it can be both, depending on what you're going to see.

I'm just as entertained sometimes by a street musician than by going to a big Pink Floyd concert. And I see value in both. I know, for example, a lot of the English bands decided that if they couldn't keep the U.S. TOURING money they made BECAUSE OF TAXES IN ENGLAND OR SOMETHING, they might as well spend it on production and tours and it was great for us as a consumer because we got these great shows out of it. But it turned it into a Three-Ring Circus too. At one point I remember saying, 'God, music's turning into Barnum and Bailey,' or it's becoming WWF big time wrestling.

So, there is that idea of 'showbiz' and a 'good show' and I like all of that aspect of it. But my feeling about a great video sometimes is 'What am I looking for?'

*I used to think that spending a lot of money on a video was to create the illusion of virtuosity. To capture the excitement ABOUT AN ARTIST with a video production and camera angles so that you are creating this... impression of someone who is just really great at what they do. Now I look at a simple hand held video on an iPhone as not creating the illusion of virtuosity, but archiving it, by documenting it. By being truthful about it. By saying 'Hey, maybe the lighting is off. Maybe the video jiggles, but what did we just see here? Was it the real thing? Or was it created in a studio with weeks of post production, and camera angels and special effects? Or did we just see something that was just phenomenal and compelling and someone happened to capture it on an iPhone?'

It reminds me of an experiment where they took a (violinist) who played sold out performances, hundreds of dollars a

Jefferson Starship - Winds Of Change



ticket, you couldn't even buy a ticket, playing in a subway... and nobody gave a shit. They didn't even pay attention to him. And the only people who really seemed to stop and look were little kids and older people. Everybody else was so busy with their daily routine that they didn't get it. (GOOGLE -Joshua Bell and the Washington Post Subway Experiment)

So, sometimes I think a "great video" can be something that archives something that was really done well and performed well, and it doesn't have to be produced well. You don't have to wait in line and spend hundreds of dollars to see it. If you're lucky enough to see this guy in the subway, he won't do it again, but he did it once as part of an experiment, then you are lucky to see it. But, by the same token, if you are lucky enough to see an iPhone video that someone posted on YouTube with all of the other stuff that's up there, then that's like archiving the greatness rather than creating the illusion of it, or trying to produce it in a movie studio.

I'm really active about producing videos in my future. Right now I have a RECENT LIVE video that I love because my band is playing so well, and the singer is singing INCREDIBLY in one take live. There were no overdubs. There were no lip synchs, but it was just someone's handheld iPhone. To me, that's just as valuable as other videos that we're going to put up that were better recorded with better equipment and there's going to be some editing involved - and I want to do that too, because that's going to be interesting to someone who might look at an iPhone video and not even pay attention to it BECAUSE IT'S JUST AN IPHONE. It's like the person who gets off on the subway and goes "Well, ah, that's not presented in a way that I can understand OR APPRECIATE ITS VALUE. So, I want to have videos that are presented in a more compelling, technical way so people take the time to listen to it and watch it instead of just walking by on the subway and not paying attention to what they just COULD have seen.

In my case, I like both. I like to be able to have a video that is just a handheld video on an iPhone that's just the real world... without any extra stuff that can kick your ass. But, I also think that it's important to do that again with better production and with editing and cameras and stuff. So, I'm really excited about YouTube. To me, YouTube and the internet are like our versions of FM radio and what MTV used to be. They are the direct, most effective way to reach a bigger audience. Back in the day, the only way to do that was MTV. And before that, the... only way to do it was in a concert.

We have the technology now to take music and mess with it IN THE DIGITAL WORLD and take a video and record a band LIVE OR do it in our garages and RECORD IN our bedrooms with our computers the way Hendrix EXPERIMENTED WITH HIS AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGY and did it all in his studio with his OLD ANALOG, four track tape recorders, THEN LATER 16 AND 24. Now, there are MILLIONS OF TRACKS WITH multi-track digital recording HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE that surpasses what he had to work with. But, he was still able to take what was available at the time and make stuff that was REALLY exciting. I think we can do that now as artists. (We can) take simple videos and cameras and computers and make our own videos and put 'em on "our own MTV," which is YouTube, and our own video channel. That's exciting to me. It kind of opens up the door to creativity without having to have a \$100K budget to do it.

Maybe the downside is it's available to everybody, so you're going to have to hear a lot of stuff, and see a lot of stuff that maybe isn't that good because it didn't have to go through a

filter of a record company or an A&R guy, or get the approval of an investor to say "That's good enough, I'll spend money on it so that more people can see it." So, in a way it kind of makes it hard to cut through the noise. There's the challenge.

You have to look for the substance over form, sometimes. As an artist, I think it's exciting to be able to reach a bigger audience now, and then it's up to you to do something that they want to see and hear and understand. The idea for me is that it's exciting... It's a new world out there. There IS YouTube now. I didn't have that before. Before that, there was MTV. Now YouTube is our MTV... It's our FM radio. Because, when I was a kid the AM radio was the norm. To hear the more creative, experimental music you had to go to FM. That's where you heard your Jimi Hendrix, and your Eric Claptons. They weren't on the same radio stations as the Elvis Presleys or the Beach Boys, or whatever, you know?

I think the music labels had a lot of control and a lot of times good stuff wouldn't make it because you'd have to go through the filter of the music label. A lot of great bands were passed on many times before somebody said "Yes." Jimi Hendrix was passed on. The Beatles were passed on. The downside at that time was, maybe some good stuff wouldn't make it. If the label didn't think it was any good then you might not get signed.

This is just my view, because I'm an artist. Since (being) a teenager, I've always made a living playing music. If music becomes so disposable and so accessible that the artist doesn't get paid for his work, he won't be able to make music. He'll play it on the street corner and then someone will film it and it will show up on YouTube, but then you're going to lose some of the quality. If you can't support the artists that are making the music they won't be able to make the music. Then all you have are hobbyists and people who just aren't that good yet. That's how I look at it. But, for new artists, they might say 'Hey, I'm not selling music anyway, so I don't care if my stuff's out there for free. At least someone will hear me, and maybe they'll come and hear me play. I understand that too. I can see both sides of the coin.

But, if you take any KIND OF HIGH quality, TIME CONSUMING, HEARTFELT CREATION and make it so it's free too often, then the person who is making it won't be able to make it anymore because he won't be able to pay for it. If everything is free, they won't be able to spend that much time making a real, true work of art. If you can go and download music for free, like it was for awhile, it could really cut into the creative process for people who are trying to make a living at it. THE SNAKE EATING ITS TAIL.

For a consumer, they look at it like 'Well, all the rock stars have a million dollars, so why should I care if I download their stuff for free? The record companies are ripping everybody off, and I'm just doing it for free.'

I understand that, too. Believe me. I would go to Tower Records when I was a kid and get a vinyl record, take it home and record it on my big brother's tape recorder and then return it. They used to have a policy that if you didn't like the album you could bring it back within two days AND GET ANOTHER ONE. Honestly, I'll tell ya, I would go and get, SAY, Led Zeppelin 1 and record it and then go back to the same record store and say I didn't like it and I wanted SOMETHING ELSE INSTEAD. They'd say, 'Okay, what album do you want to get INSTEAD?' And I'd go, 'Led Zeppelin 2.' It's silly that even I was bootlegging this stuff myself. So, it's hard for me to really complain about somebody downloading my stuff for free.

But, at some point, there is a balance there, I think. BECAUSE I definitely bought my share of Led Zeppelin albums OVER TIME, and went to my share of concerts. And they definitely made their share of the royalties. But I think that there's this big misconception that everybody in the music business is a millionaire. But, there's a lot of us out there that are just happy to be able to make music and put food on the table. If you take ALL of the income out of it, then nobody's going to be able to make music. You're going to have less, and the quality is going to go down.

It goes back to something that my parents used to say, in that it's a better mouse trap theory. What are you doing that's going to make someone want to hear you do it? If everybody is playing the same kind of music and the same kind of guitar and the same kind of song, then what makes any one artist stand out? I think that's where the video and the internet comes into play, because it gives you a chance to show them what you're about. If it's a better product in the marketplace at a better price then that's going to win. It could be music. It could be cars. It could be mountain bikes. You name it. QUALITY ALWAYS WINS - MORE OR LESS. HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL? It's, 'What is it about that product that relates to me? And what do I like about it?' I think that's what the consumer says.

But for me, as an artist, I love having a simple video that just shows that's what my band looks like and sounds like, and that's what we sounded like last week. And then you go, 'Well, there's no bullshit there. That's them.' It wasn't a video that was them 30 years ago. Or, you can have those too, to compare. And I have a lot of stuff that goes back 30 years that I'm proud of, too. But, also, what did I sound like last month. Well, you can go see that on a video. At the end of the day it's like, 'How good are you? What is it about your thing that makes it interesting to anybody else?' That's where the video comes in. You can show that.

I'm really proud of my band. I'm proud of the way they look and sing and play. That's why I think that videos are still really important in that way. Maybe not in the past sense of the old \$100K+ production video, but in a way to archive virtuosity. I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about my band. When I look at my band and I see my bass player, and my drummer, and my singer, and I see them in a LIVE video that wasn't overly produced, and that's what they sounded like that night on stage, my mouth falls open sometimes. And I hope other people feel the same way when they hear my band and maybe when they hear me. And in that way, I think it's the honesty of that kind of video that is the true value, because there's no more faking it, you know? I mean sure there's auto tune and all that stuff, but if you're seeing a live video, you're seeing what they actually sounded like and that's a true value for me I think, to be able to show the truth in advertising, as it were.

We, as artists, need to know that someone is listening to us and enjoying our music because, without that, it's only one side of the coin. You can't have one without the other. When I go to a concert and I play in front of an audience, they're part of the experience. If they weren't there, I wouldn't be



there. The music wouldn't be there. It wouldn't be appreciated. I think there is such a value in appreciating your audience and knowing how important they are to what we do as musicians. It's all part of the same energy--MUSIC--this thing that's USUALLY invisible but that can fill the room. It's somewhere in-between the angels and the ALGORITHMS, you know, between the math and the magic - BETWEEN the science of the spirit. That's where the audience comes in. There's the artist, and somewhere in between the artist and the audience is the music. They're connected.

I feel kind of lucky because I've had a career as part of a pretty well-known band, and I've also had my own music, which is quite a departure. Some people might be more familiar with my instrumental stuff and not know about the Starship or vice versa, so with YouTube they can kind of see both back to back. We've got videos on my webpage that are 30 years old and some that are 30 days old. That's a great way to get instant feedback and that instant connection with an audience who might be familiar with you from before, or maybe just turned onto you now and then. They can connect the dots, you know? I feel really fortunate to have both sides of the coin there where it's not just people looking for my old stuff as a nostalgia thing, but also people interested in my new stuff and then they go, 'Wow, he also did that? I didn't know he was on that. My mom liked that song. My parents had that album.'

When I see someone like... Em Harris; who's a teenager that started making THESE SHORT music videos. All of a sudden she has over 30 million views... I didn't even know those existed. To me that's so exciting to see that kind of creativity find an outlet WITH A NEW TECHNOLOGY, and find an audience so quickly and so deservedly. That's an inspiration to me. If someone is really good and they put it out there, its more likely to be seen and picked up now than to get lost in the shuffle because they weren't allowed to be seen. But they could still get lost in the shuffle because there is so much out there to cut through.

My singer Shae Johnson inspires me that way. When I see her play live or on a video; it can be with me on stage at a big concert or just her with her own band in a small club; she is the real thing - all live in one take. She's got it all, and now I get to see her work with the producer of Santana, Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Jeff Beck, and many more including my own Starship #1 Hit "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now" almost 30 years ago. Shae wasn't even born yet. But now someone like her and Em can rise above the big noise with their own videos and recordings!

It's a whole new world. I feel like Rip Van Winkle... I still wonder why it's taken me so long to wake up to some of this. It's all happening so fast. The kids, they're used to it. It's like they were born into it. But, I'm still catching up and I love it. It's like that instant gratification similar to what you get from an audience when you come out and play. Its like when you're the opening band and you open for a band that everybody came to see and they don't know who you are but they get to SEE AND HEAR YOU AND HOPEFULLY get turned on to YOUR STUFF - that's a great feeling. And now that's accessible through YouTube and the Internet so now ALMOST ANYBODY CAN AFFORD TO MAKE THEIR OWN BETTER MOUSETRAPS.

