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MUSIC VIDEOS, NOW AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE MUSIC MEDIUM, UNCLE STEVIE GOES THROUGH PAROXYSMS OF THE EMOTIONAL SPECTRUM AS HE LOOKS AT THIS WEEKS TOP 30

Compared to the previous three decades the egregious eighties have little to offer the history books in terms of cultural innovation in the contemporary music spectrum. Basically we've polished gems dug up in the previous twenty years and merely chiseled them into slightly more interesting forms. One of the most important aspects of the industry as a whole however has been the advent of the essential video. Only rarely does a single rake in the pigs without some form of stylized or conceptual visual forum from which to further excite the potential punter. Of course, the whole medium is ripe for criticism; the video itself purges the listener of any self-realized imagery and further, due to the manic editing inherent in many works, it could be argued that these devices also severely reduce the attention span of younger viewers. Nevertheless, it cannot be argued that here is a tremendous potential to produce a short pithy visual extravaganza that not only enhances the content of the song it accompanies, but even transcends it altogether. Unfortunately, these instances are rather rare.

It has been about five years since I last watched a television music magazine with religious conviction (The Tube Tynes-Tees Television) so, as another good excuse to further encourage our retropraisal extravaganza, I decided to take in what passes as our own top 30 videos being broadcast in Canada by the Much Music network.

Like most of the Meat kids, I have a rabid dislike for anything that smacks of blandness, mass-production or suspect ethical jingoism, and as such I plonked myself in the love-seat with a frosty expecting a bit of a hard ride.

Did I get one? Let's plunge right in.

Straight in at #28 is the exceptional Madonna [Oh Father - WEA Records]. Here is an artist that has paid her dues and knows which side her bread is buttered. But then again the presence of glaring talent and a face-and-body combo that would melt a battleship doesn't hurt either. As videos go, Miz Ciccone and her collaborators have come up with some corkers and this one is no exception. Kicking off the biggest trend of this week's selection *Oh Father* is shot in monotone. This effect is generally used to convey a sense of drama and *image realite*. Quite often (as we shall see later) the effect doesn't amount to a bag of wank but here the utilization is perfectly relevant. Plot: Mum dies and Dad takes it out on the daughter (*you didn't mean to be cruel/somebody hurt you too*). The concept of pre-subliminal symbolism is also an oeuvre that has been given a stiff kicking over the years but again in this delightful piece, the effect is subtle and substantial at the same time - the cascade of pearls from a forcefully broken necklace running through the puddle of an overturned whiskey bottle, the fleeting shadow of a bird on a crumpled shirt - little hands clutch at your heart and the point is poetically driven home. All of this however doesn't excuse the producers from including a sequence where stone cherubs sing the chorus in the snowy graveyard. Quite simply, why?

Next, another giant in her own right - Janet Jackson [Rhythm Nation, A/M Records]. The monotone effect is here used to provide further spartan embellishment to a quasi-orwellian military fantasy where one nation dance to the

groove. Set in the claustrophobic environs of a dripping gloomy tangle of factory pipes, the video gives the impression of a rebel workout. As might be expected, Janet leads her troops in her own style of on-the-spot hyper-shuffling and jerko-voguing that once again is remarkably effective. But why is she packing several telephone directories in her back pockets? A hit nevertheless.

Quality VDU time continues with another better from Dan Henley [Last Worthless Evening - WEA Music]. Surprisingly, I'm not yet bored with the monotone conspiracy (this time it's BLUE-and-white) but this is perhaps because of the singularly lasting impression that his *Boys of Summer* had left on me five years earlier (arguably one of the first and best Bruce Weber inspired pieces of abject moodiness). It's an *I'm-going-to-make-her-feel-better* song that occasionally approaches sublime condescension but just manages to shake off the tag because Don (looking remarkably like a hairy Michael J Fox in his forties) is capable of such searing bitter stares that it actually makes you fidget. So we see the achingly beautiful debutante scurrying through the nocturnal hipsters like a frightened gazelle. Uh-oh, here come some symbolism! Inner Strife is depicted as two figures having a punch-up behind frosted glass, but, as Don's magic begins to work, there is a gradual transition to a lone dancer moving sinuously in an effort to suggest a return to sanity. Excellent production includes swooping vertical shots of sleeping skyscrapers that are always so effective in this sort of noiristic love song.

Three pleasurable experiences in a row then, it only seemed natural to come down to earth with a hearty thump. So, back into the Land of Crap we go with the latest creative pittance from mondo schlongo popsters Bon Jovi. "Scuffy rock n' roll lout loves rich girl but her parent just don't approve!" is the premise that is so reworked, both song and video are reminiscent of a threadbare kleenex. So tired is this video that there is even another variation of the dry-humping-in-the-surf *a la From Here to Eternity*. Sigh. Once more the whole affair is in B/W and NOW I really am starting to get fed up.

It doesn't take too long to appreciate that videos are in face glorified commercials and much of the reasoning and logistics in the production of both are often virtually identical. McDonalds and Coca-Cola of course have the power of a moderately sized nation so why is it that all of their adverts are complete and utter pustule-ridden lumps of slug-meat? Perhaps it's because the safest most pedestrian hand always wins when one is dealing with a continent that is home to a huge percentage of morons. Even so, how on earth can anyone fail to let loose a tidal

wave of diced carrots and bile when they take in McDonald's deaf kids or those little turds cracking jokes about Chicken McNuggets? This being the Coca-Cola countdown we were of course in for the Dantean prospect of tons of this sort of crap and only the remote control saved me from a major aneurysm.

Speaking of crap, shining over the transmission comes the atrocious New Kids on the Block [Cover Girl - CBS Records] and the downright nasty Milli Vanilli [Blame it on the Rain - BMG Music]. In many ways the music industry is much like the outcome of a Paris fashion show. There you see the models mince down the catwalk with shoulder pads the size of a Sherman tank and flesh-exposing slits that trample all over nudity as a means of eroticism. It is very rare to see someone actually wearing this sort of apparel - rather it is the drastically watered down versions of these ideas that make it to the shops. Hip-hop and aggressive dance music have been the most endearingly challenging forms of music in the latter half of the decade, but Maurice Starr's New Kids are typical of the pedestrian vileness that reaches the largest audience. Here a clutch of Bean-Town whiteys clutch their dicks and thrust their hips at a hysterical mass of voluntarily incontinent pre-pubescent bimbos and it really is a nauseating experience. Grating double standards? We gottem! Barely have the pimple posse finished their last air-poke than the lead singer yanks a SIX-YEAR OLD nipper out of the audience and things go horribly mushy as he looks into her little eyes, strokes her face, etc, etc, ad pukum. For all this there is one glorious split-moment where the little girl is so obviously thinking "Just what the fuck am I doing here? ! ?". It nearly makes up for the rest of three of the most painful moments one is likely to witness in a given lifetime.

Milli Vanilli is much of the same. Snogging buxom white wenches, rowing with buxom white wenches; the only difference this time around is the buxom white wenches are rather moist. Moist? Yeah, it's a mildew blowout. Whatever happened to Terence Trent D'Arby by the way?

Into the top five it is Neal Young's task to get me out of the crease in my sofa [Rockin' in the Free World - a record company]. It is an arresting work to be sure but in essence it has all been done before. Even the post-apocalypse studio set is almost identical to the one in Police's Synchronicity (1983 A and M Records). Out on the streets, Neal plays the omniscient bag-boy/soothsayer that absorbs eco-crisis, drug wars and political maelstrom like a huge shabby sponge. You almost expect him to explode after taking in a frenzied stream of images from Tiananmen, South Africa and South America, from the

display window of a TV store. At one point the police officers attempt to move the prophet along but he wheels around and wards them off with a Sony Watchman. Is it the crucifix for oppressive demons or is it an aphorism for all his vicarious living? I'm not sure but for some reason this is one of the most memorable sequences in a very stimulating piece of work.

Probably the most influential ingredient in any promotional campaign is sexual suggestion and you won't find a more skilfully executed version of a roller-coaster bonk-frenzy workout than the one you'll see in Paula Abdul's latest piece of commercial brilliance [It's the Way That You Love Me - Virgin A/M]. Paula's genius is her body language. As a choreographer, she must be one of the best in her field but it is interesting to see just how she can be so wanton in a piece of work where most of the action is almost entirely restricted to Paula's gorgeous face. The under-lashes glance, the coy sideways peep, all the stops are out here such that when we suddenly cut to the decapitated skirt-tugging scene, my slippers impale themselves in the ceiling. Being subsequently subjected to the furniture stroking sequence and (more) pearls rolling over a lacy bra, my toe-nails follow suit. In fact after spending several minutes making small whimpering animal noises and biting my knuckles I have no idea what the video was actually about. But this in itself is a significant observation.

It's intriguing to note that at least three videos in this weeks charts deal directly with sociopolitical issues (including Phil Collin's *Another Day in Paradise*, a homage to the homeless) and at the top spot Billy Joel's first real record for ages could also fit into this category. True, it boils down to a name-dropping extravaganza using buzz-words/names/phrases that span thirty years [We Didn't Start The Fire - CBS Records]. But there is a certain anger and barely restrained bitterness that is impossible to ignore. Like Neal Young, Bill has chosen to center our attention on graven (historical) images: Klan killings, Khmer Rouge executions - you get the picture. In the meantime, we're whipped through domestic scenes taken from progressive generations and the overall effect is one of a manic cliff-notes history course. It's hard to understand just what Joel wants us to get out of the whole shebang but in the end one feels both disturbed and educated, which is quite unusual for something this high up in the charts.

In summary, watching this weeks crop of offerings, I can only grasp desperately for some profound conclusion that will singularly encapsulate the significance of video-as-art-form. But you know its just like most other things a few thorns against the roses. In this instance I was delighted to see rather more roses than expected, but of course it is always the shit that shoves.

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