



super charging the set



The making of the video: *Digital Assassins' "Return of the Living Bassheads"*

By DAN MAREK
STATE PRESS MAGAZINE

In a vast desert landscape outside of Casa Grande, the only thing that can be seen is dust spinning around an occasional bush, a random coyote and—a film crew.

Arizona has become used to Hollywood types coming to its empty deserts to shoot random scenes for their multi-million dollar movies. The techno group Digital Assassins also decided to use it for their first video.

The band, label representatives and a film crew set up camp to begin shooting the video October, 22 in the surreal wasteland.

"The song that we're doing, 'Return of the Living Bassheads' is a cover of the Public Enemy song 'Night of the Living Bassheads,'" said Carlos Vasques, one of the Digital Assassins. "The lyrics are there, but they've been chopped and kind of rearranged here and there. So it's not a straight cover."

The album featuring the song was actually scheduled to be released last month, but due to legal complications with Public Enemy's former label, it will not be released until February.

"We used every word of their lyrics, we didn't want to change anything, but we did add some shit to it," said Michael Licata, musician from the Digital Assassins. "We used their lyrics, but not one bit of the music. It's our own adaptation of the song."

Making a video for a techno group is not a very popular concept. Although many larger labels have made videos for artists like Fatboy

Slim, the Chemical Brothers and Crystal Method, smaller independent labels like the Digital Assassins' label, Offworld Records have difficulties raising funds for artist's videos.

So why did Offworld decide to front the cash?

"Well it's two things really," said Scott Marconi, head of A&R and promotions at Offworld Records. "One, it's a respect thing for the artist to show that the label is serious about pushing them, and two, it's a great tool. It sounds weird, but if you get a video on MTV you can show (people) the music they're listening to. It's so much more powerful. In techno music the videos they make are really computer generated, kind of a drug-induced state, where as trying to say 'Here's the writers of the music, these are the people that are making the music.' Fatboy Slim and the bigger artists have made some videos, but there's a million techno artists out there that just aren't doing this. It's just something that we feel is a good marketing tool and it helps advance the artist's career."

To save cash, the label decided to recruit a film crew from the American Film Institute in Hollywood, California. The film school is among the top three institutes for filmmakers in the world, and by this time next year the students will be in charge of their own multi-million dollar films.

Director Danny Passmann wanted to work with Digital Assassins to practice his skills and because of a video he shot with another Offworld band, Nynex.

"What I love about these guys is they really have a good rapport," Passmann said. "They have fun together, they really like each other and that's important — it really reads. I

think it's going to make the video better because they're having fun and that shows."

The Planning

Planning out a video includes a lot of behind-the-scenes work. Before the crew even steps foot onto the site, they must plan out the story, figure out what they will need, decide how much it will cost and find a location.

"We had like two or three creative meetings," performer Licata said. "The director wanted to know what we felt should be involved — what we saw as a vision for the song and video. It was sort of a collaboration of five or six people over two or three meetings so it came out to what we have now. Danny (director) is calling the shots, it's his show — we're just in it."

But bringing the actual ideas to life is a rather large job for the crew.

"There are three elements that put this all together," said Jacob Mosler, producer for the shoot. "They have to do with the three elements of film making: story, time and money."

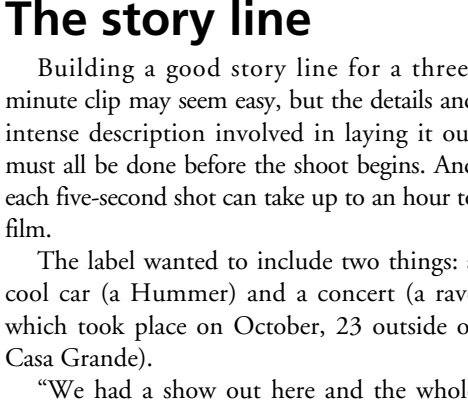
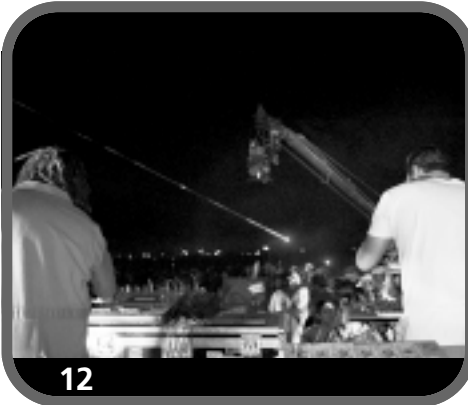
"The story—the record company had two parameters, basically they wanted the concert and a cool car," he said. "Then Danny, Jonathan (Sela, the cinematographer) and I went through brainstorming sessions and created the story for the video based on that. We had the dilemma of shooting the video this weekend because the concert was set for Saturday. So that gave us a very limited amount of time to prepare and there is also a very limited budget."

The small amount of time the crew had to prepare created a constant barrage of phone calls and hurried price negotiations.

"In the two weeks that we had before this,



Opposite page:
1&2: Carlos Vasques sits patiently in the studio-trailer while his foundation is applied.
3: The desert sets the stage for the filming of Digital Assassin's music video.
4: The film crew sets up the camera on the crane.
5: Patrick McGraw builds the camera while constantly checking for dust.
6: Licata waits while the film crew sets up the shot.
7: A film crew member triggers the 250 watt light used to create the explosion for the prison-escape scene.
8: Licata and Vasques run by the camera in the escape-from-prison scene.



The story line

Building a good story line for a three-minute clip may seem easy, but the details and intense description involved in laying it out must all be done before the shoot begins. And each five-second shot can take up to an hour to film.

The label wanted to include two things: a cool car (a Hummer) and a concert (a rave which took place on October, 23 outside of Casa Grande).

"We had a show out here and the whole concept was that if you listen to the song — it's fast paced," Marconi said. "We wanted to incorporate some of the rave culture with the video. There was no better way than to shoot in the middle of the desert. We have great minds with Jacob, Danny and everybody saying, 'Lets take a piece of that show and really build a story around it.'"

The film crew quickly put their heads together and formed the story to fit the label ideas, the musicians' ideas and their own views.

"Danny was the principal writer on it," Mosler said of the video's storyline. "It's these two guys that are on Death Row. It's their last day and we're in the final moments, they're taken from the cell and taken to the electric chairs. We cut to the desert and we see our heroine cruising through the desert looking for a spot. We don't know what the hell she's doing, but she's got a crew of people with her. She bursts into a large sub station — a power station. They basically do a tie-in and rig the power. We see that she's going off into the desert with this big power cord, meanwhile in the prison we see the two guys (Licata and Vasques) that are about to be executed, walking towards the electric chairs. There's protesters outside the prison. We then cut to the power has been successfully rigged, the lights dim in the prison and all of the sudden we cut to this big rave. They created this big rave and they pull the power out of the substation to power the rave. It sucks all the power out of the prison, therefore stopping the execution."

Passmann said the idea came to him while working on the last Offworld video. "I developed it with Jacob and Johnathan, but the idea actually came to me while I was brainstorming for another video," Passmann

said. "But it seemed to work out perfectly. The Digital Assassins obviously should be in jail," he said sarcastically, "So it made perfect sense."

Shooting the first scenes

The first day of shooting began on October, 22 on a small dirt road next to a power station. The crew set up six of the most powerful lights in the world behind the station and flickered them on and off to create an explosion effect.

"The idea is that the two guys are running out of jail," said Jonathan Sela, director of photography for the shoot. "The reason we chose this power station is — all over the song it talks about power, so you have these lights in the background and you understand the power behind it. If people would have seen it the whole time, well it's much more beautiful when these two people are running and there are all these crazy lights going on. It's just a simple thing with strobe lights in the background and just to make it so strong instead of just keeping them on the whole time."

Before the musicians even walked on to the set, they went through hours of picking out outfits, going over their scenes and applying makeup.

"I just had some guy put foundation on me," Vasques said. "The only foundation I've ever had was maybe Oxy on a bad night."

To Barak Steinmetz, the hairstylist and makeup artist, the amount of work he did on the artists seemed minimal.

"There's really not too much to do for these guys," Steinmetz said. "It's really just making sure the whole package is there. Just make sure their makeup is on, they look good, they have no wrinkles in their clothes, pretty average stuff."

After getting their makeovers, the band walked out to the set to start shooting.

"We're gonna be running back and forth like 50 to 100 times, cause it's supposed to be natural," Vasques said sarcastically. "I kinda wish I didn't eat that meatball sub, but hey, at least we'll get a workout."

But to Licata the movie set seemed a little familiar.

"I've worked on TV shows earlier in my life, so I'm no stranger to being on the set," he said. "But as far as being in front of the

9: Michael Licata displays a ring from his former production company.
10: Director Danny Passmann and Megan Schoebachler check the monitor for available light.
11: Vasques sits in the utility truck waiting for the next shot to begin.
12: The Digital Assassins perform while the 40-ft. crane captures the audience.
13: Laser beams shoot above the audience while Digital Assassin's wreak havoc on the sound board.
14: Jonathan Sela pans the audience.
15: Digital Assassins perform while clouds of dust from the dancing crowd cast itself over the set.

camera — it's very strange."

After a couple of hours of shooting a few problems evolved. The Hummer never showed up and the heroine who was supposed to rescue the team was nowhere to be found.

"It turns out that the people that were supposed to be breaking us out — they couldn't get a hold of them," Vasques said. "So now we have 'alter-egos' that are breaking us out."

The many problems of filmmaking

Passmann said that it's usual to run into complications on the shoot, but the lesson he has learned in the past is not to worry about it.

"There have been a lot of snags, twists and turns," Passmann said. "The story has changed pretty dramatically during the course of the shooting, because of this not being here or this person not being here. But we roll with the budget and that's part of filmmaking. It's kind of like you're being swallowed by a wave and you don't fight it you just roll with it — you end up floating on the top of the wave and you end up enjoying life a little more. I think that the video might actually be better because of all the complications — it's made us think about it more. It's been a very rigorous shoot, but I think it's gonna be fun."

When Mosler was faced with the alterations, he just thought of ways to carry on the shoot and keep everything within the time span.

"Anytime you're on the road...traveling location shoots are always difficult," Mosler said. "It's unique in that we've had very little preparation time, a very limited budget and we're trying something very ambitious. It's unique in that combination in that we have a very eclectic group of people. The musicians, the rave culture, we're all independent filmmakers and we're also graduate students. It's an odd combination, but everyone is extremely experienced and specialized in their crafts."

After the Hummer never materialized the crew decided instead to use the truck that brought the cable in for the power station. Arranging the group of cameras around the truck had to be done quickly and precisely.

"It doesn't matter, the most organized crew, you always have problems," Sela said. "You never can get what you want. It doesn't matter what you do; you can never get what you want. There is just a way you have to keep things moving."

Keeping things moving for the band was a little different. Since the crew accompanying the heroine wasn't there either, the Digital Assassins' "alter-egos" had to help break themselves out.

"There is this big-ass coil of cable that we needed a crane to come in and put it down — this thing had to weigh a couple thousand