

You Media students – and almost everyone else under-45 – like music videos; you've grown up with them. You love watching them and you love making them for your practical projects. Natasha Hewitt and Sean Kaye-Smith find The Detroit Cobras' 'Cha Cha Twist' a particularly rich – and fun – text.

Who and what are 'The Detroit Cobras'?

The Detroit Cobras – championed in the U.K. in recent years like so much vibrant new music by the late lamented Radio One D.J. John Peel – are part of Detroit's recent music renaissance, perhaps most significantly publicised and epitomised by the success of Jack and Meg White: namely The White Stripes. Whilst nothing will ever eclipse the wonderful legacy of Mo(tor)town, Detroit is now once again something of a 'happening' place.

Interestingly The Detroit Cobras are essentially a 'covers' band (i.e. they do other artists' material rather than writing their own); but there are two different types of covers bands.

– Firstly, those who try to reproduce the sound of the original artists as faithfully as possible, and nowadays many bands doing this are likely to have taken that extra step of becoming a 'tribute' band, concentrating on one particular band from the past (e.g. The Beatles) and trying to reproduce their look as well as their music.

– Secondly, there are those covers bands which do material that they themselves have not written but which they perform in their own very personal and unique way, so that they are interpreters of the material (of course this is what Frank Sinatra spent most of his time doing!).

The Detroit Cobras are firmly of the latter variety and, interestingly, their choice of material reflects their interest in some of the less well-known names in soul and rhythm and blues history, so it is likely that most music fans will hear The Cobras' version first before trying to track down the original recordings. Their take on Hank Ballard's 'Cha Cha Twist' is supported by a stylish and entertaining video which is, in some ways, fairly typical of music videos in general, but which is also quite an original and quirky text which throws up several popular cultural issues.

The downsides of music video

There are some convincing arguments against the ubiquitous music video, some of which are succinctly stated by David Stubbs in Wire magazine's recent review of the compilation 'Warp Vision (The Videos 1989-2004)'. Stubbs suggested that music videos have 'helped remove the spectacle of performance from the popular sphere'. It is difficult to test this thesis, particularly as some music videos do feature the artists performing, albeit in a rather artificial 'staged' setting. However, if 'performance' is interpreted as acting and singing at the same time then the point gains weight: much of this performing seems little more than walking, sitting or laying around looking sad while mouthing the lyrics to the song. But Stubbs is surely right when he goes on to say that music videos have a certain 'commodification of music'; they are essentially elaborate advertisements for songs, which carry the stamp of powerful corporations and are usually fashioned in the slick language of expensive promotion.

The high-cost element – most famously employed by some extremely high budget videos such as Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' – has cranked up the expense and, inevitably, hit the smaller companies and less high profile artists hard: competing with the budgets of Britney Spears, Robbie Williams and U2 puts smaller institutions in approximately the same position as Norwich City lining up to face Chelsea in the Premiership – all they can hope for is a 'Big-Boys' off-day and a lucky break.

But perhaps the most condemning criticism of the music video is that 'it offers banal single interpretations of pieces of music, lazy comfort food for the eyes rather than stimulus to both the ears and the imagination.'

Whilst the end of the above quotation could arguably apply to much televised or film entertainment, the music video, without even the demands of dialogue or sophisticated narrative, seems a particularly easy target. When Henri Cartier-Bresson called television 'chewing gum for the eyes' was he prescient of Reality T.V. and the current wealth of music channels? Discuss!

With its two-dance name check (for younger readers there are dances of the 50s and 60s called the Cha Cha and the Twist) the song title suggests the video will feature a lot of movement. However, it opens quietly, unusually before the music starts, with the first part of a framing device; the camera moves down from the upper storeys of what appears to be a large department store at night to the ground floor window. This window scene is backlit in a vivid red light and broken by black silhouettes of the band, standing motionless like shop dummies. We are aware of the wet, shining pavement in front of the window as a figure walks left to right to place a coin through a slot in the wall on the right of the window. So the themes of consumerism and commerce are established early on with the store, the 'goods' the band represent and the coin slot, which, when fed, inevitably animates the band and the music starts. Coin slots are one of the greatest popular culture locations for creative consumerism. Think of jukeboxes, fairground and arcade games, drink machines, museum exhibitions etc. The consumer makes a choice, or makes something happen.

The Detroit Cobras come to life with the music and although the red background remains – and the black silhouettes do make further appearances – the musicians are now in colour. From this point on (not including the framing device) there are three main locations or viewpoints:

1. The band in silhouette (mainly brief, relatively static, shots).
2. The band in colour from inside the window.
3. Shots from the street with views of the pavement and the assortment of figures who congregate there, with the band performing in the window in the background. There is considerable variation in camera angle and movement in these shots.

It is night and we are in the street and into it comes a rich assortment of dancers – the nightlife. Some of these dancers are serious as their dress and movement clearly suggests; others have a more pantomime – or carnival – feel, such as a tiny-skirted and hooded Red Riding Hood (played, incidentally, by Meg White) with a lumbering bear-like wolf, which fails to trouble her at all or even to wipe the smile from her face. Sometimes the pavement is thronging like an outdoor disco; at other times there is a single figure to follow, such as a roller-skater who eventually does the splits. This melting pot of figures, costumes and movement and cultural themes could suggest a number of themes; how the street, noticeably devoid of authority figures (not a cop in sight) is a safe arena for a multitude of characters.

Bakhtin's carnival

This is a good moment to introduce the work of Bakhtin whose ideas about 'carnival' and popular culture as carnival (perhaps most clearly rehashed in John Docker's Postmodernism and Popular Culture) have had such a growing influence on media theory in recent years.

Bakhtin saw carnival as a 'world-turned-upside-down', when barriers of status, authority, class, law and culture were knocked down and the loud, iconoclastic energy of the fair took over. The band in this video are subservient to the audience, animated by them and for them to aid the audience's self-expression through dance. There is plenty to explore here. 'Cha Cha Twist' is a very rich and open text which hopefully provokes very varied and imaginative responses.

The shots of the band which are mixed with these scenes in the street also raise some interesting issues, really giving us our money's worth. Singer Rachel Naggy is the focal point of the band; she provides a fascinating contrast not only with the current batch of Kylies, Christinas and Britneys but also with the more 'adult-orientated' artists like Dido, Katie Melua and Amy Winehouse.

Ms Naggy is rumoured to be a former 'exotic dancer' and yet here she is modestly dressed – jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt – and does not dance at all. She sways a little, and raises her arms, but

her mission is to sing, and her powerful rasping voice is much closer to pre-video artists like Etta James and Dinah Washington than to the artists mentioned above. Without doing very much, Ms Naggy is a powerful presence and an oddly compelling performer; yet this video does not promote her in the way that, say, a Britney Spears promo projects and commodifies its subject. The Detroit Cobras are a beat group with soul and rhythm and blues leanings, and very much a guitar band. Behind Ms Naggy three scruffy guys and the equally dishevelled Mary Resrepo are a fast-cut melee of hair and guitar iconography. The classic guitar shapes and shining colours and lacquers are in danger of stealing the show at times (we have a Fenderbass, an impressive semi-acoustic lead guitar and a smaller Gibson Les Paul style solid body). The persistence of the electric guitar in pop and rock music plugs bands like The Cobras into both rock history – or retro rock – and also contemporary bands like Busted and Franz Ferdinand. Guitars always look and a sound a bit surf, a bit punk, a bit metal, a bit Scottie Moore... and so the reservoir of associations continues to brim up.

At the end we return to the framing device. The band resume their position as motionless silhouettes, the street empties and the sounds of the city reassert themselves. A single figure walks back right to left this time; the carnival is over until the next night, or the next coin hits the slot.

Andrew Clifton has argued that film can be taught most effectively by studying 'bad' movies rather than 'great' or classic films, i.e. it can sometimes be more useful and entertaining to explore why *Fire Maidens from Outer Space* is a terrible – but possibly fun – movie than to discover why *Citizen Kane* has topped the critics' choice for the last forty years. You could use a similar approach with some music television, despite its large budgets and slick production values. But there are lots of good music videos – and The Detroit Cobras have given us one. We hope you'll have an interesting and entertaining time with *Cha Cha Twist* and that it will perhaps inspire some successful, less clichéd practical work.

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