

Video Vigilante

Director Spike Jonze wants his MTV

By Tye Comer, *The Review*, U. of Delaware

Spike Jonze doesn't enjoy talking about his success. Ask him about his friends or his art director and his voice fills with childhood sincerity. Ask him about filmmaking and he'll at least engage in a discussion.

But getting him to talk about the critical acclaim his work has received is a painful exercise; you can almost hear him squirm with shyness.

"You watch MTV and there'll be some videos that look the same," Jonze says in a voice that gets quieter with each word. "But then there are some people out there doing cool stuff. And [long pause] I don't think I'm on a [pause] different [pause] level than any of those people."

Quite a modest statement from the man who is almost single-handedly changing the face of music videos.

After being stuck in a swamp of uninspiring videos, MTV recently has become home to a new breed of video directors. Gone is the exaltation and inflation of artists' egos. Artistic, visual panache has given music video a shot of adrenaline and a swift kick in the groin just when it needed it most.

To say that this 25-year-old director leads the movement would be a gross understatement. In many respects, he *is* the movement. It is almost as if MTV uses other videos for the sole purpose of filling the air waves until it's time to show the next Jonze film.

Whether it's a quick game of "Where's Michael Stipe?" with R.E.M., a leisurely golf game in downtown Manhattan with the boys of Dinosaur Jr., a salute to cheesy '70s cop shows with the Beastie Boys or a *Happy Days* episode that features a Weezer performance, Jonze's videos are tattooed on the memories of video-heads.

What distinguishes him from other

directors is his refusal to be pinned down to any one technique. Some directors' styles can be read clearly even before the opening credits roll. In a Jonze video, though, the trademark is the *lack* of a trademark. His focus is undefined, shifting from one clip to the next.

"I try to do every video totally differently, because if it's a different idea, you should approach it in a totally different style," Jonze says. "I just think in terms of what's going to work best for this idea, not what *I* do best."

And what he does best is form a tight union between music and visuals, so that they appear to have been created simultaneously.

"My videos are loosely inspired by the songs," he says. "I'll put the song on repeat and listen to it a million times. Sometimes I'll be totally frustrated and won't have any ideas at all. Then I'll just be daydreaming, not even thinking about the video, and all of a sudden have a million ideas."

Jonze's introduction to the world of video direction came to him almost as suddenly as his inspirations.

After a stint of building BMX bicycles at the age of 13, the Washington, D.C., native began taking photos for biking magazines. In 1992, he got involved in producing a skateboarding video that caught the eyes and admiration of Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon.

They approached Jonze, who agreed to film some footage for the band's "100%" video. During production he was introduced to veteran director Tamra Davis, who gave him a crash course in directing music videos. Jonze decided he wanted to delve further into the field.

"I didn't know what would happen," he says, "but I knew anything *could* happen. And eventually cool things happened."

Those "cool things" developed into videos for The Breeders, Weezer, the

Beastie Boys and Dinosaur Jr., all of which landed in heavy rotation in MTV's Buzz Bin. Suddenly there was a new way of thinking about music videos. The musicians, once presented as deities, became sometimes unrecognizable actors in films where their music just happened to be the soundtrack.

"The bands I've been working with are really involved with what they do creatively," Jonze says. "I've also been lucky enough to work with really cool record labels. Take the Dinosaur Jr. piece ['Feel the Pain']. Some record labels would have never let me do a piece like that. You can't recognize J Mascis that well. He looks kind of crazy and doesn't look like, well, a rock star. Same with the Beastie Boys' video ['Sabotage']."

It was the hilariously frenzied "Sabotage" clip that first earned Jonze recognition. Even after being snubbed at last year's MTV Video Music Awards by R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts," the "Sabotage" clip proved a favorite with fans, and it transformed Jonze into an underground icon.

What he did not foresee was the enormous amount of attention and respect he would receive. For the first time in music video his-

tory, a director was gaining popularity faster than some of the bands whose clips he had directed.

Jonze now sits in an unintentional — and unprecedented — position of power. He's able to give musicians what really counts in this era of rock and roll: heavy air play on MTV.

"I never expected [the attention]," he says. "It's cool because more people notice what you're doing. But I don't think it has anything to do with my work. It's silly to get caught up in, because it's totally irrelevant."

Despite his unparalleled success, Jonze appears unaffected, and fame seems to be far from his mind. He'd much rather talk about his favorite bands, the handmade book of photos a friend gave him for Christmas or his father's brief brush with fame.

"My dad was the original Fonz when they first did a pilot [for *Happy Days*] in '77 or something," he says. "But he wasn't a very good Fonzie. They just didn't think he was cool enough."



Some say that Jonze's videos are, well, uplifting.