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CHARTING THE HISTORY OF BRITISH MUSIC VIDEO

Some say it all began with MTV, others with 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. In 2015 the University of West London started a project to find out the truth. The result is a 6-disc DVD box-set that features 200 landmark British music videos going back as far as the mid- Sixties. Here we unpack the box-set, define 'landmark' and explain why 'Bo-Rhap' is not even included.

Firstly, about MTV. If you set out to study music video – and why not? – you soon notice that writers are fixated on MTV. Keith Negus (1992) is not alone in proposing that 'it was the launch of Music Television (MTV) ... which provided the momentum for the establishment of music video as an integral part of the pop process'. And you only have to read the titles of some books to get their sense of history: *MTV Ruled the World: The early years of music video* by Greg Prato (2010), or *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (2012).

Now that the age of MTV is past we can put it in perspective. Yes, it was a major international showcase for music video (kick-started, incidentally, by the second 'British invasion' of early 1980s synth-pop acts like Duran Duran and Wham!) that normalised music video as essential to promoting any new release. But British labels started to commission videos well before this; between 1975 and 1980, when European release dates were being harmonised in order to prevent audiocassette piracy, labels needed footage of their bands to send out to European TV stations in lieu of a live TV performance.

It was this shift that saw the commissioning of iconic videos such as Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (1975), M's 'Pop Muzik' (1979), and the Boomtown Rats'"I Don't Like Mondays' (1979). MTV Europe wasn't launched until 1987 (6 years after its American parent) and even then most UK households couldn't access cable/satellite services. So, in Britain we came up with our own answer: *The Chart Show* (Channel 4, 1986-8, ITV, 1989-98). It was *The Chart Show*, rather than MTV, that galvanised the British music video industry with the rapid growth of key production companies like Oil Factory (set up to promote the Eurythmics),



Christian Bertrand/Alamy Stock

FKA Twigs in concert at Sonar Festival, 2015 in Barcelona

MGMM (behind many of the biggest names in British pop in the 80s), Black Dog (founded by director Ridley Scott), and later Warp (who traded on the 1990s popularity of electronic music).

This infrastructure enabled the emergence of some notable music video directors: Brian Grant, David Mallet, Russell Mulcahy, Sophie Muller, Godley & Crème, Tim Pope, Richard Heslop, Chris Cunningham, Garth Jennings. And directors who are now better known for their feature film work – Bernard Rose, Derek Jarman, John Maybury, Jonathan Glazer and Julien Temple – have all made significant interventions in the field of music video. Examples of some of their work are featured on the box-set. So how did we choose?

We asked our industry panel about works they considered to be landmarks in the development of the form of music video in the UK, both technically and creatively.

The Hit List

We set about asking the people who made the videos what we should include. We deliberately didn't want to create a 'best of British music video' list and we weren't interested in merely representing the changing trends in British pop music over the last half-century. So, we asked our industry panel about works they considered to be landmarks in the development of the form of music video in the UK, both technically and creatively. And we worked with specific focus groups on the topics of dance, animation, editing and authorship. This enabled us to create a longlist. But then we had to clear the rights to use these videos with the artists and their record labels. Everyone was hugely supportive of our project for two reasons.

Firstly, although music video seems to be everywhere, and we all remember a great video, its status as an artform has been undervalued; to many it's just another form of advertising. We wanted to challenge that assumption and demonstrate what an influential and innovative form of short film music video is, and most artists and film-makers were keen to help. Secondly, the industry was supportive of our aim to

create an educational resource that can be used by students to inform their studies and to inspire the next generation of musicians and film-makers.



The iconic floating heads of 'Bohemian Rhapsody' have been parodied by everyone from Wayne's World to The Muppets

It highlights the influence of the art school tradition in Britain that has informed ground-breaking photography, editing, animation and post-production effects

'Bo-Rhap'

But we couldn't include everything – e.g. 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. It's ironic, but the video that many consider to be a UK first, Queen wouldn't let us use unless we put it first on the box-set – and we didn't agree. How did it get this status? Keith Negus calls it 'the first conscious use of music video to promote a pop single' (Negus 1992: 93). But it was not the first British music video. Only the year before Michael Lindsay-Hogg had directed a video of the Rolling Stones' single 'It's Only Rock 'n' Roll (But I Like It)' in which the Stones, dressed in sailor uniforms, strut their stuff in an inflatable tent which slowly fills with foam until they're entirely engulfed by bubbles.

This is in the collection. And in 1972-3 Mick Rock directed David Bowie videos for 'John, I'm Only Dancing', 'The Jean Genie' and 'Life on Mars'. But Bruce Gowers' video of 'Bohemian Rhapsody' captured the public imagination and lodged there, because it was (unusually) a single of over six minutes' duration, it occupied the No.1 position in the UK charts for nine weeks (and was thus shown weekly on Top of the Pops because the band declined to appear in person at the BBC studios), and it combined performance footage with a couple of (then) novel in-camera special effects.

The prismatic lens shots of the band-members' heads were based on publicity photographs and the album artwork for *A Night At The Opera* (on which 'Bohemian Rhapsody' featured), thus reinforcing the group's brand image. And the colour-spectrum vision 'feedback' technique appeared to mimic, visually, the layered 'choral' effect on Freddie Mercury's vocal arpeggio. In these respects, non-performance, conceptual elements of the video served both to promote the band itself, and to present a visual corollary of the music. But if such stylistic flourishes are now widely familiar in the filmic vocabulary of music video, they are also to be found in some enterprising 'promotional clips' made back in the 1960s.

Forgotten Gems

One of the great things this project has allowed us to do is to rediscover and re-present forgotten gems. Since 1992, British music video maestro WIZ had carefully kept the 16mm print of Flowered Up's 'Weekender' in his loft. Sony Music UK and our project research grant invested the funds to digitise the rushes so that an eye-match edit and a grade could be done, to produce a new work, presented for the

first time in this collection. Also, we found out that John Crome, a director who worked in TV commericals in the 1960s, had lodged a 16mm print of a performance video he made in 1968 for Manfred Mann's 'The Mighty Quinn' at the BFI's National Archive. Under the supervision of the director, we had the print digitised and regraded. The restoration, included in the box-set, shows the band performing on the steps of Osterley Park (an eighteenth-century mansion in West London), but incorporates a wealth of visual ideas (including a roving suitcase emblazoned with the title), uses a variety of coloured gels for psychedelic effect, and features in-camera optical techniques (fish-eye lens shots and superimposition). Crome had trained at Hydrant Films as a sound editor and, above all, knew about editing images to sound in a coherent, visually dynamic way. 'The Mighty Quinn' video is way ahead of its time.





References

Power to the People: British Music Videos 1966-2016. Available to purchase from Amazon for £35.99

This collection is presented across six themed discs: performance videos, concept videos, dance videos, stories, wit and portraits. It not only showcases some of the most innovative music videos made in the UK, from Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (1980) to Daniel Wolfe's epic trilogy for Plan B (2010), and from Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill' (1985) to FKA Twigs' 'Tw-ache' (2014), it highlights the influence of the art school tradition in Britain that has informed ground-breaking photography, editing, animation and post-production effects in music video that have had a considerable impact on contemporary Hollywood film-making. It also draws attention to the distinctive practices in British choreography that have made British dance videos unique. Finally, from The Who's 'Happy Jack' (1966), through Queen's 'I Want To Break Free' (1984), to the Moonlandingz's 'The Strangle of Anna' (2017), it's got a great British sense of humour.

Whatever your starting point, this is a powerful body of work and as music video is now enjoyed by many more consumers globally, uncurated on mobile platforms, it's a great time to look back in wonder at how we got here.

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