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Cool Jobs for Cool People

So You Want to be a Music Video Director?

An Interview with Canadian Independent Music Director Paul Nguyen

By: Jennifer Walford

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YBFREE.COM: What inspired you to become a music video director?

Nguyen: Actually, I got into by accident. I had a senior year project to do, so instead of writing a 60-page thesis on film theory, I struck a deal with my professor and bargained to do a **MTV-style rap video** in the heart of the Jane and Finch area (**Editor's Note: Ontario, Canada**).



YBFREE.COM: Explain the role of a music video director. What qualities are essential for this career?

Nguyen: The director is in charge of making the best possible decisions using the resources they have in order to convey the artistic message. I believe you need to have an open mind.

Considering other people's ideas and sharing your own will help foster trust and promote a healthy, fun and creative environment. It allows everyone to work at their best. But most importantly, you can't take

yourself too seriously, the whole idea is to have fun and enjoy what you do.

YBFREE.COM: What technical skills (Education: Filmmaking/Using Equipment) does one need in order to succeed in this career? What type of equipment do you use to film and edit?

Nguyen: The more understanding a music video director has of filmmaking, technical skills, and pop-culture can help. Although, I believe as long as you have the tenacity, patience and will power, those can be enough to be successful. I use a combination of digital mediums as well as old-fashioned film stock, whenever the budget allows.

YBFREE.COM: How do you decide which artist you will work with? Which music form(s) inspire you the most and why?

Nguyen: Depending on the situation, I like working with artists who have the same passion and desire to create art/entertainment. I'm not fond of artists who have no message and are only in for it for the fame and money. **Most of the time, I have the luxury of selecting the artists I work with.** I try to maintain a balance of diversity, so as not to pigeonhole myself into directing only one specific genre.

YBFREE.COM: How do you go about designing a video concept and subsequent script? Do you work alone or with the artist/band?

Nguyen: Sometimes, I am approached by artists with their own concept in mind, so I try to work with them on that. Most of the time, I evaluate the songs on my own and I develop the imagery according to how I interpret the song. As I mentioned earlier, an open mind is important in order to develop ideas effectively.

YBFREE.COM: Who is responsible for the production and costs (i.e. budget, filming location, permits, casting, etc)?

Nguyen: Sometimes I have producers working with me. In that case, they get all the materials I need like locations, actors, and props. **I mostly use my own production company to underwrite the cost of these videos,** as I am widely known for scouting independent artists and producing videos for them. And of course there are those who hire me to direct their videos.

YBFREE.COM: Of the videos you have directed which has received the most critical acclaim? In your opinion why do you think this was the case?

Nguyen: Chuckie Akenz's *You Got Beef'* is my most well-known work. It has provoked much debate worldwide, both positive and critical. I believe it is popular, because it is the **first Vietnamese rap video** of its kind. Many have embraced the video, but others have also slandered it. The video is mostly criticized on a superficial level due to its **graphic violence and glorification of gang culture.** But its social impact is undeniable. For the **teenage Asian/Oriental audience,** there is little MTV-style product

aimed at them, that's why I think they enjoy the video. If you read the video closely, there are many thematic elements and statements I have embedded into the video. For example, the opening shot of **Chuckie Akenz** in the back seat with two females is my intention of boldly heralding in a **new generation of Asian anti-hero**, full of sexist bravado and culturally accurate I might add. The *Harold and Kumar* stuff is not how Asians really are. I see those portrayals as stereotypical American farces. On a side note, the biggest qualm I have is *Romeo Must Die*. Asians do not use the word 'honor' in every sentence nor do we all drive around in shiny BMW's and kung-fu people to death. Blacks are really doing well now with **BET**, Denzel's best actor win, and generally dominating every sport. Asians are light years behind, and I hope I can be one of the first to help create our own media world in the West.

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YBFREE.COM: Which of your videos is an example you would show artists interested in having you direct their video? What about this video is a perfect example of your artistic capabilities?

Nguyen: I think on a technical level CPX's *We Hit Hard* and [Moulann's Stressed Out](#) are polished-looking pieces. On an impact level, *You Got Beef* remains the most provocative and thought-stirring. I try to mix MTV-captivating gloss with important underlying themes and social messages. I try to make memorable videos, not just ones that are consumed, crapped out and forgotten.

YBFREE.COM: How important have web-based technologies been in bringing your art to the world?

Nguyen: The web has garnered me an international I would have never otherwise had. I direct many graphic videos, and the TV censors would never be able to air my stuff. The web allows me creative

freedom, while still being able to have access to a large worldwide audience.

YBFREE.COM: Which mainstream artist(s) would you like to direct a video for and why?

Nguyen: Any mainstream rap artist. They are overdoing the Bling Bling, hedonistic, American-dream overdosed on drugs bit. I would like to try to inject some fresh ideas into hip-hop/rap video culture. But I would mostly like to find any other Asian artists to work with. I feel I should use my opportunities to help advance Asian entertainment. African-Americans already have their directors, we need ours.

YBFREE.COM: If you had the opportunity, which music video would you choose to remake and what would be your concept?

Nguyen: I would like to remake some of Jin's videos. He has so many opportunities to promote Asian youth culture, yet I feel his management is trying to make him an Asian version of **Eminem**. Without breaking from the mold and showing off our unique culture, we Asians will remain the stereotypes and playthings of mass White America.

View Paul Nguyen's Videos @ Jane-Finch.com

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