



Digital Assassins MTV Break

by [Dan Marek](#)

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 Oct. 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.

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



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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, there wasn't an agreement of what we were going to do, Mosler said. About three days ago we got a green light on the project, we put this together in two and a half days. That involved booking all of the equipment in two states we're shooting two days in L.A. and two days here--booking all of the crew, the hotels, the vehicles, the vendors, doing a detailed budget and schedule. Last weekend we flew out and did a tech scout. We looked at all potential locations, based on the treatment or story concept.

The budget in filmmaking is a very large part of what the crew will be able to do. It determines whom they can fly to the shoots, what equipment they can rent, what props they can use and if they

can even eat.

We were given \$17,000 to do this video from the record company, Mosler said. The record company production executive is here, he's writing checks as well as myself and putting out the money. The budget is always a tough thing with every project. It determines what you can or cannot do. Every one tries to stretch it. My job is to make sure that we come in at a certain number. It never is enough. This is probably designed as a \$60,000 video, but with our student discounts, our charm and sheer ambition were gonna try and do it within \$17,000.

Label-rep Marconi said the amount of money was a lot for Offworld to put out, but that was what they wanted to do for the band support them.

It's a very big expense, but if you know your song is really good, your artists are talented and you think you can do something with it - you just take a chance, he said.

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 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 pounds, Licata said. We had to keep pushing it through the dirt. Well the first time was fine cause the dirt was hard, but after that the ground started getting soft underneath it because we're going over the same spot. So we were pushing a 1000 pounds through sand. I got splinters and cuts every where. We're just a mess.

Vasques also went through a tough day. After running up and down the desert hills repeatedly he sprained his wrists and his ankle.

It's been really hectic, Vasques said. We've been juggling a lot of things. We've had barely any sleep total sleep deprivation. Michael fell asleep in the bathtub last night, we were about to go to bed and I knocked on the door and he was all splashing - like he just woke up.

But the director appreciated the effort the band members put into the shots.

Carlos took eight falls in a row, Passmann said. He kept repeating it for us landing on his back and getting thorns in his clothing. I think he sprained his wrist and ankle. They've been great sports. They trust that I'm gonna make 'em look cool.

After a hard day's work, the band admitted that professional actors really have their work cut out for them.

I was talkin' shit saying 'Acting so easy,' Vasques said. Meanwhile we've done all this running, tripping and jumping around. I sprained my wrist, my ankle and Mike's thrown out his back. So now maybe we'll give these actors their props.

The rave has landed

Setting up for the rave on the second night of the shoot, the crew ran into another problem the rave

itself.

You have a rave and you can't crowd control at a rave people are on drugs, they're in their own worlds, Passmann said. They don't want to wave their hands if you want people to wave their hands you have to have the musicians wave their hands. It's challenging to get what you want with those parameters. You are hoping that you can stir certain energies.

Lighting for the event was also a concern. The rave came outfitted with laser beams, spotlights, smoke screens and fire breathers.

Today is a little more complicated because there is not too much control, Sela said. Whatever you get, you get. I'm just going to play around with some of the colors and stuff but that's about it.

When shooting the rave scene, the band was finally in their element and could stick to what they do best play music.

First of all we're performing in our environment which is cool, Licata said. We finish shooting tonight, somehow get a little sleep, go to the airport, get to L.A., change close and then were set for the L.A. shoot.

To capture the audience, band and the theatrics of the rave including Slam Chen, a fire-breathing troop, the crew decided to bring out the big guns (or cameras).

The producer had wanted to get some overhead shots, some really cool angles to take advantage of this big crowd we have out here, said Adam Burns, Offworld vice president. The crane is going to be above the crowd and it's going to be taking shots straight down on them and get big shots of the audience. When it gets transferred to film, it's going to look crazy. So we're taking advantage of the show here to show as much linkage as we can, because the actual music is catered to the body. It's a good opportunity to get some real live footage and not the created bullshit. This is the real stuff here.

Although the idea was great, setting up a 40-foot camera crane in the middle of a developing rave could create disaster.

We have a 40-foot crane swirling over people's heads which is pretty dangerous, Passmann said. It's all dark and we can't see anything. We didn't know until tonight what it was going to look like. It's actually turning out OK. Things have worked themselves out. Films and videos all have a life of their own- they breathe, they cough, sometimes they beat you up, sometimes they embrace you and usually at the end of the day you have something that sort of looks like some kind of kid. It ends up living and being what it is.

The night is finally over

After finishing the rave shoot, the crew began to tear down the set so they could finally get some sleep.

The next day they would drive to Los Angeles to spend another two days shooting the prison sequence of the video.

While the video will not be completed for another three weeks, the crew began to feel some relief knowing that at least half the shoot was over.

The best part is probably being with your friends, you know it's always fun to shoot, Sela said. This is what I like to do in my life. The director, I like him a lot. I've worked with him five or six times and it's been good. I like my crew. It's a cool shoot. There's a lot of stuff to do. The story is so nice.

After all the work for the band members, they said the video should turn out great.

It's much more than I thought it was, Licata said. The video will look good I'm certain of it. Just the work you put into it, comes out of it.

While Offworld is still anticipating the final cut of the video, they have already started planning what to do with it.

Were gonna make hundreds of copies and send em out to *The Beat*, *Raveworld.net*, *Freak City*, *MTV AMP*, the mainstream *MTV* like *Total Request Live*, hundreds of magazines and out at shows, Marconi said. It's just another step.

But to Vasques, he's glad the video is close to being done and is grateful for the experience.

I put out tons of shit way back on different labels and stuff, Vasques said. It was like no big deal, you put out a 12' and you kept it underground, you kept it real whatever the fuck you want to call it. Well, finally years later, it's paying off and were doing a video. It probably won't get played until four in the morning, but who knows. If it gets picked up that's cool. I just want to play. If some promoter sees the video and likes it, cool we play a couple gigs. If not well, I got something to tell my kids, 'Hey, I made a video.'

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