



MONKEY BUSINESS

PUPPETS, DRUNKEN TEDDY BEARS AND THE FUTURE OF MUSIC VIDEOS

ROSS RIEGE: IMAGE

The Willowz are mid-song, and Toben Seymour, a 26-year-old music video director clad in lumberjack plaid, is kneeling, with one arm aloft, in the center of the crowded dance floor at Cinespace in Hollywood. He's surrounded by a mass of bouncing girls in skinny jeans, and slipped over his raised arm is a dog-eared puppet named Mr. Monkey. The puppet grins and waves and does a jig with Ace Norton, a twenty-four-year-old music video director who is also, incidentally, wearing lumberjack plaid.

"This song is for one of our favorite boys, Toben Seymour," says Richie James Follin, lead singer of The Willowz. And a couple of tunes later, "This one is for Mr. Ace Norton." The crowd cheers.

The plaid notwithstanding, there's a reason for the shout-outs. Between them, Seymour and Norton have directed nearly forty videos for the cream of the indie crop: Death Cab for Cutie, Neon Blonde, The Sounds, Mickey Avalon, The Faint, Pony Up, The Teddybears and Tahiti 80, among others, including two apiece for The Willowz. It's been a grassroots effort, with project budgets often topping out at five-hundred dollars.

Seymour and Norton met as film students at the University of Southern California, and with several friends, formed their own upstart production company, Commondeer. Working out of Norton's bedroom, they began contacting bands and pitching ideas for music videos. Eventually, the pair found USC limiting, and Norton dropped out and took a job as a busboy in Venice Beach.

"I was starving, but I knew people who knew some bands, and I met a band called Addison and did a stop-motion video for them," Norton says, referring to a technique used to make static images appear mobile. After doing more stop-motion animation videos for Smoosh and Everybody Else, The Faint came calling. The subsequent video for "Desperate Guys," off The Faint's *Wet From Birth*, caught the eye of Georges Bermann, who signed him to Michel Gondry's production company, Partizan.

"I could feel his passion for making images, for picturing a youth culture outside obvious stereotypes," Bermann says. "There was a great feeling of freedom, youth and rebellion." Before long, Norton was directing videos for Death Cab and Norah Jones. He's since become one of the youngest directors ever inducted into the Director's Guild of America.

Norton, a self-described "nervous wreck," grew up in Venice, where he still lives, renting the bottom floor of his parent's Frank Gehry-designed beachside home. He wears an oversized ruby class ring he bought at a garage sale for ten dollars, and his living room is adorned with various strange accoutrements, including a stuffed monkey—unsurprising, given the mischievous eccentricity of his videos (think giant clocks and drunken teddy bears.) There's also a poetic sensibility at work, seen in the stirring images of affection and loss in his "La Ritournelle" video for Sebastien Tellier, or the animated broken heart in Death Cab's "Someday You Will Be Loved."

Where Norton is spry, Seymour is more reserved, albeit just as quirky. He's prone to wearing suspenders, and lives in an apartment full of handmade puppets a few blocks from Norton. Raised in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, the

fourth in a family of eight children, he began puppetry and animation in grade school. To this day, his videos continue his fascination with the imagined world.

"I've always enjoyed picking things up and bringing them to life," he says. In high school, he made animated shows for the public access station, and videos for local bands like The Vatican Unit. After moving to California and forming Commondeer with Norton, he began pitching an idea for a video involving puppets. He went to a Neon Blonde concert and told the band about it in person.

"They must have thought I was crazy," he says—except they didn't, and the resulting video, "Headlines," a stylized feat of puppetry, was an official selection at South by Southwest in 2006. In December, his "Cons and Tricks" video for The Willowz (also a SXSW pick that same year) was chosen as a top ten video of the year by MTVz Subterranean. Loyal to his instincts, he recently declined a coveted spot on a VH1 reality show about up-and-coming music video directors, saying simply, "It just wasn't the direction I wanted to go."

With early success has come wider exposure. Seymour is in early talks with the Jim Henson Co. about a potential collaboration, and Norton just completed a video for Mandy Moore, as well commercials for Toyota and Coca-Cola. Still, both say they love the freedom of low budget work, and both hope to venture into feature film territory. They often assist one another on shoots; Seymour starred alongside Mark the Cobrasnake in Norton's "Chinatown" video for Tahiti 80.

On this night, however, they're at Cinespace to film an episode of *The Mr. Monkey Show*, a viral video series produced by Seymour, and hosted by his childhood puppet. Their friends, sound designer T.K. Broderick and cinematographer Ross Riege (both also sporting lumberjack plaid) are along to document.

Seymour emerges from the crowd with Mr. Monkey on his arm, and slides into a booth beside underage nightlife queen Cory Kennedy. Riege turns on the camera, Broderick dangles a microphone, and Mr. Monkey tickles Kennedy as she squeals with delight. Later, Mr. Monkey shares an embrace with Willowz guitarist, Eric Bohn. ("We love Toben and Ace," Bohn says. "When we work with them we know we'll get a great video even if our song is bad.")

Norton appears. "You're the funniest person in the world," he says to Bohn, grasping his shoulder.

"No," Bohn replies. "You're the funniest person in the world."

The show is over and the house lights are on. With the camera rolling, Seymour kneels and lifts Mr. Monkey into the frame. "Well," he says in the puppet's high, playful voice, "thanks for joining us tonight on this episode of *The Mr. Monkey Show*." He stands, dusting off his knees and wiping the sweat from his brow. "This is what we do every night," he says with a smile. **YVONNE PUIG**