The art of VJ-ing: it's in the mix" by Julian Meadow mr@j.co.nz

Published in Pavement magazine NZ, July 2003

"*Scratch video is meta-medium, a search engine of the popular consciousness*." – Hart Snider

"In the dance scene the VJ is like the DJ's younger brother … he feels he has something to prove." – Wellington VJ

Whilst VJ-ing has been around the New Zealand dance scene for over a decade, the skills of today's VJs remain poorly understood - by club promoters and the public alike. Be aware: the VJ is not the DJ - approaching the guy behind the bank of screens and asking if he has can play some "house" is going to get you an image of a suburban scene sooner than it will change any beats.

The term VJ was coined in the early days of MTV, and was originally used to describe the announcers introducing each music video. In the early 90s the likes of Mike Hodgson (now one-half of Pitch Black) and Hypnotech (a former VJ collective based in Wellington) began exploring the role of the VJ within the live music scene, creating visual compositions responding to and moving with the sounds at progressive dance-parties and music festivals. Today there are over 50 VJs within New Zealand, but gigs with visuals are still scarce and only a few will be performing in the main city clubs on an average weekend.

Mixing images in-sync with music is a complex artform, requiring a critical balance of creative and technical skills. Most observers are unaware VJs are creating their projected images live. Unlike the music video producer – who has the luxury of knowing their musical source beforehand, and can carefully select, sequence and manipulate appropriate visual footage over a period of days or weeks - the VJ is working in realtime. The selection, sequencing and manipulation of visual footage occurs simultaneously, in direct response to the DJ's sounds and the vibe from the crowd, creating an image-flow that unites the two.

So how do VJs manipulate images in realtime?

VJs manipulate video in much the same way DJs mix records - the basic principles of sampling, selecting, crossfading, cutting and scratching to the rhythm are similar. The equipment used, however, is a story all of its own.

In the early days VJs sourced their images from TV, the local video store or – for those few who could afford a video camera – they filmed their own footage. Found material was carefully selected and pre-sequenced onto video tape, then played back and mixed live using between two and four video players, hooked together through a video mixer. Each video player had a TV connected to it, enabling the VJ to preview their sources, in much the same way a DJ previews their records using a set of headphones. As the DJ played their music the VJ would choose appropriate images from a collection of twenty-plus video tapes and would synchronise them with the music through the video mixer. Old-school VJ mix techniques include fast-cutting between sources to the beat,

overlaying multiple sources and adding synchronised video effects (such as negative or strobe).

Around the mid-90s digital video equipment became more affordable. Digital video cameras are used to shoot broadcast-quality footage, which can then be transferred onto a laptop and pre-edited using software applications such as “Premiere” and “After Effects”. The resulting video clips are then played back and mixed with others at the touch of a key, using one of many VJ software packages now available. The digital revolution, combined with the explosion of the web and its bottomless pit of images and movies to download, dramatically transformed the VJ’s capabilities.

The main difference between analogue and digital video is the speed with which it can be accessed, analogue video being linear and digital video being non-linear. By placing a needle in the right spot on a record a DJ can go straight to the place in a sound they want, but before digital video a VJ had to carefully cue-up their video tapes in advance of a gig, and still had a delay whilst they loaded their tape into a video player and pressed play. Using digital video off a laptop or DVD player, the VJ can instantly select the in-point of the image they want at the touch of a button. VJ’s can also now scratch video, playing it forwards or backwards at any speed they desire.

But what exactly goes through our head when we’re watching fast-cut jumping video mixed to a driving beat? Much of the originality comes not from the individual scenes themselves but from the ways in which they are mixed, from the ways these sequences are composed. The meaning comes not just from within a scene but from the juxtaposition, the relationship between different scenes.

Understanding what happens is a three-step process. First is recognising the sample, which includes recognising the genre and its references. Second, connections are made between the sample you’re watching and other images from the mix. Finally, new meaning is created by all of the samples as a whole. They take form as one image, shedding their individual associations to form a more complex idea. The brain is concurrently assigning beats to those images, finding matches by assuming the two come from the same source. This final step is “closure”: how we see things as a whole, and not just as component parts.

The ability to sustain two or more contradictory thoughts simultaneously is one of the great strengths of “new video” or “intelligent video” - it doesn’t hypnotise us into couch-potatoes, but has the opposite effect: it energises our thought processes.
Fast-cut video often proves too energetic to content itself with just telling a simple story … its inclination is to tell an excess of stories, with an exuberant overflow of narrative and cultural references.

VJ-ing is fast evolving as a form of visual communication unlike any other. To quote Mitchell Stephens, professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at NYU*: “… Video can help us gain new slants on the world, new ways of seeing. Through its ability to step back from scenes and jump easily between scenes, video can also facilitate new, or at least previously underused, ways of thinking. … Video will prove a recipe for new kinds of wisdom.”*

Indeed, to talk to a VJ is to be struck by their quietly evangelical sense of their role in the dance music scene. This is certainly a labour of love – equipment is expensive, setting-up, performing and packing-down can typically consume 12 hours, all for a relatively low return. However, as VJs begin to master their progressive artform, they may well unleash the full power of moving images, lifting the whole dance experience to a higher level.