

Rocky Schenck, Los Angeles 2026. Photo: Robin Greer



MTV and more

Rocky Schenck interviewed by Sonja Birch-Olsen

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How did MTV influence your early career as a music-video director, especially during the height of its cultural impact?

I had been obsessively creating my own short films since my teenage years and attempting to have them screened wherever possible. Thankfully, my films received some attention and won some awards, including a grant from prestigious American Film Institute. Around the time I was filming my AFI film, "Four Ladies Dancing", my old friend Bill Paxton approached me about co-directing a music video for an obscure radio song entitled "Fish Heads".

I'd never heard of a music video at that time, and MTV didn't quite exist yet, but the project interested me and I absolutely loved the outrageous song by Barnes and Barnes.

Thanks to Bill's determination and patience, and sitting in the executive offices at NBC in NYC for hours, he was able to talk the head honchos at Saturday Night Live into watching the film, and they loved it. When "Fish Heads" aired on Saturday Night Live, we had a little party to celebrate its national debut and I was in shock when they also included our credits as directors, which I photographed off of my TV set. Little did I know that my life would be permanently changed from that moment on, and that I'd be writing and directing music videos for the next several decades!

After Saturday Night Live, MTV started up, and "Fish Heads" began airing in heavy rotation on their station. Suddenly, I had a new career as a filmmaker for hire, and because I knew how to shoot, light, edit, and write, I was an inexpensive "one man operation" that was affordable, and creative. A series of super low-budget videos soon followed for Barnes and Barnes and other artists, and then I was hired by a production company, and then another. I loved every minute of this experience, although I had to set aside my AFI film "Four Ladies" for decades... finally finishing it in 2022.

Did MTV's visual trend or broadcast standards ever push you to experiment - or limit you - in your creative approach?

This new era of short films inspired me to be more creative than ever, and pushed me into experimenting and exploring various avenues I'd never attempted in cinema. The budgets for these projects were usually quite small, but I knew a few tricks utilizing in-camera multiple exposures on film to add a little "je ne sais quoi" to the visuals. I became obsessed with experimenting with

this ancient filmmaking technique, and included various sequences of multiple exposures in almost all of my early music videos.

This led to working with certain artists who pushed and enhanced my reality – artists like The Cramps, Alice In Chains, Redd Kross, Raging Slab and many others, who encouraged me to expand, to grow, to take my imagination to the limits. I'd never met folks like these before – who adored pushing boundaries and going to the very edge of this new art form – music videos. I'd never experienced this type of filmmaking before, and it was so free and exhilarating – I could write and direct the most insane and bizarre scripts for these short films and get paid for it – unimaginable just a few years previously.

I have such wonderful memories of working with these various folks and sharing my ideas, and witnessing them getting excited about all the possibilities available to us in this new form of cinema. I remember sitting with Lux and Ivy from The Cramps in their home and pitching them my idea of opening the video for their song “Creature From the Black Leather Lagoon” with Ivy giving birth to Lux and then Lux singing “You better ask my Momma how to make a monster”! They were like children on Christmas morning when they heard this idea, and screamed in delight. It was an outrageous proposal, and psychologically it satisfied a few issues I had with my own mother, which I'll share at another time.

Of course, they embroidered on my idea when we shot the sequence in my studio, with Ivy painting her legs green, adding long red toenails, and having her spread legs being supported by antique children's crutches. Lux was “birthed” covered in blood, which he spit out of his mouth upon his delivery, and was pulled out of Ivy's body with giant ice tongs by held by Nick Knox, with Candy Del Mar playing nursemaid.

Of course, I shot still photos of this spectacular event, and on another memorable evening, just me, Lux and Ivy spent a long night driving around Hollywood together shooting neon signs from various tawdry establishments. We then went back to my studio and I re-exposed the neon montages I'd shot with multiple exposure sequences of Ivy dancing maniacally – truly heaven on earth! Because the budget was low, I was able to create these complicated and technically challenging sequences “in-camera” on one roll of 16mm film.

I remember sitting down to write a concept for a band called Raging Slab, for a song called “Anywhere But Here”. The band requested that I write my most insane and over the top concept of any video I had ever done up to that

time, which put a lot of pressure on me to come up with something brilliant. I fixed a martini, and sat down at my desk and thought and stewed and tried to loosen up my writer's block with a few more martinis.

I started thinking about a few things that fascinated me ... oddball, unrelated things that had nothing to do with each other, like miniature golf courses, marionettes, ventriloquist dummies, Gary Coleman, insane female dancers, fire effects, bubble machines. I fixed another martini, and forced myself to write a script that included ALL of these elements, then rewrote all night. I finally finished a concept I liked and went to bed around 5 in the morning, thinking never in a million years that the band would like it or that I'd get the job.

Well, I did get the job and Gary Coleman, and according to Gary's best friend, shooting this insane video was one of the highlights of his life. And Beavis and Butthead chose it as one of their favourites, too.

You directed videos for artists such as Adele, Cramps, Alice in Chains and Nick Cave. Which of your MTV-aired videos best represent your artistic voice, and why?

What a question! I'd have to say that all of my videos represent my artistic vision, since I'm the guy creating them. I have many cinematic styles that fascinate me, and thankfully my work appeals to a variety of different types of musical artists. The conservative musicians tend to like my rather classical approach to filmmaking, and the more cutting-edge artists like my rather bizarre and aggressive stylings. I'm grateful that I've always had an abundance of creative ideas when it comes to cinema, photography, and art, and I'm even more thankful that I've always been fascinated with all aspects of different types of art - architecture, cinema, photography, music, sculpture, painting and so on - from extreme modernism to vintage.

And because of my dedication to diversity in all mediums, I suppose my cinematic point of view has attracted a wild variety of different types of artists, which honestly thrills me! Each artist you mentioned are quite different from one other, and each artist requires a unique approach when it comes to creating a music video for them and their particular style of music. I could hardly utilise my visual esthetics for Alice In Chains on a video I was writing and directing for Adele, so I suppose my versatility became an advantage in the scheme of things.

How do you feel the decline of MTV's music-video programming has changed the landscape for directors such as yourself?

To be honest, the internet and social media has opened many more doors for all filmmakers – more than MTV ever did. After I completed the Adele “Hometown Glory” video, I felt that I had explored all the avenues I wanted to traverse in the land of music videos, and focused on my fine art photography and worked on another photography book for many years. I also wanted to dabble in writing screenplays and travel the world a bit more, so I started thinking that perhaps the video for Adele would be my swan song from that world.

I also felt that music videos were a young person's domain, and I was a bit tired of the politics involved with working with the major record companies and artist's management organisations. Working with hundreds of artists and their egos can be draining after decades in show business, so I was ready to explore other realities.

But then something interesting happened, which opened my eyes to new possibilities. One of my favourite quotes has always been “The only thing constant in life is change”, attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. The son of my old friend Bill Paxton contacted me last year and asked if I would be interested in directing a music video for him in my home, and this started me thinking. Bill's the person who started me out directing music videos many years ago, and his son James was an exceptional young man who I'd known since he was an infant ... so why not?

Was this destiny leading me back to making videos, or something more mysterious... perhaps a guardian angel I was unaware of?

I was overdue for some changes, so I agreed to James proposal, and he released my latest music video on YouTube and his various social media accounts on April 24th. The song is called “Snapshot”, and his moniker is “Love, Pax”.

James is a bright and talented young man, and I was truly intrigued with the idea of creating a music video where I could light, direct, and photograph the entire project by myself, which is what ended up happening. We spent three long nights filming together at my home, and it was just me, James, and his fabulous young lady friend Lucy Gargiulo. I'm thrilled with the way the video turned out, and thankful that I was able to shoot it myself with no crew, and I might consider doing it again if the right artist comes along.



James Paxton. Los Angeles 2026. Photo: Rocky Schenck



Commentary on the industry shifts?

I choose to remain in my own world when it comes to “the industry”, so perhaps I’m unaware of any shifts occurring. I stay on my own road and continue to follow my intuitions, so if there’s “shifting” occurring in the industry, I’d rather not know because it really doesn’t affect my journey. I’ve been told I was a “piece of shift” in the past, and I’ve also been introduced as “Meet Rocky - he’s involved in the lowest form of filmmaking – he makes music videos.” Apparently, it’s not a respectable art form in certain circles.

Music videos will always be around as long as there are ambitious musicians who want to promote their art, and aspiring filmmakers desiring to share their cinematic dreams. Tastes and aesthetics will change from decade to decade, but I remain true to my vision, or shall I say “visions”, so we’ll see how long that works. I’ve learned to “embrace my inner has-been” and I’ve retained a sense of humour about show business shenanigans. It’s an extremely rough business - one day you’re hot and everyone wants you, then your old and considered a loser, but I’ll always find something to keep me amused and busy and working on some project or another.

As someone who helped shape the visual language of music videos, how did you experience MTV’s shift away from music-video programming? Well, to be blunt, I was beyond excited when the videos started playing on the internet much more than having them play on MTV, but I’m thankful that MTV set the stage for my career in this unique art form. And I was extra thrilled when MTV started crediting the many directors that wrote and created these videos – a practice not often shared on the internet.

Which leads me to a major complaint in today’s reality about the record companies, the artists, and the artists’ management organisations. I’m not mentioning any names, but there are certain artists I have worked with in the past who post my music videos on the internet on all their various platforms, and they choose not list the person who wrote and directed the video. I believe this is absolutely unforgivable, and I can just imagine if these same musicians had their music played without a writer’s credit or their names listed as the artist.

For example, there’s one major artist whose video I wrote and directed, and the video has garnered around 500 million views or more... depending on

where one views the video. In some of the posts, the wording simply states “a music video by “ _____ ” (the artist).

On another occasion, I wrote and directed a music video for a pair of fabulous artists, and the video went on to win multiple awards on various programs. When the artists went on stage to collect the award for “best music video”, they graciously thanked their record companies, their management, and all the various musicians and music producers who worked on the project.

One of the artists involved later apologized profusely for the omission, but this event still hurt me tremendously. And both of these artists and their management and their record companies still refuse to add a director credit to their websites and social media. I’ve contacted both their management and record companies multiple times, but nothing changes, sadly.

Many other filmmakers and producers have continued to reach out for original footage from my music videos to use in their many upcoming documentaries on various artists, and personally, I’m thrilled that footage that I wrote and directed will be included, but heaven knows if they’ll give a film credit to the original creators of these sequences. I guess I’ll find out at some point, but I’m ready to face the reality of the situation.

As far as I know, there’s not a “union” for video directors, and we do not own the footage that was created for these projects.

It seems many directors around the world are making documentaries on artists that I’ve worked with in the past, and the calls, texts, and emails keep on coming. I’ve already had clips from many of my videos included in existing documentaries, with my name usually misspelled and my credit buried somewhere within a very quick scroll at the end of the film, but so be it.

It’s strange, but I’m kind of excited that deleted film sequences and raw footage will be viewed by the public after all the years. And I don’t blame the producers and directors of these new documentaries for desiring this unseen footage – they want to lure an audience for their films with new scenes from familiar videos that everyone has already seen countless times. I guess we’ll soon find out how it all turns out when the documentaries air in the future, and perhaps all the record companies have discovered a new way to monetize their holdings and make even more money off of all the artists they’ve represented over the years by selling this film footage that’s never been viewed.

Did the decline of MTV's influence affect the kind of projects artists were asking you to create?

Not at all. There'll always be an audience for these creative little short films, and perhaps more people will see them on the internet than ever before.

I'm still bombarded by musicians from all over the world who track me down and ask me to direct their videos or do a photo shoot, but I have other obsessions these days and hopefully will be directing a feature I've written that I want to film in my home - we'll see if that ever happens! I love writing scripts with stories that fascinate me, but they're probably not "commercial" enough for the major film studios to be interested in financing. Of course, I could always shoot them myself.

And after this recent experience directing the music video with James Paxton, I'm intrigued with the idea of possibly creating other videos with solo musicians whose music I admire, and whose personalities are agreeable - who knows?

Looking back, is there anything MTV could have done to preserve its role as a cultural force in music-video storytelling?

MTV did a fine job when it was first created, but its moment in the sun came to an end many years ago. The internet happened, and all things changed forever.

Perhaps I'm somewhat naive, but in my opinion the collaboration between dozens and sometimes hundreds of human beings in the creation of a singular artistic vision in the worlds of cinema, architecture, music and theatre is unlike any other creative process in this world. I've always been thankful that I've been allowed to experience these enlightening endeavours.

Show business can be an odd profession, but I'm thankful for all my divergent experiences. I've always enjoyed being a "behind-the-scenes" kind of guy, glorifying sometimes-narcissistic folks who adored being documented by a camera.

I attempt to watch a film every day of my life, and if I have the time, sometimes one or two more. It's probably my greatest pleasure, or perhaps an addiction.

I'll always considered cinema to be the greatest art form, and I'm so grateful for all the artisans who create films. I've been fascinated with all aspects of filmmaking since I was old enough to appreciate them - from the extras in the

background to the person who painted a wall, from the plasterer who created a fireplace mantel to the lighting person in the rafters adjusting a backlight on the featured actors. All human beings working on a film set have their own point of view on how a scene is unfolding in front of the cameras, and one never knows what their thoughts might be.

A film requires a unique collaboration between so many people, somewhat like architecture but perhaps with more emotions involved. Who were these people? The extras, technicians, gaffers, grips, designers, editors, writers, actors, camera operators and all the behind-the-scenes artisans... where did they live, and what are their honest feelings about the films that employed them? I'll never know, but I'm thankful that I remain curious about their individual realities.

Lillian Gish, an actress in films for 75 years from 1912 to 1987, once described Hollywood as "an emotional Detroit"... and I agree with her point of view entirely. It's a factory town that creates a product that entertains the world - a dream factory.

As the years go by, I look back on my career as a writer, director, and photographer and I'm extremely grateful that I've been a small part of that factory. There are so many wonderful memories of fascinating encounters and collaborations with hundreds of artists, musicians, actors, and creative creatures that continue to inhabit my vivid dreams from time to time. Who knows what the future holds...

Otherwise, my latest project is creating and designing my tombstone, which will be located at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

It's going to be a whopper!

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