



# REVIEW | Power to the People: British Music Videos 1966-2016

Emily Caston and Justin Smith

6-disc DVD box-set, Thunderbird Releasing 2017

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What is a music video and what is it for? Where (and when) do videos come from? Who commissions and makes them? Who watches them and in what circumstances? As so many videos are attached to the momentary promotional life of recordings and their chart fortunes, what happens to them once their immediate usefulness is done?

Such questions have been the local focus of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project *Fifty Years of British Video* and have resulted in the impressive collection under review. Led by Emily Caston (University of West London) and Justin Smith (De Montfort University), the team for this project has worked in partnership at the British Film Institute and the British Library, as well as with UK independent record label Warp Records; distributor Thunderbird Releasing; and the licensing agency for the British recording industry, Video Performance Ltd (VPL).

This six-disc DVD includes over fifteen hours worth of material selected from five decades of British video production, its national character emphasized by the patriotic red, white and blue of the packaging. A short essay from Caston accompanies the discs and compiles an extensive list of credits for each video, inclusive of director, producer, commissioner and production company. The essay alone makes one eager for a promised book on the project, as it is full of allusive detail that prompts further questions about the field of video production and the origins of this collection. There are, for instance, issues of classification, organization and selection that drive the presentation. As Caston notes, to label this content as British does not quite accurately capture every artist or associated video creator, the designation serving as a catchall for a culture of production and context of reception.

Of course, the key focus is the videos themselves that offer an intriguing array of inventive material tracing developments of the form and its possibilities. The discs

are organized as follows. 'Performance' captures bands – for example, Supergrass in part puppet form for "Pumping On Your Stereo" – and close-ups on vocalists – Bat For Lashes/Natasha Khan singing "What's A Girl to Do" to camera from astride a bicycle. 'Concept' is described as an industry term that foregrounds more than the concern with performance; it is encapsulated at one extreme by the excess of Duran Duran's fantasy "Wild Boys" or the pure concept of Richard Heslop's work for 23 Skidoo on "Kundalini". 'Dance' encompasses a genre of that name (Chase and Status' "International"), as well as the choreography of dancers in the *mise en scène* of video for any type of music (Young Fathers' "Shame"). A disc on the short film form offers love stories (Human League's "Don't You Want Me"), heroes and anti-heroes (Disclosure's "Grab Her"), as well as social realism (UB40's, "Red Red Wine"). 'Wit' describes "sex, drugs and rock 'n' royalty" (The Prodigy's "Smack My Bitch Up"), "classic comedy" (Lily Allen's "Alfie") a further category suggesting "pop will eat itself" (The Buggles', [of course!] "Video Killed the Radio Star"), as well as a reflection on "the state we're in" (M.I.A.'s "Borders"). Finally, 'Portraits' presents a view of femininities (Girls Aloud's "Sexy! No, No, No") and masculinities (James Blunt's "You're Beautiful").

One might conclude from these examples that the discs are arranged around consciously permeable labels (one might thus imagine other organizing principles). Nonetheless, the utility and decisiveness of these categories can be appreciated in relation to span of material that has been surveyed in developing this collection and its representational choices. As Caston and Smith have written elsewhere: "We estimate that the number of 'British music videos' commissioned in the UK since 1965 has been close to 200,000" (2017: 3). These figures suggest the considerable challenges for archiving, preservation and access for an area that has received little systematic scholarly attention. On this point, the collection offers some useful technical detail about video-making that describes particular approaches to aesthetics in terms of aspect ratio and so on that impact upon what one sees and hears on screen. As Caston notes in her essay for the collection, some editors remix audio tracks in favour of the visuals: examples in the collection include Hurts' "Lights" and The Shoes' "Time to Dance". Likewise, there are insights on necessary tasks of remastering and restoration that are apparent on examples such as WIZ's spectacular production of "Weekender" for Flowered Up.

While Caston and Smith eschew any gesture to canon formation, the material has been chosen by a panel of industry insiders, which tends to problematize the democratic allusions of the collection's title. Thus, the power of these people might cause one to ponder the claim in Caston's accompanying essay that each of the items collected "represents a landmark in music video history" (2), whether in terms of pioneering genre, techniques in the shoot or post-production, distribution "or other landmark" (*ibid.*). I suspect that musicologically-minded scholars of popular music might approach these selections and their ordering with ideas and agendas that diverge from the priorities of film and television specialists of this kind. Likewise, I am sure that any perspective in viewing this collection will depend upon the viewer's age and historical relationship with popular music and its place on screen and across digital platforms. This reviewer, for instance, is struck in particular by the rather abrasive and unappealing textures of the use of videotape itself: in the Boomtown Rats' "I Don't Like Mondays" or Adam and the Ants' "Prince Charming". For all of the sophisticated aspirations of the latter, the image looks rather garish as a result of the qualities of videotape compared with filmstock. Furthermore, and for all of the gestures towards filmic style amongst music video makers, one is again struck by how early versions of the form express the kind of televisuality that afford them the appearance of sketches from light entertainment

shows of the period. This is certainly how I read Julian Temple's 'Breaking the Law' video for Judas Priest; but then maybe that's the point. That said, there's enough here also that speaks to the influence not only of cinema, but of the kinds of aesthetic sensibility and adventurousness that one finds in contemporary art installations, witness FKA Twigs' "Pendulum" as one elegant example collected here.

Watching this collection, then, is to encounter affective images that are by turn, intense, amusing, scary and inspiring, at one with the sounds of some great (and sometimes not so great) sounds. The choreography of dancers amidst a prison riot on Plan B's "Prayin'" or Neneh Cherry's joyful "Buffalo Stance" are signal moments that come to my mind. On this basis, those who view this impressive collection might wish to sit back and simply enjoy the range of material it presents, although I'm not sure it offers the same pleasures of the contemporary box-set binge. Instead, one might feel inclined to make one's own playlists and permutations from the categories mentioned above and to ponder, as pedagogue and researcher: what could one do with this material (and what else would I want to include in it)? Certainly, there is any number of ideas to think with prompted by the collection given the thematic approach and historical range. Changing youth styles and fashions, appropriations of musical styles, sounds, cultural imaginaries, conventions and transgressions are all tracked here (on that last point, I suspect that Fat White Family's "Touch the Leather" would never have received an airing on the BBC's Saturday morning family entertainment programme, *Swap Shop*).

This collection represents a move towards a political economy of the music video, evidenced by Caston and Smith's recent work and that of others collected in a 2017 special edition of the journal *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*. This approach deserves further attention in order to comprehend the process of production, circulation, consumption and indeed preservation of this form. Consequently, this rewarding collection is a pointer to the invigorating possibilities of a field worthy of further critical investigation. I look forward to further insights and material from the *Fifty Years of British Video* project.

## References

- Caston, E. and Smith, J., 2017. Fifty Years of British Music Video: Introduction. *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* 11(1): 3.  
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