Producing a music video

Introduction

Making a music video is a fantastic way to express your creativity. Plus, it can be great fun and really rewarding, especially if you love music.

Depending on the sort of video you want to make, coming up with the concept and organising the production process can require a lot of knowledge and experience.

But you can also produce a music video with far less effort, for example by using a video collage or stop-motion animation as your starting point. That's why you can do this sort of project whether you're a beginner or an advanced film-maker.

In this chapter we look at the main types of music video and how to film them.

Vision *in action*

• Make sure you have permission to use the music you've chosen for your video.
• Rehearse the choreography with musicians and dancers before you start filming.
• Remember to record playback sound – either through your camera's built-in microphone or by connecting directly to the playback device – so that you can easily synchronise all the shots later.
• Check your footage regularly during the shoot, and make sure body, finger and lip movements are synced with the playback sound.
• Think about the design of any props and the background, as well as lighting at the shooting locations.
• When recording a live performance, make sure you're getting good-quality sound for all the voices and instruments through the mixing desk. Connect to it directly, either through your camera or an external recording device.

Equipment and tools

To film a music video, you'll need at least one camera with an audio input or internal microphone, as well as all the other usual filming equipment (tripods, lighting, and so on).

Depending on the video you want to produce, you'll also need some additional equipment as described below.

Music videos using studio sound (pre-recorded song)

- Laptop, MP3 player, smartphone or tablet, to play back the pre-recorded music. (A CD-played isn't as useful, since you can't easily skip to specific points in a song.)
- Good speakers, to connect to the music-playing device. This would help the musicians hear the song clearly on set. It also means the camera can record the song along with the image, which helps with synchronisation at the editing stage.

Music videos using sound from a live performance

- The sort of equipment you'd use to film a stage performance or sports event. Remember to connect your camera or an external recording device directly to the mixing desk, so you can record good-quality sound.
- Additional action cameras you can put in interesting places, for example at one end of a guitar neck, facing the fretboard.

Editing

- Computer with film-editing software.
- Good speakers or headphones, to help you select the correct sound levels for the video.

Main section

In a classic music video the musicians are shown singing and playing a song, usually at one or more locations.

They aren't actually playing the music live during the shoot, but miming instead. A recording of the song is played (playback) on set, and the band members' movements – body, fingers, lips – are synced with it.

Shots of the band singing and playing can alternate with other images as the music plays. For example, in a parallel sequence actors could perform scenes that help to illustrate the story in the song.

This approach is very similar to making a short feature film. The main difference is that there's no spoken dialogue, and the story is told by one of two parallel, interjecting sequences, rather than by the video as a whole.

Video: Music video showing a singer miming to a playback recording of a song, with actors performing in a parallel sequence. 'Jaz in Ti' – Erika Kralj (Utrip Media, LIJAmedia).
A Crosscut Project production

Other types of film, such as a video collage and a stop-motion animation, can also be used to make a music video.

Video: A live music recording interspersed with a variety of other shots, as in a video collage. 'Premikamo meje' (LIJAmedia), produced by young people

Video: Music video that doesn't show musicians performing. DJ Tagmond, 'Finally' – video produced by a WTV user.

Copyright issues

Of course, it's possible to completely leave out any shots of musicians performing (see the DJ Tagmond video above).

This means you can create music videos for songs by your favourite bands. You'll need to check with the relevant copyright holder(s) if you can use their material – for example the recording of the song itself, but also any other still or moving images by third parties that you've got hold of for your video.

If the song you've chosen is by a band that's represented by a major label, it's very unlikely that you'll get permission to use it for your video. Bands that don't have a label, or that only work with small labels, might be happy for their fans to produce and publish videos for their music.

Some musicians actively encourage their fans to produce videos for their music. They provide the rights to the songs free of charge as long as you don't use the video for commercial purposes. So don't be afraid and just speak to the bands you like!

> *Using music that you don't hold the copyright to can make it difficult to publish your video online. Some video platforms like YouTube could refuse to accept your work if they can't easily verify that all copyright holders (including the authors of the song) have given their permission.*
>
> *This all depends on the legal situation where you're based. For example in Germany it's often not possible to watch videos that you can view in other countries – the law is just that complicated!*

In some countries you might even have trouble publishing a video of your cover or arrangement of another artist's song. In Germany, for example, the arranger and composer of the original song need to have been dead for 70 years before you can publish your own version.

To be on the safe side, only use songs written and performed by you or your friends.

Live performances as music videos

Live recordings of concerts can also be used for music videos, as long as you had formal permission to film and you have the necessary rights to use the footage.

You can record a live performance in the same way you would document any live event (see Filming a stage performance or sports event) or you can focus on creative camera work with focus shifts and fast zooms, for example.

Using action cameras on stage could help you get images from really interesting angles. For example, you could attach them to musical instruments – perhaps at one end of a guitar neck, facing the fretboard – or to the head/chest of a musician.

If you film a song performance live, it would be difficult to then synchronise your footage with the song's studio recording (if you want to use that as the basis for the video). Things like the tempo and the musicians' movements will most probably not match the rhythm of the recorded song. But you can still use the live performance footage to create a parallel sequence that will help make the video more engaging.

Or, if the quality of the recording is really good, you can simply use the sound from the live performance itself, rather than the studio recording!

Video: 0:00 min, 3:18 min, 7:48 min, 20:43 min: Music videos based on sound and images recorded at live concerts (Band 'Ganz Normal Anders' – a WTV production as part of a media education project for young people)

Rehearsal and choreography

If the video is based on playback sound, and the band members are simulating singing and playing, it's a good idea to rehearse with them before you start filming. This will help you get better shots and improve the overall quality of the video.

Performing in a music video is different from performing on stage. The band might not be familiar with looking at the camera – perhaps because they are used to concentrating on their playing, or because they're very shy. Another important thing to practise is syncing lip and finger movement with the playback sound.

General and dance choreography takes some effort, and you might want to ask a more experienced choreographer for help. Shoot the rehearsals if you can, and show them to the band members so they know what they look like when they're playing/moving on camera.

The production process

As with other types of film, making a music video starts with writing a script or a storyboard, then developing a production schedule.

Before the shoot, rehearse any choreography, miming movements and lip-syncing, as we mentioned above. You can film each rehearsal to check for accuracy and make sure you can see improvement from one session to the next.

Rehearsing can also help if you only have one camera and you need the musicians/dancers/actors to perform the same movements several times so you can film them from different angles.

One difference between music videos and other types of film is that the soundtrack of a music video – that is, the song – will be playing in every shot of the 'film'. This means that all your cameras need to record not only image but playback sound as well, to make synchronisation easier at the editing stage. If the cameras have audio inputs, use them to connect the cameras directly to the music-playing device on set instead of relying on built-in microphones.

If the music video is based on a live performance, you'll want to make sure the sound you record is of very good quality. It's best to connect your camera or external sound-recording device directly to the mixing desk at the venue.

The quality of the recording will still depend on how many different microphones and inputs are being used to capture voices and instruments. Other factors include the quality of the microphones, and how much effort the sounds engineer is putting into the mixing. If the mixing desk has a multi-track internal recording device, this would give you the option of mixing individual tracks later.

Any cameras that aren't connected to the mixing desk should record sound through their built-in microphones, to help with synchronising sound and image later. You might still find that, at loud concerts, the quality of sound recorded in this way is very poor and unsuitable for syncing.

Editing music videos

As usual, the first thing to do is sift through the material and make notes about the quality, especially if there are several takes of the same shot.

If you've used several different cameras to film the same action, synchronise the video footage first and then note down the best parts.

After you've viewed all your material and selected the clips you want to use, you can start editing in your video-editing program.

Music videos using studio sound (pre-recorded song)

If you filmed the band using several different cameras, and a different video track is assigned to each camera, you could quickly run out of available tracks.

Try to combine your chosen video clips of the band singing/playing across the bottom one or two video tracks. This would free up tracks for any other image material (sectional images, parallel sequences with actors), titles, and so on.

Once the video material is in place, add the studio recording of the song in the bottom audio track of your project. Then you can start syncing the video material with the song.

The type of music, and the look and feel you want to achieve, will determine the type and frequency of the cuts you make.

Music videos using sound from a live performance

First, synchronise the video tracks from the different cameras you used.

Unlike editing a typical video of a stage performance or sports event, in a music video you don't need to present the material in chronological order. For example, you can show the shots you took of the first chorus when the second one is playing in the audio track – as long as the musicians kept a consistent rhythm as the song progressed.

To help you achieve a more dynamic, music-video 'look' (as opposed to a documentary look) you can, for example, use frequent cuts between shots to match the rhythm of the song. You could also add sectional images and parallel sequences that introduce another dimension to the video.

Adding video effects

Video-editing programs offer a wide range of effects you can add to your music video. But be careful not to use them randomly. Always consider if they are relevant to the look and feel of the video, or if they reflect the story that the song is trying to tell.

Music videos often use colour in specific ways. For example, colouring a shot red can express the aggression in a song.

You could also ‘colour-code’ different elements in the video: for example, shots of the musicians performing their song for the video are in colour, whereas a parallel sequence with footage of their live concerts is in black and white.

If the video is based entirely on live-performance footage, you could use colour to give a uniform look to material in the same resolution or material recorded by individual cameras.

Find out more about applying effects in Film editing.

Exercises

The best way to get inspiration for your own project is to watch music videos online or on TV.

Pay particular attention to how the videos are produced. Are there parallel sequences, with band members playing on one and actors performing in another?

What do you notice about the camera work? How was the video edited in relation to the music? What transitions and effects are used?

Common mistakes

Related topics and links to external sources

Chapters: Feature film, Basics of stop-motion animation, Filming and editing a stage performance or sports event, Film editing

Video: Stop-motion animation with no playing musicians. Peter Dirnbek & Vox Populi – SE predno

Methodology

Making a music video has great potential for bringing together young people taking part in media-education

projects with their peers from music and dance initiatives. At the same time, partner organisations need to be realistic about the contribution that participants from each of the three strands will be able to make.

Within the media-education arm of the project alone, young people will have a preference for different roles. Some might like to direct, some to operate the cameras, and others to edit the film.

Think ahead about the learning objectives in relation to media. Should each young person be involved at least once in every step of the production process, to help everyone develop a wide range of skills? If so, how you can rotate the roles around your team of young people? It's likely that participants won't have enough time in each role to develop their skills and establish a routine.

An alternative approach would be to ask young people about their preferences for production roles. Observe them yourself to confirm if they've made the best choice, or if another task would suit them better. Either way, negotiating their responsibilities with the participants themselves can really help to motivate the young people and make the most of their talents.

Before the project begins, think about what type(s) of video would be most appropriate for the project. If you have a wide range of ages and skills, for example, you might want to give one group the task of filming musicians performing to playback sound. Another can prepare a stop-motion animation or video collage, or record a live performance, to be used in a parallel sequence.

Choosing a song they like can be a great motivation for the young people on the project. This could be a song one of them has written, a cover version of a popular song they've performed, or even an original song by an established artist. As always, it's important to make sure they have the necessary rights to use someone else's song for their video.

If they decide to use a song in a foreign language, it's a good idea to translate the song with the young people. Understanding the story will help them come up with a concept for the video.

Another thing to think about is how best to coordinate the project, especially where any additional musicians, dancers and choreographers are involved. It might help to prepare a chronological overview of the production process on a large poster, so project leaders can see the different steps and their involvement at a glance. There will also need to be good communication between all partners throughout the production.

Last but not least, create a good team spirit, make sure that the young people understand their roles and responsibilities, and that they agree with how the project will be run. Help them understand that respecting each other and the agreed procedures is the only way to finish the project successfully.

Terminology