

Moviekiss

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Music video director Gina Niespodziani and musician Nick Niespodziani of Y-O-U share their Lite Brite experiences, talk about the independent music scene and dish out the reasons that they make art.

Rummaging in the closet of childhood memory, the pieces are hidden under layers of socialization, acclimation and now, for many of us, adulthood: jacks, jumping ropes, Teddy Rumpskins, Cabbage Patch dolls, sticker books, G.I. Joes and Barbies all piled one on top of the other. In the back perhaps for some, and certainly for elementary school art teacher Gina Niespodziani and the band members of the Y-O-U, Nick Niespodziani, Peter Olson and Mark Cobb, a Lite Brite held nostalgic some naive and abounding beauty that now is clearly rendered in the band's music video "Moviekiss." It's a video, that in its upbeat sweetness, reminds its audience of a more innocent past.

"Everyone I've talked to who has seen it has been like, "Oh, I loved this. It made me feel like a kid," says Gina, who directed and designed the video. "It's really important that the people who are seeing what you produce remember it or relate to it." Adds Nick, "In the end, when you're making videos and making music, your job is not only to be an artist but to be an entertainer as well. You want to evoke feelings in people, and generally I would say Y-O-U tries to go to the positive side of the feelings rather than the negative side..."

Despite the high-energy, childlike wonder of the final product, however, the process of making the video was frankly gruelling. Over a six-month shooting schedule starting in October 2006 and divided into eight-hour days running three days a week, Gina sat on a stool in her brother's apartment, pulling pegs from color separated piles that stretched across the Rhodes piano adjacent to her. The Lite Brite itself sat on top of a speaker. "We got an F on ergonomics," Nick admits. Digging in a bit more to the making of the video, Gina and Nick here share their thoughts on the independent music scene and the reasons they make art.

SM: How did you go about picking color, and how do you do the timing for projects like this?

GN: As far as the images and colors, I did the design, and I did all the actual directing of where the pegs would go. I would take just a normal picture that you'd take with a digital camera, and then we'd plug it into (Nick's) computer. He did more of the match up with the music.

NN: That part is time-consuming as well. You want something to explode on a beat so you're able to line that up. Other (images you fill in) retroactively based on what thing you wanted to have happen on the beat. There was a lot of messing with the frame rate. Most of the video is 10 frames per second, or 10 pictures for every second, but other things that we knew we wanted to happen on a certain time frame, we would speed up to as many as 60 frames per second...I could animate small videos using the stop-motion option in Quick Time, and then put in together in Final Cut. There's probably a more efficient way of doing it, but we'd never done a video before so...

Both laugh at the learning curve, the uphill battle neither anticipated.

SM: The color changes in the back went from pinks to blues. Did you do that while you were working?

GN: His room has big windows. We put trash bags up, but you can only control that so much as far as what goes on in the back. Then depending on how many pegs were in the Lite Brite, it would change the color of the background. The camera would do that on its own because it would try to adjust to the correct lighting.

NN: We didn't have control over the aperture and shutter speed.

GN: Yeah, and we didn't use a flash obviously...That was probably one of the most frustrating parts to fix at the beginning, but I think it added some character to it.

SM: When you were designing, did you storyboard before shooting?

GN: I did one, but it didn't turn out at all like what I'd planned. With the kissing animals, I had a list of animals who had to kiss, and when they got tedious, I would move on to another section, whether it be something literal or just design. Just out of boredom, I experimented a lot. Most of it was just that I would start with a peg and see what happened...The only part that we had a real idea set for was the girl with the kite, when it goes up (through the clouds) the kite, balloon, plane, fighter jet.

SM: Oh, yeah, that was interesting to me: that you're working in a totally linear world, and you've got diagonals. But, because of the way the video moves, the images feel circular.

NN: That's kind of the thing with the Lite Brite; you have horizontal lines, but vertically it's all diagonals. You can't

make vertical lines.

GN: You can't put two pegs next to each other straight up and down because of the angles—which is frustrating. You see something in your head, and then you can't really do it.

NN: A lot of those shapes that you think would be basic are much difficult...

GN: It's easier to make a three-dimensional cube than it is a square... It's really bizarre. I see rhombuses everywhere now because that was the only shape I could see when I was (working on the video.)

SM: Y-O-U has a history of doing innovative videos. When you go into conceptualizing videos, do you usually turn to your directors, or do you say, "This is an idea we have in our heads. We'd like to be innovative in this way." How do you approach that?

NN: We'll have an idea as a band, and we'll be like, "Oh, we want to do a mockumentary about jump roping." Then they'll be a director we'll have met through some random happenstance, and we'll be like, "Hey, we want to do this." It turns out to be a lot more work for him than it does for us, or in this case for her. For the Chapman brothers (creators of Homestar Runner), we were like, "We want to have an animated video, and we all want to be animals in it." We've just been really lucky in the people we've chosen and had the opportunity to collaborate with have been so talented, to realize the visions that we've had.

SM: I first saw the video through OurStage, and so a question for both of you is: How has art acquisition changed with the Internet, and do you see that as a positive or negative? How do you synthesize that?

NN: It's both. It enables so many people to have their visions seen, heard or experienced by others. In that sense, it's much more democratic. But, as an artist, especially someone trying to make a living, it's a little bit frustrating because the market is so saturated with creative output of varying degrees of quality. It's difficult to shift through it all; it's more difficult to rise to the top of it and be outstanding when people have so many choices.

Another factor of it is that the Internet has made the way that we consume art much more centered on the self or user than it is on the artist. If you look at everything from MySpace to American Idol, it's more about, "That could be me," or "This is my Website." It's more about what you give back to the user than it is pure self-expression like art in the last century was.

GN: Being an art major in school—I'd check my e-mail and download music—it wasn't part of my creativity; it wasn't part of how I expressed myself or shown my work. This is the first time, with this video, that I feel like without the Internet, I wouldn't even know how to have people see this video.

SM: I was also interested in the fact that I was able to download the last album for free. I was wondering why you guys did that.

NN: That was actually our manager's idea. His thought was with the amount of CDs that we sell at the level that we're at, we're foregoing X-amount of thousands of dollars, and it's not really that much money. We were talking about having a marketing budget for the album, and we decided the best money we could spend was by not making money, by putting our album out there and having people listen to it because we were really proud of it. For the first time, we really felt it encapsulated some of the personality of the band. There were good songs on our other albums, but this was the kind of music that we would all listen to, not just the kind of music we would make. It's been really successful. We've already sold way more copies than either of our first two records, and five or six times as many downloads.

SM: Now, are you guys working on anything new?

GN: We are. We're getting ready to start shooting—hopefully in the next few weeks—another animated video using toys but not at all like the last one. We're doing a lot of buying on Ebay of dolls..., and they're going to be working as a team to build a house of cards. We bought a case of cards.

NN: One hundred and forty-four packs of cards.

SM: How big are these dolls?

GN: There're Barbie-ish sizes. There are no real Barbies. We tried to find interesting dolls that are a little bit off. We have a Wrangler doll, Wrangler jeans, that's a cowboy, and we have this off-Barbie whose body is all reflective gold. It's really bizarre. I've never seen anything like her. So we have these interesting dolls that are going to play out in some sort of interesting narrative as they are building this house.

NN: They'll probably also do a dance routine.

SM: How big is this house of cards going to be?!?

NN: We're not sure yet.

GN: I've done a little test so we'll see. We'll kind of just go with it and see what happens.

SM: Now, here the big question...:Why is it that any of us make art, whether it is music, film or visual art?

NN: For me, I've just never wanted to do anything else. I've been trying to explain it to some people lately, and it's hard for me because I feel like when I do things that aren't related to doing something creative—when I clean the toilet, or get my car fixed—I feel like I'm not being responsible because I'm not doing something creative. There's some skewed value system inside my head where the only thing I find the value in is making art. I'm kind of a workaholic in that sense. I find it really rewarding, the thing that makes me most happy.

GN: I feel when I'm not being creative, I feel not myself. Right now I'm serving tables a lot, and I don't have that outlet right now...Sometimes it's nice because you know you need a break, but I do enjoy it so much. It's really important to express yourself, and people do it many ways. (Creativity) is just how I do it.

NN: I love making people happy. It's an obsession I have. Spreading joy. I love it.

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