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Writing The Music Video Treatment - Nigel Dick

Nigel Dick is a veteran of more than 240 music videos, 18 documentaries and feature films, two MTV awards, 2 Billboard awards, three MVPA awards, one Brit award and a Cable Ace award. His videos have earned 20 additional MTV award nominations, along with a Grammy.

Music Video Wire: Can you break down the process of how to write a treatment?

ND: I think the truth of it is that for everybody, the process of writing is different. People work in different ways. Certainly for myself, I've learned different techniques over the years. Every morning you get up and look at the blank wall, and you play a record and you have to come up with an idea, so what works for you one week won't work for you another week.

Sometimes you're just lucky and you have a pure piece of inspiration. And then after a while, when you're working on a regular basis, that endless font of inspiration dries up. You have to find techniques and methods of stocking inspiration. I think it's like anything creative; whether you're a painter or a songwriter or whatever it is, or a journalist or a novelist. Initially you're just wandering around one day and you have this great idea, but then you suddenly find yourself having to do it for a living, and it reaches a whole new level.

So I have learned over the years a whole bunch of techniques to sort of come up with ideas. One is, what I pretty much always do, is I break the song down. I make sure I have the lyrics, I type out the lyrics, I put in all the bars breaks, I figure out how long it is, how long the verses and chorus are, so I actually have some kind of structure. I break the song up into its various acts, if you like, the same way if you're analyzing a screenplay you figure it has three acts, or if you're analyzing a symphony and you're trying to write about it, you realize it has three movements. So with a song, when I'm breaking it down to write a treatment, I figure it's got two verses, three choruses, a middle eight, and a sixteen-bar solo or something. And that gives me an idea of what I need to fill in the holes.

And also, for myself, a thing that I find useful, is that it helps to try describe and visually to the audience how the song is broken down. So you're not just having somebody standing in front of a wall just singing the whole song. You're actually helping them to have some kind of journey however simple or elementary it may be, it's actually reflecting the structure of the music, which I think is quite important, well, it is for me anyway. And then from there there's a whole number of gags that I use. Sometimes I just start flipping through magazines, and

perhaps I'll find one picture that inspires me. I mean, like when I did the Believe video for Cher two years ago, I was pitching ideas to her and we weren't getting anywhere, so I went round to her house with about 50 pictures I'd ripped out of magazines and I said to her, "Which of these pictures inspires you?" And she picked a picture of two girls in a disco and she said, "That feels like what this video should look like. I feel there should be a story around that." And so I was able to come up with a story based on two girls going out to a club for the night and then an just idea grew from it. And actually the video bears no relation to the picture anymore, but I was able to use that picture as sort of a bouncing point for the way the girls looked, what they were going to do, the way it would start. You know, you could look at the picture now and it wouldn't relate to the video, but it was very inspiring.

Perhaps I'm driving around in my car and I'll see a billboard for something and I go, "Ooh, that's it..." A number of years ago trying to write a treatment for a band called To Die For, and I spent a week trying to come up with an idea and then I saw an image for some chewing gum or something. There was somebody bungee jumping and I went, "Ooh, that's the idea right there!" And you know it was written in 10 minutes.

It's really useful when an artist has an idea and they say, "I want to something like this." Though from some perspectives the idea may suck, big time, but the fact that the artist has some kind of vision, however misplaced it may be, it gives you a sort of direction to start in, even if it's a way of saying, "Well I'm definitely not going to go down that road..." The minute you start closing avenues off, it starts revealing avenues you can go down.

An analogy that I would use is that when I was trained to be an architect, we would always complain to our tutor that when we were given buildings to design they would send us off into the city where we lived and they would show us a piece of land and say, "You've got to build a hospital on this piece of land, bearing in mind that you can't build more than three stories high and that that oak tree has to stay there." And we would always complain because we would say, "That doesn't allow us a situation where we can give full reign to our creative juices. If you give us a square plot of land without planning restrictions, we'll come up with a much better building." And he said, "Well, frankly I disagree. There's two big reasons why: Firstly life isn't like that. You'll never get a perfectly flat piece of land with no planning restrictions. And secondly, if you do have a piece of land like that, chances are you'll come up with the most boring building you've ever built." So the restrictions give you that.

[Often it will go like this:] "I need to have my video shot next Thursday at this airport because I'm on the way between A and C and you've got to shoot me at point B." Initially it may seem to be a restriction but eventually it can become a source of some inspiration for you. So you have to allow that to be useful to you.

Sometimes I just sit... Something I've been doing a lot recently is I just start playing the song over and over again, and I sit at my computer and I just mentally dribble. I just start typing any piece of drivel that comes into my head and then suddenly something will come out. I read in a book about creative writing that when you wake up in the morning, the first thing you should do before you make a cup of coffee or anything is sit down and write for an hour and just write everything inside your brain and just get rid of that and then you can truly start creatively writing because you've dispelled all the crap inside your brain. So in the same way, though if I'm writing for an hour I usually give up and go and do something else for a while, I sit down and just sort of... mental diarrhea if you like, until something useable comes out. And very often I have parts of an idea, I just have an image... you just have one little idea, and then as you're writing it out you get this wonderful resolution and you think, "Aha! You know, that's gonna make it really come together in the end."

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