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Rock 'n' rollers score with 'video vignettes' of songs

Rock/Chuck Pratt

IN THE first scene, a group of well-dressed people (wardrobe from a Henry James short story) is enjoying a summertime garden party. On a surreal cliff high above the tranquil lawn, a ragged hermit demonstrates "How It's Done" to a callow, would-be suicide. The patricians take all this in, reacting with a bemused interest that gives way to irritation, then becomes an elegant lust for violence. The lust is satisfied when the hermit leaps to his doom, a surrogate suicide.

Scene 2: A mutant creature—a green-haired survivor of a nuclear tragedy, dependent on a wire-and-tube life support system attached to his body, professes his love to an androgynous, alluring woman. As the couple is engaged in mutant lovemaking, the woman's jealous human lover discovers them. Enraged, he rips the power pack from the mutant's body. "Why," he asks the woman, "do you lie to me?"

In the background of both scenes, cameramen, technicians and directors are at work. Are they making movies? No. Television? Not exactly. Joe Federici, director of "How It's Done," and Dan Dinello, director of "Lie to Me," are videotaping interpretive performances by local rock bands, adding a visual dimension to the groups' songs by turning them into video vignettes. "How It's Done" is a tune sung and interpreted by Phil 'n' the Blanks. "Lie to Me," written and sung by Jim Desmond, is acted out by Desmond, his band and Carla Evonne and Fast Frank, of the band Bohemia.

Federici and Dinello are ambitious local talents in the forefront of the much ballyhooed—but no less real—video explosion. Both are experienced filmmakers and videotape artists who enjoy rock music and want to use their talents and technology to pull Chicago bands into the video arena pioneered by such artists as Blondie, Mike Nesmith, the Kinks and Todd Rundgren. (Today, almost every major national rock music act is making videotapes.) Both have their sights set on the burgeoning cable television market (slow to come to Chicago). And both think that Chicago bands have enough of the "right stuff" to translate into effective video performances.

Federici, a New Yorker who now lives in Evanston, studied film and video at Northwestern University. He honed his skills working at Chicago television Channel 26, a commercial production house and the video-television department of a major Chicago-based corporation. "Public relations and industrial films call for creativity, of course, but I wanted to use my expertise in a more artistic manner," Federici says. "I also wanted to have some fun. I thought it would be exciting to do some rock video with my favorite bands."

Much of the Channel 26 programming was live, and Federici had plenty of experience with lip-synch work. When he took his corporate job, he had access to state-of-the-art equipment—and permission to use it for his own projects. "So I was ready to go with my rock video."

Because of its cost, not many local groups had considered getting on the video bandwagon. Although videotape is inexpensive, the camera, editing equipment and technicians are costly. (Ex-Monkee Mike Nesmith spent a reported \$350,000 on a one-hour video feature.) But Federici was willing to work for free—and he had free use of sophisticated video machinery.

The first band he approached was the zany Tuts and the Pirates, but the band broke up just as the project began. Next, Federici did a modest performance tape for singer Ronni Toy. Ultimately, Federici wanted to string together a number of video shorts into a variety feature. "The bands could use their portions for promotional purposes," he says, "and I would add commentary and interviews, then try to sell the thing."

"Home Invasion," was his ambitious but uneven pilot project. Modeled after England's "Kenny Everett Video Show," it featured video performances by Chicago bands, commentaries by Beatles chronicler Wally Podrazik ("a hairy Andy Rooney") and an interview with the English group Echo and the Bunnymen.

During his work on the pilot, Federici met Phil Birstein, leader of Phil 'n' the Blanks. Not long after that, he was taping a video version of the band's first single, "PRL-8-53," a song about a laboratory experiment with an intelligence-increasing drug.

"The Blanks are a great band for video," says Federici, "because so many of Phil's song are cinematic by nature. Phil and singer Blanche Leblanc have some theater background, so they come up with good suggestions."

The clever and polished "PRL-8-53" became part of "Home Invasion," along with performances by Toy and haunting interpretation of a song by Da, an all-female local band. Federici took the tape to New York, aiming at national syndication. "But I was turned down and told to try the local market—an exercise in futility since there isn't much local cable as yet. Music video is still in the early stages, and I suspect that the national stations don't really have the money to buy much programming. They get most of the stuff for free."

The best market so far for music programming is Warner-Amex's 24-hour Music TV (MTV), a visual radio station with playlists, video jocks and all. "Right now," says Federici, "MTV is more interested in national acts, and gets most of that programming free from record companies, which produce the videos and promotional devices. But soon the record companies will realize that there's money in those

videos, and won't be giving them away. There will be lots of cable time to fill, and the cable stations will be more receptive to 'local' product by interesting, if not famous, bands."

Federici has completed three Blank videos. The latest, which premiered at the band's September album release party, is called "Vi-Sectomy." The most artistically successful of the trio, "Vi-Sectomy" is done in a tough "West Side Story" visual style, with a number of sophisticated special effects. Birstein has used the videos for promotion, occasionally playing them before live performances, and sending them to record stores for in-house play. He rented four TV monitors to display the entire Blank oeuvre during the album release party at Gaspar's Rock America, a national video distributor, has picked up "PRL" for marketing to rock clubs across the country. In late December, the three Blank videos will be shown on Channel 11's "Image Union."

Federici, who has quit his full-time job to work as a free-lancer, views his video work as a disposable form of art. "People won't want these videotapes for their permanent collection. This stuff isn't like a record album. People will watch one a few times, then become bored. I want to make interesting and effective music videos, but I don't pretend that they will be lasting works of art. They're disposable entertainments."

Though Federici hopes to do more work with local bands—and perhaps upgrade "Home Invasion"—his main thrust now is to persuade the major record companies to hire him to direct promotional videos. (His most recent project was a documentary about a jazz band.) Planned trips to New York and Los Angeles will bring him into contact with the national video powers that be.