

CULTURE

MONDAY, AUGUST 23, 2010

The video that accompanies *Te Amo*, the latest song from R 'n' B megastar Rihanna, is in many respects an unremarkable effort. It's ramed with your standard pop shorthand for decadent, intense, dangerous-yet-picturesque passion. Scene one: a mindlessly sexy love interest drives a vintage car up the gravel path of a grand and ghostly house. Rihanna waits within, clad only in a leotard, lace gloves and ankle boots. She writhes around a bit in frenzied anticipation. Scene two: love interest enters the room in which Rihanna writhes and approaches the singer — slinkily and with purpose. They dance together erotically, never quite touching. Scene three: the couple cavort in silhouette; Rihanna plays the dominatrix, sings the song's chorus into her lover's ear, drags a dark-painted fingernail along the length of her lover's jaw. So far, so predictable — apart from the fact that Rihanna's love interest is played by Laetitia Casta, a 32-year-old French supermodel turned actress.

"Then she said 'Te amo.' Then she put her hand around my waist ...
"I said 'Te amo, wish somebody'd tell me what she said, 'Don't it mean 'I love you?'" run the lyrics, which Rihanna sings over a loaded, sinister and sexy beat. YouTube was registering 9,125,000 previous views by the time I got to it — and, well, you can quite imagine why.

The summer of 2010 has been monopolized by videos just like this. Glossily hedonistic, hyper-sexualized, controversy-embracing, arch and incorporating at least one visual reference to sadomasochism. Furthermore, they've all been the work of extremely high-profile female artists. In early June, Katy Perry shot streams of whipped cream from a red sequin bra and gyrated on a candy floss cloud for her number one song, *California Gurls*. A week later, Beyonce wore a basque, flexed a whip, smoked a cigarette and subverted the cliched ideal of the compliant 1950s housewife in the video for *Why Don't You Love Me?* Last month, Christina Aguilera wore designer fetish gear and reprised the pseudo-sapphic theme with one of her dancers in the video for *Not Myself Tonight*. And that's just for starters.

Of course, pop music has always been sexually charged: that's half its point. Pop videos have always reflected this, ramping up the sexual aspect of songs: that's their entire point. But still, what we are witnessing here is a very specific set of visuals and notions, which encompass a series of recurring themes (lesbianism, whips, retro-hairstyles and extremely high-end fashion), and which mark a shift in culture.

Where did it come from? Lady Gaga, obviously. That unrelenting, ubiquitous, all-singing, all-piano-playing, unapologetic, bleached blonde spectacular of a pop concept. Gaga (as she's popularly known) only entered the public consciousness 18 months ago when she released her first single, *Just Dance*, but she has come to inform and alter it profoundly. Those videos, those themes, that subversive sexiness, is very much her shtick.

Not everyone thinks her reach is a good thing, mind. "Gaga has launched every single woman in pop music into this crazy personality crisis," the male pop star Mika announced on Tuesday. "I don't think men have felt it, I think it's a female thing. I'm looking

Rihanna's duet with French female Laetitia Casta has caused a stir. But they are only the latest in a line of confident female pop stars — Lady Gaga, Beyonce, Kate Perry — who are resolutely in control of their own sexual imagery

BY POLLY VERNON
THE OBSERVER, LONDON



US singer Rihanna performs on stage at the Staples Center in Los Angeles on July 21. PHOTO: AFP

forward to seeing what else is out there." This, a week after record producer Mike Stock (previously of Stock, Aitken and Waterman) pronounced contemporary music videos "99 percent R 'n' B, 99 percent of which is soft pornography." "You can't watch a Lady Gaga video with a two-year-old," he added.

Which you probably can't. But that doesn't mean that we aren't a lot better off for her, or that her videos aren't important. To dismiss Lady Gaga — and her visual spawn — as salaciously, gratuitously, unnecessarily sexual, is to miss the point. To denounce it as yet another facet of our increasingly porn-obsessed, casually misogynistic culture is just plain wrong.

The full force of Lady Gaga's new sexual aesthetic was unleashed in March, with the video for her song *Telephone*. *Telephone* is nine minutes 32 seconds-worth of camp joy. It's a mini film, in which

Lady Gaga gets sent to prison, flirts with female inmates (while wearing a leather, studded bikini and sunglasses fashioned from lit cigarettes), gets released into the care of co-star Beyonce ("You've been a bad girl, Gaga") and whizzes off on a cross-country killing spree. *Telephone* is funny, lush, nuanced, clever. It makes a knowing virtue of blatant product placement and of referencing everything from the 1974 film *Caged Heat*, to Shania Twain's video for *That Don't Impress Me Much*, to *Pulp Fiction* and *Thelma and Louise*.

But it's the sexual undertones of the piece, the suggestion of a relationship between the fictionalized Beyonce and the fictionalized Gaga, that really mark *Telephone* out. It crackles with naughtiness. It's genuinely shocking to see the formerly very mainstream and very heterosexual Beyonce so complicit in Lady Gaga's transgressive vision.

Lady Gaga built on the *Telephone* moment by posing for the cover of the April issue of Britain's *Q* magazine, clad in studded skin-tight trousers and pointy fingered leather gloves, with a dildo strapped to her crotch. In June, she released her single *Alejandro*; in the video she played further with ideas of sexual identity and dominance, toying with the pale bodies and unknowable affections of legions of androgynous male dancers. (She also incorporated a series of homages to Madonna's finest visual moments within the mix.)

So no, Mike Stock, you wouldn't necessarily want to watch Lady Gaga videos, or leaf through her media coverage, in the company of a two-year-old (although heaven knows how much of Lady Gaga's most risqué imagery would resonate with your average pre-schooler). I wouldn't want to watch it with a 13-year-old either. But I really wouldn't mind if that 13-year-old was watching it behind my back.

Lady Gaga's video version of sexuality is extraordinary. It's extraordinary from an aesthetic perspective. She makes fashion statements out of gimp masks and gaffer tape, and orgies of vast synchronized dance segments. She turns sex into extremely camp theater and the end result is challenging and alarming and powerful and exciting. If it wasn't, it wouldn't have been revisited by so many other singers.

But it's also extraordinary from a political perspective. Lady Gaga presents an extremely empowered vision of sex and sexiness. Hers is a million miles away from the cynical, soulless titillation of your average Britney Spears video; of ... *Baby, One More Time*, say (in which Spears, who was 17 at the time, dressed as a 14-year-old schoolgirl and beseeched whoever to "Hit me baby, one more time"). It's the opposite of the sex offered us in the majority of R 'n' B and hip-hop videos, in which unnamed, interchangeable bikini-clad models dance for the slathering delectation of the male recording artists, because men dance for Lady Gaga.

Gaga owns this version of sex and she's not asking you to approve it. She's a complete pop icon — but she's no pin-up. She hasn't bothered constructing a version of herself designed to please a straight male audience. Lady Gaga doesn't do pretty, or available, or submissive, or obviously glamorous. Instead she does scary, she does theatrical, she does brave. Her costume choices — though often revealing, and sometimes not entirely complete; she famously chose to go on stage at the Glastonbury festival in the UK in 2009 without any pants — are too fiercely directional to appeal to most men. There is something Bowie, something early Madonna-esque about the way Lady Gaga wields her sexuality. Something unapologetic, unfinching, and shameless in the very best sense.

As for Mika's complaint that Lady Gaga is messing with the minds and the brands of female artists — oh, she's just raising the bar, isn't she? Furthermore, I know I'd much rather see Rihanna cavorting with Laetitia Casta than I would watch her sing the bitter chorus on Eminem's *Love the Way You Lie*, an uncomfortable paean to a relationship defined by domestic abuse (number one at the time of writing). The more Lady Gaga-referencing works in circulation, the better.

The new sexual politics that is changing pop

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

AUG. 13 TO AUG. 19



1 Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and *Myself* with 24.25 percent of sales

2 Wang Lee-hom (王力宏) and *The 18 Martial Arts* (十八般武藝) with 15.64%

3 Jing Chang (張芸京) and *The Opposite Me* (相反的我) with 6.31%

4 Terri Kwan (關穎) and *The Secret That Can't Be Kept* (關不住的秘密) with 4.27%

5 Chen Wei-quan (陳威全) and *Yes, I Love You (Goodbye, Single)* with 2.95%

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

The bid by hip-hop star Wyclef Jean to become Haiti's next president ended on Saturday after the singer's campaign was disqualified by election officials.

The move brings an end to one of the most bizarre incidents in the island's troubled political history after several days of speculation about the viability of Jean's high profile but eccentric attempt to lead his former homeland.

Jean, who was born in Haiti but grew up and rose to fame as a singer with the Fugees in the US, had launched his campaign in a blaze of publicity. But within days he was said to be in hiding because of alleged security concerns and death threats. Haiti's electoral council gave no reason for not allowing him to run, neither did it make an official announcement on his case. Instead, late on Friday night a council spokesman, Richardson Dumas, read out a list of 19 approved candidates and 15 rejected ones at an election bureau in Port-au-Prince. Jean's name was on the latter list.

While Jean's political career has stalled before it began, outspoken radio show host Laura Schlessinger will end her 30-year career on talk radio after

coming under attack in recent days for using a racial slur 11 times on the air.

"I made the decision not to do radio anymore," the most popular US female radio talk show host told Larry King in a CNN interview on Tuesday.

"I want to regain my first amendment rights [of free speech]. I want to be able to say what is on my mind, in my heart, what I think is helpful and useful without somebody getting angry," Schlessinger, 63, said.

She said her radio show, which is syndicated worldwide, will end in December when her contract expires. But she is not retiring and promised to continue to speak out on her blog, on YouTube, and in her books.

"I'm not retiring," she told King. "I'm not quitting."
The conservative talk show host ignited a firestorm last week for her comments to a black female caller who had complained about her white husband's use of "nigger," long considered a racial slur against black Americans.

Schlessinger told the caller she was being hyper-sensitive, then repeatedly used the word, raising the ire of some listeners and media watchers.

She later apologized.

Ten years ago, her views on homosexuality, which she termed a "biological error," and comparison of gay parenting to pedophilia led to the cancellation of a planned TV talk show.

In other celebrity news, actor Michael Douglas has canceled plans to speak at an investor forum in Hong Kong next month, organizers said on Wednesday, as the Hollywood star battles throat cancer.

"It has been confirmed that he canceled his trip to Hong Kong and will not be speaking at our investor forum," a spokeswoman for Asian brokerage CLSA said.

Douglas, a son of screen legend Kirk Douglas, was set to receive eight weeks of radiation and chemotherapy treatment, his spokesman told *People* magazine online on Monday.

His doctors expect Douglas to make a full recovery, he added.

Actress Zsa Zsa Gabor has decided to spend her final days at her Bel Air home after declining to undergo any more surgery, her publicist said on Monday.

Gabor, 93, was given the last rites by a priest in hospital at the weekend after undergoing a series of setbacks

following hip replacement surgery a month ago. Doctors wanted to perform surgery on her liver that would give her a 50-50 chance survival rate, but Gabor and her husband, Frederick Prinz von Anhalt, decided "she wanted to spend her final days at home," publicist John Blanchette said.

"Frederick said he did not want to torture her anymore," Blanchette added. He said the star, who has been a Hollywood fixture for 60 years, "is in and out of consciousness."

She left a Los Angeles hospital on Monday and returned home. Gabor, whose string of movies, television shows and wealthy husbands dates to the 1950s, was released from hospital last week but was taken back on Friday to treat two blood clots.

She broke her hip on July 17 when she fell out of bed while watching the television game show *Jeopardy*. The actress was partially paralyzed in a 2002 car accident.

"She had a great run," Blanchette said. "She's 93. She knew five presidents ... she knew kings and queens, celebrities."

[THE WEEKENDER]



Hsueh Hsin-yi performs in Sun Chuo-tai's *Ripple Effect*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF 8213 PHYSICAL DANCE THEATRE

Wave power

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

Ripple Effect (漣漪效應), 8213 Physical Dance Theatre's (8213 肢體舞蹈劇場) newest work, wasn't as loud as I had expected at Saturday's matinee at the Experimental Theater — apparently the volume was turned down after earlier audiences had complained — but its buzzy, industrial-tech soundscape enveloped without ever being obvious or over the top. It just was.

Just as Sun Chuo-tai's (孫毓泰) choreography just was. Nothing super spectacular — deceptively simple, really, but all the elements combined for a powerful performance. So what if a dancer could stand motionless with his right leg held perpendicular to his body, his foot almost to shoulder level, for a few minutes? Big deal, let's move on and concentrate on the small motions. The devil is in the details after all.

Sometimes I had to look really hard to see what was moving — the twitching of the fingers of one hand, the flex of a shoulder, the almost imperceptible shaking of one leg — before these movements grew into major tremor. The isolationist exercises that break down each body part turned that part into a separate performance vehicle and led the outward flow of one movement from one dancer to the next.

Sun tried to use pure energy and force to examine the impact that people have on others — through combinations of solos, duets, trios and group pieces — to show how ambitions and actions flow outward from us, creating ripples in relationships and society. Perhaps the most shocking ripple was created toward the end, when Chen Yu-jen (陳雨任) reached out and lightly touched his hand to Casey Avaunt's cheek, which led to a series of hands to faces or hands to shoulders with all the dancers. The delicacy of the movement was a shock since with Sun's work it's more common to see dancers pushing and shoving one another.

The performers were all great, even though they're not all trained dancers. Avaunt, Chen, Hsueh Hsin-yi (薛欣宜), Chiu Po-chang (邱柏禎) and Liu Yen-meng (劉彥明) have varied backgrounds, including training in classical, contemporary dance and street dance as well as Beijing opera, gymnastics and martial arts.

Of course, the fact that the dancers were wearing yellow jumpsuits, which looked almost like neoprene, meant that even the slightest movement was sure to work up lots of sweat. Before the performance, Avaunt told me that the outfits were a lot more breathable than the scuba suits the company wore in last year's *Electron*.

The costumes were the one downside to *Ripple Effect*. They were cartoonish, looking like a cross between a bad science-fiction movie of the 1950s and a Japanese cartoon superhero, with a bit of Thierry Mugler thrown in, and proved a lot more distracting than the platform the performers were dancing on, which was illuminated by flashing LED lights.

My only complaint about *Ripple Effect* was that it was too short — just an hour. I'd would have liked to see more, although I'm not sure the dancers would agree.



Hip-hop star Wyclef Jean's eccentric campaign to become president of Haiti ended in rejection by the country's electoral council. PHOTO: AFP

The Hungarian-born Gabor has appeared in more than 30 movies, and her penchant for calling everyone "dahl-ing" in her Hungarian accent made her a well-known Hollywood personality.

—AGENCIES