

Raw, basic, primal: 'Hip' video director goes back to basics

By Hunter Drohojowska

This is one of those stories that renew your faith in the theory of being in the right place at the right time, in the Garland and Rooney style of optimism. "Come on, kids, let's put on a show."

A young girl, cinnamon freckles on her nose, straight shiny blond hair hanging in blue eyes that can't possibly be as innocent as they look, comes to the door in blue jeans and a white Hanes T-shirt. Tamra Davis-Herman, 24, is about to become one of the hot new video directors in Hollywood.

She shot Husker Du's video "Don't Want to Know If You're Lonely" with director Bill Pope, and shot and directed the DelLords' new video, "Heaven," both of which are playing on MTV. The record companies of Warner Bros. and EMI are clamoring for more. In a glutted industry that's notoriously difficult to break into, Davis-Herman grabbed executives' attention by working against the slick narrative and ubiquitous video style. Shot in super 8 and 16mm, using a vintage, hand-crank Bolex, her videos have the grainy quality of basement tapes, in black and white intercut with color, but ripping along to the rock 'n' roll beat.

The DelLords' tape opens with New York bridges whooshing past, shot from a car window, and cuts to images of the band performing in a series of Eastern clubs. The effect is nearly abstract, a composition of close-ups of the sweaty faces, an elbow, a tattoo, foot pedal on the drum, the crowd. Occasionally, a single gesture will be slowed to a dreamy lost motion; otherwise, the syncopated images race by. There is nothing else like it on MTV.

As the story goes, Davis-Herman and her producer, Sharon Norvell, sent a demo tape of the True Believers to EMI when the band was signed last April. Frenchy Gauthier, EMI vice president of creative services and merchandising, was thrilled with Davis-Herman's work and suggested her for the DelLords' video, as well as the True Believers single.

"We were pinching ourselves, we'd never been in a big executive's office before," Davis-Herman says sweetly.

Gauthier showed Davis-Herman's tape to other EMI executives who were equally impressed. "Unfortunately, the video business is redundant. What I saw in Tamra was a special style that belonged only to her," says Gauthier. "She

has a vision and she can realize it on film. Everything looks good on paper, but Tamra is a sort of one-woman team (she shoots, directs, lights and edits), so what she wants comes out very accurately on film. She creates an aura around the band. I hate to use the word 'hip,' but she definitely did that with the DelLords, gave them a strong street image they didn't have from their first video."

Sharon Oreck, at No Pictures, heard what happened at EMI and called Davis-Herman when Warner Bros. needed a Husker Du video. With director Bill Pope, Davis-Herman went to Minneapolis to shoot the band performing in a local club. But no one could find the band. At 2 a.m., a frustrated Davis-Herman left her hotel and started shooting footage of the city at night, wound up back at the club, and backstage found Husker Du singer Grant Hart. He looked at the slim, young blonde with the camera and asked, "Are you from Burbank?" Much of the footage she shot that night was included in the video.

"I loved the band," says Davis-Herman, "and loved hanging out with them. A lot of directors are directing groups they have no feel for much. I love rock 'n' roll."

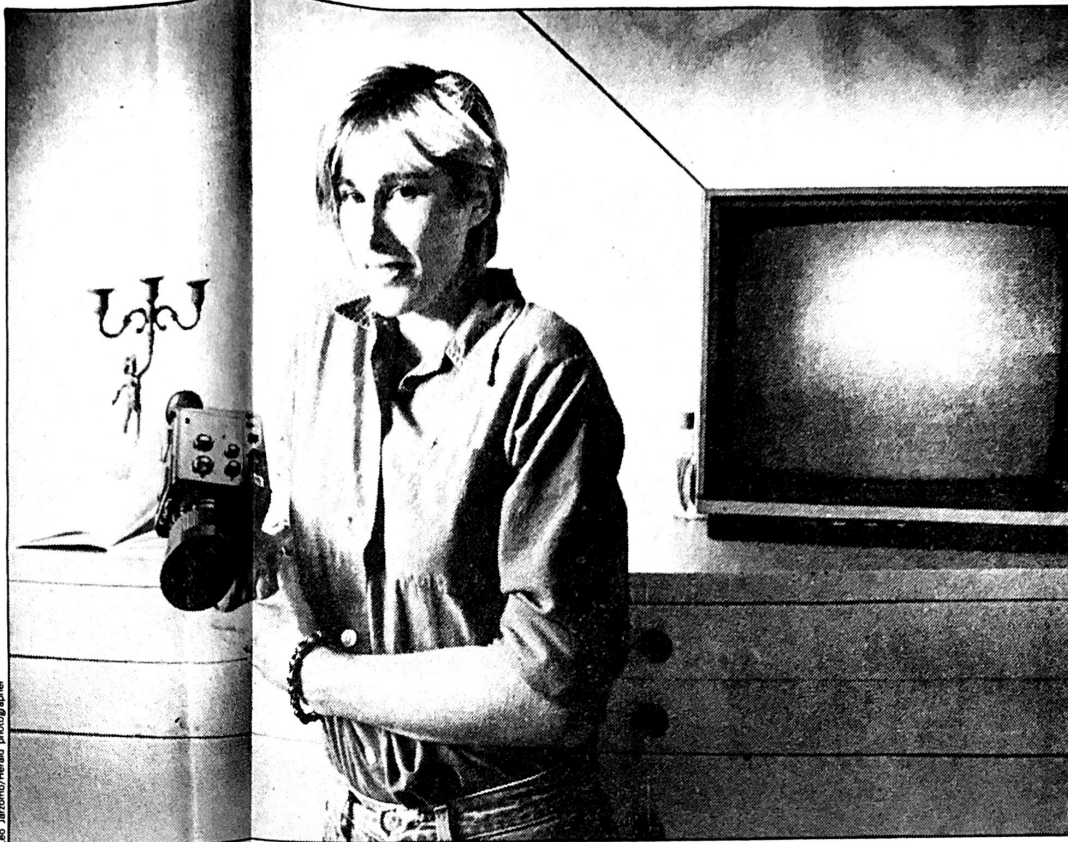
Of her technique, she says with a shrug, "It's the easiest thing you could do. No cranes, no smoke. That innocence made it important for what it was."

Initially, she was concerned that the record companies weren't giving her instructions or concepts for the videos. But animator Ralph Bakshi, who has his own video hit with the Rolling Stones' "Harlem Shuffle," saw her work and assured her, "Look, nobody can tell you how to do this."

Oreck adds, "Her format is raw and simple, just super 8 and one or two lights. It's just an eye behind a camera, but she has a great eye. Her raw, powerful style is correct for bands like Husker Du or the True Believers. And she is unafraid, the most effective strategy you can have. When you are not intimidated, people are impressed and assume you know what you are doing. It helps to have good work, but attitude is extremely effective."

Davis-Herman does seem confident beyond her years — or perhaps she has the blind self-assurance of youth. She aspires to direct features, like most directors of music videos, and her company, Mode Productions, has two scripts in development.

She comes from a Hollywood family. Her grandfather, the late



Tamra Davis-Herman, the 24-year-old *Wunderkind* of rock 'n' roll music videos, has caught the attention of record company executives with her distinctive style.

Stan Davis, was a comedy writer for such stars as Milton Berle and Bob Hope; grandmother Dorothy Davis was an actress once on contract with 20th Century Fox.

Davis-Herman's own ambitions began at 15 in Italy, where she acted in commercials and did small parts in film and television. But she decided that she wanted to be behind the camera. "I could hear myself saying the lines," she recalls, "but I could always see someone else saying them better."

Back in the States, she was hired to assist on the Francis Coppola-directed film "One From the Heart" — "walking behind the producer and watching him sweat." She met Coppola, who told her that the way to become a director was to go to film school.

At 19, she enrolled in the film department of L.A. City College. "The students there were not so posur as those at USC or UCLA. There were Vietnamese kids making movies for \$50 with a super 8 because they had something to say. They didn't have parents who were paying thousands of dollars, and didn't have to follow in the footsteps of Spielberg." She put herself through school by working for real estate tycoon Jack Margolis, and learned the world of business as well as aesthetics.

She financed her own first films. Of the music videos, she sighs and says, "It's so exciting to have people give you money to do anything you want."

Davis-Herman approaches her films with the eye of an artist, and

a limitation in her struggle to direct. "People think it's against my eye, but I think it's the strongest thing I've got going for me. People notice you."

She recalls that a woman called her about her film project "Kicks,"

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it's not surprising that she is married to Roger Herman, a German artist who paints and makes wood cuts in an expressionist style.

"Roger is a great influence," she says. "He loves movies and films and helped me see a lot I hadn't seen before. What he does is so personal and what I've been doing in videos is the same, just me and my camera."

She denies that being a woman is

which she describes as "a gang movie set 25 years in the future, like '48 HRS.' meets 'Night of the Living Dead.'" The woman asked why a talented young woman would want to direct such a gross film. "I don't think you can say there is such a big difference between what a man and woman want to make in a film. It's so stupid to classify something as a woman's picture."

When working with male bands and male crews, Davis-Herman says she adopts the "queen bee theory." "To gain respect from men working for you works to your benefit. I'm the biggest flirt. You want everybody to fall in love, you can use that sexual tension. Flirting is fun, and it relaxes people. I also have to fall in love with the band, or the actors, and to feel that the other people will fall in love. But you flirt through ideas, you don't have any kind of relationship. If you follow through it becomes too serious. Keep the fantasy going, that's fertile ground for creativity."

Davis-Herman most recently finished a video of Los Lobos, and is waiting to do another for the True Believers. She also sent her tapes to Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin. "I think they are so great," she says. "I'd love to work with him. I'm doing it sort of backwards, choosing a song I want to do instead of waiting for the record company to decide."

Asked about her new-found success, Davis-Herman laughs. "The whole thing about rock videos, and that amazed me, is that they are all alike. People are looking for new ideas. If you have them, you are going to work."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.