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# American Cinematographer

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# Short Takes

Kermit the Frog, Animal, Fozzie Bear and Gonzo are among the Muppets who make mayhem in OK Go's version of *The Muppet Show* theme song.



## Muppet Mania

By Iain Stasukevich

Chicago-based rock band OK Go is known as much for its whimsical, cleverly designed music videos as it is for its music. The band's latest single is a cover of *The Muppet Show* theme song, a cut from the Muppet-themed *Green Album*. When the musicians enlist Jim Henson's lovable creatures to help them with the video, all hell breaks loose.

The collaboration was actually a match made in heaven, according to the video's director, Kirk Thatcher. "I've never met four guys who embody the Muppets' freewheeling, creative fun and incredibly craftsman-like approach to execution more than band members Tim [Nordwind], Dan [Konopka], Andy [Ross] and Damian [Kulash]," he observes.

Thatcher is actually a Henson veteran: in 1986, Henson hired him as a character designer. The video's cinematographer, Craig Kief, had also worked with the Muppets before, on a project for pop singer Tiffany Thornton.

The filmmakers were presented with some heavy specs for a two-day shoot. There were 14 sets on three stages at Delphino Studios in Sylmar, Calif. On the second day, Kief and Thatcher were joined by 2nd-unit director/visual-effects supervisor Christopher Alender and cinematographer Mateo Londono.

The Muppets and production company Soapbox Films were coming off four days of production on another Muppet project, so all the infrastructure was in place. The key Muppet performers,

including Steve Whitmire (Kermit), Eric Jacobson (Piggy and Fozzie), Bill Barretta (Rowlf and Dr. Teeth) and Dave Goelz (Gonzo), live in different parts of the country, so their in-person meetings often means weeks of concentrated work on a variety of projects.

Kief confirms that working with puppets necessitates some unusual departures from the way he typically shoots. "The puppets like to be shot with wide lenses, up close," he notes. This is partly because the puppets are very small — Kermit is about 18" — and the wide-lens perspective helps to make their movements feel larger and more alive.

Composition is maintained using the lower frame line as reference. Handheld work is often avoided, as are vertical camera moves. "Muppets tend to walk in groups of three and five," Thatcher observes. "Then they'll line up and talk to each other, so many of our shots are proscenium-oriented from the waist up. The hardest thing to do with a Muppet is an extreme close-up, because you don't want the audience to discern that the eyes are made of felt. And over-the-shoulders are difficult because a lot of them don't have shoulders." In addition, the characters' distinctive facial features discourage camera operators from cutting their close-ups off at the forehead.

When working, Muppet performers are most comfortable standing, with their puppets raised over their heads. All Muppet sets therefore had to be constructed with 3'-high "puppeted" floors assembled from 4'x8' steel-deck sections that could be removed at any time.

This also meant that Kief needed to position his camera, a

Photos by Craig Kief and Chris Alender. Images courtesy of Disney.



Clockwise from top left: the Muppets puppeteer the members of OK Go; Damian Kulash performs against greenscreen; the Arri Alexa was rotated 90 degrees to maximize resolution.



Panavised Arri Alexa, at a height of 8' or 9'. All of the lights on set had to be raised as well. "Sometimes it takes a while for people to get into that mode of thinking," says the cinematographer. "Luckily, some of my crew, including key grips Alex Klabukov and Bodie Hyman, had worked on the new Muppets movie, so they were already very familiar with how this works."

Kief was impressed with the Alexa's handling of the Muppets' bright color palette. The digital image was recorded as 4:4:4 LOG C ProRes HD files to onboard SxS cards. The only adjustment he made on set was to inch up the saturation on the main HD viewing monitor at video village.

"The colors were insane," he notes. "Not only was I dealing with Kermit's extreme green and Gonzo's blue, but we

also had other craziness, like the band members' colorful suits and a wall of LED lights. The image held up phenomenally well, and I knew it would look great when we started the timing."

One of the video's early gags, a parody of the classic Muppaphone act, involves a very tricky shot. The camera dollies across the musicians' faces, then speeds up (a post effect) and pulls back as Marvin Suggs (performed by Jacobson) hurls a pair of mallets over their heads. The mallets fly past the camera and start a Rube Goldberg device that sets the rest of the video in motion.

Jacobson had trouble throwing the mallets while holding the Suggs puppet, so Kief and Thatcher came up with the idea to lock off the camera at the end of the shot,

clear the band from the frame, and then have Jacobson (sans puppet) toss the mallet. The Muppet hands and mallets were rotoscoped back into the hero shot (by artists at Soapbox) to look as though they're part of the action. "We used every trick available, but it doesn't look like it," Thatcher notes.

A few shots later, some penguins drop a curtain across the frame, and then pull it back as the camera begins a long push-in on a dolly. Kermit and pals emerge from behind the curtains as the dolly passes by.

To achieve this shot, Londono and Hyman guided the camera past six rows of curtains, lighting cues and Muppet performers. Each time a curtain was pulled back, a Muppet hit its mark, and 2nd-unit gaffer Kieran Waugh turned up a 1K or 650-watt Fresnel, kicking lens flares into the upper corners of the frame. (The lenses were Panavision Primos.) "The shot looks completely effortless, even though it was very complex," says Thatcher. "Getting 15 people to have perfect timing to music on a 70-foot dolly took almost seven hours to accomplish, but we loved the idea of capturing as much in-camera as possible." ➤



Clockwise from top left: Tim Nordwind awakens from his nightmare; cinematographer Craig Kief and the Alexa on set; key grip Alex Klabukov uses a Panther crane to fly the camera over the bedroom set.



"One of my favorite shots in the video was something Kirk and [producer] Kris Eber came up with called the 'peacock setup,'" says Kief. In this scene, the four band members and four Muppets stand in a single-file line facing the camera, and then they lean around each other on a musical cue. During the shot, Kief had the lighting-board operator cycle through different background lighting cues with ETC Selador Vivid R LED lamps.

"When the band and the Muppets start going crazy and jumping around, I told [the operator] to just go nuts and start cycling through the backgrounds," says Kief. "It was fun to see it instantly, live and in-camera." (In post, Alender thought of adding flying CG penguins to the shot.)

Kief came across the Selador Vivid LEDs while searching for a lamp suitable for lighting a pure white cyc. "The problem is

that there are gaps in the LED color spectrum," he remarks. The Selador Vivids use seven LED hues — red, red-orange, amber, green, cyan, blue and indigo — that together create a more complete spectrum of white light.

By using 14 Vivid lamps above and 14 below the white background cyc, Kief was able to create a smooth, solid wash of color that could be changed in an instant. "It was so saturated and clear that it looked like a post effect," he says. DMX dimmer control was routed through an ETC Ion console.

Two big greenscreen shots close out the video. Klabukov rigged bluescreens and greenscreens to fly in front of the cyc, and gaffer Mark Marchetti lit them with 12 Kino Flo Image 80s (six above and six below) lamped with alternating green and blue tubes. The first greenscreen gag reveals that

OK Go are actually puppets being controlled by the Muppets. The band members performed in front of a greenscreen while wearing a floor-length skirt of the same chroma-key color. Each member was photographed individually, with the camera rotated 90 degrees, and then combined into a single shot. "We needed more vertical resolution than horizontal resolution," Kief explains. "Getting in close with the camera and shooting sideways allowed us to do that."

The reveal of the Muppets puppeteering the band is a separate shot, achieved in the same fashion, with the puppeteers watching the musicians' performance on a monitor in order to make the puppets' movements match. According to Thatcher, keying the Muppets has always been a challenge. Kermit is a few shades off chroma green, but if he is in an effects shot with Gonzo, bluescreen can't be used, either. "There's no single color that works for everybody, so we had to be flexible and be ready to shoot either at a moment's notice," says Kief.

"I've shot about 50 music videos, and this is maybe the most ambitious one," muses the cinematographer. "It also might be the most fun I've ever had on a shoot. Everyone, including the band, the puppeteers, Kirk, Soapbox and the Muppets Studio, brought a creative energy to the video that was exciting and inspiring."