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Visual wizardry

New Age VJs are taking gigs to the next level by syncing music with quirky visuals, says **Shreya Shukla**



Dhanya Pilo entralls her audiences with animation like the nine steps of draping (or un-draping) a sari

You're at a swank nightclub and a great track's playing but something's missing so you don't hit the dance-floor.- Then, suddenly a larger-than-life Rajnikanth visual springs up on a wall next to you. And before you can blink your eye, a melange of other images bombard your senses as they pop up on the walls, the dance floor, the ceiling — and even on the sole couple grooving to the music.

There are movie scenes, stop-motion animation clips and even psychedelic patterns of light and shadow pulsating to the beats of the music. They're all controlled by a visual jockey — and you can bet that they won't allow you to hang about warming the couch.

So, what's this pump-up-the-visual fest all about, you ask? Well, just as a disc jockey (DJ) mixes tracks, a visual jockey (VJ) mixes and projects visuals in sync with the music beats playing in a nightclub or musical gig or even at a fashion show. The idea is to lend a visual dimension to the experience and make it fun and funky too. And yes, VJ is the new lingo for a visual jockey, not your old-and-forgotten video jockey.

"Visuals are a great ice breaker," says visual artist and VJ Avinash Kumar aka Thiruda, a founder of the audio-visual collective BLOT! (Basic Love Of Things).

The visual performances are popping up everywhere from nightclubs to music festivals to even Indian classical dance recitals and fashion shows. The early practitioners of visual jockeying were avant-garde youngsters like Kumar, VJ KayCee of Bangalore, Mumbai's Dhanya Pilo aka VJ DECOY and Calcutta-based visual artist and VJ Varun Desai aka Yidam who was introduced to the concept of visual jockeying while studying computer engineering in USA in the early 2000s. "At some of the Chicago parties I attended, the VJs were bigger than the DJs. I felt VJing was a very big part of the electronic music culture that was missing in India, so I began doing it once I returned," he says.



Some of the biggest nightclubs in India and Berlin have been treated to BLOT! performances

Or, look at Arnav Banerjee (Mandrake) of Undefined Dimension, who came across video jockeying on YouTube. And BLOT!'s gigs grew out of the electronic dance music and visual acts that its founders experimented with in the basement of their old studio.

BLOT! has been going places. It's performed at well known Berlin nightclubs like Tresor and Bar 25 and top Indian ones like Blue Frog. Besides, it curated the experimental stage at Goa's Sunburn Music Festival and even did the audio-visuals at Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week.

The visuals could be just about anything. Kumar, for instance, likes to throw in a dose of "surreal pop culture" in the form of Tamil and Bollywood film clips, and even Japanese animation from the 70s. So, for instance, he has mixed clips of N.T. Rama Rao playing a superhero in a Telugu film with early Superman footage and also played with Rajnikanth clips. "In nightclubs where everyone's preoccupied with looking hot, we present our gigs with nice helpings of humour," he says.



Visual jockeying caught Varun Desai's imagination when he was studying computer engineering in the US. Pic by Rashbehari Das

On the other hand, Pilo's animation of the nine steps of draping a sari "has a tease involved". Depending on how she plays the animation, the lady in it can either be wearing the sari or taking it off.



Innovation is the name of the game. At this year's Indo-German music festival and conference India Goes 3D, Kumar had guests wearing 3-D glasses while listening to music on wireless headphones — in a silent disco. And the visuals were a mix of 3-D images and footage created using a special software, clips from pulp horror films and early 3-D Hollywood movies.

Or take Desai, who uses the Xbox kinect to control visuals based on the movement of people at the gig (for instance, if he projects a visual representing water on the screen and a person walks in front of it, it looks like he's leaving a trail of water behind him). And at Bangalore's Submerge Supernova festival this year, VJ KayCee created an LED screen set inspired by the Space



Invaders video game and custom-made visuals to go with it.

The surface on which a visual is projected is as important as the content. So, the visuals aren't just projected on screens, plasma TVs and LED walls but also on the audience itself. During a gig in Delhi's Lodi Gardens last year, BLOT! projected on white hooded capes it handed out to the audience. And at the Goafest 2011, Banerjee projected onto a shack covered with white lycra fabric.

KayCee (above); pic by Gajanan Dudhalkar, was inspired by a video game to create an LED screen set at Bangalore's Submerge Supernova festival; Photograph Courtesy Submerge Supernova

VJs are also adding a dash of spice to music festivals, award ceremonies and corporate gigs. KayCee's performed at music festivals like Sunburn, Bacardi NH7 Weekender, Storm (Coorg) and Dubai's Atelier Live Dance Arena. And BLOT! has the Berlin Music Week and Geneva's Electron

Festival in its kitty. "Visuals connect the crowd with the music and DJ at mega festivals," says Vinay Agarwal, assistant manager, operations, Sunburn.

The trend's growing. "Organisers realise that a visual keeps people tuned in to the performance," says Kumar. So, they welcome a dash of visual Tabasco to their events.

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