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Live, Raw, Real: Producing One-Take Online Music Videos

There's a wave of raw, demolike one-take music videos with an unmistakable live feel sweeping the web, and some savvy event filmmakers have thrown their hats into the ring. Here we look behind the scenes of Bill Grant's boneshow and Jet Kaiser's One Take Shows, and get their spin on this new, viral field-recording phenomenon.

By [Liz Merfeld](#)

Posted on January 18, 2012

Page 1 of 3 next »

If you want your MTV, then move along; this article isn't for you. But stick around if you're intrigued by the prospect of watching or producing genuine homespun, documentary-style short films of roots/Americana musicians performing their songs.

"You had me at documentary-style," you say? Well, it gets better. Turns out that producing these little labors of love—and you better sincerely love indie musicians (meaning, more often than not, struggling musicians) to take the time—can be a rewarding diversion to your wedding or event filmmaking and a great way to apply your ability to capture the moment and get great shots the first time to a whole different sort of undertaking.

There's a wave of these unproduced, demolike, one-take music videos sweeping the web, and some of your fellow wedding filmmakers have caught on. It started, we're told, way back in April 2006, when Vincent Moon (real name: Mathieu Saura), a young filmmaker from Paris, conspiring with Chyrde, creator of popular French music website [La Blogothèque](#), filmed songs guerrilla-style "to go" (as opposed to shooting in a standard concert setting) and then uploaded them to the website for mass consumption.

The result was Take-Away Shows, a collection of more than 100 music videos featuring prominent indie rock artists from all over the world performing ad hoc in the apartment balconies, poorly lit cafes, and alleyways of Paris. Most are intimate, single-take recordings of acoustic performances.



Birth of the boneshow

"I was instantly struck by the power and immediacy of the performances I saw [on La Blogothèque] and realized that I could bring that to the 'small' musician as a promotional tool," recalls Bill Grant of South Carolina's [Caveat Films](#). With his wife, Mary, a photographer, Grant shoots dozens of weddings yearly. He's also a lifelong musician, and after watching Moon's Take-Away Shows and seeing the alchemy achieved despite minimal budget and editing, Grant's love of music prompted him to start his own series, dubbing it the boneshow.

"My goal with the boneshow was to bring the local musician and national artist on the same plane and focus on performance and musicianship over studio perfection," he says. Since February 2009, Grant has shot 85 one-take videos, starting with friend and "local legend" Danielle Howle. Many performers are local to South Carolina, but boneshow has also featured

national acts such as Amy Ray.

[boneshow56](#) from [Steve Nathans-Kelly](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Page 1 of 3 next »

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« [previous](#) [Page 2 of 3](#) [next](#) »

Folke Up! (in Terre Haute)

Jet Kaiser, an Indianapolis videographer who runs [Jet Kaiser Films](#) with his wife, Danielle, specializes in cinematic wedding films but was similarly inspired by Moon's avant-garde approach. "I have been a fan of [Take-Away Shows] since the beginning," he says. Jon DaCosta, a Terre Haute, Ind., musician, was also a follower of Take-Away Shows and wanted to make a few of his own.

He teamed up with videographer Patrick Boggs (who happened to be DaCosta's multimedia professor in college) to start up the series known as [Folke Up! \(in Terre Haute\)](#). After watching the first few videos they produced, "I knew that I wanted on board," remembers Kaiser. He contacted Boggs and shot his first video in September 2009. A dozen shoots later, Kaiser decided to broaden his focus, expanding beyond the city limits of Terre Haute and exploring musical genres outside folk. He started his own company, [One Take Shows](#), in August 2010.

[One Take Shows BTS](#) from [Steve Nathans-Kelly](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Sound and Vision

As you can probably guess, one-take videos owe much of their magic to happenstance. Ambient noises and imperfect lighting only add to the appeal, and editing after the shoot is minimal and precise. "Editing a video that is mostly one take is usually a very short and simple process. Audio mixing is the most time-consuming part, especially if there is a large number of mics and musicians," Kaiser says. "Coloring is important to our films. Each show is uniquely colored to fit the artists' personality, environment, season, and, most importantly, the song. Color can greatly embellish the emotion of the performance."

Elementally, the video is dictated by the impromptu atmosphere. "I have never lit the shoots at all. I try to take advantage of darkness and shadows and, consequently, what light is available and choose my locations wisely," Grant explains. Kaiser has shot by the light of the setting sun or the spotlight of a street lamp in a variety of locales. "One may notice while watching our videos that the acoustics reflect the location, whether it be in a back alley or an old cathedral," he says, adding that he uses only the audio captured on the shoot and, in fact, encourages musicians not to rehearse. "I want my music films to be raw in all aspects including the performance, the visuals, and the sound."

This passion for raw authenticity is echoed in Grant's fourfold definition of boneshow—the four tenets that set these videos apart from his wedding videography. "I have a few rules that I generally apply to every boneshow. One: No prerecorded overdubs. No fixing. Two: No cuts. It has to be one continuous shot from beginning to end. Three: One camera. I don't want any tricks to pull focus from the live nature of it. Four: Portable. Either the camera or the artist should be completely portable. My goal is not to be tied to electricity. I have floated the idea of a car DC inverter or battery-powered amp, but everything should be live and ambient."

Grant calls the improvisational elements of these shoots pleasantly "exhilarating," recognizing that he has very little control over how the shoot ends up. "The attraction of this is the ability to control the input but not necessarily the output. In boneshow #4 we walked into an old barber shop in middle of the city and

asked the guy if we could film. We did, to the amazement of the fellas getting haircuts.

Kaiser experiences a similar sense of exhilaration during the process. “Shooting these shows gives me a rush, and I’ve joked in the past that I think sometimes I go the entire song without breathing. I use a custom shouldermount rig, which helps me stay somewhat steady while capturing the dynamic range of shots throughout the performance. The camera becomes a part of me and almost acts as a curious spectator.”

[One Take Shows from Steve Nathans-Kelly on Vimeo.](#)

Both filmmakers frequently rely on the Canon EOS 5D Mark II, famously adaptable to low-light situations and night shooting. Grant favors a Canon XH A1 for its image stabilization and XLR inputs. For audio recording, Grant uses two Sennheiser G2 wireless setups, two Zoom H2s, and an array of other mics to capture ambient noise. Kaiser mics the performers with lavaliers and wireless mics, and he also uses the 5D’s shotgun mic, mainly as a sync reference in Final Cut.

[« previous](#) **Page 2 of 3** [next »](#)

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« previous Page 3 of 3

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Taking the Shows on the Road

After the videos are complete, they are available online for fans to view and as a promotional resource for the featured musicians. Kaiser equates the process of shooting his One Take Shows to the rise of a nascent independent musician using digital DIY means. "We are in an age where a talented, small-town band can produce an album on a laptop and use online marketing to climb the ladder to success. I love this! I think that true talent and originality now has a chance to rise to the top and compete with the mainstream, cookie-cutter artists like never before. I think these one-take music videos give bands like this an opportunity to show off their capabilities without dumping thousands of dollars into a music video that sometimes conceals the artist's true talent."

Yet emerging artists usually keep their day jobs before rising to stardom. Despite the growing attention paid to lo-fi one-take videos on such major music websites as Pitchfork and Stereogum and the increasing prominence of bands such as Phoenix or Bon Iver showcased in Take Away Shows, neither Kaiser nor Grant harbor any illusions about what's in it for them. As Grant puts it: "I would say that doing music video in general should be a love thing first. You must love it or it makes no sense. Approach every project from the perspective of whether you want to do it or not. Judge the music. Make it reflect your personality or it won't make you happy. And with what little money is involved, it must make you happy creatively."

Kaiser agrees. "Using video to tell unique, emotional stories rooted in love has always been my way of manifesting an inner drive to create. It seems as if One Take Shows was destined to be created considering my love of film, music, and challenges." He encourages like-minded filmmakers to reach out to bands in their area and offer to shoot a video for free. The viral nature of online video works to promote both the musician and the filmmaker, and word-of-mouth has led to an onslaught of inquiries to One Take Shows.

Kaiser is looking ahead optimistically: "There are a few nationally recognized artists that I'd like to work with in the future. I see a bright future for One Take Shows." Conversely, nearly a hundred boneshows in, Grant is fine-tuning his approach, focusing on maximizing exposure for the artists he's already shot and scouring the internet and airwaves to discover "diamonds in the rough." Though he is developing Grant Digital Media, which is intended to manage corporate and commercial projects, he won't be giving up on his boneshows anytime soon. "boneshow has been a very fulfilling and enlightening experience for me, and I have Vincent Moon to thank for the idea. I knew that it would work from the first frame of the first shoot, and I hope I can keep it going as long as there are artists who truly play their own songs."

« previous Page 3 of 3