

## **Director Vanessa Pla controls chaos through surreal music videos**

**December 5, 2024**

**By John Melendez**

You're looking down the barrel of a fully loaded revolver held by a striking, red-and-yellow clad cowgirl staring straight into your soul.

She sings hauntingly.

Western guitar strings, marimba rhythms and steady tambourine flourishes lead her burgundy cowboy boots through the sparse desert vegetation until she lays her head on the railroad tracks. Her stoic cowboy lover picks her up against an artificial dusk as the full moon rises.

On what resembles a vintage soundstage, she struts through the desert twilight to a stone well where she raises her pistol before letting it plummet.

Down, down, down the camera follows until a black and white spotlight at the bottom reveals the duo somberly plucking at their guitars. The curtains behind them open to the glow of a campy, paper fire as she delivers the last of her bewitching vocals.

"I've seen the power of that video that goes beyond me and none of that was planned for," says 35-year-old director Vanessa Pla about the surreal, six-shot, four-minute music video for the song "Funeral" by the spooky, psychedelic western band Tele Novella.

"It took a long time to believe and trust in this process that kind of happens without intervening too much. It's like believing in yourself in an abstract but big way," she says on the phone from Los Angeles, where she's spent the last month recharging after a busy year with twelve music video releases for artists like Wallice, Britti and La Luz.

Although the captivating retro-west visual was released in October of last year, it recently won the Best Music Video award at the inaugural Round Top Film Festival this November.

Mickey Duzdevich, Programming Director for the festival, said the video's vibrant color palette, vintage Americana set-design and intentional framing made it clear that Pla has paid attention to a lot of cinema. Her cat Godard, named after the French-Swiss pioneer filmmaker, would probably agree.

“She does it very well to pay homage instead of just copying,” he says. “I think that’s why [artists] keep coming back to her, because it’s fresh and new. People think it’s really easy just to throw a music video together and that’s not the case.”

The numerous obstacles of creating music videos are less discouraging for the Lockhart-based director, who threw everything in her car and moved to Austin from San Francisco in 2014 for an internship with director Richard Linklater’s production company, Detour Filmproduction. With a bachelor’s in French Studies and no film school experience, Pla followed her heart to Texas for the opportunity to be a storyteller.

Within a month of living in Austin, she was already directing her first music video, a colorful, low-budget fever dream for the song “Axe Me If I Care” by the psychedelic scuzz-rock band Annabelle Chairlegs.

With the DSLR she had scraped together money for in-hand, the music videos jobs snowballed. There was no real financial gain behind those early music videos - or current-day ones, for that matter - but the passion for storytelling and opportunities to learn were enough.

“The first year was just gnarly. Like really gnarly,” she recalls with a chuckle. “I would find my sanctuary within my group of friends and the music that we all loved and that was the only thread that was keeping me alive.”

From sleeping on a yoga mat to rooming with a “schizo stripper,” the surrealist filmmaker maintains that following her dreams has hardly ever been pretty. During those dark times, she used her heart as her compass and held onto her integrity.

She also went to lots of live shows.

“Maybe that’s why I’ve become such a music video charity,” she says. “Because I just have so much respect for musicians who are creating despite the hardships.

Since then, Pla’s portfolio includes artists like The Black Angels, Shannon & The Clams and Megafauna. In the past four years, her emergence into the commercial space, with clients like Target, Capital One and Tito’s, has provided the financial stability to continue creating musical passion projects. Despite loving music videos, she considers herself a director with a lot more to say.

“People pigeonhole you so quickly without really seeing the multitudes that you contain,” she says.

The Halloween-born director's latest music video, for the song "Vampire Cowgirl" by frequent collaborators Tele Novella, was released in October. It's a sauntering, ghostly, western lullaby that considers a complex female character like those Pla loves to create stories about.

Musician Natalie Gordon, one-half of Tele Novella and the compelling protagonist of the melodiously macabre vision, says Pla's portrayal adds another layer of interpretation to the song while still alluding to what the narrative is really about.

Since their first collaboration in 2015, the medieval-western duo and Super 8 film buff have evolved together. The singer-songwriter says Pla balances structure and spontaneity well and that their chemistry has become an integral part of the band's aesthetic.

"She's just so much more than just a director because she's writing the storylines and she's managing all the details on set," she says. "She just has a really clear vision that's getting clearer and clearer as she becomes more advanced."

Pla recently considered hanging up her music video hat in lieu of focusing on her own narrative feature. While the commercial and music industries have opened doors for her, she doesn't want to lose sight of the longform storytelling that brought her to Texas in the first place.

In the end, she's settled on simply being more intentional about the music video jobs she takes on. That said, she already has plans to release two music videos and three live session recordings early next year.

"Whether a song gets you out of your own darkness or the darkness around you, [music] was always a means to create for me," she says. "And also has somehow pushed me to challenge myself into thinking more in a narrative way because as I work with so many musicians I also have to think about, well, what's my song?"