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Kanye West

Kanye finds launchpad to Seventies-style movie

Touch The Sky (Roc-A-Fella)

Director: Chris Milk

Chris Milk's first video for Kanye West, *All Falls Down*, got him recognised as a video director of huge promise. His second for Jesus Walks sealed his reputation. Now his highly entertaining third video for the rap superstar could make Hollywood sit up and take notice. And it would be appropriate if this video proved to be a launch pad for a movie directing career. It does, after all, involve a launch pad.

Milk's video for *Touch The Sky* is like a movie, with touches of a vintage TV special. It's a suitably impressive production for a track that, bedded by a horn-heavy sample from Curtis Mayfield's *Move On Up*, the director describes as "bombastic". The song deserves nothing less and Milk serves up humour, sex, performance and even a spot of social and cultural history in this five-star entertainment.

It's set in 1972, and Kanye is "Evel Kanyevel", the world's greatest stuntman, arriving at the scene of his next and greatest challenge yet - to traverse the Grand Canyon on a rocket-powered motorbike. And his girlfriend is Pamela Anderson. The video encapsulates the lead-up to the event and the TV spectacular around it - including interviews, commercials, and a sub-plot of an ex-girlfriend and her friend outraged by our hero dating a white woman, which makes for a hilarious interlude in the middle.

Then we have the big climax where Kanye executes the stunt - but not before Pam rushes to his side for a sizzling clinch. Does he make it? The ending is in fact, perhaps, the most extraordinary part of the video. But it also confirms its Seventies credentials, which the director has passed off beautifully.

Certainly nothing in this clip suggests it was made in conditions that at moments were close to chaotic. But, between its green lighting and first delivery on the night of the Grammys, the job

took less than three weeks.

"That's retarded for a video of this size," Milk admits. As a result it was a massively pressured and often crisis-prone production.

"This was a super rush job mainly because we batted around so many ideas for so long," explains Milk. "We've been talking about this since the album was being recorded. This was the eighth or ninth idea that was raised." He has built a special relationship with West this past two years following the *All Falls Down* video, and now, rather than write a treatment first, he'll verbally explain his idea to West.

The first concept that gained favour was another Seventies-set idea - reflecting the vintage of the Mayfield sample - which cast West in a recreation of acclaimed documentary *When We Were Kings* - the Ali-Foreman Rumble In The Jungle. However, Milk says that once budgeted "it proved exorbitantly more expensive than anyone was willing to pay for".

Another idea was eventually incorporated into the final video - the cloudscape performance. As a stand-alone concept, West was enthusiastic, but Milk was not, and it was dropped. The only problem was that time pressures were becoming acute.

"So I went back to all my books," says Milk, referring to his portfolio of stored music video ideas, "And I came up with 'Evel Kanyevel'. It's rare that an old



Unexpected finale: viewers might be surprised how the spectacular stunt concludes

Rocket man: 'Evel Kanyevel' scopes the Grand Canyon, over which he is about to fly



KANYE WEST
PRODUCTION:
Radical Media;
director: Chris Milk;
producer: Janice
Biggs; production
manager: David
Camera; 1st AD:
Todd Lent; DP:
Danny Hiele;

production designer:
Steve Rudy;
wardrobe: Charlene
Roxborough; sfx:
Jack; location: Grand
Canyon, Arizona
POST: telecine: Dave
Hussey at Company
3; offline editor:
Livio Sanchez at The

Whitehouse; online:
Jack
COMMISSIONER:
Margo Wainwright at
Def Jam

treatment lines up so well, but here it fitted the lyrics completely: 'The day I die, I touch the sky.' It was such a no-brainer. And Kanye was like: 'great, we can shoot this weekend.'"

In fact, West was so keen to get the production started he was initially prepared to shoot the video in Los Angeles. "My position was that nothing in LA looks like the Grand Canyon," notes Milk. "I finally put my foot down. I wasn't shooting this on green-screen." However, the director admits that his adamant position was almost to rebound on him disastrously.

For a start, actually filming at the Grand Canyon is hugely difficult: permission from the US Government is necessary for filming of any kind. That is, apart from one small part of the Canyon that is part of an Indian reservation - and where you just have to stump up the fee. However, as this site was extremely remote it created huge logistical problems. "It was two and a half hours from Vegas, and the last hour was down the most

miserable dirt road in America," recalls Milk. "Getting equipment there was nearly impossible."

It was a three-day shoot and the first day was set aside mainly for pick-up shots, including the opening sequence where Kanye and Pam's limo is storming through the desert, and West's performance. This itself took place on a 12-foot high scaffolding containing a moving conveyor belt which the director describes as "the most dangerous rig you've ever seen. Any other artist would have said: 'are you kidding me?'". Steam was blown through the scaffolding for the cloud effect, but the water-truck needed to create the clouds didn't show up the first day. Consequently the three-day shoot overran.

Then Milk discovered that he could not place the bike-rocket - built by production designer Steve Rudy to scale of something similar ridden by Evel Knievel over Snake River in the Seventies - on the secluded part of the Canyon he wanted to. "So my boards were completely upside down. I'd have to rewrite during the shoot. I was

fucked. I was convinced I was through as a director."

However, instead of returning to a hotel two hours away, he stayed at the location that first night in the production camper and sorted out his boards. "It was the best decision I made because four hours of travel would've driven me insane. I laid out my boards and prayed to the Indian gods to show mercy on me."

Evidently something worked: the production got back on track; most importantly his leading lady showed. "When I came up with the idea I said we needed a Farrah Fawcett-like girl, and Kanye said, 'we gotta get Pam', so naturally I agreed," says the director. West and Pamela Anderson had met on his recent *Rolling Stone* cover shoot, shot by her close friend David LaChapelle.

"She was a total pro," says Milk "It was freezing and she was by far wearing the least clothes, but there was no star attitude at all. We owe her a huge debt."

Meanwhile, Pam's love rival is played by Nia Long - who is mentioned in the track and therefore "the obvious choice for for the old girlfriend" - and her tall friend by Tracy Ross, daughter of Diana.

As for the ending - where a patently unrealistic model falls into the ravine as Kanye fails his attempt, Milk admits that it has proved controversial, but he defends it stoutly. "People say 'you're still working on that end shot, right?' So I've gone back and made it more obvious, more like a model. Because it's a Seventies movie, they're not going to use a real thing are they? They'd use a model."

"As for him crashing and not making it, well, he has to crash and die, because it's a post-mortem performance - he's in the clouds. There was never going to be a happy ending. It's just the song is so big you had to have the big show. But finally, it's about failure."

The big question is: what does Evel Knievel make of it?

David Knight