



A National production: Casey Reas offers inside view of videos for top alt-rock band



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Reas on his work with the National: "I think of each video as creating a visual world that complements the music."

The National recently released its seventh album, "Sleep Well Beast," and the alt-rock band, which in recent years has sold out Los Angeles' Wilmett and Greek Theatre, is scheduled to perform at the Hollywood Bowl on Oct. 11. The new album has earned wide critical praise ("an emotional battlefield, beautifully drawn, familiar and true," said Rolling Stone), and yielded the Grammy-nominated band's first-ever No. 1 song on the adult alternative charts.

The record's rollout also had a key UCLA connection: Four of the songs were accompanied by videos directed by Casey Reas, professor of design media arts in the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture. Reas is a co-creator of an open-source programming language called Processing, which is used in the visual arts. His work has been exhibited in art galleries and projected onto buildings around the world.

The seeds of his collaboration with the National were planted in the early 1990s: Reas met bassist Scott Devendorf and singer Matt Berninger, who would later become two-fifths of the National, when they all were graphic design students at the University of Cincinnati, and he even played drums in a band with them. Although he has worked frequently with music and musicians over the years — his work served as a theme for stage design on a tour by the band Yeasayer — the National videos were Reas' largest music-related collaboration so far.

In an email interview, Reas offered insights about the vision behind the new work and the mix of art and technology he used to give the videos their distinctive look.

When did you work on the videos, and how long did they take to produce?

I started work on "The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness" at the start of May. That video was made in five days and nights. The other videos took between two and six weeks each.



The videos have a unifying feel but also some distinct visual differences. Did you have one overriding vision for them, or view them more as individual pieces?

I think about them as a group of four related videos, but each is an outlier in some ways. “Carin at the Liquor Store” is less like the others, but I think of it as a part of the group and I think it’s correct for the song. The barn [where the band recorded most of the album] is the primary image for Sleep Well Beast and it’s also the focus of the first video, “The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness.” “Guilty Party” begins and ends with the barn and the countryside in the middle of the video is also from the same location. “Day I Die” is similar to “Guilty Party” visually — they share much of the same code — but it is entirely different in rhythm and tone.

Also, the video for “The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness” is about the drums. “Day I Die” follows the guitars. “Guilty Party” is the language and background sounds. “Carin at the Liquor Store” is the piano and Matt’s presence, as well as the guitar solo.



How much back-and-forth did you have with the band before each video was finished?

The process was different for each one. In general, I like to collaborate and I want the best ideas to

come through. I want to know what other people think. I'm open to discussion and unexpected ideas. Specifically, I have a deep trust for members of the National.

The one constant for each video was a time for exploration where I would disappear for a few days or weeks. I would then post fragments of video, usually without sound, to a private server and ask for the band to watch and to comment. After one or two rounds of that, I would disappear again and more or less finish the video, before sending it around again.

To what extent do you consider fans' potential reactions to the work?

To be honest, I was worried about the blue video effect in "Carin at the Liquor Store." It was correct for me, but I was concerned for the band. I was, thankfully, encouraged to move forward with it. Outside of that, the audience wasn't on my mind. I was making the videos for myself and for the band, in direct response to the music. I think of each video as creating a visual world that complements the music. I think each song is a world of its own, and it's the position of the director to respond to that, first and foremost.



Can you share any inside stories about how any of the videos were shot?

"Day I Die" includes everyone involved with the band on tour. Because it was photographed by Graham MacIndoe over two days and there are 5,000 photos in the video, an individual frame sometimes tells its own story about personal dynamics or events of the day. It's wonderful to go through, frame by frame, to catch a glimpse of someone in one frame who's gone the next, or of two people lingering at the front of the stage. I think this video means something different to the band than the others; it's their entire working life on tour for all to see.

You're known for blending art and technology in innovative ways. What are some examples of how you brought that to the table in these videos?

The flickering grid in "The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness" was derived from a series of works that I've been creating for years, the "Signal to Noise" series.

The technique in "Guilty Party" is called "frame differencing." It's an algorithm that compares two

images and only shows the “difference” between them. In comparing two images, pixels that are the same aren’t visible and pixels that are different are shown as gray values. This is done thousands of times, on each pair of images within a longer video. The same technique is also the base for “Day I Die,” but for that video, I allow the frames to overlay over time to see multiple images at the same time, with older images fading into the background. Each video finds itself through tuning and modifying these techniques intuitively in relation to the music. They cook a long time, at low temperatures.

