

“Featuring Music From”: Song, Sound, and Remix

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“Everyday Life: The Viral Musical”:

From surprising outbursts of song and dance in public spaces to the repurposing of found sound into dance remixes and independently-produced protest songs, the presence of musical energies across the field of viral video is remarkable in its diversity. And of course, even industry-produced music videos, once a boon to basic cable subscription, are increasingly being territorialized as online phenomena, along with their attendant clusters of user-made homages, parodies, and responses. Within our discussion of the role of song, sound, and remix in the contemporary mediascape, I’d like to call attention to some of these viral phenomena and how musicality, most often in conjunction with comedy, is thriving as a mode of expression and, often, critique.

To help give us a somewhat discrete and recent point of reference here, I offer the musical comedy act The Gregory Brothers. Following an initial step into the viral spotlight using Auto-Tune software to musicalize spoken elements of the 2008 US Vice-Presidential Debate ([VP Debate in Song and Dance](#)), Michael Gregory recruited his two brothers Andrew and Evan along with Evan’s wife Sarah to form The Gregory Brothers. The group launched [Auto-Tune the News](#) in 2009 as an online series taking television news coverage and other viral videos as fodder for their satirically remixed and reconfigured takes on current events and Internet culture. By treating spoken voice samples with Auto-Tune and mixing them with contemporary hip-hop production elements, *Auto-Tune the News* casts political and news media rhetoric into unique relief, while likely attracting attention to news stories for some audience members who may not otherwise engage with them.

Maintaining popularity over the course of 2009 to the present, the summer of 2010 has seen The Gregory Brothers rising even further in profile with two more overtly song-oriented productions, [“Double Rainbow Song”](#) and [“Bed Intruder Song.”](#) Both use Internet memes as their basis: the former a viral clip of a bewildered man, Paul Vasquez (aka Hungry Bear), videoing and narrating a double rainbow just beyond his backyard and the latter a local news clip (which was already spreading virally online) of Antoine Dodson, a resident of a Huntsville, AL, housing project, expressing emphatically his mix of anger and resolve towards an intruder who had attempted to sexually assault his sister. In each case, the viral songs have succeeded in attracting greater attention than the initially non-musical clips upon which they are based, and each has been successful commercially as digital downloads through iTunes. With the Brothers sharing revenue with the unintentional singers, they are effectively helping Dodson and Vasquez monetize their Internet celebrity in short order. In addition, both songs have become popular objects for some surprisingly earnest cover versions, getting treatments by performers ranging from solo bedroom webcam singers to at least [one full university marching band](#). However, with the injection of musical comedy in these situations, especially with “Bed Intruder Song” and its star Antoine Dodson, there is a fine line being tread between uplifting their muses and denigrating them.

What might such mobilizations of the logics of popular music in traditionally non-musical aspects of everyday life mean for music as a mode of communication for news satire and general engagement with popular culture? Especially with “Double Rainbow Song” and “Bed Intruder Song,” these clips are becoming hits in their own right, finding circulation not only online but gaining airplay on radio too. With the Brothers and other inventive musicians making everyday life into bits of musical comedy, will Auto-Tuning and other forms of effects continue expanding as tools for commenting on the state of our culture? And what of the power differentials at play even with such seemingly amateur productions? As of August 2010, the Brothers have announced that they have been contracted by Viacom to produce a pilot for Comedy Central, and though, they have not yet fully moved to the ranks of mainstream media players, such a fate now seems quite possible. What are the implications of using the chronicling of an attempted criminal attack and the flamboyantly aggressive outburst of one of its potential victims as grist for their musical mill?