

# JEAN-BAPTISTE MONDINO: SLAVE TO VIDEO CHIC

**I**N IN FRANCE, JEAN-BAPTISTE MONDINO IS A STAR, a title hard-earned in that nation of philosopher-politicians and existentialist fashion designers. As a photographer, he helped shape our memories of the 1980s through his work for British style bibles *The Face* and *i.D.*, and his videoclips created a genre that is often described as ‘Mondino-esque’ – sexy, chic, stylish, irreverent.

In reaction to the media hype about him in the European press, Mondino has proven an elusive interviewee in the past, but recently I spoke to him in his new Paris headquarters, Bandits Productions. Mondino was in a reflective mood, still mulling over his decision to decline promises of even greater fame and fortune in the States for the preservation of his artistic soul and integrity back in Europe. He was quietly pleased at his escape from the L.A. big bucks men, and elated at the opportunity to reinvent himself once more, a new Mondino for a new decade.

Invention and change are the hallmarks of this photographer/director. Mondino began life as the quintessential outsider, son of Italian immigrants to the Parisian suburbs, who dropped out of school to find the promised land of his first love, music.

‘I had a real complex about coming from the suburbs,’ recalls Mondino, ‘a lack of education and culture, the difference in my speech. All I had was Jimi Hendrix and Mick Jagger. But when I was 20 I got lucky. I travelled to London, worked in restaurants and deejayed in nightclubs.’

‘Around then the punk thing was happening, I knew the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren. S&M imagery was important for me too. Everything is connected: music, fashion and images. I was there for three years, and when I returned to Paris it was the beginning of Jean-Paul Gaultier and local bands influenced by British music.’

Luck stepped in when Mondino found a job as art assistant in a Paris advertising agency, rising to art director after two years. Mondino’s visual education began with eye-

opening exposure to the work of illustrious photographers such as Helmut Newton and David Bailey, within a now near defunct French advertising tradition once known for its wit, charm and style.

Boredom set in after three years, so Mondino returned to his roots, hung out with musicians and art-directed their album covers. 'Finally, one day, because the photographer I was working with had an accident, I took the cover shot myself. I never wanted to be a photographer. I always thought it would be impossible, but it worked quite well,' he explains. Another shoot followed, then another, then it snowballed as every young French artiste demanded his name on their album cover.

'My fame came by association,' says Mondino, 'with the people I was photographing. But it took away the fear, the complexes of my background. I am not a very good photographer on top of that, I am not a technical photographer, but for me music has always been the starting point.' Although modesty makes him attribute his success to luck alone, it is more true to ascribe it to his uncanny ability to forecast the Zeitgeist, then press home the advantage, before anyone else sees it.

Often Mondino's opportunities came from the strangest quarters. His directing career took off in America with a videoclip for an almost forgotten, 1970s country rock hero on the comeback trail, Don Henley of The Eagles. The song, *Boys Of Summer*, was a global smash hit and the video won five MTV awards. More importantly, Mondino proved himself to be one of the very few photographers who truly understands the medium of the moving image, when most fall victim to the fatal mistake of just stringing together a bunch of still frames.

Mondino humbly sums up his approach to directing: 'The song is the bones of the video. I try to create a space as big as the song, and then match up the mood and the imagery.' Which is exactly what he did with the notorious (and banned by MTV) video for Madonna's *Justify My Love*.

In a sixth floor suite of the Hôtel Monceau Royale in Paris, Mondino locked himself up for two days and one long, long night with Madonna, her then boyfriend Tony Ward, model Amanda Cazelet and a skeleton lighting crew to make the sexiest pop video of his career.

Mondino's style is liable to change radically in response to the artist and the song. His video for Neneh Cherry's *Manchild* was filmed in a studio set, using swaying hypnotic camerawork, while by way of contrast *Open Your Heart*, also

for Madonna, featured hard, rapid cutting, snappy action and rich, almost acid colouration. With a collection of video credits that includes artists as diverse as Brian Ferry (*Slave To Love*), Sting (*Russians*), David Bowie (*Never Let You Down*), Prince (*I Wish U Heaven*), Neneh Cherry (*I've Got You Under My Skin*), and Vanessa Paradis (*Tandem*), each with a distinctly different visual style, Mondino distinguishes himself from the majority of other photographers-turned-directors.

Rather than simply repeating the same stylistic tricks as his still shots, the Mondino look has evolved from close attention to his obsessions. When pressed on them he lists: 'the beauty of people, the sexiness of things, a mixture of men and women, black and white, and something bigger than life, almost spiritual in a way', which he guesses may be a product of his Italian Catholic background, of being 'a bad boy who believes in God.'

His recent marriage and the birth of his first child have caused Mondino to compare his life and work in the 90s to what it was in the 80s. 'The 80s were all about the younger generation taking power,' he admits. 'It was all nightclubbing, sex and fashion. Visual artists, not writers, became the culture heroes. The United Colours Of Benetton campaign was typical: visual flash. And my work too, it was all shiny, glitter, surface, but honest, beautiful and graphic. All of my work then was in the studio.'

Mondino is being just a touch too disparaging of his work throughout the decade of greed. His collaborations with the late Australian fashion stylist Ray Petri, under the blanket name 'Buffalo' for *The Face* and *i.D.*, created a look that would outlast the decade and whose legacy is apparent in the clean-cut, sexy graphic imagery of this decade. Mondino now works with another Buffalo era alumnus who shares his vision, Judy Blame, famous in his own right as a London-based jewellery designer.

Now, in the 90s, Mondino feels that 'the party is over. This decade demands you stop dreaming and get realistic. Reality will show through, no more obsession with the surface, It's a rough decade. My book has changed too. It's still graphic but I am trying not to use hair and makeup artists, I'm now working in the street. I need to suffer a little bit. It's good for me, I need that, it shouldn't be too easy.'

Mondino's darker mood is reflected in his current choice of music: 'I like the grunge sound, the Seattle sound, like Nirvana and Soundgarden. The important thing now is the human voice, and the attitude is political.'

Leaving the promise of America has not meant saying goodbye to large budgets and high fees. Mondino still works for advertising clients like Yves Saint Laurent and Calvin Klein on major tv commercials, as well as the more familiar videoclips and editorial photography. And, 'because there is no longer the struggle to pay the rent', Mondino can afford to be driven by the project, not the money. He has always been offered all sorts of commissions, books and exhibitions, so he has set up Bandits Productions to handle them and to pass on projects to younger photographers and directors.

He is even considering coming to Australia, to search amongst the Aborigines for evidence of the Mondino hallmarks: 'spirituality allied with sexuality, a search for the essence, a little piece of the soul.'