

Shock And Awe: How Far Is Too Far?

From Miley To Beyonce, Pop Stars Are Pushing Limits Of Taste

BY MIKAEL WOOD
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LOS ANGELES — The record-industry score-keepers at Nielsen SoundScan recently confirmed something many music fans had probably already assumed: Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" — the cheeky disco-funk jam with the controversial, nudity-enhanced video — was the biggest-selling single of 2013, with 6.5 million copies sold.

The tune, nominated for record of the year at this month's Grammy Awards, spent 12 straight weeks atop *Billboard's* Hot 100, longer than any other song last year; that video, meanwhile, has racked up nearly 300 million views on YouTube.

However singular its domination, though, "Blurred Lines" was just one of a number of hits that reflected the return of raunch to pop music after several years in which propriety was a more dependable pose.

In 2012, you couldn't turn on the radio without hearing Carly Rae Jepsen's squeaky-clean "Call Me Maybe" or "We Are Young" by the cuddly New York trio Fun.

Adele topped album sales that year and the year prior with her old-fashioned "21." And let's not forget — or maybe let's do — the self-consciously virtuosic folk-rock revival that made mainstream stars of Mumford & Sons and the Lumineers.

By comparison, 2013 came in like a wrecking ball, to quote the year's most important vulgarian, Miley Cyrus, who set off a national debate about the boundaries of taste with her thrillingly lewd appearance alongside Thicke (and a giant foam finger) on the MTV Video Music Awards.

Pop always circles back to sex; it's low-hanging fruit ripe for the picking when innovation runs short, the economy tanks or a gen-

eration of kiddie-culture stars come of age.

But for listeners who count on artists to push limits, last year's wave of obscenity felt like a course correction after the conservatism of the early 2010s.

Cyrus pushed plenty. In wake of the VMAs, she extended the naughty streak with the clip for her chart-topping power ballad "Wrecking Ball" — it depicts a naked Cyrus astride just such an implement of destruction — and her album "Bangerz," on which the former Disney Channel star raps slyly about replacing a man with a battery pack.

For Cyrus, 21, the twerking and tongue-wagging served as a rupture with her tween-idol past.

Ditto Justin Bieber, who spent much of the year sketching a map of grown-up misbehavior, with unsavory incidents involving a mop bucket, a Brazilian brothel and a woman reported to be a porn star.

Yet as unified as they seemed in their determination to titillate, Miley and her peers each had their own agendas.

With "Blurred Lines" (and other off-color songs from Thicke's album of the same name), the 36-year-old's goal was the exact opposite of Cyrus'. He was using sex to age himself down and shake off the harmless adult-contemporary vibe he'd accrued thanks to his ultra-sensitive 2007 hit "Lost Without U."

You got the same feeling from Bruno Mars' "Gorilla" and its video, which starred Freida Pinto as a tequila-pouring pole dancer. Here was the kindly balladeer of "Just the Way You Are" in a racy rebranding effort.

More pointed bawdiness came from Kanye West, whose album "Yeezus" felt at times like an explosion of psycho-sexual politics, and Lady Gaga, who for her song "Do What U Want" enlisted R. Kelly for a little bump 'n' grind at the intersection of desire and celebrity.



Singer Miley Cyrus is shown performing at Hot 99.5's Jingle Ball at the Verizon Center in Washington last month.

OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT

Kelly lent his imprimatur to several other stars in 2013, including Bieber (in the steamy "PYD") and Mars (in an even more lascivious remix of "Gorilla"). The veteran R&B star put out his own album too, "Black Panties," which after a string of decorous retro-soul discs heralded his re-embrace of the kind of outsized bedroom boast with which he'd made his name.

"Tonight," he sang, "you're lying with a sex genius."

And then, perhaps boldest of all, there was Beyonce, who shocked the world in December first by re-

leasing a self-titled album on iTunes with no advance warning, then by peppering the record with far more sex talk — much of it unprintable here — than she'd previously given us reason to expect.

The superstar's aim seemed to be providing fans with a glimpse into her tightly guarded private life. One highlight of her album is "Drunk in Love," a bass-heavy duet with her husband, Jay Z, about the liberating joy of married sex.

Counter-examples, of course, pointed toward other themes. Eminem scored the year's second-

biggest-selling album with "The Marshall Mathers LP 2," where the closest thing to a sex song is "Love Game," a hateful screed against an unfaithful ex.

And Lorde and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis both had huge hits with songs about economic woes. In "Royals," Lorde described not being able to relate to visions of "gold teeth, Grey Goose, tripping in the bathroom"; the latter's "Thrift Shop" is about finding a mink coat for 99 cents.

But perhaps that class consciousness was part of what fueled the ribaldry that otherwise flourished. Even the most adventurous evening in, after all, comes cheaper than a night on the town.

"It's just one of those songs that loosens people up," Pharrell told me over the summer, referring to "Blurred Lines," which he co-wrote and produced. "With everybody so anxious about everything going on in the world, people need something to help them be happy again."

In an increasingly oversaturated media environment — one in which Cyrus' every move makes Google News — we also need something to hold our attention.

That might be how we ended up with "Timber," which after four weeks at No. 2 is shaping up as one of 2014's first inescapable hits. An ostensibly party-starting duet between Pitbull and Kesha, the song seems at first like a product of the same mind-set that gave us "Blurred Lines" and "Wrecking Ball."

"I have 'em like Miley Cyrus," Pitbull brags over a kind of electro-hoedown groove. "Clothes off, twerking in their bras and thongs."

Unlike last year's durable pop erotica, though, "Timber" wears out its welcome as soon as you realize that this isn't a song about the excitement of being turned on — it's about utilizing a film's turn-of-moment to manufacture excitement.

Coupled with recent signs of economic improvement, it could be bad enough to send us tumbling back into wholesomeness.

Mikael Wood: mikael.wood@latimes.com

Motion Picture Academy To Honor Film Lab Employees

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The motion picture academy is honoring employees of film laboratories with an honorary Oscar.

The move by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences comes at a time when the digital medium is overtaking film. It marks the first time the organization is collectively recognizing a group of individuals with an Academy Award of Merit.

The motion picture academy said Wednesday that this year's other Scientific and Technical Awards recipients will include visual effects supervisor and director of photography Peter W. Anderson and distribution executive Charles "Tad" Marburg.

Anderson, whose credits include "Cocoon" and "The Hunt for Red October," will receive the Gordon E. Sawyer Award for technological contributions that have brought credit to the industry, while Marburg will receive the John A. Bonner Medal of Commendation for outstanding service and dedication in upholding the high standards of the academy.

The academy will honor 19 scientific and technical achievements in total at its annual Scientific and Technical Awards on Feb. 15.

Portions of the Scientific and Technical Awards presentations will be included in the Academy Awards broadcast on March 2.

Birds

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The brochure includes a trail map and a checklist of birds commonly seen in the area.

"We get a good variety of birds out there every year," Dietrich said. "You just have to get to the right spot to find them. I think we've done a good job of choosing those areas, so if you follow the trail, you should see them."

Birds featured on the checklist include perching birds (such as Black-Capped Chickadees and Northern Cardinals), tree-clinging birds (such as White-breasted Nuthatches and Downy Woodpeckers), hawk-like birds (such as Bald Eagles and American Kestrels) and a variety of waterfowl.

"You can do some of the birding from your car, but if you do a little walking along with driving, you should be able to find 15 or 20 species of birds along there," Dietrich said.

To maximize an individual's birding experience, the Natural History Museum offers the following tips:

- Familiarize yourself with the various types of birds you will see so you can identify the different species;

- Keep your binoculars out at all times. Birds may disappear before you can get the binoculars out of their case. Also, use the neck strap on the binoculars to avoid dropping or damaging them;

- When you see a bird, don't look down at your binoculars. Keep watching

the bird and raise the binoculars to your eyes, then quickly adjust the focusing wheel to get a sharp image. This will take practice, but it will help you to avoid missing birds;

- Think like a hunter and stalk the birds carefully. Be slow and patient, and avoid sudden movement. Don't wear bright clothing or materials that make a loud rustling sound. Try to avoid talking and whispering loudly when birds are near;

- Add to your experience by taking notes and drawing sketches of the birds. Add details about when and where you saw the bird, how many there were, any interesting behavior, colors and patterns and the weather.

Park visitors are reminded that a park entrance license is required year-round for all vehicles entering the park and may be purchased at the self-pay station at the entrance booth if the park office is closed.

Dietrich added that he is excited that the park officials are promoting birding, and he hopes people take advantage of the opportunity.

"The birds are always out there, and it's an activity that has a lot of interest," he said. "And it's always good to get out in the winter to get some fresh air, even if it's a little cold."

For more information, contact Lewis & Clark Recreation Area at 605-668-2985.

You can follow Derek Bartos on Twitter at twitter.com/d_bartos/. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net/.

Movie Wasteland Of Winter Does Have Some Intriguing Film Entries

BY MICHAEL PHILLIPS

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How crowded was December at the movies? Crowded enough to push George Clooney and "The Monuments Men" into an early 2014 release. And that's good! That's good. Because a little quality to go with our winter movie diversions would be good.

Here are 10 coming in the next three months. And here's hoping they're all equally brilliant. (Dates are tentative and very much subject to change.)

- **"Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit,"** Jan. 17. What becomes a reboot most? It helps to have the piercing eyes and attendant, highly imposing eyebrows of Chris Pine. The "Star Trek" headline stars as the CIA's intel whiz and man of action, created by Tom Clancy, played in earlier films by Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford and Ben Affleck. Kenneth Branagh directs this prequel-y story of a Russian terrorist attempt to destroy the U.S. economy, and our man Jack's valiant efforts to show these terrorists who's boss.

- **"Ride Along,"** Jan. 17. Ice Cube and Kevin Hart co-star in director Tim Story's action comedy, set in Atlanta, about a cop, his security-guard brother-in-law, and an eventual 24-hour patrol. A mismatched law enforcement duo: If this thing's a hit, I wonder if that concept will catch on?

- **"Labor Day,"** Jan. 31. Adapted from Joyce Maynard's novel, director Jason Reitman's drama stars Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin. She's a lonely single mom; he's a dangerous yet exciting escaped convict. Sparks fly; secrets are revealed; hard truths are learned by all. We'll see what the actors can do with it.

- **"The Lego Movie,"** Feb. 7. Finally, all those stray, nubby, tiny pieces of plastic get their own animated film. From the folks behind "Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs," which is promising. Voice cast includes Chris Pratt, Elizabeth Banks, Will Arnett and Morgan Freeman, also promising.

- **"The Monuments Men,"** Feb. 7. A ridiculously crowded December release calendar kicked director and star George Clooney's World War II adventure into an early 2014 launch, but you know what? I'm glad. A little breathing room. A sterling cast: In this true-life tale of a platoon tasked with stealing back precious works of art from Nazi thieves, Clooney co-stars with Matt Damon, Bill Murray, Cate Blanchett and Jean Dujardin.

- **"Pompeii,"** Feb. 21. From energetic schlockmeister Paul W.S. Anderson comes this no-doubt historically accurate action picture about an ex-slave gladiator (Kit Harington) racing against time, fate and the elements in a mission to save the leading lady and avoid the wrath of Mt. Vesuvius. Also starring

Emily Browning and Carrie-Anne Moss.

- **"The Wind Rises,"** Feb. 21. In limited release and festival action last year, animation genius Hayao Miyazaki's plaintive portrait of Jiro Horikoshi, designer of World War II Japanese fighter planes, landed on several end-of-year "best" lists. Each new Miyazaki film is special; this one, we hear, is more special than most.

- **"The Grand Budapest Hotel,"** March 7. Wes Anderson's follow-up to "Moonrise Kingdom" is a between-the-wars period piece with a mouth-watering cast of sly farceurs. Among them: Ralph Fiennes as the title hotel's concierge. Also starring Saoirse Ronan, Bill Murray, Tilda Swinton, Jude Law, Edward Norton, Mathieu Almaric, Jeff Goldblum ... I mean, come on. That's a lotta droll.

- **"Muppets Most Wanted,"** March 21. Though audiences were split on the recent Muppets reboot's sardonic streak, the box office results were strong, and a sequel was inevitable. This time the gang gets mixed up in a Euro-jewel heist. The genuinely funny human cast (depending on material, of course) includes Tina Fey, Ty Burrell, Ricky Gervais, Tom Hiddleston and Stanley Tucci.

- **"Divergent,"** March 21. The extraordinarily good Shailene Woodley of "The Descendants" and "The Spectacular Now" stars in this futuristic thriller, shot in Chicago by director Neil Burger. Kate Winslet co-stars.

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