



FILM JOCKEY

Combining live performance with old film gets Julie Meitz back to her roots. By Ross Orr

Julie Meitz first picked up a Super 8 camera as a teenager, and has worked with experimental film, video, and multimedia installations ever since. Lately she's been mixing video in live performance, for music shows and other events in the Detroit area.

For VJing, she lugs along a Mini-ITX PC, stuffed with 30 gigs of source clips — her own original footage, found film, or processed feature-film shots. She collages and layers these sequences on the fly.

But every once in a while, Meitz likes to get back to her roots and do some old-skool “FJing,” her term for live mixing of multiple 16mm film projectors.

To prepare a film mix to accompany live music, she starts by pulling reels from her five shelves of salvaged educational films and obscure theatrical releases, looking for thematically related clips. The process is not click-and-drag easy: previewing footage and experimenting with combinations can take Meitz a month of preparation for a 45-minute set.

She chooses carefully which of her six balky vintage projectors is up to the strains of performance. One favorite is an old Lafayette Analyzer — originally sold to scientists and sports coaches — designed to jog film forwards and backwards, and instantly change speeds. This lets her “scratch” with film clips much as a DJ can with vinyl.

Meitz preassembles one reel and lets it run continuously (including segments of black leader, to leave gaps for other projections). She overlays more footage alongside or superimposed onto this, swiveling her projectors on lazy Susans as needed.

And effects processing? Completely manual, low-tech, and homemade. Meitz swaps in and out colored gels, or a spinning multicolored filter wheel made from an old film reel. She hand-cranks a fan blade in front of one lens, giving a beautiful strobe effect.

In performance, she is a blur of movement, darting around her clattering setup to change filters, swap reels, and flip levers. The resulting collage can be funny, evocative, quirky, and magical.

Getting the timing of a performance to work can be tense, even using a prepared cue sheet. And there's a constant risk of bulbs burning out, or a show-stopping film jam. Meitz ended a recent performance by giving all her projectors grateful kisses, for making it through the show with only one minor breakdown. She sometimes wonders if the stress is worth it.

But Meitz still delights in the look and feel of projected film. And audiences, jaded with gee-whiz CGI effects, seem to appreciate her efforts to keep it reel.

Ross Orr keeps the analog alive in Ann Arbor, Mich.