

Dancers in the Crowd Bring Back 'Thriller'

Doreen Carvajal



A seemingly impromptu number in Chinatown in London.

FROM their seats on the rumbling London Underground, a group of stony-faced passengers rose at random and burst into the jerky slide kick of a zombie dance before melting away without a word.

The response of British passengers — stiff gazes, nervous silence and tepid applause — was, naturally, videotaped and posted online, and it quickly spun off into zombie dance sequels at the central Copenhagen train station, in Chinatown in London and on the street outside the Sydney Opera House.

By this week, the videos had together been viewed more than a million times, to the pleasure of the music company Sony BMG, which staged the scenes to promote the 25th anniversary of "Thriller," the Michael Jackson album that featured the zombie dance in a graveyard video.

A commemorative "Thriller" album, which contains original music and remixes with Kanye West and Fergie, is faring better in Europe and Asia than in the United States. In France, it has been the top-selling album for the last three weeks.

Sony BMG undertook the campaign in part because of some major hurdles to a traditional approach. Mr. Jackson is not only somewhat tarnished, but also reclusive. The solution was an unconventional strategy that has attracted news coverage as well as controversy over when a soft corporate sell should be disclosed.

In Britain, Sony BMG executives videotaped professional dancers in everyday settings — like the Tube and a Tesco supermarket. The results had a gritty street reality that mirrored amateur tributes like the video made in a Filipino prison, where more than a 1,000 orange-suited inmates performed "Thriller" as their daily exercise. That clip has been viewed more 11 million times on YouTube, about twice as many times as Mr. Jackson's original version on that site.

"It's really guerrilla marketing," said Roger Menz, vice president for international strategic marketing for Sony BMG. "You go in, do your thing and leave as fast as you can. There was never any intention to hand out leaflets and say 'Thriller' is coming out again. It's just bringing 'Thriller' back in the minds of people, but without the hard sell."

But critics remain wary of the hazy line between guerrilla and "shill" marketing, an industry term for pitches whose source is not disclosed.

Emmanuel Vivier, the managing director of Vanksen Group, a communications agency in Luxembourg that specializes in viral marketing, said that Sony BMG had made it clear in its

YouTube posts that the video from the London Tube was part of a contest in connection with the re-release of "Thriller."

In Copenhagen, professional dancers made a surprise appearance in the middle of a busy train terminal, milling among other passengers in bulky winter coats and knit hats. When the first notes of "Thriller" echoed through the station, the dancers merged toward each other, jerking into zombie mode, right down to Mr. Jackson's signature hip grinding moves. When the dance finished, they sauntered away wordlessly, leaving behind a space in the crowd and flustered passengers who seemed frozen in place.

Their dance was featured on national Danish television and posted on YouTube. Fritz Wehner, a dance teacher who organized the group of about a dozen dancers, said he wanted to do it as a tribute and contacted Sony BMG, which supported the group.

"It's so funny to watch because it's another way of doing a show," said Mr. Wehner, who compared this approach to "public freezes" that have taken place in Trafalgar Square in London and in Grand Central Terminal in New York. "And people are surprised, of course, and you get a crowd pretty fast."

The effort is part of the continuing quest to reach consumers without turning them off. Sony BMG executives said the strategy was successful with younger fans, a factor in the sales of "Thriller." "It's all about engaging the consumers," said John Ingrassia, the Sony BMG commercial music group president.

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