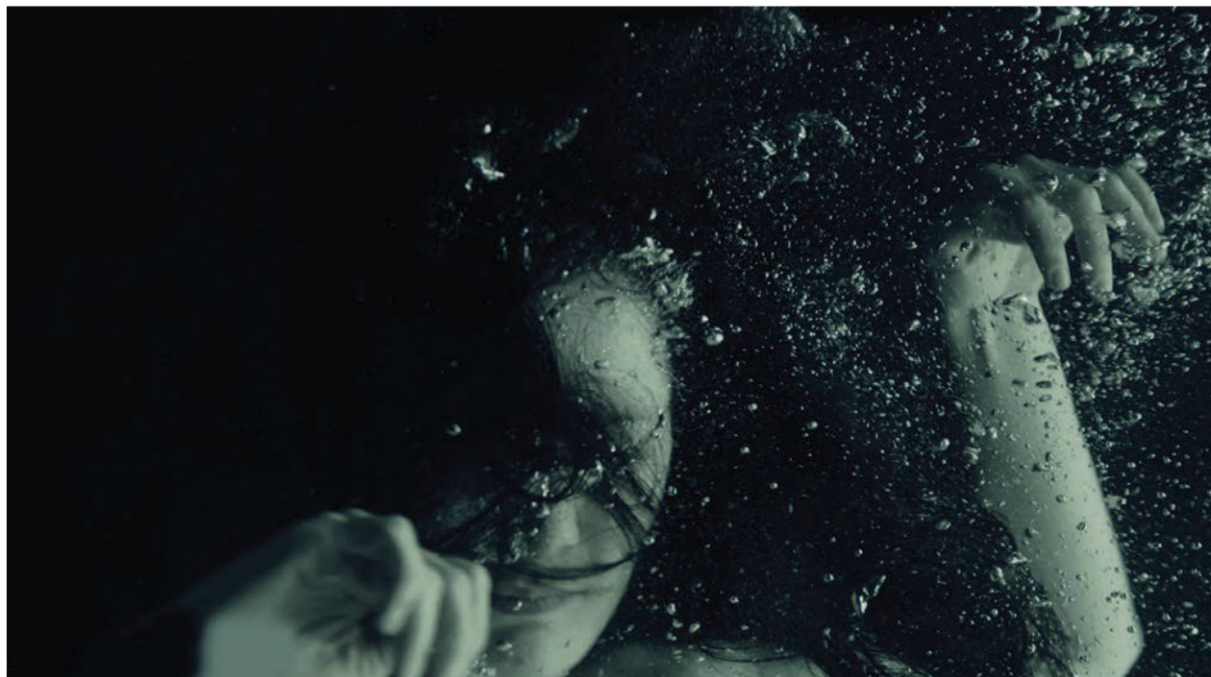


# Short Takes



Singer Aleksa Palladino of Exitmusic hits the water in the video for "White Noise."

## Diving Toward Self-Discovery

By Jennifer Wolfe

The video for Exitmusic's "White Noise," directed by Monica Perez and shot by James Laxton, is a strong performance-driven piece that explores the song's themes of inner struggle and self-realization with visual metaphors that include reflections, physical doubles and strong black-and-white contrast.

Perez was making her music-video debut with the project, and she meticulously storyboarded it with Exitmusic, a.k.a. husband-and-wife team Aleksa Palladino and Devon Church, over a period of several months. "From the start, I was very interested in creating something that matched their sound," says Perez. "Their music is very immersive and ethereal, kind of dark, but with an unusual, sophisticated quality as well."

In the video, Palladino battles her inner demons in a moody underwater sequence intercut with highly stylized footage shot on a black theatrical set. Lens flares and other in-camera effects highlight Palladino's struggle with her twinned selves against the stark background.

"Monica had pretty specific ideas about the techniques she wanted to use," Laxton recounts. "She knew, for example, how she wanted to light the underwater portion of the video. One of the

things we talked about was that we definitely didn't want to have any ripples of light on our subjects. We wanted to make this lighting feel more ethereal than naturalistic."

Laxton used an Arri Alexa EV outfitted with Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses. Footage was recorded at 1920x1080p in ProRes 4:4:4 to 5xS cards. "Considering that part of the video was going to be shot underwater, the Alexa was the best choice," he asserts. "We wanted a great-looking image first and foremost, and we wanted a format that would be flexible when we got into the grade and visual-effects work; we knew the Alexa's latitude and codec would facilitate that. We also loved the soft, gentle way the camera renders skin tones. And, finally, we needed to get the most out of our time with the artists underwater. These were not professional swimmers or aquatic performers, so we needed to make sure we could maximize our time and capture as much material as possible."

The team found a suitable location at a Los Angeles swimming school that featured a belowground window that afforded a view into the pool. Relying primarily on a submerged HydroFlex 5K tungsten Fresnel to light the underwater action, which was shot against a 20'x20' water solid hung by key grip Tyler Johnson, Laxton kept the Alexa locked off behind the window as the artists performed in the pool. "The setup definitely posed more challenges for the talent than it did for me," he laughs. "I was literally stuck in

Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.



The video finds Palladino struggling toward self-realization in a limbo created on a black theatrical stage set, where a physical double and mirrored reflections underscore the song's themes. Middle: Cinematographer James Laxton frames a close-up of Palladino with an Arri Alexa.



one spot, and that put a lot of pressure on the talent to make sure they were in the right area so we could grab their performance."

Laxton eschewed lens filtration, concerned that extra glass would interfere with the sharpness of the image. "We did change lenses a fair amount," he recalls. "Certain shots use a 16mm or a 20mm lens, which was fun to play with because you don't notice the [wide-angle] distortion as much when you're shooting on a black background. For the close-ups of hands, I don't think we went any tighter than a 32mm or 35mm."

For a shot showing Church following Palladino into the water, Laxton used the deck alongside the pool to set up an array of 5K softboxes to create reflections of backlit ripples as the artists jumped in, and a Source Four Leko to create a strong shaft of light.

To carry the sense of a metaphysical void beyond the pool, the filmmakers utilized a black theatrical stage set hung with windows and dressed with a few chairs. "The stage was large enough to provide an initial palette, and from there it was all about creating very distinct, sharp, high-contrast imagery," Laxton says. "We used a lot of 5K Fresnels and just a little fill,



Top: Devon Church takes the plunge in this frame grab. Middle: Church confers with director Monica Perez. Bottom: The crew sets up at a Los Angeles swim school.



the 5K softboxes, and that gave us harsh shadows and really delivered the tone Monica was looking for." To help flare the lens and create in-camera blooms of light around Palladino, Laxton utilized a Tiffen Ultra Contrast filter.

"My gaffer, Marc Antoine Serou, would walk around the set with a Leko, trying different options to create flares on the edges of the frame in the wide shot, and even in some of the close-ups," Laxton relates. "All of that came from just being very playful with the light.

"There's definitely a rawness to the concept, the lighting and the camera style, but at the same time there's a delicacy to it, which helps to mirror the duality that's the subject of the song," he continues. "There's a roughness, a rawness, but we also made sure to add some beauty light — a 5K softbox with a 4-by-4 of 250 diffusion — so our artists looked their best. It's a bit of a balance between those two worlds, but I think we achieved it.

"This project was definitely a departure from the other work I've done, and that's exactly what attracted me to it," says Laxton, whose credits include the indies *The Myth of the American Sleepover* and *Medicine for Melancholy*. (The latter was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Cinematography.)

"White Noise" was Laxton's first foray into short-form work. "I'm very new to this part of the business, but I really love it," he says. "There's a great freedom to shooting commercials and music videos that I haven't often found in features. 'White Noise' is a good example of that. All artists look for challenges in our work, and this was definitely a challenge." ●