

AND THEN THERE WAS LIGHT

LIGHTING DESIGNER MICHAEL KEELING IS THE MAN WHO MAKES ROCK STARS LIKE PUFF DADDY, LENNY KRAVITZ AND *NSYNC SHINE ON SCREEN
TEXT BY SHONQUIS MORENO

**I DON'T KNOW WHY WE ALWAYS CRY
THIS WE MUST LEAVE AND GET UNDONE
WE MUST ENGAGE AND REARRANGE
AND TURN THIS PLANET BACK TO ONE**
LENNY KRAVITZ, ARE YOU GONNA GO MY WAY

Record label / year: Virgin Records, 1993
Video director: Mark Romanek

Michael Keeling usually works on short deadlines, compensating for a lack of time by speaking rapidly in a shorthand language filled with electrical jargon, acronyms and numbers that might refer to amperes, watts, phases, decay factor or degrees Kelvin. Keeling is a Los Angeles-based lighting and production designer who designs sets for music videos using lights, colour and darkness as much as plywood and aluminium. Created by Keeling, the set of the most recent Justin Timberlake music video, *Rock Your Body*, resembles a deluxe Lite Brite toy circa 1978. A black void, its ceiling and walls lined with multicoloured bulbs that seem to stream down the walls, the set is kinetic, graphic and candy-coloured. Keeling's work reminds us that light and dark, like more palpable materials, are capable of defining and animating space and, not least, animating the viewer.

Keeling never liked school very much. At the age of 15, when a friend invited him to help with lighting for a Bob Hope television special, he embarked on an alternative path, working on sets for the television sitcoms *Soap* and *The Jeffersons*, for *The Gong Show*, and for dance-music classics like *Soul Train* and *Solid Gold*. As time went on and Keeling gradually mastered his niche in TV, he put his knowledge of large-scale dimming and electrical-distribution capabilities to work to create concert lighting for musicians like Bob Dylan, Tom Petty and Frank Zappa. In 1993 he designed the set for *Are You Gonna Go My Way?*, a Lenny Kravitz video that went on to win an MTV award. The director asked Keeling to create a vast 'chandelier' of light bulbs, an element big enough to span the ceiling above a large, round room ringed with curving walls and three balcony tiers. It took Keeling – poring over Sylvania, Philips and Acey Decy equipment catalogues – two weeks to find the appropriate light source: a \$9, 23-centimetre, 100-watt, incandescent aquarium bulb with a 20-centimetre filament that could be dimmed or warmed up to various intensities to create patterns. He used 983 of these cylindrical bulbs, each controlled from a console by an individual dimmer.

In his role as designer, Keeling chooses light sources and determines where they will be placed (ceiling or wall), how they will read (as a point of light or diffuse source), which patterns they will form and at what intensity of brightness. He sees his design through its entire life cycle: conception, installation, execution and breakdown. His designs are based on the director's conceptual treatment, which details the theme of the video, but



**YO! D.. J.. RUN! D.. MMMMMM C!
YEAH, WHAT? KINGS, OF, ROCK!
YEAH, YEAH, YEAH, YEAH!
ECHO TECH, B-BOY DOWN...
RUN-DMC, ROCK SHOW**

Record label/year
Capitol Records, 2003

Video director
Alex & Martin

he also gets ideas from the music itself. 'I usually download the song onto my iPod, take my dogs and my fly rod down to the lake, and start by purging all other elements from my life,' says Keeling. 'And for the next whatever period of time I live, eat and sleep to the track that I'm working on – whether I'm a fan or not.'

Developing the shapes of the grids that will anchor and configure the lights and circuitry takes days of sketching out the design, drawing overlays and making renderings, small-scale models and animated 3-D computer models. After he choreographs the patterns, weeding out the weaker ones, Keeling hands them over to his lighting director, who translates them into working mathematical tables and feeds them into a console that controls the entire system during shooting. Certain patterns work as fluid sequences, rippling like water; others work as 'punches', either bursting outwards and collapsing in response to percussion or spiralling out, blade-like, in response to the licks of a guitar solo. Keeling works with incandescent or tungsten bulbs that have unique 'bubbles' or bulb shapes to allow for a larger-than-normal filament. A bigger filament means the light has a greater 'decay factor'. It takes longer for the glow to fade, leaving trailers and gradations or, as Keeling calls them, 'shooting-star effects'.

The whole design process varies radically depending on project, client and deadline. Keeling worked fast on the set of the Eminem video *My Band*, featuring D12, which was shot in March. He used 30 people to produce five sets in three days. He booked the job on Friday. Shooting began on Wednesday. In between, he had the kids for the weekend. Three weeks later, the video had already climbed to number 15 in MTV's weekly Top 20 rankings. 'Mike's got a strong understanding of the technical aspects of lighting and can bring that together with an artist's interpretation,' says producer Chris Palladino. 'He works like an artist, with light as his medium.'

The design considerations – how to generate a sense of scale, colour and emotion in a small space and a short time, and on film – differ greatly from those involved in lighting a concert stage. Keeling's video design seems to both blossom from and distil the stage work. It feels original, resourceful and immediately engaging. For good reason, he began to call the type of design he did on *Are You Gonna Go My Way?* his 'calling card' to the music-video market. After the *relatively* conventional chandelier design, he concentrated on developing the potential of variously configured



**YOU'VE GOT THE MOST
AHH, BUT NOBODY LOVES YOU
NOBODY HAS TO
JUST BECAUSE**
JANE'S ADDICTION, *JUST BECAUSE*

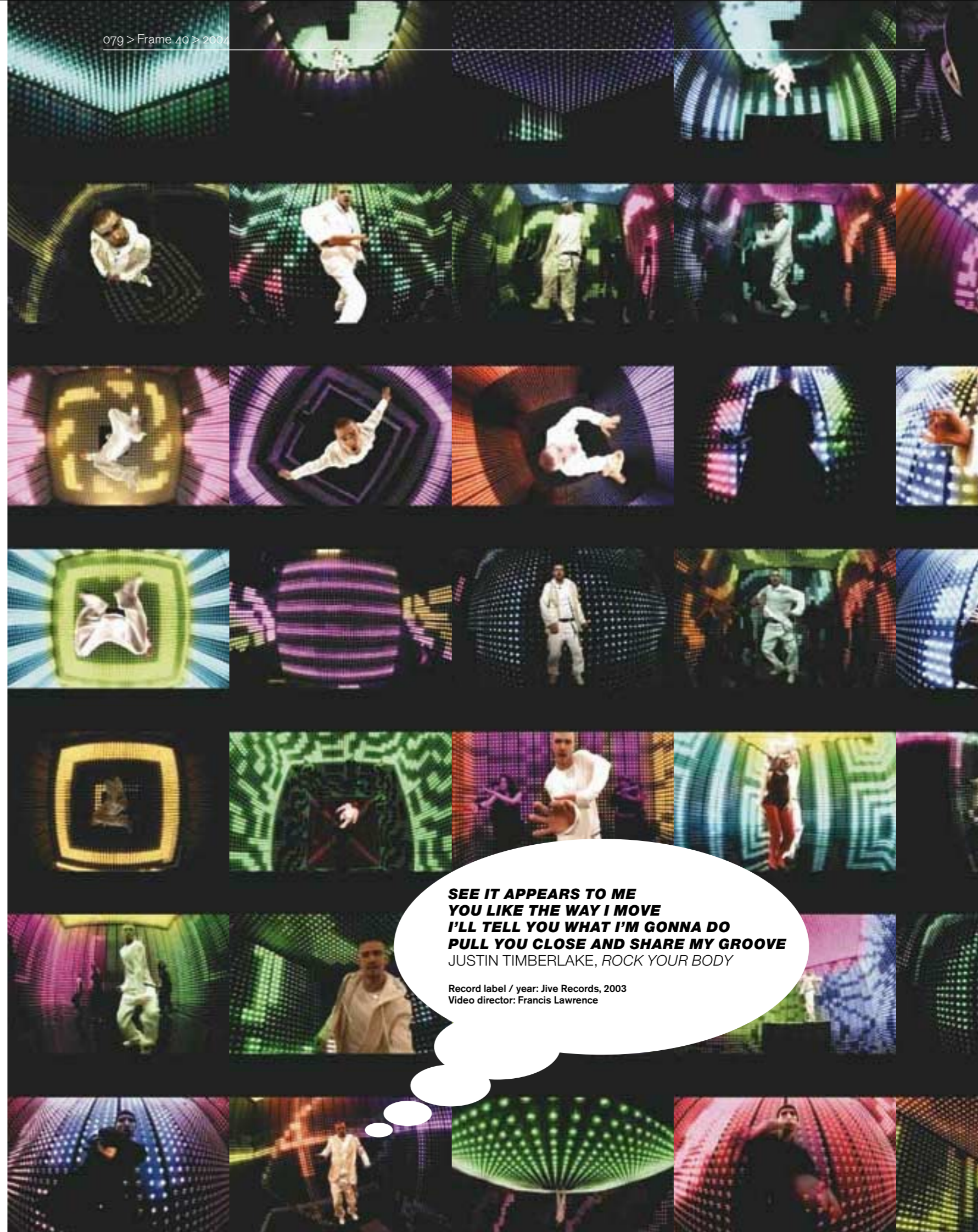
Record label / year: Capitol Records, 2003
Video director: Alex & Martin



lamps to carry colour, intensity, shape and movement. He tucked light into walls, beneath transparent floors and opposite reflective surfaces. In 1999, for boy-band *NSync, Keeling designed a room that tapered slightly as it rose above the stage. This wood-clad dome was painted grey and strung with four rows of 60 automated light fixtures (every 183 centimetres vertically and 61 centimetres horizontally). From behind the wood, bulbs illuminated the walls and shot light through gaps between panels. The effect, unexpectedly, was seamless. The stage looked faceted but all of one piece: a cavernous gem lit by a single, shifting, ubiquitous source – from green to blue, from blue to red, from red to a pearly white . . .

That same year, Keeling designed a set for Puff Daddy (*Public Enemy 2000*) and lighting for Q-Tip (*Vivrant Thing*) that took the chandelier idea and slathered it on the walls from floor to ceiling. The whole room became, explicitly, all about light bulbs. Not a ceiling of bulbs, not bulbs hidden behind walls, but fields of glass-shielded filament. The Puff Daddy set featured an 11-metre-high wall and resembled the interior of a wasp-waisted silo. On a tight budget, instead of using parabolic reflectors over each bulb to give the light a reflective quality, Keeling painted translucent plastic salad bowls silver and mounted them over the lamps. *Vivrant* featured another wall of lights. This time, with costly parabolic reflectors in place and 20,000 watts hitting the film, it would have been easy to overexpose the set. Keeling's solution was to dim the foreground illumination and let the light wall, as he says, 'do its work'.

In 2000, with director David Meyers, Keeling created the concert-like *Rock Show* video for Run-DMC (featuring Stephen Jenkins). In the video, a road-show trailer pulls up and peels open to reveal a stage. Keeling boxed the musicians in front of walls latticed with 2.5-metre-long fluorescent KinoFlo tubes, which are traditionally used to light motion-picture productions. Shot from below, the performers seem larger than life. Keeling broke ground by using dimmers on the KinoFlos, which was a new application for the bulbs. 'Michael advances the design of the lights with each project he does,' says Meyers, who has worked with Keeling on three videos. 'He seems particularly inspired by the movement of light to music. His lighting brought energy, a visual 'wow' and overall coolness to the Run-DMC video. He made my job easier as a director, because whether I moved the camera or not, wherever I placed it there was already



**SEE IT APPEARS TO ME
YOU LIKE THE WAY I MOVE
I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I'M GONNA DO
PULL YOU CLOSE AND SHARE MY GROOVE**
JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE, *ROCK YOUR BODY*

Record label / year: Jive Records, 2003
Video director: Francis Lawrence

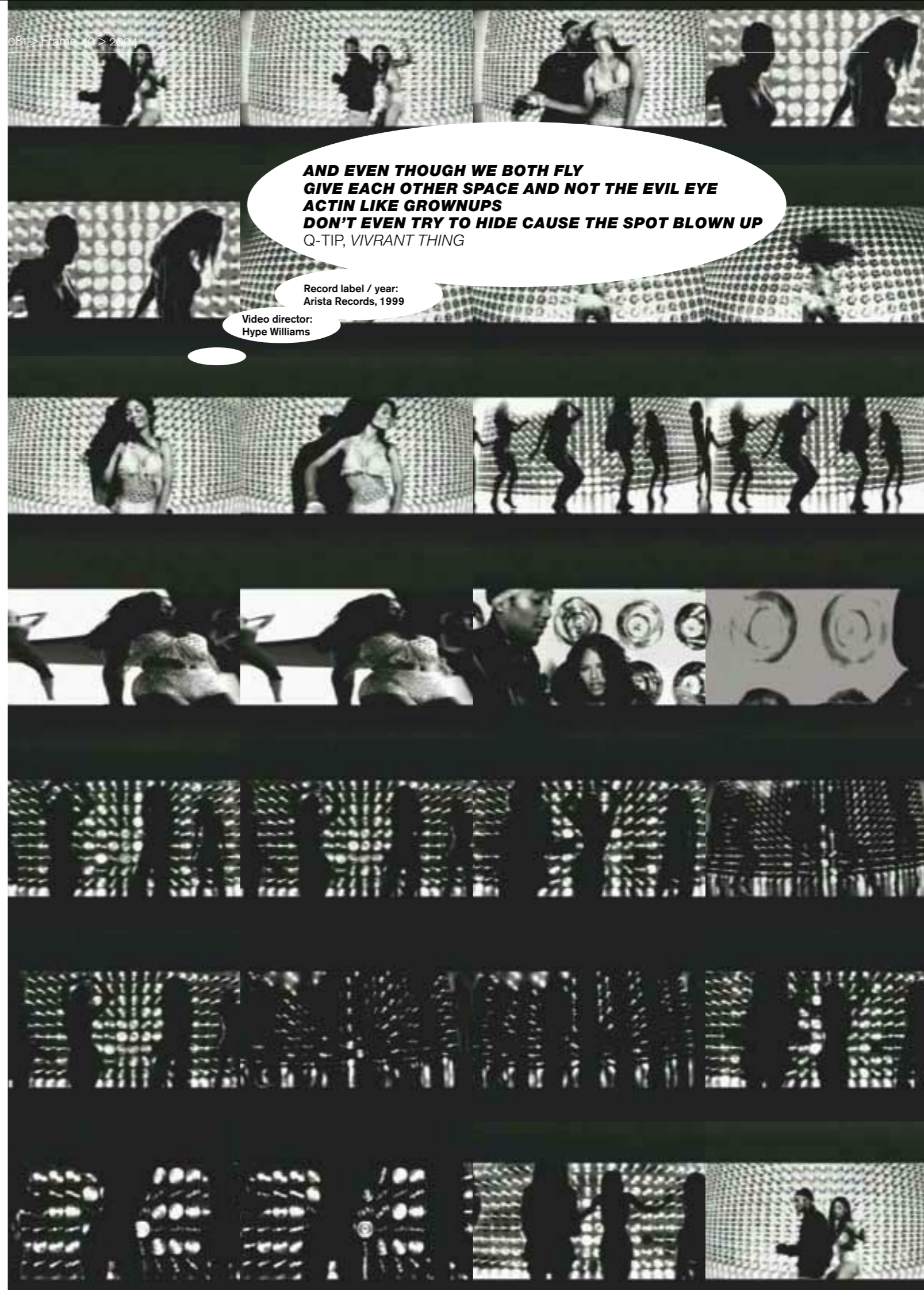


an incredible energy in each frame.' In the videos that followed, Keeling found ways to make the structure of a set recede and disappear until all that is apparently left of it is a play of lights describing its architecture. For last year's *Just Because* for Jane's Addiction, Keeling layered white, globular, concert-stage lights beneath a clear Plexiglas floor and arranged them in arcing rows over a dome of aluminium tubing. The desired effect was a stage that would appear to float on air or light, or both. With the frame transparent, the lights and the stars (the rock stars) performed in a volume crafted of light, darkness and reflections that visually intersected the two. The audience had entered a radiant constellation.

Keeling envisioned this year's *Rock Your Body* set as a void defined by shooting beads of light wrapping a 9-by-9-metre black-box room. He began by laying down a black-gloss MirroPlexi glass floor to create depth and reflection. Not actually embedded in the floor, the video's 'floor' lights are reflections from the ceiling. Keeling used over 9000 clear 60-watt vanity bulbs which, in the finished video, blink on and off in pink, green, blue, yellow and orange. For budgetary reasons, the disco-dance-floor colouring was added in a post-production process called TeleCine, but Keeling usually provides the colour for his sets. He favours shades that are rich in depth and contrast, but also appreciates black and white. 'Both have their descriptive properties. Black is raw, exciting. It can create tension, evoke the high-tech or just be mind-twisting. White is pure, elegant, soft and virgin. With red I create horror, anticipation, uneasiness. I consider people's emotions when I choose a colour.' Sometimes in *Rock Your Body*, a fisheye lens makes the lit walls bend and bubble towards the viewer; at other times the lights run down the wall in perfect columns, reminding us that we are, after all, in a room with six surfaces. 'I was fascinated by the atmosphere that was created with the simple use of light bulbs,' says Spanish industrial designer Patricia Urquiola of the video. 'In design, the use of light is as important as the choice of suggestive materials.' Keeling's 'ether' and 'void' approaches both emphasize the virtues of light as a building material. They make space cohesive and malleable, dynamic and moving. Even if Justin Timberlake doesn't 'rock your body by the end of this song', surely Keeling's light show will do the trick.

**THERE COMES A DAY
WHEN I'LL BE THE ONE, YOU'LL SEE..
IT'S GONNA-GONNA-GONNA-GONNA-GONNA
IT'S GONNA BE ME**
*NSYNC, *IT'S GONNA BE ME*

Record label / year: Jive Records, 1999
Video director: Wayne Isham



**AND EVEN THOUGH WE BOTH FLY
GIVE EACH OTHER SPACE AND NOT THE EVIL EYE
ACTIN LIKE GROWNUPS
DON'T EVEN TRY TO HIDE CAUSE THE SPOT BLOWN UP**
Q-TIP, *VIVRANT THING*

Record label / year:
Arista Records, 1999

Video director:
Hype Williams