INFECTION

THROUGH THE POWER OF AUTO-TUNE, THE GREGORY BROTHERS ARE MAKING VIRAL VIDEO HITS AS THE COMMON SONGS COLD. BUT A LOT MORE FUN.
When Diana Radcliffe stepped into a convenience store in Kansas City, Mo., on the morning of Sept. 1, 2010, she had no idea she'd be a witness to a botched robbery and a frantic escape accompanied by a hail of bullets; or that her account of the thwarted crime, as recorded by a local ABC television station, would become an Internet viral sensation; or that this video, in turn, would make her, at least for a short while, a pop-music star.

Speaking to a reporter for KMBC-TV, Radcliffe described her ordeal. “When I’m on my knees, I’m backin’ up, backin’ up, backin’ up, backin’ up, backin’ up, backin’ up, ‘cause my daddy taught me good,” she said, while hunching down and shuffling backward to recreate the scene. And that was how numerous Internet users were introduced to Radcliffe in a video clip that was posted about a year ago.

Many millions of viewers know her from a different video, though, one in which she does not merely recite the story of her ordeal, but rather sings it, accompanied by snappy electronic percussion:

I’m backin’ up, backin’ up,
backin’ up, backin’ up,
‘cause my daddy taught me go-oo-d
I’m backin’ the hell out of there
And I’m like oh, my God
Oh, my God, my God

This might not seem like the kind of thing you would hear on a Top 40 radio station or see on MTV — not yet, anyway — but “Backin Up Song (feat. Diana),” a video produced by a Brooklyn-based group of musicians-slash-Internet comedians called the Gregory Brothers, has been viewed more than 10 million times.

Through a combination of old-fashioned musical ability, high-tech skills and the do-whatever-you-want spirit of the World Wide Web, the Gregory Brothers — a quartet consisting of siblings Evan, Michael, Andrew, as well as Sarah Fullen Gregory, Evan’s wife — have built a cottage industry around videos like “Backin Up Song (feat. Diana),” and previous videos like “Double Rainbow Song” and “Bed Intruder Song.” They do this by taking footage that has already been widely circulated around the Internet — a viral video sensation — and they, to use a word from their lexicon, “sognify” it.

“The first time you hear most songs, it’s, like, awesome,” Michael Gregory, the youngest of the three brothers, told me when I visited the band’s Williamsburg studio. “And then the next time you hear it, you’re like, ‘Bo-ring.’ But if it’s a good song, you still care. And it’s the same thing with this.”

In other words, it was the Internet’s voracious appetite for found comedy — a primal need to laugh at things that are different or unexpected and not necessarily planned to be funny — that made Radcliffe’s original “Backin’ Up” video interview a momentary diversion. But it took the Gregory Brothers, who give their mission statement on their official YouTube page as “spreading opera throughout space and time,” to turn that diversion into a worldwide pop hit.

When Michael’s clips turned into viral hits, his video projects became more ambitious. In a segment called “Auto-Tune the News,” posted on April 11, 2009, he and Sarah insert themselves into a montage of exchanges with the likes of Biden, Newt Gingrich and former Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Thanks to MSNBC’s “Rachel Maddow Show,” which showed some segments on-air, and the YouTube news-satire channel Barely Political, which posted them, “Auto-Tune the News” videos were subsequently viewed millions of times. This was a pretty stunning return on the Gregorys’ time investment, which consisted mostly of Michael working at 1 a.m. on a computer he kept in the closet beneath the stairs of the apartment he continues to share with Andrew. That apartment, on a recent visit, was still decorated with old handbills advertising concerts by the Gregory
of two vivid spectra side by side in the sky; or if he did not have a video camera with him; or if he recorded the occurrence for three and a half minutes in stony silence, you probably wouldn’t be reading about him right now. But you are, and it’s because as Vasquez documented the event, he provided his own gasping, rapturous, nearly orgasmic narration: “Whoa, that’s a full rainbow. All the way. Double rainbow, oh, my God. ... What does this mean? Oh, my God. Oh, God. It’s so bright.”

He posted this experience to YouTube in a video officially titled “Yosemitebear Mountain Giant Double Rainbow 1-8-10,” but more commonly known on the Internet as “Double Rainbow.” And his sustained and audibly authentic ecstasy — which caught the attention of, among others, Jimmy Kimmel, the comedian and ABC late-night host, who shared the video with his followers on Twitter — helped “Double Rainbow” reach some 29 million YouTube views and counting.

Andrew was probably the first of the Gregorys to see “Double Rainbow,” having spotted it from a re-Tweet of Kimmel’s original Tweet. There was quick consensus that Vasquez was a strong candidate for songification. The bandmates realized they were seeing a soon-to-be wildly popular video in the earliest moments of its virality — sort of like catching the Beatles at the Cavern Club or buying Apple stock at $10 a share.

There was some concern among the Gregorys, though, that a songified version of “Double Rainbow” would be too different from their “Auto-Tune the News” videos, which had grown into a popular series, and might be perceived as an obvious attempt at riding Vasquez’s coat-tails. But the prevailing sentiment was that trying something new could encourage the Gregory Brothers to publish videos on a more regular basis (breaking them out of what Andrew called “the every-43-day plan”), and that there was something undeniably appealing about “Double Rainbow” that suggested it could be transformed into a pop hit.

“if you’re writing a pop song,” Evan said, “you don’t write a pop song that covers four topics. You write a pop song that is about one thing.”

The alchemical process that the Gregorys use to transmute found footage into pop gold is deceptively simple. With pitch-correcting software, they can manipulate portions of recorded speech like musical notes, making them higher or lower, longer or shorter, and arranging them into something that sounds like a tune. (As if to demonstrate that this part of the operation does not even require human judgment, the Gregorys have released their own Songify software app for the iPhone.) To these newly minted vocals, they add instrumentation — guitars, bass, keyboards, backing vocals, synthesized handclaps — and bang, run-away hit.

Of course, it is the ability to hear an entire song within melodic human speech and to bring the music out of that is the real skill — and that’s what distinguishes the Gregory Brothers from anyone else who could be doing this. You could say another term for it is art.

Unlike the “Auto-Tune the News” videos, which are funny for their high-culture/low-culture juxtapositions or the surprise of seeing powerful people singing like “American Idol” rejects, “Double Rainbow Song” is, well, an authentic song, with a memorable tune and an emotional trajec-

Brothers, back when the group looked deathly serious in its promotional photographs. Andrew proudly pointed out that the Gregorys’ personal Wi-Fi network, named “Nerrrrrrrrrrrrrrds!” is still active. While other networks have come and gone as neighbors moved onto and off of their block, Andrew said, “Nerrrrrrrrrrrrrrds! endures.”

Their early experiences with “Auto-Tune the News” taught the Gregory Brothers a couple of lessons. For starters, as Andrew said, “In one fell swoop, there could be a piece of work that all these people would see, more than the entire amount of people that saw us on a three-month tour.” The other, which they have come to understand better over time, is that not every memorable speech can or should be turned into a song, and the best candidates for songification are usually speakers who fall into a subjective category the Gregorys call “unintentional singers.”

“It’s not necessarily an inherent melodic nature in their voices,” Evan said, “although that can be there. It’s that their use of their speaking voice is more physically akin to the way a singer would use their voice, in terms of projection and delivery and enunciation.”

For example, Andrew said that when they tried to create Auto-Tune videos using Obama’s debate footage or stump speeches, “he was really bad, because he’s so” — he imitated Obama’s clipped delivery — “He’s just. So. Thoughtful.”

Looking at the vice-presidential race, however, Andrew said: “Biden and Palin were not like that at all, even in front of a small crowd. They were just yelling, like, ‘Gaaawd bless America!’ or ‘Ten million gallons of crude oil!’”

Michael agreed. “Biden is one of the top unintentional singers of all time,” he said. “I mean, like, honestly, not even an exaggeration. He’s had some of the best hooks.”

If, on a certain bright January day, Paul Vasquez had gone outside his home near Yosemite National Park in California and seen only one rainbow instead...
Virology 101

The viral video isn't just an offshoot of technology; it's becoming a kind of art form. Ten videos that define the genre.

Lazy Sunday
Established YouTube as the go-to site for forward-to-all-your-friends videos.

Charlie Bit My Finger — Again!
The viral hit as “America's Funniest Home Videos” outtake.

The Shining Rodux
A fake trailer reimagines the horror classic and spawns a mini-genre.

Dramatic Look
Evolves the endless online craving for random weirness.

Leaves Britney Alone
An unhinged ode de courser to unintentional viral hilarity.

JK Wedding Entrance Dance
Small-scale high jinks as unintentional viral heartwarmer.

Bed Intruder Song
The Gregory Brothers remix made it onto the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart.

Friday
Rebecca Black’s last laugh: the inept failure as runaway smash.

Can’t Hug Every Cat
Possibly fake dating video plus cats + Gregory Brothers = pop success circa 2011.

Best Nascar Prayer Ever
Gregory Brothers’ latest and maybe greatest. Boogity, boogity, boogity, Amen.

unidentified man broke into the bedroom of Dodson’s sister, Kelly, and tried to rape her. Hearing her sister’s screams, Dodson rushed to her defense, stopped the attack and chased the assailant out of the bedroom window.

When he explained these events later to a reporter from the local television station WAFF, Dodson was wearing his long hair in a shaggy Afro barely contained underneath a bandanna, and he was unshaven. Looking directly into the camera, Dodson defiantly declared: “Well, obviously, we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He’s climbing in your windows, he’s snatching your people up, trying to rape ’em. So y'all need to hide your kids, hide your wife and hide your husband because they’re raping everybody out here.”

At the time, the Gregory Brothers were eager to create a Dodson music video as quickly as possible. And sure enough, the Internet gobbled up their “Bed Intruder Song.” It may be the band’s most minimalist creation to date, building easily upon the inherent musicality of Dodson’s voice and needing not much more than a basic drum-machine beat and the re-ordering of a few of Dodson’s accidental aphorisms to create a catchy, angry hook. (“So you can run and tell that/run and tell that/run and tell that/homeboy/home/home-homeboy.”) The song would not round out of place as a duet performed by Cee Lo Green and Gwyneth Paltrow.

It is also, easily, their most popular video, having been watched more than 86 million times and spawning dozens of remixes, tributes and response videos.

The video also proved more than a little controversial. Its subject is not a fatuous Holly-wood celebrity or Washington politician but someone who has experienced a potentially traumatic event and is now being made a vehicle for comedy. And the racial divide at play — white kids from Brooklyn having fun at the expense of a black man from Alabama — does not make the situation any more comfortable.

“Bed Intruder Song” was criticized by viewers like Baratunde Thurston, a comedian who works for the satirical newspaper The Onion and who told NPR that the more he saw the video, the more he "became increasingly uncomfortable with its separation from the underlying situation.” Thurston added: “Watching the wider Webjump on this meme, all but forgetting why Dodson was upset, seemed like a form of ‘class tourism.’” Folk with no exposure to the projects could dip their toes into YouTube and get a taste.”

Dodson initially proved elusive when the Gregory Brothers sought his permission to sell the “Bed Intruder Song” on iTunes; the band eventually found him by creating what Andrew called “the Bat signal” — a huge
graphic that appeared at the beginning of the "Bed Intruder Song" video that "covered up, like, half the screen that just said, like, Antoine, please get in touch with us." Within a few days the Gregorys received replies from one of Dodson's friends as well as his newly hired manager.

The Gregory Brothers were circumscript when they spoke with me about Dodson. Michael said he appreciated Dodson not as a caricature but as a charismatic personality who brought a lightness to what would otherwise have been a frightening set of circumstances. Andrew agreed, saying that Dodson was "just full of energy and really mad, but he's just so naturally witty, he's coming up with these turns of phrase on the spur of the moment." When he first saw Dodson's interview, he said, "I'd never seen such an amazing combination of righteous anger and dead seriousness, about something so serious, mixed with humor so successfully."

Dodson did not reply to several requests I made to interview him for this article, but he has since become an Internet mockcelebrity. In its first month of release, "Bed Intruder Song" sold more than 91,000 copies on iTunes, enough to land it at No. 89 on Billboard's Hot 100 singles chart (which also incorporates radio play and online streaming to determine its rankings). Dodson has his own Web site that sells products like "Bed Intruder" T-shirts, lunchboxes and cellphone ring tones. In a YouTube video posted on the one-year anniversary of his sister's attack, Dodson recounted the events that catapulted him into the public eye, saying: "It was like, really, really weird. But we're still here. We're never going to leave." One of the more popular comments on the video reads, "No one cares anymore."