



TYPOGRAPHY

## Not the Silent Type

A GRAPHIC DESIGNER MAKES MUSIC VIDEOS FOR THE HEARING-IMPAIRED.

BY CAROLINE PURTELL  
They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but apparently that wasn't enough for Gregg Brokaw, creator of a music video for the hearing-impaired

titled *Visual Music: Expanding on Closed Caption Television*.

In 1997, while finishing his master's thesis on visual communication at Kent State University in Ohio, Brokaw gleaned inspiration from two unique sources: Oliver Sacks' book *Seeing Voices*, which discusses the implications of visual lan-

guage, and MTV. The latter inspiration occurred late one night when, while watching music videos, Brokaw accidentally clicked the mute button on his remote control, turning on the closed-captioning feature. Surprised to see captions appear on the screen for a music video, he began critiquing the typography's effectiveness. "The static black slate of all capital letters gives no indication of what word should be emphasized or de-emphasized, and the tempo of a song, its rhythm and melody have all been virtually ignored," says Brokaw, who now heads Chicago-based motion-graphic firm, Brokaw Motion. "It just isn't enough for the deaf to fully 'hear' or enjoy music."

Five years after his late-night revelation, when starting his own firm, Brokaw began production on videos that synchronize animated typography with live action, while keeping tempo with the music. Brokaw says, "The typography is the primary performer on-screen, while images and color are edited in the background to flow with the musical dynamics of the song."

It took six weeks to produce two examples of "visual music," both of which are set to the Peter Gabriel song "I Have the Touch," which was chosen for its understandable lyrics. The first video—favored by deaf viewers—couples black and white type with images that support the lyrics; the second video experiments with colorful, more abstract type, but no film footage. "Pictures added to the meaning

of the song, helping those with lower reading skills understand it," he explains. Brokaw also likes to keep his design simple, favoring a two-dimensional, flat graphic look because words have such limited screen time. His background in film animation helps with the creative process, especially when trying to keep the type positioned and in sync with the beat.

The deaf community has responded positively to the videos, which were created as personal projects. And Brokaw predicts that visual music will eventually become a form of mainstream entertainment for the deaf community. "There are approximately 22 million hearing-impaired persons in the United States," Brokaw says. "My videos were seen by only a small handful of that population, who welcomed them with open arms." The Corporation on Disabilities and Telecommunication seems to agree: It recently presented Brokaw with a special Audience Access Award.

Brokaw hopes that in the future, a few well-known musicians would consider making type-dominant videos to increase the impact of music on deaf culture. He says, "Visual music could grow into something big, maybe even give birth to an all-deaf music channel. Wouldn't that be something?"

For more information on the videos and to watch a clip, visit [www.brokawmotion.com](http://www.brokawmotion.com).

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Gregg Brokaw used the lyrics from the Peter Gabriel song, "I Have the Touch," for his hearing-impaired videos. The slides on the left use images to reinforce the words.