

This video shoot was staged using models.

HOT SH☆TS

MEET THE YOUNG-GUN FILMMAKERS WHO ARE REBRANDING THE REPUBLICAN PARTY— ONE YOUTUBE VIDEO AT A TIME. BY RAFI KOHAN PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN COOLEY

DURING A GREEN-SCREEN STUDIO SHOOT ON THE south side of Atlanta last June, Ladd Ehlinger Jr., a 43-year-old NASA animator turned independent filmmaker, was behind his $125,000 Hollywood-grade Red camera while an actress wearing black hot pants—and not much else—stomped out the pins and needles from her sleepy legs. "The gal was a real trouper," he recalls of the making of "Give Us Your Cash, Bitch," an ad aimed at California Democratic congressional candidate Janice Hahn. (Like Hahn, who'd go on to win the special election, the actress-cum-stripper bore a blonde shag.) "We were sticking dollar bills in her shorts, and her legs kept falling asleep from all the butt-shaking maneuvers, so we bent her over some apple crates. I thought of the ass as a character. It wanted to be seen."

Ehlinger had already demonstrated a flair for producing politically charged YouTube hits: "Nancy Pelosi, Wicked Witch of the Left," Barney Frank dancing the "Barney Shuffle." But those were love letters by comparison. One week after shooting the spot—which also features the rappers Uncle Head and Kue Dog of Splack Pack brandishing automatic weapons, going face-to-ass with their costar, and lip-synching the titular lyric ("Give me your *caaaaash*, bitch/ So we can shoot up the street!")—Ehlinger posted it to YouTube, then tweeted the link to pundits like Keith Olbermann and Politico's Ben Smith. Within three days it had racked up half a million views and reams of viral vitriol. "[It's] so stunningly sexist and racist that it verges on pornography," wrote *U.S. News & World Report*. Even the campaign manager for Craig Huey, Hahn's GOP opponent, called the ad "highly offensive." But to Ehlinger's mischievous way of thinking, it was a necessary provocation. "Huey's strategy was to hope that the Dems didn't notice there was an election," he says. "I have a real problem with the Republican establishment being such pussies. They're terrible at fighting back."

Despite his proud outsider status (he's an independent libertarian agitator), Ehlinger is perhaps best viewed as the Grand Old Party's new, page-view-baiting id. According to Andrew Rasiej, the founder of the nonpartisan Personal Democracy Forum, which tracks the intersection of technology and politics, "The election coming up is the first where the two parties will have parity in the online arms race." After getting outmatched by Obama's superior social-media stagecraft in 2008, Republicans had a come-to-Jesus moment in more ways than one, and now they're embracing a new guard of Internet-savvy, Hollywood-inspired auteurs who are exploiting the viral-messaging potential of YouTube. In the run-up to 2012, Rasiej predicts, "the Republicans will be willing to do crazier stuff, and Obama will play it safe."

Like Sarah Palin and the Tea Party, these emerging GOP operatives are rising from the ashes of the 2008 campaign, when "it was Old vs. New—literally," says Lucas Baiano, the 23-year-old filmmaker whose de facto campaign-kick-off ad for Tim Pawlenty, "Courage to Stand," continues to reverberate with party strategists. "It was imperative for the Republicans to re-brand themselves. We needed to energize and inspire the party. That's why I tend to go a more cinematic route, because it's a formula that really connects with people."

If Ehlinger is the id, Baiano is the superego. A skinny-suit-wearing Michael Bay wannabe, Baiano got his break in 2008 when he made a movie-trailer-style video on spec for Hillary Clinton's campaign after puckishly pitching the idea to Bill at a book signing. (The video serves as a teaser for *Lucky Strike*, Baiano's 2010 feature-length documentary about how he got the career-making Clinton gig.) After Hillary bowed out, Baiano switched sides, becoming director of visual media and film for the Republican Governors Association. "Everything's a stepping stone for me," Baiano says. "It's important to rebrand yourself, to stay ahead of the curve." At the RGA, Baiano honed his summer-blockbuster aesthetic—soaring music, lightning-fast cuts—with a video series called "Remember November" that helped make New Jersey governor Chris Christie a player on the national stage. And although some of his superiors at the RGA were reportedly irked by his slick persona, Baiano's talent won him the Pawlenty gig. "Courage to Stand," released in January, splices iconic imagery of American accomplishments (the Iwo Jima flag-raising, Dr. King on the march) with footage of Pawlenty looking every bit the commander in chief as press cameras pop and military jets roar overhead. "Wow," exclaimed Stephen Colbert after cueing up the video on his show. "[Pawlenty] is clearly running for president of the next *Transformers* movie." (Baiano welcomes the Michael Bay comparisons—the schlockbuster director is a master of what Baiano calls Hollywood's "flawless formula.")

Colbert may have been mocking the dissonance between Baiano's pyrotechnics and the milquetoast candidate they were meant to serve, but he found the video captivating enough to feature on his program. Baiano had succeeded in bringing sex appeal to an otherwise limp candidate, transforming him, if only for a moment, into a full-blown Republican celebrity. And we haven't seen the last of the wunderkind. Barely 24 hours after Pawlenty quit the Republican-nomination race, Baiano was already fielding offers. "I've had quite a few individuals approach me," he says. "I'm going to want to stay involved and be an influence."

That's already happening. In a recent article for *The Daily Caller* titled "2012: The Year of the Web Video," Vincent Harris of Harris Media wrote, "My firm has received many calls from people asking for 'Pawlenty-esque' videos." (Baiano's impact has even spread to his native Canada, where the conservative prime minister ripped off "Courage to Stand" during his reelection bid—and won.) All this represents a sea change from the last election, when the Republicans' slickest move was an ostensibly defamatory pairing of Obama and Paris Hilton: the "Celebrity" ad. Although it found approval with the GOP's aging base, it ultimately made John McCain seem clueless in the eyes of younger voters. Since then, Republicans have doubled down on the policy front while enlisting these new-school ad-makers to broaden the party's appeal—through a change in packaging, not in platform. "Celebritizing candidates is simply an acknowledgment of the media-saturated culture we live in," says the renowned GOP strategist Mark McKinnon. "And winning campaigns is all about adapting."

NOT EVERYONE SAW THIS COMING. FRED DAVIS, THE Los Angeles–based GOP ad vet who created the "Celebrity" ad, says, "Flat-out-talented filmmakers tend to be in the film industry, not in politics. And if they are interested in politics, they tend to be bloody liberals." But the opportunities afforded by new media as a platform for cheap-to-produce, brand-shaping video have revealed a side of Republicans that many never knew existed. Beyond Ehlinger and Baiano, there's a growing pack of young videographers and Web-based ad wizards capitalizing on the Republican candidates' willingness to take creative risks, earning themselves an unprecedented fast track to political relevance.

"There are more and more kids coming up," says Justin Germany, a 31-year-old, cowboy-hat-wearing, stubble-chinned pioneer of run-and-gun camerawork who is "the future of media in politics," according to McKinnon. Germany is already a veteran of two presidential runs (Dubya '04, McCain '08) and can watch with satisfaction as the Republican field embraces the fresh-faced breed he helped spawn—video mavens like Richard Sales, a 26-year-old who churns out spots for the Karl Rove–backed American Crossroads, and up-and-comers like PassCode Creative, the Nashville-based operation responsible for a series of rabble-rousing mini-docs bankrolled by SarahPAC, the former Alaska governor's political-action committee. Founded by a former Palin staffer (Jason Recher), the son of country-music star Larry Gatlin (Josh Gatlin), and an award-winning music-video director (Eric Welch), PassCode got its first commission in February 2010, when Palin was at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville. Recher arranged the introduction. "She got a good vibe," says Welch, who soon found himself surrounded by flag-waving Tea Partiers at a rally in Searchlight, Nevada, running to capture as many wide-angle shots as he could, utilizing his experience of shooting concerts for Toby Keith and Tim McGraw. "I just thought, 'Man, it'd be nice to present conservative ideals with an edgier, more aggressive, artistic look,' " Welch says.

His efforts did not go unnoticed. PassCode's first video, "Mama Grizzlies," got more than half a million views on YouTube last summer and prompted CNN's Rick Sanchez to practically erupt on-air. "The whole thing is so well put-together," Sanchez said. "I mean, writing, lighting, editing . . . it looked Reagan-esque!" Germany's capture-the-moment intensity was greeted in similar fashion in 2004, during Bush's reelection campaign, when the filmmaker was just 24. ("The video stands out, not for its content but for its edgy, unpresidential style," observed the *New York Times*, "with grainy pictures, speeded-up action and off-kilter camera angles shouting out 'You got a problem with this?' to anyone under 25.") And when Sales, on behalf of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, released an April Fool's video earlier this year touting Obama's accomplishments (voice-over: "A president . . . who consults with key decision-makers"—cue Obama onstage with a Jonas Brother and Paul McCartney), it got 250,000 views in the first 24 hours and 1 million views within six days. "I'm surprised Comedy Central's not jealous," said a guest on *The Sean Hannity Show*, " 'cause it looks like something they would've produced for *The Daily Show*." Forget generic amber waves of grain; Republicans are ready to roll out the quirky, high-energy spots that connect with, in Baiano's words, "*my* generation of voters."

"Back in the day, shooting an ad required huge crews and days of analog editing in huge and expensive facilities," McKinnon says. "The young guns today are one-man bands who can do it all. They can script, shoot, edit, approve, and ship a spot within a matter of hours." Web ads can be "grittier, grimier" than their TV counterparts, Germany says. "You can take a few chances, you can blast the music, let loose." For the most part, these new filmmakers admire one another's work, each of their successes validating the group as a whole, moving them up the political totem pole. "I think of them as colleagues, not competitors," Sales says.

That doesn't mean they are without creative differences. "A lot of these campaign videos are just Michael Bay movie music," says Welch, who scored "Mama Grizzlies" with a plinking piano. Ehlinger insists that his right-wing brethren need to push the envelope further. "I believe in fighting to win, not fighting to avoid a loss," he says. "Fuck you if you're offended. I am only interested in those political candidates that offer the most freedom for me and my art."

If the battle for the White House is going to be swung online, the stage is set for a rousing run-up to the 2012 general election. "The Democrats have had this puppy nailed for a while—they're not to be fucked with," says Nicco Mele, who served as the Web director of Howard Dean's ground-breaking, pre-YouTube campaign and now teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. But he recognizes that Obama & Co. will be facing an entirely new opponent this time: The GOP, he says, is "going to try everything under the sun to win." Germany agrees—he and his fellow right-wing auteurs have this "off-the-wall, hard-hitting material" down pat, he says. Even as they toil on their own projects, using congressional campaigns as target practice, they are aiming for a common goal: a Republican image constructed on humor, art, and entertainment—and high production values. And they have a common enemy. As Germany says, "All guns will be blazing on Obama." ■

THE GOP'S GREATEST VIDEO HITS A SAMPLING FROM THE RIGHT WING'S NEW-GUARD AD-MAKERS.

LADD EHLINGER JR. "GIVE US YOUR CASH, BITCH!" (2011)



Featuring two rappers brandishing guns, plus a curvy blonde stripper meant to represent California Democrat Janice Hahn, this ad was an attack—on women, blacks, and (per the filmmaker) "pussies."

RICHARD SALES "DEMOCRATS' RAINBOWS AND UNICORNS" (2010)



An April Fool's joke—courtesy of the National Republican Senatorial Committee—this ad praises Obama for "replacing cars with low-emission unicorns powered by the renewable energy of rainbows."

PASSCODE CREATIVE "MAMA GRIZZLIES" (2010)



"You thought pit bulls were tough?" Chalk it up to yet another branding victory for Sarah Palin and her PAC.

JUSTIN GERMANY "CAP AND TRADE CAPERS" (2010)



Made on behalf of then Congressman (now Senator) Roy Blunt of Missouri, this video gives new meaning to DC Comics, depicting Obama as the Riddler from *Batman*.

LUCAS BAIANO "COURAGE TO STAND" (2011)



With Hollywood production values that draw Michael Bay comparisons, this lauded video simultaneously gave milquetoast Tim Pawlenty A-list action-star chops and presidential credentials.

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