Satire busts a hump

Morissette speaks volumes about sex, power and YouTube with a sly spoof.

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PEOPLE endlessly complain that Hollywood is full of dopey, superficial films bereft of anything new to say. And they're right. Anyone looking for art that is edgy or relevant — and inspires comment — is turning to Internet video, which has become the true engine driving our pop culture.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the tsunami-like viral success of Alanis Morissette's "My Humps," which surfaced three weeks ago on YouTube and quickly became the most popular video on the channel, attracting 5.5 million views, easily outdistancing such rivals as "Otters Holding Hands" and "Farling in Public."

"What's so cool is that she did this all by herself. There was no capitalization of it — it wasn't geared to help a new record takeoff on the original "My Humps" hit by the Black Eyed Peas. But Morissette's video is armed with a provocative subtext that has people aubuzz with debate. It's a fascinating piece of video art, an inspired combination of satire, social criticism and career reinvention that is a signature artifact of today's viral Web culture.

On one level, "My Humps" is a commentary on dim-bulb pop. The Black Eyed Peas' "My Humps," though a huge smash, was widely mocked for its vapid, suggestive lyrics. (Sample: "The boys they wanna sex me, they always standing next to me, always dancing next to me, tryin' a feel my hump, hump.") The video, featuring Fergie, the group's lead singer, was, if possible, even tawdier. Full of nonstop teasing and thrusting, it after all it's the kind of hip-hop booty porn that would make great torture material for Muslim prisoners at our Guantanamo Bay prison camp.

Dressing herself Fergie-style, with baubles and bling, surrounded by black-clad male dancers, Morissette retained the original's visual sluttiness but replaced the Peas' thumping rhythm track with a pensive solo piano. By removing the intoxicating bass line and clearly enunciating the crass lyrics, she gave the song's sexpot swagger a new tone of sadness and desperation while simultaneously parroting her own artistic tendencies toward self-absorbed angst.

It's striking performance, functioning as both social criticism and self-criticism. It also has given an instant shot of street credibility to Morissette, whose career had slid downhill after her incandescent debut in 1995 with "Jagged Little Pill."

Sterotyped as an earnest navel gazer — one blogger recently dismissed her as an "emo-feminist" — she suddenly has fans seeing her through fresh eyes.

As Mark Blankenship put it in his ITotallyHearThat blog, "Remember when I was saying Pink didn't manage to criticize the objectification of female sexuality in 'Stupid Girls' without becoming the very thing she supposedly opposed? Well, Alanis found a way. If that kind of wit, intelligence and humility is in her next album, I'm buying it."

This is what gives YouTube its real power. It is a forum not just for amateur pranks but also for career reinvention. For Morissette, this video — made at her home on digital video for roughly $2,000 — may transform her persona as much as taking a part in "Pulp Fiction" did for John Travolta.

"It absolutely helps her career," says Bob Lefsetz, whose Lefsetz Letter is one of the leading blogs in the music business. "What's so cool is that she did this all by herself. There was no capitalization of it — it wasn't geared to help a new record or movie project. So it gives her credibility. It felt like the old days when Led Zeppelin would come to your town, do a show that blew the roof off and then — they were gone. No one knew how they did it. There was no explanation, no interviews, no nothing."

It's the quintessential definition of mystique: less = more.

Living in today's always-on-duty media culture, it's almost impossible to remember that there was a time — before TMZ, before MTV, before People — when pop culture had an air of ineffable mystery. Today, everything is over-analyzed, endlessly debated and all-too-glibly explained, which essentially reduces even the most thoughtful art to trivia and effluence.
Morissette has followed the model once practiced by Bob Dylan, who in his '60s heyday refused to explicate anything, bobbing and weaving in interviews, baffling the MSM of the day with a fog of evasions, sly jokes and put-ons.

Unlike Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears and Fergie, who can't stop blabbing about their various addictions, pet causes and loser lovers, Morissette has greeted all "My Humps" interview requests with a vow of silence.

According to manager Martin Kirkup, she turned down everyone, including late-night TV chat shows, a Styles reporter from the New York Times who wanted to ask about her fashion choices and someone who wanted to start a music parody website. In an era when everyone talks — even lonelygirl15 went on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" — her silence has been golden.

As Lefsetz put it: "The less she does, the bigger the story is." By refusing to explain her intent, Morissette invested her clip with an irresistible layer of inscrutability, something that packs extra punch at a time when all too many found objects — even Will Ferrell's "The Landlord" video — turn out to be a marketing come-on for a website or movie project.

According to Kirkup, Morissette has no new album or tour to hawk. As she has remained mum, others have jumped in to stage a healthy debate about whether the sexual antics of today's starlets represent girl power or pathology. It's an issue that goes way beyond Fergie. As Natalie Nichols wrote recently in CityBeat, TV shows like "America's Next Top Model" and "The Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll" "perpetuate the notion that a woman's hotness is directly related to the amount of 'power' she has. As though the best power women can hope to wield is sexual sway over men."

After "My Humps" appeared, the blogs were full of similar passionate argument.

When the Coterie of Zombies' Howard James Hardima wrote off Morissette's video as a "misguided potshot at confident, powerful sexy female figures everywhere," his post inspired heated response, led by Auros, who wrote: "Confidence and power don't come from trying to get boys to buy you stuff by playing the tease…. I believe the common term for that is 'gold digger.' Sexy is a girl who is smart, self-sufficient and couldn't give a fig for whether anyone thinks she's sexy."

Sex, of course, fuels debate everywhere, not just on the Internet. But the Web today is also brimming with a new kind of participatory activism, one that uses video as a tool for social criticism, from pop issues to political ones.

Robert Greenwald, who used to make issue-oriented films and TV movies, is now an Internet pamphleteer, having launched the websites FoxAttacks, which runs critiques on Fox News, and TheRealMcCain, which highlights flip-flops in Sen. John McCain's policy positions. Greenwald says his pieces, posted on YouTube and other sites, have reached 2.4 million viewers without him having to spend a penny of marketing money.

Like Morissette, Greenwald uses video as social critique, with the issues he once addressed in a six-hour miniseries now framed in two-minute commentaries. The shorts have just as much visceral immediacy as Morissette's video, not just because of their eye-catching visuals but because they are passed along — i.e. endorsed — by peers and friends. One of Greenwald's most viewed pieces, "Fox Attacks Black America," has been credited with helping spur the leading three Democratic presidential candidates to pull out of a September debate co-sponsored by Fox News.

"People spread these short pieces around because they want to, not because they're being bankrolled by a giant studio marketing campaign," he says. "Our young staffers can shoot and edit these pieces in three days and have them up for people to see. It's not just user-generated content. When someone watches it and hits the forward button, it's user-distributed too. You're replacing Universal Studios with a peer-to-peer network with the click of a mouse."

Universal Studios isn't going to disappear anytime soon. Nor, sadly, will Fergie and her humps. But the era of video activism is here to stay. Whether you're a political activist or a singer eager to try your hand at social comment, the pop culture playing field has never been more open to ideas than it is today.

"The Big Picture" runs each Tuesday in Calendar. Questions or criticism can be e-mailed to patrick.goldstein@latimes.com.