

MUSIC TELEVISION: OVERVIEW OF A PHENOMENON

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The date is August 1, 1981. First there is a simple introduction: "Ladies and Gentlemen... Rock and roll!" Then there is music with visual images. It is the first video clip shown on the channel. The Buggles are singing "Video Killed the Radio Star", a song from their album, The Age of Plastic. There are images of a girl listening to an old-fashioned radio. Then, the group is seen performing on television monitors and in front of television cameras. Symbolism is running rampant. Music Television, or MTV as it is known, has signed on the air. A phenomenon has begun.

MTV means rock music videos to its millions of viewers. The popularity of the channel has made the music videos more common, even to non-MTV viewers. The videos existed before August 1, 1981, though. Prior to this time, American videos were used almost exclusively overseas on closed-circuit television, on cable as fillers in programming, and in new wave rock clubs to basically promote the American groups in other countries.¹ In the early 1980's however, this changed, as the research for MTV began. Marshall Cohen, then in charge of research for the Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC), questioned 600 people between the ages of 14 and 34 to determine the amount of interest in such a channel. With an 85 percent positive response, it was decided that more research was needed.² Cohen then did what he calls a "market-segmentation study" to see who the channel should feature, the format, and the image of MTV.³ Surveys of cable operators, advertising agencies, and record companies were taken as well.

The results from these tests were also generally favorable.⁴

Video clips were shown on the Nickelodeon cable service to test audience reaction. After the results came back positive also, WASEC decided to go ahead with the launch of MTV.⁵

The concept of MTV is credited to John Lack, executive vice president at WASEC. The others who helped get the channel on the air were Bob Pittman, WASEC vice president of programming, Larry Divney, WASEC vice president of advertising sales, and Robert McGroarty WASEC vice president of marketing.⁶ Each of these men had great success in the past working for the likes of NBC Radio, CBS Radio, and WLS-AM in Chicago.⁷ The possibilities for MTV seemed limitless, and the men in charge were well aware of this. Lack describes the feelings of management at the time:

When we got going we saw we had four opportunities. First, because of the technology, we had the chance to add stereo to television -- a stereo signal with a picture. Second, because of our low overhead -- almost all of our programming is given to us by the record companies -- we were able to go on in a long form, like radio, twenty-four hours. Third, we found that we could serve advertisers and an audience for a kind of television that hadn't existed before. Fourth, we were there for the record industry. We found we could help a business in trouble, and it worked, and they've responded. Ask anyone at CBS or RCA or Arista.

Still, as of this writing, MTV is the only twenty-four hour video music channel in stereo. This fact is proudly announced every hour. In truth, there has not been, or is, a channel quite like it. The effects of the channel are hard to determine, yet some facts are available. Throughout this paper, I will point out some of the possible effects that this phenomenon has had on the music industry, the cable television boom, the songwriters and

performers, and the American public. Peter W. Kaplan sums it up by saying that MTV is "Provocative and it is threatening and it is invigorating as an answer to the musical question, Is there life on television? It is almost definitely here to stay, and I mean really to stay."⁹

Who is watching MTV? Apparently, the answer is: many many people. MTV began on 160 cable systems, reaching about 2.1 million subscribers.¹⁰ Since that time, the numbers have multiplied incredibly. As of November 1983, the channel was being cabled into 16.8 million homes across the United States.¹¹ In any given hour, one million people are watching; 85 percent of them are between the ages of 12 and 34, a favorite target of advertisers.¹² Plus, at least half of the viewer are over age 24.¹³ The fact also entices the advertisers to buying MTV time. The average viewer is 23 years old and watches for an hour a day each weekday, and for 90 minutes over a weekend.¹⁴ In addition, they watch in groups, with an average of 2.7 people watching MTV together.¹⁵ Some prefer not to turn it off at all. Traci Reid of Santa Barbara, California, says, "I'd have it on 24 hours a day if Mom would let me."¹⁶

Certainly it is obvious that people are watching, and it is this fact that makes MTV a very important factor in the recent resurgence of record sales. The channel clearly has something to do with this. Let us take a closer look at what draws the person to MTV. Just what do you see when you turn the channel selector to MTV?

The set in the MTV studio seems haphazardly thrown together. There are many different areas of the set, each with a personality and name of its own. There is a lunch counter called "Little Sams",

a corner with a few plants named "The Jungle", "The Barber Chair", "The Pretzel Chair", "The Kitchenette", and "The Pickle Wall".¹⁷ The set is like a large version of a teenagers bedroom, complete with posters and pictures of recording artists posing with the MTV personnel. The idea of the set is to create the illusion of a furnished basement or recreation room. However, it does go beyond that image at times. One set is made up of television monitors, video games sit in the studio, a video jukebox, and an old classic car have recently been added to the surrounding atmosphere. The background is filled with "the kinds of goodies a fifteen-year-old would want in his bedroom -- stuff like stereo equipment, albums, wooden boxes, videogames and vaguely nifty doodads on the wall..."¹⁸ It is this set that provides the casual atmosphere that gives MTV its appeal.

Fitting in nicely with the laid-back setting are the video jockeys, or VJs. These five people have been called, "the glue that holds the videos together."¹⁹ In a sense, this is the duty of the VJ, just as a disc jockey keeps the music flowing in radio. The VJs give the viewer a feeling of watching video clips with a good friend instead of simply watching them alone on a television screen. Choosing the five VJs that are now seen on MTV was a difficult task. The audience reaction was always of great importance. Market research, for instance, showed that the VJ should be clean-shaven; a fact that was not taken lightly.²⁰ The producers interviewed approximately 1500 applicants before finally settling on the current combination of five.²¹ Those chosen were: Nina Blackwood, Mark Goodman, Alan Hunter, J. J. Jackson, and Martha Quinn.

Since its beginning in 1981, these five have been the ones to give MTV its humanity; its live appearances, and in fact, its driving force. Each of the VJs has a very separate and distinct air personality.

Nina Blackwood is somewhere near 30 years of age and came to MTV as an actress from Los Angeles. According to Sue Steinberg, who was an executive producer of MTV, Blackwood was "young-looking, sexy, hip... the young boys will go nuts."²² She is certainly played up to be the female sex symbol of the VJs. Descriptions of her range from "the sultry and shy one,"²³ to "MTV's blond bombshell."²⁴ Her deep voice sometimes gives viewers the impression that she is extremely serious, although at other times she comes across as a dizzy blonde. Blackwood says that the latter effect is not intentional. "I'm really a very serious person," she claims.²⁵

If Nina Blackwood is the female sex symbol of the group, the man most likely to be her counterpart is Mark Goodman. Steinberg said of him, he is "a teen-idol type -- we hoped young girls would write letters, start fan clubs..."²⁶ He has in fact received some notes from girls. Goodman, 30, is described by his fellow VJs as, "a music pro, a perfectionist, Mr. Smooth."²⁷ He certainly comes across as the picture of cool and smooth on the air. Goodman spent time as a DJ at WMMR in Philadelphia, and at WPLJ in New York where he was involved in programming. He would like to become involved in that aspect of MTV also, but the producers have not enlisted his help with those duties. Goodman feels that this is a disadvantage for the channel saying, "Now, especially, we want to be a step ahead musically, to be opinion leaders. If I say I

enjoy something, I'd like people to check it out,"²⁸

The other experienced radio hand in the VJ slot is 37 year-old J. J. Jackson. He worked at KLOS in Los Angeles and at Boston's top "underground" FM station, WBCN.²⁹ Jackson is the only black in the group. With his experience, he is also the most knowledgeable of the five and has more connections in the business. He is referred to as "The Chairman", and "a rock encyclopedia" by his peers.³⁰ It is obvious from Jackson's personality on the air, that he knows what he is doing. In fact, at times he looks like he has been doing this job for most of his life. Jackson appears very comfortable with his surroundings and is always in control. He seems to be the most professional of the group in my opinion. His confidence passes on to the viewer just by watching him.

Alan Hunter gives MTV its movement on the set. Hunter is a 26 year-old ex-actor from Mississippi whose on-camera stunts show the only real signs of activity on the set. The others describe him as "down-home, witty and irreverent."³¹ It is this irreverence for the music industry that makes him a fresh change from his male companions. Hunter continues to consider himself as an actor. He says, "As an actor, I'd be lying if I said MTV is the only thing I ever want to do. It's great now and will continue to be great. But I'd like to do both -- acting off-broadway at night, getting involved in films, and so on. Being on MTV is good exposure, but then you have to prove you can be more than a VJ."³²

The fifth member of the elite VJ cast is perky, 24 year-old Martha Quinn. She was little more than a fresh graduate of New York

University with an interest in music when she came to MTV back in 1981. Since then, things have picked up for her. Last year, she was receiving over 200 fan letters each week.³³ Quinn, the step-daughter of pop economist Jane Bryant Quinn, is the typical music fan turned loose. She has little experience, but what she does have is a certain "magic". MTV executive producer Julian Goldberg describes it by saying, "It's as if Martha were born to be on TV. She relates to a camera the way the rest of us relate to people."³⁴ Quinn brings a simplistic approach to the VJ position. At times she seems lost with all that surrounds her, but she makes the viewer feel a part of her show. She is successful because she provides the viewer with a friend that is as excited with the music scene as the average MTV viewer. She is the average music fan relating to other music fans about music. "I try not to tamper with the fact that I'm a fan," she states. "I don't know about album production techniques; I just know what I like. That's the way most of the world is."³⁵

A sixth VJ should be added to the cast soon. Interviews, auditions, and applications have been occurring for over a year now, but still there has been no decision made about the person to fill that slot. Whoever does step into the role as the sixth VJ will have to live up to the original requirements set down by Pittman: be "good guides who could sublimate their egos, be human faces you could relate to."³⁶ Their connection to the music was to be only symbolic; they would not actually program the music themselves. The five had to create their own job descriptions.

Hunter explains, "When MTV started, we had no idea what it would become. When I got the job, I said O.K., now explain it to me."³⁷ Jackson sums it up best by stating, "No one told us what to do, so we just did it."³⁸ What they actually did was to nonchalantly become celebrities in their own right. Mick Fleetwood, drummer for the group Fleetwood Mac, commented, "At concerts I've seen them get more applause than the bands they introduce."³⁹ The VJ's job is more than just fame. There is a great deal of research that goes into the job. Each VJ must keep up to date with all of the bands and new music on the channel. During their off-hours, they study videos in the "VJ Lounge" so they can comment on them intelligently afterward. This gives the viewer that the show is being done live, when in fact, almost everything is taped days before the actual air date. Another touch that makes the program look live is the calm, nonchalant attitude of the VJs. Mistakes are rarely corrected. "There is a nice air of naiveté about them I find refreshing," says Fleetwood.⁴⁰ This relaxed atmosphere has made the VJs an integral part of MTV's success. Although these five neo-celebrities are not sharing greatly in the success of MTV financially yet, their three-year contracts come up for negotiation in the summer of 1984.⁴¹ It will be interesting to see what the price of an established VJ will be.

One of the on-air duties is the reporting of the Music News. These are usually very short stories about people involved in the music industry that are mentioned throughout the day. A segment of Music News is presented usually twice an hour with stories repeated every two or three hours. According to Pittman, MTV

decided to do music news to help their audience identify with the industry, saying that "Knowledge is status" among music cultures.⁴²

Occasionally, an interview with a famous musician is cut into the music news. Usually a VJ conducts a long interview from which these snippets are cut for use throughout a long period of time.

These interviews particularly appeal to VJs Quinn and Blackwood.

"I like to talk to artists about their videos," Blackwood says.

"I'd like to do more interviews because I enjoy meeting new people and finding out how they decided to pursue the road they have."⁴³

A viewer cannot escape the commercials that appear on MTV. Sometimes, though, it is difficult to tell the ads from the music clips. The commercials shown on the channel almost always contain music. The music ties the commercial in with the rest of the programming and fits it in with the flow of MTV. A few spots are produced just like a thirty or sixty-second clip, complete with identification tags. Advertisers such as Clairol, Coca-Cola, Wrangler, Union Bay, Chams, and many others have chosen to use an almost entirely musical message. Very few spots contain no music at all. The few that are void of music usually depend greatly on the use of sound effects. There are even a few produced without a music bed. These ads are usually for medicines or acne cremes. Just as the sound of the programming, the sound of the ads on the channel are very musical, very upbeat, and very carefully targeted toward the audience of MTV. It is clear in almost every spot that the target audience is between 12 and 34 years old. Advertisers have learned how to use MTV's demographics, and the channel itself has learned how to deliver results to the advertiser.

Another trend in the commercials shown on MTV is the increasing use of video clips. Albums are sold this way, with the advertising being done by the record companies. This is an excellent way to advertise an album and an artist. Frequently two different clips by a performer are used together to advertise an album quite effectively. Another user of video clips are record stores. Many are using national spots with a mention on a tag at the end of an announcement. There are two phone-in record stores, Hot Rock and Rock Box, which use the clips in their own commercials. The use of the videos effectively ties in the advertising with the MTV programming.

With the popularity of MTV growing, the merchandising of the MTV logo also increases. The viewer can buy the logo on many articles of clothing. Some examples are: tee shirts, sweat shirts, letter jackets, hats, and satin jackets. The clothing line is large enough that a catalogue is printed. It is available from MTV upon request. The merchandise is not limited to clothing, however. A publication entitled, "Who's Who in Music Video" features 100 acts and their videos which have helped to make the channel so successful. Certainly more products will be manufactured to take advantage of the popularity of MTV.

Program promotions on the channel are definitely original. At the top of each hour, a rocket blasts off creating an incredible stereo sound effect. Astronauts are shown on the moon saluting an American flag which has been incredibly turned into an MTV flag through the magic of television. The VJ's voice then tells three of the artists to be featured in that hour along with accom-

anying photos. The theme music pumps a feeling of power into the promo. This same theme is repeated at the bottom of the hour, as an astronaut is shown saluting the MTV flag, while a voice-over is read by the VJ on duty. Other animated identification shorts include the MTV logo made out of brick, stone, french fries, and paint dots. A few identification shorts use video clips or live shots of performers. For example, the three members of the group ZZ Top are shown telling the viewer to keep watching MTV -- all day and all night.

A favorite trick used in the channel's promos is the use of old black and white film footage, edited to fit into a script, which is dubbed over the visuals. An example of this is the "MTV Science Director" promo which shows an old scientist explaining an experiment to the camera. However, MTV dubs a voice over the clip that turns the scientist into a salesman for the stereo hookup to MTV. These vintage film clippings are used very well, using humor to benefit the overall effect.

Some of the best promos are for the contests run by the channel. The promos are good because the contests themselves are so different from anything run by a radio station. This is due to the differing strategies of the two media. Bob Pittman explains by saying that instead of holding contests to get more listeners, MTV holds them "to help build an emotional bond through the fantasies they develop."⁴⁴ John Sykes, MTV's programming head explains further:

Promotion is key. (We wanted) MTV almost larger than life when we started, so we had to have grand fantasy promotions. Everything had to have a weird edge to it. Any station can give a trip to Hawaii, but we offered a luau with Pat Benatar. Zany ideas, but there's a method to the madness: good marketing plan, strong rotation for announcements, entries in record stores... it means our viewers are involved in MTV. 45

Summing it up, Sykes remarked about the strange contests, "MTV was so new and different, we couldn't give away six-packs and pizza."⁴⁶

On December 6, 1983, MTV combined a contest with a special live concert in their Asia in Asia promotion. Sykes called it "the most extensive promotion we've done to date."⁴⁷ A contest was held giving away trips to see the rock group Asia in concert in Tokyo, Japan. That concert was subsequently broadcast live on MTV. The concert was also simulcast by Westwood One, a syndicated radio network, and other radio stations.⁴⁸ A total of 285 stations broadcast the sold-out concert which went off without any major problems.⁴⁹ The "Asia in Asia" contest shows the power of MTV to create an event, then capitalize on it by promoting the concert and the channel at the same time. Certainly this is just a small sample of what the power of MTV can accomplish.

MTV also has various other special programs. Every weekend many different events take place. On Friday night, two videos compete in a popularity contest against each other called the Friday Night Fights, with the audience calling in to vote and determine the winner. Saturday night is concert night with a multitude of groups performing for the MTV cameras. Many of these concerts were actually recorded by the channel's crew, but others are already in video long form to be shown. On Sunday night special programs such as short movies or interviews are shown. Once each month, the MTV Basement Tapes contest is conducted with six unsigned bands competing for a recording contract. Again, this contest has the winners determined by the audience phoning in, which makes the channel seem a little bit closer to the average viewer. World Premiere Videos usually are presented at the rate of two per week,

although this varies greatly. This is simply the very first showing of a video clip anywhere. Many artists choose to provide their video to MTV first to pick up a little added publicity from being a World Premiere. Perhaps the most unpredictable program is the Guest VJ hour. A celebrity, usually a big name rock musician, acts as VJ for an hour and generally does what he wishes. For example, Guest VJ Dan Aykroyd became irritated with the chair he was sitting in, so he cut it in half with a chain saw! The smoke from the incident set off fire alarms in the studio and halted production for five minutes.⁵⁰ This wild programming definitely puts MTV in a category of its own. However, even with this original programming, the major point of the channel is that they are still the only twenty-four hour all video music channel. It is video music that started the phenomenon back in August of 1981, and it is video music that still draws people to MTV today.

The videos run one after the other, hour after hour, day after day, and week after week. It has been compared to a radio station with pictures, but MTV is much more than that. It is this conglomeration of visual images set to popular music that makes the channel work. Each clip costs anywhere from \$5,000 to \$500,000 with the average price of production at about \$30,000.⁵¹ A budget of \$150,000 though is not at all uncommon.⁵² What does the viewer get for the \$30,000 worth of videotape? The answer is: an addicting montage of stories, concerts, and visual imagery that has spelled success for MTV.

Each video is a three to four minute "mini-movie" that is matched with a popular song to enhanced the music. The clips had

their start back in the 60's when the British television show "Top of the Pops" started showing videotaped performances from groups instead of live performances. In 1975, Bruce Gowers directed a "concept" video for a little-known British band's song "Bohemian Rhapsody". After the video appeared, the band, Queen, saw the sales of their album soar.⁵³ From that beginning, the clips have grown in number, in popularity, and in quality. In fact, The Museum of Modern Art added three videos to its permanent collection.⁵⁴ A major reason for the increased quality is the big-name directors that turn from motion pictures to put their influence into the video music business. Bob Giraldi showed his style in Michael Jackson's "Beat It", a \$150,000 budgeted, award-winning video. He also directed the Jackson-Paul McCartney collaboration on "Say Say Say". Bob Rafelson worked with Lionel Richie on his "All Night Long" video, while John Landis, director of Animal House, Twilight Zone: The Movie, and An American Werewolf in London, teamed up with superstar Michael Jackson and choreographer Michael Peters to produce the full-length video/mini-movie "Thriller". This fourteen-minute version of a five-minute song was even shown in movie theatres to make it eligible for the Academy Awards.⁵⁵ With the combination of experienced directors and large-budgeted scripts, the videos can be done better and better. Some musicians take more of an active interest in the directing of their videos. Martin Briley, singer and songwriter, prefers to take an active interest in the direction while other artists completely trust the director to do the work. Herbie Hancock, keyboardist, explains,

"I wouldn't go about telling a bass player how to do his job, nor would I dictate to a director."⁵⁶ Whatever the method, a good director can vastly improve a video; possibly enough to improve record sales.

There are basically two types of video clips: the concert video and the conceptual video. The concert videos usually show the band performing before a live audience, although some of them are shot before cameras only without the live atmosphere that an audience provides. These are the easiest videos to plan and shoot, and they are also the cheapest to produce. However, the "most visually arresting clips are the 'concept' videos".⁵⁷ It is also the conceptual videos that are the extremely good ones. Every winning video at the Billboard Video Music Awards in 1984 was a conceptual clip.⁵⁸ These conceptual videos are probably more popular than concert videos because of the repetition of playing clips. Len Epanq, Polygram Records' vice-president of video states, "These videos have to hold up to repeat play, and how many times can you watch a drummer hit a drum?"⁵⁹

However, even within the "conceptual" category, there are two subgroups. According to Darryl Hall of the pop duo Hall & Oates, "You now have two schools emerging in the music industry: Those who, like us, want our videos to set a mood and those who are, in effect, actors making miniepics."⁶⁰ An excellent example of the first group is the Hall & Oates video clip for the song "Adult Education". A plot in the video is almost nonexistent, but the setting, costumes, and actions all set forth a specific mood which transmits into the song. On the other hand, many "miniepics" are among the most popular videos shown on MTV. The grand-

daddy of all conceptual clips would have to be the "Thriller" video. This fourteen-minute story with a reported budget of one-half of one million dollars makes use of a story idea in the lyrics and a lot of imagination on the part of performer Michael Jackson and director John Landis. The clip parodies old horror movies with a vignette of Jackson and co-star Ola Ray performing a "werewolf scene" to set the tone before the title music even starts. When the song "Thriller" does begin, another story of zombies and sinister fiends begins with it. The video is full of special effects and dancing zombies -- a visual montage that is addicting to the viewer.

It was two other Jackson clips that set the standard for conceptual videos. The first was "Billie Jean"; a \$75,000 clip featuring Jackson as "a light-stepping, back-alley lover en route to a tryst."⁶¹ That route is lined with sidewalks and stairs that light up, and a photographer trying to snap photographs of the prancing Jackson. Then came "Beat It". That clip cost over \$120,000 to produce with a cast of 25 dancers and 50 youth gang members.⁶² It featured Jackson turning a gang fight into a dance party. With these videos, the standard of conceptual clips went even higher.

"Beat It" also started a trend that has become quite commonplace since. The clip has an "introduction" before the music starts with only sound effects to go with the visual scene set in a small run-down cafe. According to Jackson's manager and sources at CBS Records, MTV at first refused to keep the twenty second introduction in the video. However when threatened with the clip entirely by the record company, MTV decided to run the clip intact.⁶³

Since "Beat It", many other videos have included an introduction before beginning the music. Among the artists with clips using the technique are The Pretenders, Lionel Richie, Duran Duran, ZZ Top, Rick Springfield, and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

Another technique made popular by "Beat It" was the use of sound effects during the song to correlate with the visual happenings. In Jackson's clip, the sound of manhole covers moving and doors opening are heard during the song along with the music. Since then, many artists have used the sound effects during the music. In Lionel Richie's "Running With the Night", almost every sound from police radios on motorcycles to Richie snapping his fingers are heard. Other clips use the technique more sparingly.

Of all effects that are used, the visual special effects seem to be the most popular, both with the artists and the viewers. Producer Patrick Kriwanek says that the question most often asked of him when planning a video is: "Can you make it look like the last 30 minutes of 'Star Wars'?"⁶⁴ Such high goals are obviously present in the minds of many directors with the amount of visual effects present in most videos shown on MTV. However, as Len Epanand warns, "It is possible to be too rich, which can damage the song if it's overly laden with visuals."⁶⁵ The video "Goodbye To You" by the group Scandal is an excellent example of this. The entire clip is concert-oriented with chroma-keyed effects that wipe out parts of the band members. On top of this is a color tinting system which changes hues constantly. All this movement and change on top of what would actually be a bland, relatively stable concert video turns it into a clip that could make the viewer dizzy. Kriwanek sums up the situation by saying, "It's

very easy to razzle-dazzle and 'bell and whistle' your viewer with effects. But when the clip is over, your audience may not remember what the artist looks like."⁶⁶ The directors of the videos must keep in mind that effects are fine, but too many of them can confuse the viewer. This is an important factor to consider, since many times the quality of the clip can influence the song's popularity.

Another big trend in videos today is the extensive use of dance in song interpretation. Prime examples are "Billie Jean", "Beat It", "Thriller", and Stevie Nicks' "Stand Back". These especially featured dancing as the main attraction of the video, with the trend spreading to other artists such as Robert Plant and Pat Benatar. John Gruen of Dance magazine comments on the trend saying:

It's not that each segment contains actual dance sequences, although some, like segments produced by Tony (sic) Basil (herself a choreographer), Talking Heads, or the Australian group Men at Work contain dancing of a very anachronistic sort. Most clips, however, have no dancing at all, yet because nothing is ever static, these visualizations could easily stand on their own as brief video-performance pieces or video-ballets particularly when viewed with the sound off. ⁶⁷

Alicia Culver, director of college, club and video promotion of IRS Records, says of the dance trend, "People have always liked it, just look at the success of 'American Bandstand' and 'Soul Train'. I even see kids on the street doing Michael Jackson moves. It's happy, carefree and something people can enjoy."⁶⁸ Also Don Beck, Epic Records' director of merchandising states that, "Dance is entertaining, exciting, and shows other dimensions if used cleverly."⁶⁹ The dance trend may continue in videos, especially with the success

of dancing movies such as Flashdance, and Footloose. If not, another trend will take its place because the components of a popular video are often copied to take advantage of a growing trend, almost like a bandwagon effect. Yet dance is the trend now, and will probably continue as the major force in videos; especially upon looking at the continued success of the dancing television shows mentioned by Culver earlier.

The videos are a great promotional means for artists, providing that the clips are good and make the performers look exciting and interesting. The whole point is to make both the artist and the music more interesting, and with all the trends and special effects used now and those yet to be developed, the videos being produced should continue to become more creative and innovative.

The channel's rotation list is split into three sections; heavy, medium and light rotation. Videos in light rotation are played a maximum of twice per day. More popular clips are put into medium rotation where it airs up to three times per day. The most sought after position is to have a video in heavy rotation, where it plays four times each day, or about once every six hours. These positions become very important for groups fighting to get their clips on MTV. Since the number of videos in heavy rotation is not very flexible, a clip must really impress to obtain this coveted position.

MTV has taken a lot of criticism about its format. The music played on the channel is limited to the definition of "rock and roll" put forward by Bob Pittman. The definition is brought about through research, usually done over the telephone. Pittman's advance

work shows that the average MTV viewer would be turned off by video clips of country, rhythm and blues, or easy listening hits. He vowed to air any rock video that passed the technical standards that didn't "show naked women running around or throwing babies out of trucks."⁷⁰ Pittman chose rock and roll as the format "because the audience was larger;" and "The mostly white rock audience was more excited about rock than the largely black audience was about contemporary rhythm and blues."⁷¹ However the format does not stop with just rock and roll. According to John Sykes, the format includes new music also. "When we started our general idea was to use television to expose new music."⁷² The new music has been aired quite extensively, sometimes launching new careers. Acts like The Human League, Duran Duran, and Men at Work owe a great deal of their success to MTV airplay.

Making the MTV playlist is the end result of a screening process done at the channel's head offices. There is no strict set of criteria, so each video must be judged separately. However a few general guidelines are set. "Gratuitous sex and violence are out," according to Sykes. "Since we are a free service, we have to respect community standards. We realize that the set is on in over 18 million homes around the country."⁷³ If no objections are found in the video to begin with, then the clip is tested in terms of format. This is where many of the clips fail to meet the MTV standards. If the video passes the format inspection, it is then studied by a group of four who actually end up scheduling the clips. The group is made up of Sykes, Les Garland, MTV vice-

president of programming, Gale Sparrow, director of talent and artist relations, and Buzz Brindle, MTV music director.⁷⁴ If the video obtains the approval of this group it is put into rotation; either heavy, medium or light depending on how well the clip is liked by the programmers. Competition for the heavy rotation slots is very fierce, and this is one of the major reasons that there have been so many complaints about the channel's format.

Rick James was the first major complaintant against MTV. After his video for the song "Super Freak" was rejected by the channel, James called the MTV executives racists and charged that the channel set "black people back 400 years."⁷⁵ Sykes countered that accusation by stating that the channel plays clips by "Blacks from Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie to Sylvester and Prince."⁷⁶ He continues by saying that James has turned a format issue into a racial issue. "We are not into middle-of-the-road music. We do not program country or heavy R&B either. We reject acts as being too country -- not because they're white, but because of the music."⁷⁷ Les Garland concurs by defining MTV's format as somewhere between Album Oriented Rock (AOR) and modern pop. According to Garland, the country and R&B songs are too far off the musical spectrum to be played.⁷⁸ "You cannot be all things to all people. You cannot play jazz and country music and funk. You lose your focus."⁷⁹ However the definition of rock and roll put forth by Pittman and the rest of the programming staff does need some work. Despite Pittman's argument that the "definition is not speculation," and "There's a million dollar's worth of research there," still refinement is obviously necessary.⁸⁰ The presence of videos from

Darryl Hall & John Oates with heavy soul overtones shows one weakness, while the appearance on the playlist of "You Can't Hurry Love" with Phil Collins recording the old Supremes tune shows more hypocrisy. While these differences do exist in some form, in my opinion, too much is made of the issue. Too many people want to force MTV into an MOR format simply because it is the only channel of its kind. Record store owner Michael Lewis writes, "To try to force a programming issue on MTV is unfair. Should a black-format radio station play Quiet Riot because they have white listeners? Should a country station play Rick James because of black listeners?"⁸¹ Jeff Scheckner takes the thought even further by pointing out that, "MTV has responded to its lack of black music acts by stretching its boundaries to include black acts only remotely considered rock, i.e. Lionel Richie, Shalamar and Herbie Hancock. At the same time, they are playing some black video that even black radio is not receptive to -- Clarence Clemons, Sylvester and Peter Tosh."⁸²

The racism complaints were much greater before March of 1983. Then came Michael Jackson. The pressure hit a climax with the release of Jackson's first video from his Thriller album, "Billie Jean". The album was the best seller in the country, and the video was immaculate. It featured the magical dancing of Jackson and many special effects. The MTV programmers had reached a critical decision: Should they reject the video, calling it too R&B, or add it to the playlist. MTV had almost no choice in the matter. With all the racism complaints mounting, the pressure was on from the black community. In addition, Thriller was the number one

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rock album in the country, so how could it not fit into the format? The programmers were getting pressure from inside the organization as well. VJs and other employees were urging them to go ahead with the clip. J.J. Jackson told Rolling Stone magazine, "I think we all wanted to see 'Billie Jean' on the channel."⁸³ On top of all that CBS Records are rumored to have added pressure to the situation by threatening to pull all of their clips if "Billie Jean" was not accepted. CBS Records officials have since denied that this actually happened, but the confrontation had clearly reached a showdown.

MTV responded by adding the clip in early March of 1983 into heavy rotation. After that, the next Jackson video, "Beat It", was added into heavy rotation also. From that point, the number of black performers appearing in rotation has noticeably increased. Rolling Stone that before "Billie Jean" only two black acts were in the sixty clip rotation. By the end of April, the rotation had eleven black acts, including three in heavy rotation.⁸⁴ An editorial in Billboard recognized this occurrence, noting the presence of clips by Ashford & Simpson, Andre Cymone, and Earth Wind and Fire on the playlist.⁸⁵ Les Garland claimed though, that the playing of these clips did not mean a change in the MTV rock and roll definition. Sykes backed him up using the term "new music" when answering questions at the Billboard Video Music Conference.⁸⁶ Apparently the term includes some black acts to the MTV programmers, but it does show that the channel has made some concessions to appease those crying racism.

Even with the concessions made, some people are still intent upon changing the format of MTV to fit their own standards. Joe Tamburro, program director of WDAS in Philadelphia suggested that whatever percentage of the population blacks make up, the same percentage of black videos should be programmed on MTV.⁸⁷ This idea is probably as ridiculous as has been conceived. The format of the channel would be entirely forced upon MTV. Would Mr. Tamburro be willing to program his radio station according to the percentage of white people in the population? Probably not. Why then should he expect MTV to conform to conform to a "something for everyone" format? Tamburro must remember that MTV does not hold a patent on the video music channel. The channel is, in all likelihood, simply the first of many different channels with many different formats.

Certainly there is a need for a better definition of MTV's format. While it is strictly up to the programming department to air whatever they feel should be put on, consistency is needed to improve the sound, and looks of the channel. If MTV was limited just as a radio station, I feel that the problems with the format would definately hurt their performance in the marketplace. However, MTV has no real competition. Thus, for the time being, it is free to program what it wishes. The pressure of airing black videos should be eased when the Apollo Entertainment^{Network} begins its broadcasting. The channel has been called a "black MTV" and will feature a black-formatted sound beginning sometime late in 1984. Until then, MTV stands alone in status and power.

The power of MTV is shown in the increased saled of records. A CBS Records publicist used a specific example. "Men at Work's

first album wasn't getting any airplay. But when MTV and the other video shows picked up on it, record stores said they had never seen anything like the demand they had for it."⁸⁸ Other examples include the J. Geils Band who recorded eleven albums from 1969 until 1982, with none reaching number one or selling a million copies. Their twelfth album, Freeze Frame, was promoted with two separate videos and the album sold over a million copies and hit the top of the charts.⁸⁹ Michael Jackson's Thriller album fell out of the number one slot until the release of the "Thriller" video. "it went on MTV, and all of a sudden we started sell mass quantities of the album again," said Dick Giering, a Denver record store owner.⁹⁰ Paul Grein of Billboard recognized the same MTV influence on the album sales.⁹¹ Other examples are easy to pick out, but actual figures are hard to find. "As soon as we premiere a video, a radio station can program the single," says Sykes. "So it's hard to say who's responsible for the sales."⁹² A spokesman for Capitol Records told Billboard, "I don't have a piece of paper to back up the fact that videos sell records."⁹³ However, a few informal surveys have been conducted. One found a ten to thirty percent increase in new record sales after the area has been wired for cable."⁹⁴ A Billboard survey showed a sales increase of fifteen to twenty percent for acts shown on MTV. Whether the statistics are accurate or not, it is obvious that the videos are helping. One only has to look for a short period of time in a local record store to see stickers proclaiming "As seen on MTV" plastered on albums of many different types to help the sales. According to

Hall & Oates manager Tommy Mattola, "You can't release a record today without a video."⁹⁵ However, the power of the clip can hurt as well as help. David Sonenberg, rock manager, puts it like this:

a blatantly ugly video can ruin a record by diminishing the groove of the music. But by planting a tremendously hot image on the kid's brains, the video can tangibly focus on the song's message and motivate a buy. ⁹⁶

I can think of no feasible reasoning to support an argument that MTV does not influence record sales. It is obvious to the record companies as well.

Chrysalis Records realized the importance of MTV exposure to break their newest star, Billy Idol. A video of Idol's song "White Wedding" helped bring the tune back to the charts in the United States even though the record was eighteen months old. Brendan Bourke of Chrysalis stated, "MTV has really helped us to break Billy."⁹⁷ He also talked of the lack of video outlets in other countries making it hard to get exposure for Idol's music.⁹⁸

Capitol Records have also recognized the significance of MTV and its role in breaking out new groups. The company serviced the channel with a copy of Duran Duran's "Union of the Snake" over a week before its release to American radio stations. This action greatly upset radio programmers in this country, but emphasized the importance that the record companies put on MTV exposure.⁹⁹ New groups are especially helped by MTV, and record companies are quite aware of this. Companies check on the artist's "video potential" before signing them. In turn, the artists often get cash advances to help produce their video clips. Darryl Hall states, "These outlets are great for new groups because of the exposure it gives them.

For (established) groups like us, it's good because we aren't faceless anymore... It lets people know who we are."¹⁰⁰

The videos may be helping the artists, but it could end up hurting the creative effort of the music. Stephen Holden, pop music for the New York Times, tells of the rough quality of today's synthesizer-dominated bands, and the lack of connective words in their songs. "I think that rock videos are in part responsible for pop music moving in that direction."¹⁰¹ August Donnell of Kid Creole and the Coconuts states, "The attention that used to be devoted to content and song form is now being given over to videos."¹⁰² Even with this danger, artists are still very excited about writing their new songs with video in mind. Patrick Simmons, once of the Doobie Brothers and now a solo artist claims, "I think that's just the natural progression for music to take at this time."¹⁰³ Neil Schon of the group Journey, told his video director, Tom Buckholtz, "Next time you're going to write the songs with me. That way, we'll definately get it right."¹⁰⁴

MTV is the first twenty-four hour video music channel, but it is not the only place where videos are aired. NBC has begun a weekly, ninety-minute program of video clips called Friday Night Videos which has become very popular. The USA Network features Night Flight on the weekends and Radio 1990 throughout the week. Night Tracks is featured on WTBS in Atlanta, Showtime airs Showtime Video Rock and Take Five, Cinemax features Album Flash, HBO shows Video Jukebox, and the Playboy Channel presents Hot Rocks. Local programs are aired in many cities including Washington, Oklahoma City, Nashville, Topeka, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Indianapolis. In addition, plans for other MTV-type video music channels are in the works for later in 1984 and in 1985.

Another trend begun by MTV's popularity is the use of stereo simulcasting. Since the channel is broadcast in stereo, others are attempting to imitate the sound by cooperating with FM radio stations around the country. Friday Night Videos uses this technique to enhance the sound; and hopefully, the number of viewers. HBO also uses simulcasting for the first run of selected concerts. Even MTV uses simulcasting at certain times to appeal to those subscribers without the stereo hookup, and hopefully generate more stereo subscribers. And the simulcasting does draw viewers. Surveys conducted by HBO and NBC each show that at least half of their audience take advantage of simulcast opportunities.¹⁰⁵

Certainly MTV has proven to be a huge success. Advertising on the channel has increased from nineteen advertisers in 1981 to 125 two years later. John Lack explains the appeal saying, "We are a company that believes in specialized entertainment, and if you are Budweiser or Kawasaki, or Pepsi-Cola, you want our audience."¹⁰⁶ MTV delivers the age 12 to 34 audience to the advertiser which gives the channel a supply of spots to help pay the bills.

MTV does face some problems in the future, though. The major focus is on payment for videos with the Michael Jackson "Thriller" video playing a major part of the controversy. All sides of this problem have not yet surfaced, so I will refrain from discussing the matter in great detail. However, MTV must come to an agreement with the record companies about payment for clips and payment for providing videos to avoid another possible stalemate which could endanger the future of the channel.

What is the next step for MTV? The view of Robert Pittman is a possible concentration on the home video market. According to Pittman, MTV helps make the idea of home video viable due to the free promotion of video clips. He stated at the International Video Music Conference held by Billboard in late 1983, that the home video would satisfy a need for new video forms in much the same way that the video game did.¹⁰⁷

Even with all the endless possibilities for the future of MTV, the present remains clear. MTV is a phenomenon; both as a cable channel and as a music outlet. It serves as a "national radio station" exposing new music and giving a new look to established artists. Will the phenomenon of MTV continue? Probably the idea, if not the channel itself will continue to be around as long as television will be. The channel with no competition has the capabilities to stay forever, but with the format problems at MTV, a better video music channel can be run, and probably will be started in competition. In fact, I believe that soon there will be many music video channels on the dial to choose from, just as there are radio stations on the dial today. Once competition occurs, the programming executives at MTV will find out how well their original ideas will stand up to other ideas. Until then, MTV will stand on its own as the leader of the pack and a true phenomenon.

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