

MUSIC TELEVISION

MTV (Music Television) is the oldest and most influential American cable network specializing in music-related programming. It was launched on August 1, 1981, with the words "Ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll," spoken on camera by John Lack, one of the creators of MTV. This introduction was immediately followed by the music-video clip *Video Killed the Radio Star*, featuring a band called the Buggles. The title proved somewhat prophetic as MTV greatly transformed the nature of music-industry stardom over the next several years. At the same time, MTV became a major presence in the cable-TV industry and in fact in the overall American cultural landscape.

One of the earliest and greatest cable success stories, MTV was established by Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC) after extensive marketing research. The key to MTV's viability, at least initially, was the availability of low-cost programming in the form of music videos. Originally these were provided free by record companies, which thought of them as advertising for their records and performers.

MTV presented one video after another in a constant "flow" that contrasted with the discrete individual programs found on other television networks. Clips were repeated from time to time according to a light, medium, or heavy "rotation" schedule. In this respect, MTV was like Top 40 radio (it even had video jockeys, or vjs, similar to radio djs). Moreover, it soon became apparent that MTV could "break" a recording act (move it into prominence, even star status), just as radio had done for decades.

A music video (also called a clip or promo clip) is a brief (usually three- to five-minute) television segment, usually shot on film but intended to be shown only on a TV set. The foundation of a video clip is the soundtrack, which is a recorded song, the sale of which is promoted by the video. In some cases, other material such as sound effects or introductory dialogue may also appear on the soundtrack.

The visual portion of a video usually consists of live concert footage or, more commonly, lip synching and pantomimed instrument playing by the recording artist(s). Dancing is also very common. In many cases there is also a dramatic or narrative concept, sometimes grounded in the song lyrics. The "acting" in a concept video is usually done by the musician(s), although in some cases (e.g., *Crazy* and other recent videos by Aerosmith) the video cuts away from the band to actors who act out a drama inspired by the lyrics. This is increasingly the case with clips previously used as sound-tracks for films. In these instances footage from the film, with the original actors, may be used. In some



Courtesy of MTV

Some of the displaced musical content of MTV, especially soft rock and other "adult" music, has landed on VH1 (Video Hits 1), a second video channel owned by MTV. Launched in 1985, VH?1 (hyphenated until 1994) quickly acquired a reputation as "video valium" for yuppies. Otherwise, the channel has had an indistinct image and has languished in the shadow of MTV. Makeovers in 1989 and (especially) 1994 raised the network's profile. By 1994 VH1 was playing slightly harder music and "breaking" recording artists, most notably Melissa Etheridge.

MTV and VH1 are by far the most important outlets for music-video programming in the United States. Many competing services have fallen by the wayside, while BET (Black Entertainment Television), CMT (Country Music Television), and TNN (The Nashville Network) are probably the most important survivors as of 1995. These networks specialize in black programming and country and western, which means that they compete only in a limited way with MTV and VH1.

Music video and MTV are major ingredients of television programming internationally. MTV Europe, launched in 1987, was followed by an Asian service in 1991 and MTV Latino in 1993. VH1 seems poised to follow a similar course, having established a European service in 1994. Both economically and aesthetically, MTV has wrought major changes in the entertainment industries. By combining music with television in a new way, MTV has charted a path for both industries (and movies as well) into a future of postmodern synergy.

- Gary Burns

FURTHER READING

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cases outtakes or re-shot sequences from these films are used to create a narrative link to the filmed musicians. (In these cases the video serves as an advertisement for the film as well as for the soundtrack album or the single track used in the clip.) The combination of elliptical storylines, record-as-soundtrack, lip sync, and direct address to the camera seemed so novel in the early 1980s that music video was often referred to as a new art form. The content of the new art was sometimes bold (and controversial) in its treatment of sex, violence, and other sensitive topics.

Many of the earliest MTV videos came from Great Britain, where the tradition of making promo clips was fairly well-developed. One of the earliest indications of MTV's commercial importance was the success of the British band Duran Duran in the American market. This band had great visual appeal and made interesting videos but was not receiving radio airplay as of 1981. In markets where MTV was available, the network's airing of Duran Duran's videos made the band immediately popular. Ultimately MTV proved to be immensely important to the careers of numerous artists, including Madonna, Michael Jackson, Prince, Peter Gabriel, and U2, as well as Duran Duran.

Andrew Goodwin identifies three phases in the history of MTV. The real ascendance of the network began in 1983 with phase two, the so-called "second launch" when MTV became available in Manhattan and Los Angeles. Phase three began in 1986, following Viacom's purchase of MTV from Warner Amex and the departure of Robert Pittman as President and CEO. Pittman had been largely responsible for leading MTV down the programming path of flow and narrowcasting. By 1986, however, MTV's ratings were in decline as a result of a too-narrow musical palette.

Throughout its so-called third phase, MTV has diversified its musical offerings, most notably into rap, dance music, and heavy metal. To some extent these genres have been segregated into their own program slots (*Yo! MTV Raps*, *Club MTV*, and *Headbangers' Ball*, respectively). At the same time, the move toward discrete programs has increasingly become a move away from music video. In the process, MTV has become more like a full-service network, offering news, sports, sitcoms, documentaries, cartoons, game shows, and other traditional TV fare. Often these programs are also musical in some sense (*Beavis and Butt-Head*), but sometimes they are not (reruns of *Speed Racer*).

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See also [Beavis and Butt-Head](#); [Music on Television](#); [Pittman, Robert](#)