

I WANT MY MTV

THE UNCENSORED STORY OF
THE MUSIC VIDEO REVOLUTION

Craig Marks and
Rob Tannenbaum



DUTTON

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To my mom and dad, who loved me unconditionally and always had cable.

And to Porter, for whom I promise to do the same. (C.M.)

*To Gabriela, who links the family that's recently gone
to the family that's soon to arrive. (R.T.)*

So the book covers the years 1981 to 1992 . . .

WALTER YETNIKOFF, record executive: Okay. I don't remember any of that.

Introduction

“RIDICULE IS NOTHING TO BE SCARED OF”

HARDLY ANYONE THOUGHT IT WOULD SUCCEED.

Upon hearing of the plan to launch a TV channel that would show music videos around the clock, businessmen of wealth and experience—worldly men who ran record companies and partied with rock stars, and visionary men who made fortunes by anticipating the explosion of cable TV—scoffed and snickered. Who would watch this channel? Even if it proved popular, who would advertise there? Why would GM or Anheuser-Busch want to reach this channel’s audience, consisting mostly of fourteen- to twenty-four-year-olds? Where’s the money in that?

Prior to the launch of this channel on August 1, 1981, only a few dozen people believed it would succeed, and all of them worked at the channel. The start-up staff was a coterie of misfits, inexperienced and determined, and included two one-eyed executives who were later hailed as visionaries. Which is not to say that *everyone* who worked at the channel believed it would succeed. “It sounded like an asinine idea,” Bob Pittman (one of the one-eyed executives) admitted five years after the launch, when the channel was the centerpiece of a \$525 million bidding war. It’s easy to imagine this as the theme of one of the network’s early advertising campaigns, which were usually brash and self-mocking: “MTV: It sounds like an asinine idea.”

There are two kinds of successful consumer products: some fill an existing need by making people’s lives easier (toilet paper, or the dishwasher), and others create a need that didn’t previously exist (sanitary wipes, or coffee). It’s easy to predict success for the first type of product, but harder for the second. In 1981, there was no need for music videos. MTV was an outlet for something that barely existed; the network had about a hundred of them in inventory, mostly by marginal or unpopular British and Australian bands. Not only that, MTV planned to get more videos by asking someone else—record labels, to make and pay for them, then hand them over for free. That’s not a business model, that’s chutzpah.

But from asinine beginnings, MTV became the sun around which popular culture rotated. The MTV aesthetic during its Golden Age of 1981 to 1992—quick cuts, celebrations of youth, shock value, impermanence, beauty—influenced not only music, but network and cable TV, radio, advertising, film, art, fashion, race, teen sexuality, even politics. The channel was plotted to captivate an audience whose interests had been ignored: John Lack, who started MTV, called teenagers “the demographic group least interested in TV,” because TV wasn’t interested in teens. Children had cartoons; adults had the evening news and most of the shows that followed it. Teens were an untapped audience, an invisible power. MTV gave them what they wanted, and got them not only interested in, but obsessed by MTV, making it their clubhouse.

Like MGM in the 1930s, or CBS from the mid-’50s to the mid-’70s, MTV became the preeminent arbiter of celebrity. Constant airplay of Michael Jackson videos helped make *Thriller* the best-selling album of all time. When MTV Europe launched in 1987 as the start of a global expansion that now reaches from Brazil to Pakistan, the network’s influence expanded beyond the U.S. *Yo! MTV Raps*,

which debuted a year later, gave hip-hop its first international forum and accelerated the music's popularity around the world. The channel's first foray into long-form programming, the faux-game show *Remote Control*, introduced dorm-dwelling smart-alecks to novice comedian Adam Sandler. When *House of Style* arrived the next year, it transformed Cindy Crawford from a model to a mogul. Cannily, MTV never tied success to the fate of any one or two stars. ("MTV works in dog years," Downtown Julie Brown wisecracked, after her VJ tenure ended.) Unlike traditional networks, which spend millions to retain popular shows and actors whose popularity is bound to dwindle, MTV sees talent as disposable and replaceable; the network is the star, not the performer. Martha Quinn got five years. Tawny Kitaen got a year and a half. A-ha got three months.

MTV gave work to young directors, producers, and executives who became power brokers in film and TV, most notably David Fincher, who received Academy Award nominations for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and *The Social Network*, and Michael Bay, who received no Academy Award nominations, but who made shit blow up real good in *Armageddon* and the *Transformers* series. Videos created ample work for *Playboy* playmates and for choreographers, dancers, mimes, animal trainers, pyrotechnicians, hairdressers, aestheticians, dry-ice vendors, coke dealers, and midgets. (Midgets were a staple of music videos. Midget freelance work surely peaked in the '80s.) MTV did a lot for record labels, helping to revive a slumping industry, but it was the bands who benefitted most. The channel gave a platform to new acts, asking only that they be beautiful or outrageous. MTV could make stars out of Brits in eyeliner, rappers in genie pants, permed Jersey boys, even choreographers with weak singing voices. Within weeks, acts went from journeymen or unknowns to stars whose faces were familiar across the country. Their lives were transformed, sometimes ruined. The story of music videos is also the story of overnight celebrity and the experiences created by celebrity: the indulgence and decadence, the backstage sexual exploits, the drugs that were as ever-present as makeup kits and hair weaves. This is true not only for the artists but for the network executives themselves, most spirited among them former radio program director Les Garland, who partied on yachts with Rod Stewart, cameoed in videos with Eddie Murphy, and charmed centerfolds, actresses, stewardesses, and starlets, often on the same night. A history of MTV is also a history of excess that has since vanished from the music business due to dwindling sales. As Simon Le Bon, the Marlon Brando of music videos, mutters darkly, "Nobody's got any money to make videos now." From today's frugal perspective, the stories of the video industry's invention, expansion, and domination read like the last days of the Roman Empire, if Nero had been really into dry ice and pyro.

Not all MTV content was fleeting. If an artist's peak coincided with the Golden Age of music videos, there's a good chance that artist is among the few remaining acts who can still sell out sheds, arenas, even stadiums, testament to MTV's pop-cultural dominance in its first decade. Before Xbox and Facebook, the Disney Channel and text-messaging, kids did one thing, separately but simultaneously: They watched MTV. Now those kids are parents, and when they want to relive their youth, they plunk down \$250 for a ticket to see Madonna, the Police, U2, Guns N' Roses, Bon Jovi, Van Halen, Bruce Springsteen, Motley Crue, George Michael, Michael Jackson (until his death), or Janet Jackson. All were synonymous with MTV's first decade, and all continued to pack enormodomes twenty and thirty years later. Oldsters, purists, clergymen, and boomers carped that MTV's corrupt value system promoted style over substance, impermanence over immortality. MTV and its viewers knew this was a false choice. Videos made songs better, not worse. They enhanced the joy of being a music fan, rather than diminishing it. Unless you were Billy Squier. Then, you were fucked. (See Chapter 21: "A Whopping, Steaming Turd.")

As the subject of an oral history, MTV is uniquely compelling; the network identity morphs but

never peters out. There's no dreary third act where the star gets old, Learns an Important Lesson, and ceases being relevant. Like *Charlie Brown* or *Beavis and Butt-head*, the passing of time does not age MTV. It is perpetually fourteen years old, about to start high school, excited, but not too smart. With vampiric persistence, the network perpetually finds new, young blood.

But for us, 1992 marks the end of MTV's Golden Era, which was brought to a close by a series of unrelated factors. Video budgets rose steeply, leading to wasteful displays; digital editing arrived, making it a snap for directors to flit between shots and angles; all the good ideas had been done; record labels increasingly interfered in video decisions; many of the best directors moved on to film; Madonna made *Body of Evidence*. It's also the year MTV debuted *The Real World*, a franchise show that sped a move away from videos, the network's founding mission, and into reality shows about kids in crisis, whether an unplanned pregnancy or how to un-marry Spencer Pratt. *The Real World* was the culmination of the network's initiative to create its own shows and was also the last time MTV could claim to be revolutionary. MTV created the video music industry, then abandoned it, leaving behind a trail of tears—disgruntled music-video fans have stamped the phrase “MTV sucks” and “Bring back music videos” all over the comments pages of YouTube.

MTV WAS CREATED BY WARNER AMEX SATELLITE ENTERTAINMENT Company (WASEC), a joint venture between two companies with little in common: Warner Communications, a fast-growing media company committed to “identifying new markets and new technologies,” and American Express, the credit-card giant, founded in 1850 as a shipping company. Warner executives believed in a future when all homes would be wired, and they invested heavily in cable TV and Atari home computers. (“The computer's emergence as a commonplace object in the home,” Warner's 1980 annual report predicted, “will, in fact, change life all over again for the American consumer.” They were right, but they were also too early to profit from their foresight.) Warner Communications envisioned cable TV as a sales tool, to deliver goods and services directly into the home, and American Express rode along in the hope that soon customers would buy the company's traveler's checks and investment services via two-way, interactive cable TV.

MTV first appeared in suburban and rural areas, where the cost per mile of digging and installing cable was far cheaper than in cities. As a result, it was seen first by teens who probably needed it the most—videos brought big-city ideas to the sticks, and terrified parents who had terrified *their* parents by listening to the Beatles. In small towns or big cities, MTV was like an early social network—when Stray Cats videos aired, showing the trio in rockabilly outfits, fans in the Midwest began coming to shows in cowboy shirts and pompadours. And Mike Score of *A Flock of Seagulls*, owner of early MTV's most unprecedented hair, says video exposure brought like-minded fans together at clubs where outcasts discovered they were part of a tribe.

Even if it accomplished nothing else, MTV pissed off baby boomers, in part because it signified a transition from an era when the biggest rock stars were bands that transformed public consciousness, to one where technology filled that role. Today, that transformation is complete: Apple sold 275 million iPods in the first nine years they were on the market, which is higher than the number of records sold by Elton John, Aerosmith, AC/DC, Pink Floyd, or U2 in their careers. But MTV was the first time technology became a rock star, because—unlike calculators, CD players, or home gaming systems—it was sold at a reasonable price.

Every new technology contains a philosophy. The Walkman told consumers they should never stray far from music, nor were they required to interact with strangers. The iPhone preached permanent

access to all media, while also miniaturizing the idea of status. What was the philosophy of MTV? It was best expressed in an Adam Ant song that was an early favorite on MTV: “Ridicule is nothing to be scared of.”

MTV was an invention, as many principals in the story emphasized to us. Music video was “the Wild, Wild West,” a lawless place where nerve and cunning hands were rewarded. “All the rules go away,” Bob Pittman told a reporter in 1981, and other people recall it as a time when “There were no rules.” One cinematographer proudly said, “We had a policy not just to break the rules, but to blow up the fucking rules.”

The people behind MTV had almost no TV experience, so they had no habits or allegiances to limit them—except when it came to picking videos. MTV’s programmers came from radio, where the trend was “narrowcasting,” a way of targeting a specific demographic and selling your popularity within that audience to advertisers, rather than aiming for the broadest possible audience. Broadcasting was Ed Sullivan creating a show that mixed the Beatles with Topo Gigio. Narrowcasting was embodied by MTV’s initial commitment to playing rock videos, which meant videos by white musicians.

MTV’s narrowcasting mission was challenged by Michael Jackson, whose *Thriller* videos transformed the network from a curiosity into a fulcrum. A similar event repeated five years later with rap, a style of music MTV feared, hesitantly embraced, and then built its brand around. Once that occurred, MTV became The Singularity, the last media force that represented an encompassing view of pop culture.

HISTORY HAS NOT RECORDED THE DATE, LOCATION, OR name of the first musician who was filmed playing or singing, but it’s likely to have happened soon after the movie camera was invented. Musicians are not modest, and the first one who saw a camera in operation probably suggested, “Hey, why don’t you point that thing at me while I play?”

Each decade had its own variation on music videos. In 1930, Warner Bros. Pictures began making “Spooney Melodies,” short performance films of popular songs, including “Just a Gigolo,” later revived by David Lee Roth. In the 1940s, thousands of black-and-white “soundies” were made with Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, and other suave, camera-ready jazz artists, dancers, and comedians.

Scopitones edged closer to the modern music video—the Scopitone was a coin-operated video jukebox, created in France and bigger than a refrigerator. In the 1960s, they could be found at diners and truck stops across the U.S. An article in *Variety* praised “the jet-paced editing, exceptionally vivid color and generally top-drawer production values” of Scopitone videos, many of which are catalogue on YouTube, where the editing seems, to modern eyes, more tugboat-paced. However, Scopitones were shamelessly lewd and provocative, full of cleavage, bikinis, and enough butt-shaking to match any gratuitous display seen in a Sir Mix-a-Lot or Poison video.

So MTV was the culmination of a fitful relationship that went back twenty-five years. “Since the beginning of time—1956—rock n’ roll and TV have never really hit it off,” said Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, shortly after MTV appeared. “But suddenly it’s like they’ve gotten married and can’t leave each other alone.” Richards picked 1956 because it was the year of Elvis Presley’s debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which delivered a giant audience of 60 million. *American Bandstand*, the first regular music show on TV, arrived the next year. After the Beatles topped Elvis by luring 73 million people to their first Ed Sullivan broadcast, the short-lived musical-variety series *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* appeared in the U.S., as well as the long-lived *Top of the Pops* in the UK. *The Monkees*

was a daffy mid-'60s show about a rock band who acted out their songs in a series of comic, almost slapstick vignettes.

Music shows of the '70s centered on live performances: *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in England, and ABC's excellent *In Concert*, quickly followed by *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* (hosted by Kirshner, who, years later, claimed credit for MTV and music videos), NBC's *The Midnight Special* (often hosted by the bland soft-pop star Helen Reddy), and PBS's more homespun *Austin City Limits* in 1977. There were even music-video programs prior to MTV: Australia had *Countdown* and *Sounds*, neighboring New Zealand had *Radio with Pictures*, the unhosted show *Video Concert Hall* began on the USA Network in 1978, and WNBC-TV in New York had *Album Tracks*, hosted by future MTV execs Bob Pittman and Lee Masters.

There were plenty of precedents for what began on August 1, 1981. And many pieces of film have been cited as "the first music video": The Beatles made short films for "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane"; the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Doors, and Bob Dylan made similar films, as did TV heartthrob Rick Nelson and country star Buck Owens. Queen's 1975 clip for "Bohemian Rhapsody" dazzled forward-thinking Britons and helped the song filibuster at number one across the UK. But the term "music video" (which barely existed before MTV) now connotes a specific set of qualities—aggressive directorship, contemporary editing and FX, sexuality, vivid colors, urgent movement, nonsensical juxtapositions, provocation, frolic, all combined for maximum impact on a small screen—that were not formalized until MTV provided a delivery system. There is no such thing as "the first music video."

What aired on MTV was so strange and unfamiliar that explaining it proved difficult. The channel's first mention in *Time* magazine contained language you might use to explain a laptop computer to a caveman: "The main ingredients in MTV's programming are 'video records' or 'videos': current recordings illustrated by 3- or 4-minute videotapes." A year later, *Time* writer Jay Cocks was still struggling to familiarize the magazine's audience with MTV, referring to videos as "illustrated songs" and "little three- or four-minute clips" and "production numbers soaked in blotter acid."

Even as MTV struggled financially, and employees worried the network could be shut down any day, its influence rippled across the culture, most quickly in film. In a review of the smash 1983 film *Flashdance*, Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* wrote, "Basically, the movie is a series of rock videos." She did not intend this as a compliment. The next year, *Flashdance* producer Jerry Bruckheimer got even more MTV-ish with *Beverly Hills Cop*, which spawned videos for the soundtrack songs "Axel F," "Neutron Dance," and "The Heat Is On." "It was free promotion," says Bruckheimer, "another platform to reach a young audience, and it helped enormously."

Network television followed; the hit series *Miami Vice* launched in 1984, according to legend, after NBC's Brandon Tartikoff wrote the phrase "MTV cops" on a piece of paper. Michael Mann, *Vice*'s executive producer, dismisses this as "a nice anecdote without much basis in history, as far as I know." But Mann imbued the show with a video sensibility: "I watched MTV a lot in those days. And *Miami Vice* was a radical departure from everything else on the air. The conventional way of using music in Hollywood was to apply the music to picture, more or less. But MTV influenced editing—now, we were cutting picture to music. And the content of videos on MTV was often what you would today call 'fractals.' They didn't have the beginning, middle, and end of a story. MTV forced feature filmmaking to evolve: you didn't need to bring an audience through so much clunky, conventional exposition of the story. That kind of stuff was obsolete."

Also, John Sayles says, "MTV had a huge influence on independent films." Sayles, who had been directing independent films since 1980, explains that music videos gave novice technicians access to

state-of-the-art equipment; previously, someone would “start as a camera loader and fifteen years later might touch a Panavision. Twenty-three-year-old technicians had horror stories about working on videos, and then they’d say, ‘But you should have seen the camera they gave me!’”

THIS BOOK INCORPORATES INTERVIEWS WITH MORE THAN four hundred people who were significant, even if only briefly, in MTV’s Golden Era. It’s been thirty years since the network signed on with a few videos and a flurry of technical mishaps. Memories change over the years and agendas can conflict, so two people might recall an incident in different ways—when this occurs, we’ve let each side have his or her say. MTV lent assistance to us; however, this is not an MTV book. No one from the network had any say in its content or read the book prior to publication. We thank them, collectively, for their faith that we’d tell the story with candor, affection, and, where appropriate, criticism.

Throughout our research, the people we interviewed almost unanimously looked back at this period with joy and happiness, even if they now regret some of the clothes they wore, and we hope their enthusiasm—and ours—is obvious on the page. This is the story of how an asinine idea changed the culture of America, and then the world, for better or worse.

—Rob Tannenbaum

Chapter 1

“IT’S THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD”

FIRST GLIMPSES OF MTV

BILLY GIBBONS, ZZ Top: One night I got a phone call from Frank Beard, our drummer. He said, “Hey, there’s a good concert on TV. Check it out.” So a couple of hours went by while I watched TV, and I called him back and said, “How long does this concert last?” He said, “I don’t know.” Twelve hours later, we were still glued to the TV. Finally somebody said, “No, it’s this twenty-four-hour music channel.” I said, “*Whaaaat?*” MTV appeared suddenly—unheralded, unannounced, unanything.

STEVIE NICKS, Fleetwood Mac: I was living in the Pacific Palisades and I would sit on the end of my bed, watching video after video, just stupefied.

DAVE NAVARRO, Jane’s Addiction: I was fourteen when MTV came on the air. My record collection at the time consisted mainly of Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, and here I was being exposed to a cross section of hard rock, new wave, and pop music. I still listen to Musical Youth every day. Okay, maybe not.

DAVE GROHL, Nirvana; Foo Fighters: It seemed like a transmission from some magical place. Me and all my friends were dirty little rocker kids in suburban Virginia, so we spent a lot of our time at the record store or staring at album covers. With music videos, there was a deeper dimension to everything. On Friday nights, you’d go to a friend’s house to get fucked up before going out to a party, and you’d have MTV on.

“WEIRD AL” YANKOVIC, artist: I was living in a \$300-a-month apartment in Hollywood with a Murphy bed and a tiny TV, but man, I wanted my MTV. It was a luxury for me to get cable TV. I would watch all day long. At the time, MTV felt like a local, low-budget station. The VJs would make glaring errors, or forget to turn off their mics. I mean, it was horribly produced and great. I felt like, *This is television for me.*

JANET JACKSON, artist: I loved watching it. How exciting back then, being a teenager and having something so creative, so fresh, so new. It was about waiting for your favorite video, and not really knowing what hour it would hit, so you'd have to watch all day long.

CONAN O'BRIEN, TV host: I was a freshman in college and a friend of mine was staying at her grandfather's apartment in New York. She said, "Come over and hang out." When I got there, she said "I'm watching this new channel, MTV." What a weird thing. What do you mean, they're showing music videos? What's a music video? Why would you show that? I can't stop watching! We watched for six hours. It's one of those things you can't describe to anyone who's younger than you, like the first year of *Saturday Night Live*. It was like a comet streaking across the sky.

DAVE MUSTAINE, Megadeth: My mom moved out when I was fifteen, so I'd been living alone in my apartment for a few years. People would ditch school, come over, buy pot from me, and watch MTV. I'm telling you, man, I had the coolest house in the town.

LARS ULRICH, Metallica: I lived with my parents, and we didn't have cable TV. We had three channels, and PBS. Dave Mustaine was a couple years older, and he had cable. And as I'm sitting here now, I can clearly see his apartment. In the right-hand corner, under the window, there was a wood-cabinet television and it was tuned to MTV 24/7.

LENNY KRAVITZ, artist: The first time I saw MTV, I was on vacation with my parents in the Bahamas. They had MTV in the hotel we were staying at. It was beautiful outside, eighty degrees and sunny, and I spent the whole week in my hotel room, watching MTV, 24/7. My parents were like, "My god, what is wrong with you?" I did not want to come out. I just wanted to watch videos all day. Duran Duran, Prince, Hall & Oates, Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes," Talking Heads, Bow Wow Wow, Haircut 101, Adam & the Ants. That's when MTV was MTV.

LADY GAGA, artist: The '80s was such a magical time. We'd just come off Bowie's '70s glam rock and disco was spiraling into this incredible synthetic music. Everything was so theatrical. Once the video was born, all these visuals found a new medium.

PATTY SMYTH, Scandal: I remember watching MTV at my boyfriend's house in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, in the summer of '81. A year later, I was on it.

PAT BENATAR, artist: I was in a hotel in Oklahoma, just this little roadside motel, and it was one of only about eight places in the United States that actually had MTV on the day that it aired. We were all sitting on my bed—the whole band, my manager, everybody—with our mouths open. I'm telling you, within a week, we couldn't go anywhere without being recognized. It changed everything, in one week.

AL TELLER, record executive: The timing of MTV was perfect. The music industry was in the doldrums and trying desperately to reinvent itself.

CHRIS ISAAK, artist: I had a TV that was from, like, 1959, a portable with rabbit ears and tinfoil. I got two and a half channels, and MTV was not one. My buddy was a photographer for the San Francisco 49ers, and it was a big treat when I went to babysit his kid, because I could watch MTV. At first, it was almost underground or counterculture. I don't think people had gotten to the payola yet.

BRET MICHAELS, Poison: I was eighteen or nineteen, working as a fry cook and maintenance man and singing in a covers band. We got cable just so we could watch MTV. I'd go to parties, and girls would ask me, "Why are you watching the TV?" I'd say, "I'm waiting for Van Halen." I'd sit there with a little smokage and wait for their video to come on.

MICHAEL IAN BLACK, comedian: We did not have cable. Cable was for millionaires. I grew up in Hillsborough, New Jersey, a terrible place, but there was a local UHF station, U68, that hopped on the MTV bandwagon. If the weather was clear and the antenna was pointed just so, we could watch videos on U68. It was a ghetto MTV.

CHYNNA PHILLIPS, Wilson Phillips: I saw MTV the first day it aired. I was in New Jersey, visiting my dad, and our friend had MTV. We all crowded around the TV, and "Video Killed the Radio Star" played. I was hooked.

DAVE HOLMES, MTV VJ: I grew up in St. Louis, and when I was ten, somebody told me there was gonna be a thing called MTV and it was just gonna show music videos. First of all, I didn't believe them. And second, I thought, *If that's true, it's the greatest thing in the world.*

B-REAL, Cypress Hill: I think it was the greatest invention ever.

RICHARD MARX, artist: I spent a ton of time watching MTV. I'd set my VHS machine to extended-play mode, to get six hours on a cassette. I videotaped midnight to 6 A.M., because they'd play videos overnight that they wouldn't play during the day. I was studying it.

SEBASTIAN BACH, Skid Row: I'm from Canada, where there was no MTV. Every summer, my dad would send me and my sister to California to be with my grandma. I went to my cousin's basement, put on the TV, and saw the Scorpions on fuckin' television. I was a huge heavy metal fan, and I couldn't believe my cousin had the Scorpions on his TV set! I didn't leave the basement all summer. His parents said, "Are you okay? Do you do this at home?" I'm like, "I've never seen music videos, so you've got to leave me alone."

CHUCK D, Public Enemy: These days, everybody has a hi-def camcorder in their pocket. It's accepted with shrugging shoulders. "Okay, so what? A video." But back then, it was a main event.

RUDOLF SCHENKER, Scorpions: We came on an American tour in 1982 and I exactly remember

every night coming from the concert into the hotel. I went in the room, switched immediately MTV on. It was so fantastic.

NANCY WILSON, Heart: Everybody wanted their MTV so bad. I remember *craving* it like crazy.

ANN WILSON, Heart: It was like the difference between silent films and talkies. All of a sudden, records could be seen. You could just put it on and party around the TV.

JANE WIEDLIN, Go-Go's: It was the go-to place to find new music, and you could find out right away what you need to know about a band, like if you liked their style or if they were cute.

STEVIE NICKS: When “Video Killed the Radio Star” came out, we took it with a grain of salt. We thought, *Well, video's not gonna kill the radio star*. It did. The song was prophetic.

Chapter 2

“I DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO PLUG IN A LIGHT”

MUSIC VIDEOS (ONLY THEY WEREN’T CALLED THAT) IN THE 1970s

THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN MUSIC AND PICTURE, WHICH went a long way back, took a different perspective in the '70s. Low-budget video novices were influenced by experimental filmmakers: Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, the Kuchar Brothers, and Bruce Conner, who spliced together existing film footage like a cinema DJ, and was hired by Devo, pre-MTV, to create a video for their song “Mongoloid.” The *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis, writing an obituary for Conner in 2008, noted the wide influence of his “shocking juxtapositions and propulsive, rhythmically sophisticated montage,” and concluded, “MTV should have paid him royalties.” Later on, music videos would reflect the influences of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Shining*, *West Side Story*, film noir, Russ Meyer’s breast-laden film farces, and Saturday-morning cartoons. But here at the beginning, they were bold and wild.

DAVID MALLET, director: Music video was a medium that was not regarded at all. It was like lavatory paper. In England, they were referred to as “fillers.” That was an insult.

JERRY CASALE, Devo: Videos were a curiosity at best. The record company thought we were stupid for using promotion money to do low-budget videos. “What’s *that* for?”

DAVID MALLET: The first time anybody put film to music satisfactorily, in my opinion, was David Lean in *Brief Encounter* [1945]. The second time I noticed it was *Death in Venice* [1971], which was Luchino Visconti. The third and most effective time was “Born to Be Wild” by Steppenwolf, which was at the beginning of *Easy Rider* [1969]. That was the first time images and music went together to illustrate the music, rather than to illustrate the mood.

MICHAEL MANN, film director: The different ways music can collide with dramatic action, complement it, or prepare or surprise us is not new. You can go back to *Alexander Nevsky*—Sergei Eisenstein was writing storyboards on the same long roll of paper Sergei Prokofiev was using to write the score. They were doing this in 1938, and “talkies” were only nine years old. Watch the battle-on-the-ice scene; the planning, the synchronization of music and picture, the premeditated architecture of their collision is as specific as in the best MTV videos.

JERRY BRUCKHEIMER, movie producer: *The Graduate* was the first time I saw contemporary

music integrated into a story. The Simon & Garfunkel songs gave you an emotional lift. It told the audience how to feel about those scenes and those characters.

MICK JONES, the Clash: When the Rolling Stones got busted for drugs, they did a promo film for “We Love You,” where Keith Richards is the judge and Mick Jagger is Oscar Wilde, and on trial. Really fantastic.

JO BERGMAN, record executive: My first experience with music videos was when I was working for the Rolling Stones in London in 1968, and we shot “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” and “Child of the Moon” in the freezing English countryside, with the band dressed as itinerants. They’re funny little films.

NIGEL DICK, director: I was at Bath University in 1975, and every Thursday night at 6:30 we’d gather in a common area to watch *Top of the Pops*. The program after it was *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, so it was a big event. There’d be five hundred people watching one television. *Top of the Pops* came on, and number one on the countdown was “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen. This video comes on and we’re all like, *What the fuck is that?* It was astonishing.

BRUCE GOWERS, director: When I was a cameraman, I worked on at least three Beatles videos—can’t remember the songs, but “Paperback Writer” was one. In 1975, two crooked wheeler-dealer brothers from Queen’s management company asked me to do a film for “Bohemian Rhapsody.” We started at 7 P.M. and were in the pub before it closed at 11 P.M. That famous multiplying effect during the “thunderbolts and lightning” part, where you see many Freddie Mercurys and Brian Mays? That was corny. I stuck a prism onto the camera lens. It was held on with gaffer’s tape.

JOHN TAYLOR, Duran Duran: “Bohemian Rhapsody” could not have held the number one spot for as many weeks as it did if *Top of the Pops* hadn’t kept running their film. But nobody called it a “video.” Later, there was one for the Boomtown Rats’ “I Don’t Like Mondays” and for Ultravox’s “Vienna” as well—most of the long-running number one songs in the late ’70s had some form of filmic presentation, because bands didn’t want to keep showing up to play the song on *Top of the Pops*. That was the motivation within the UK market.

ROBERT SMITH, the Cure: “Bohemian Rhapsody” was number one every fucking week. I fucking hated it.

BRIAN GRANT, director: Nobody had seen anything like “Bohemian Rhapsody.” I was working on *The Muppet Show* as a cameraman, and at that point I determined I wanted to direct videos.

JULIEN TEMPLE, director: The first video I directed was the Sex Pistols’s “God Save the Queen.” The Sex Pistols were banned from television in England, so we used to take a projector around and show the video before other bands played, so kids could actually see them.

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