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Changing the Business: Music Videos in Society

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Changing the Business: Music Videos in Society

By: Rebeca Zepeda

Though the origins of the music video can be debated and have been, what is less clear is the impact of the music video in modern times. In 1981, Music Television (MTV), a television channel and network, was designed solely to air music videos, though the term “music video” was just beginning to become defined. MTV revolutionized the way music was viewed – it made it possible for music to be expressed as visual art in conjunction with sound, as a visual aspect of music that was just as important as the music. Music videos were purposefully coordinated to be televised, rather than an artist’s live performance being televised as a “side” marketing technique for promotion. MTV’s dedication to music as its main focus was an innovation that no other network had ever attempted before. Airing the first music video in 1981, created a society and therefore a business, which valued the visual image of an artist equally, if not more importantly than music itself.

Television and Music: An Evolution

The visual image of an artist in music, throughout history, can be largely attributed to the mediums or platforms available in that artist’s time. The television, a platform available since the late 1940s, has been a medium crucial to the development of marketing music. Moving images of an artist on a screen demonstrated the power of television contributing to new artists’ success in ways that had not yet been analyzed.

Elvis Presley was made a national star as the result of his many appearances on television in 1956, from his first appearance on the Dorsey Brother’s *Stage Show*, to his three performances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* – it was clear that his appeal to an audience was not just the result of his vocal ability. Televising performances was an innovation that sparked the relationship between

music and visual mediums. The evolution of television and music continued into the 1960s and 1970s with artists like the Beatles and Queen. The Beatles created two films, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help* (1965), that focused on the artist in actor roles while their music played in the background. Queen created a more “music video like” visual component to accompany their song “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1975), which hinted at the growing direction of music coinciding with visual artistic expression. However, television and visual mediums had yet to revolutionize the music industry to its fullest extent.

“Video Killed the Radio Star”

MTV aired its first music video, The Buggles’ “Video Killed the Radio Star”, on August 1, 1981, a first video fitting of the network’s future impact. However, the process of getting that first video on air was quite an effort. Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company, a joint venture between Warner Communications and American Express (WASEC) invested in what would later become MTV. Warner Communications had historically invested in technologies that promoted a future where all homes had cable TV and investing in MTV was a continuation of that initial goal.

MTV’s initial plan was to capture an audience that no other television network had attempted to cater to. Teenagers and young adults in the 1980s, before MTV’s introduction, really had no network that catered to their wants or desires, especially within the world of music. MTV made it their goal to provide that outlet for teenagers and young adults – though it was an outlet that the audience did not know they had even wanted at the time. However, it is important to note that MTV was catering to a very specific teenage and young adult demographic – white suburban male from ages twelve to thirty. In MTV’s first two years, they showed strictly rock-based content, which meant showing, for the most part, white artists.

MTV in its primitive stages could only be viewed in the suburban and rural areas of New Jersey, which coincided with the cheap cost in those areas to install and pay for cable. As a result, MTV was viewed by teens that had no access to any form of music-related material like the videos being shown on the network – big cities have historically been the centers of innovation, especially in the music industry. In this sense, MTV was acting as a sort of social network, in sharing the material to cities that had little access to “big city” innovations.

MTV’s original founders had very little knowledge of the television industry, which was in some ways, a weakness and in some ways, a strength. A strength that came of their background in radio, in MTV’s formative years, was the process of casting videos to air on the network. Robert Pittman, hired by WASEC executive John Lack, was just 26 years old when he was tasked to get the network up and running. According to Robert Sam Anson of *Vanity Fair*, in an article titled “Birth of An MTV Nation”, published on November of 2000, Robert Pittman said:

“I had some experience with music videos, through a show I did for NBC in ’78 called *Album Tracks*. A lot of other people had been playing around, but no one had hit on a winning formula. The concept I had was to have a clear image, to build an attitude. In other words, to build a brand, a channel that happened to use video clips as a building block, as opposed to being a delivery system for videos. The star wouldn’t be the videos, the star would be the channel.”

Pittman’s experience and background in radio, brought to light the trend of “narrowcasting”, which meant that MTV would cast its videos aiming for a specific demographic and then once obtaining that strong demographic, using it as a means to sell to advertisers, in contrast with “broadcasting” to a wide and unspecific audience. According to Ed Levine of *The New York Times*, in an article published in 1983, Robert Pittman commented, “I’m concerned not only with how people use a product, but what is going on in their lives. When you’re dealing with a music culture - say, people aged 12 to 30 - music serves as something beyond entertainment. It’s

really a peg they use to identify themselves. It's representative of their values and their culture.'”

This narrowcasting approach would later be questioned when black artists like Michael Jackson and new genres like rap rose in popularity.

The first videos to appear on the network were the result of that narrowcasting technique. Getting those videos was more of a struggle than one might expect of what would become one of the most notable networks in the development of the music industry. Record labels were in charge of producing promotional content and therefore had access to music videos or clips as they called them, which MTV was going to rely on to drive their entire business. According to Robert Pittman, in a book titled *“I Want MY MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution”* written by Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, he said:

“My mission was to get to the labels to give us their videos... There was an ex-lawyer, David Braun, running PolyGram. He said, ‘I’m not gonna give you those things for free. You’ve gotta pay.’ Sid Sheinberg was running MCA Records. He said, ‘You gotta pay. Nothing’s free from MCA.’ And at CBS, Walter Yetnikoff, obviously he’s gonna make a tough deal. So rather than go to him, I went to Dick Asher, his deputy, and got Dick interested. Went to Bruce Lundvall, who was a president at CBS Records. Then we went to a lot of Walter’s bands and got them interested.”

Going to the bands directly was a smart move on behalf of Pittman because they just wanted their content to be played somewhere – showing them how this could positively affect their careers was what they were really after. Some of the first artist played on the network included The Buggles, Devo, Andrew Gold, Styx, Blotto, and The Tubes – a mix that had MTV a bit weary of the response from the audience watching. The videos were strange and quite low budget as music videos had yet to be a real part of a record label budget for an artist. Though the first couple of artists aired on MTV were anything but ideal, the response from playing the “mediocre” songs was

extremely unexpected. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, Robert Pittman recalled the impact:

“We needed to be very scientific about the impact MTV was having on the recording industry. So I sent John Sykes and Tom Freston to Tulsa, Oklahoma. And one night, Sykes and Freston called me very excited. They’d been to a record store, and the store had suddenly sold out of the Tubes, and we were the only people playing the Tubes, so it had to be us. We had our first evidence that MTV was selling records.”

From the moment that MTV could prove to record labels that it was producing real results and promoting artists in a way that had never been done before, they were able to get a wide range of videos from record labels easier than their first attempt - this was seen in one of their first aired artists, Duran Duran. According to Joe L. Kincheloe, in an article titled, “MTV: Killing the Radio Star”, “Duran Duran – an unsuccessful British band with substantial visual appeal – was unknown in 1981. In TV markets where MTV was available, the sales of Duran Duran records exploded after the airing of the videos. Of course, the band enjoyed a successful career for the next several years.” Showing that a band from Britain could prove to be successful in the United States only added to the growing idea that music videos were the next big thing for artists. By their first year, MTV was well on their way to making history, not just for the network itself but especially for the artists featured on it.

Just Following the Format

It was no secret that MTV was airing a very narrow mix of music videos in their initial stages of programming, this narrow mix being a strictly rock based music video format – also known as AOR programming or Album-Oriented Rock programming, that was borrowed from the founders’ background in FM rock radio. For their first couple of years as a network, they adhered to that AOR programming, which sparked controversy amongst the music industry, as the “rock “

genre was confined to a majority of white artists, with few exceptions. Ed Levine remarked on this controversy, saying:

MTV has been criticized for not airing enough videos featuring well-known artists in black popular music, sometimes called contemporary rhythm and blues. MTV's Bob Pittman insists there is no racial motivation behind this programming decision. In his support, he cites the fact that black and white popular music have always been segregated. "We chose rock because the audience was larger," Pittman explains. "The mostly white rock audience was more excited about rock than the largely black audience was about contemporary rhythm and blues." In addition, he feels that the rock-music press is more innovative than its black counterpart. Finally, there are more rock videos available, and the age-clustered rock audience is attractive to advertisers.

With the increase in popularity of the network, questions on the grounds of discrimination and racism frequented around the executives of the show. MTV's visual image in the music industry was just a replication of the race issue that has always been present in the music industry. Pittman, in formulating a plan for the network, failed to realize that by tailoring the programming to just rock, he left out a population that has historically been overlooked in the music industry.

According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum:

Buzz Brindle (director of music programming at MTV) told a reporter, "We'll air black artists who play rock," which ignored the fact that MTV aired videos by plenty of white artists who didn't play rock. Bob Pittman and Les Garland defended their policy (which caused grumbling even within the company's offices) by saying that black artists weren't excluded because they were black, but because they didn't play rock n' roll, which was MTV's format... Andrew Goodwin later wrote acutely, "denied racism, on the grounds that it merely followed the rules of the rock business (which were, nonetheless, the consequence of a long history of racism)."

It was clear after these accusations that MTV needed to make a change, regardless of their reasons or lack thereof, for not representing enough black people – the bottom line was that there needed to be more diversity on the new network.

In January of 1983, Michael Jackson released the single, "Billie Jean", off his new album, *Thriller*, and it quickly rose to the number one spot on Billboard's Hot 100 chart. The music video

for the single was released shortly after and though it was only three to five days after the release of the video when it aired on MTV, the network was under fire from Jackson's label for not playing it within 24 hours of its release. The reality was that MTV was just too busy to play it within 24 hours of its release, but some took it, especially CBS Records, that MTV would never play the video – further contributing to the rumor that MTV would not play black artists. Les Garland, Executive Vice President of Programming recalls the moment in an article by Robert Sam Anson of *Vanity Fair*:

“Billie Jean” came in, and it blew my mind. The whole staff flipped over it. I phoned Pittman, who was in California, and said, “Bob, I’m FedExing the most amazing video to you. Wait till you see it” He calls the next day, and he’s like, “God this is great.” I said, “There is no question here, is there?” He says, “You do what you want to do.” I said, “You know what I am going to do.” And he says, “Fine.” The problem was, we waited three or five days to put it on, ‘cause of whatever, and someone misinterpreted it as us holding back. The next thing you know, this whole thing with CBS blows up. We’re looking at each other, saying, “Where did this thing come from?”

Nonetheless, MTV was captured by the videos’ production and creativity, which was reflected in the videos’ success from being aired on MTV. “Billie Jean” and its successor, “Beat It” proved to be the most notable music videos in the history of MTV – this only showed how powerful black artists were in the music video world. Finally showing black artists on the network marked a significant change in the music industry. Michael Jackson’s album, *Thriller*, sold 800,000 per week, which led to the making of his third music video for the single, “Thriller”. Michael Jackson broke the racial barrier for black artists in the music video world, which would eventually lead to MTV creating a new segment for a predominately black genre in the late 1980s, rap.

Still Not Our Format: Rap

Hip-hop’s emergence in the late 1970s in black urban communities in New York and its popularization in the 1980s to the rest of the world would, no doubt, make its way to MTV.

However, what many didn't anticipate was just how popular the genre might be in the 1980s, like the many genres that were created in the underground scene. In rap's early years, it was projected to be fad by labels and many industry professionals. As a result, MTV did not closely consider it to be worthy of airplay, especially because they were playing videos in the mainstream. This was quite ironic considering they helped many artists start their careers simply by playing their videos. According to MTV, however, they refused to play the videos because they did not have the qualities that they often looked for in videos – which often coincided with production value. Nonetheless, perception to the outside world is what really mattered and they were accused of racism again.

Though MTV refused to play hip-hop videos, hip-hop artists continued to make videos even though they were made with little production investment on behalf of labels (because MTV would not play them). This furthered MTV's argument that hip-hop videos were not worthy of being played on the network. Other channels, however, would program hip-hop and rap in their rotation in an attempt to fill the hole that MTV left – two such channels were Video Music Box broadcasted in New York and Night Tracks aired on the network TBS. Chuck D, member of the famous rap group Public Enemy, recalled the sentiment around MTV during this time, according to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, he said, "Around that time, Night Tracks was on TBS, late on Friday Nights, and they debuted rap videos. MTV had to pay notice to that buzz. How could they not? The motherfuckers were based in New York, the birthplace of rap. Either they were totally blind to the fact, or they were racist. And if they were blind to the fact then they were racist anyway, because they chose not to acknowledge what was happening."

MTV eventually caught on to what was happening after other networks began receiving positive feedback from the hip-hop music videos they played. In 1984, Run-D.M.C., a rap trio

from New York, released a music video for their single “Rock Box” which had a unique electric guitar rock influence. MTV played their video after its release, making it the first hip-hop video to be played on the network. However, some criticized that it was only played because of its rock influence, which they thought would appeal to their white male audience. This was evident in the music video, as they showed a predominantly white audience in the crowd listening to the rappers and used a little white boy as recurring focus. MTV continued playing “safe” rap videos in their rotation, as they were still afraid that rap would not have lasting effects, which would harm the network if they invested too much into rap music videos.

By 1988, however, rap continued to pave its way into the mainstream, proving that it was not just a fad. Tom Hunter, joining MTV in 1987 as the Vice President of Music Programming, took notice of the growing popularity of rap and took it upon himself to change the way MTV saw rap’s influence. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, Hunter recalled having a conversation about rap’s influence with higher ups, saying:

An independent promotion guy bought me lunch one day and said, ‘Do you know what’s going on with rap? It’s huge, and MTV should play it.’ So I started to look at rap sales numbers and became convinced that we should do a show. I’d bring it up every week at my meeting with Lee Masters, and his argument against it was consistent: ‘We’re white, suburban, male, affluent. That’s who we are.’... I said, ‘Okay, how about we do a one-off, two-hour rap special, and you let me air it between noon and 6 p.m. on either a Saturday or a Sunday?’ He finally said okay... We got the highest rating in the channel’s history.

From this came “Yo! MTV Raps”, a show on MTV solely dedicated to airing hip-hop music videos, which no other network had done. Doing this showed the diversity of hip-hop, which in turn expanded the diversity of hip-hop’s audience beyond their initial intended audience. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, Monica Lynch, a record executive at the time commented about the audience that MTV created for rap, saying, “All these little white kids in

middle America sat on the edge of their seats, waiting to see what Fab 5 Freddy, Ed Lover, and Dr. Dre would say or wear or play, or who they're gonna have on their show, so they could try to live that lifestyle themselves. The white homeboy nation arose, and Yo! had a lot to do with that.”

Music videos were no longer just about the artistic qualities presented, but also about the physical image that artist projected. This made attitude and appearance critical to marketing music videos and therefore the artist. Music video marketing based on attitude and appearance would make its stamp on gender as well.

Owning It

As MTV broke barriers in race and genre, they did so with gender as well. However, marketing females and males through music video were approached very differently. From the start of MTV, sexuality was exploited in music videos as a means to draw viewers. Duran Duran's music video for "Girls on Film" released in 1981 is an example of this sexual exploit. A part from the creative aspects, the music video centers around many different women in revealing outfits while the band performs. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, bass player for Duran Duran, John Taylor, said, "There's no plot to 'Girls on Film.' The only plot was to set up some sexy scenes with girls. You don't need a plot to make a cool video. You just need something that catches the eye, that's sexy or amusing. Sometimes it's enough just to have style." As MTV allowed for endless artistic creativity in the videos they played, objectification of women often coincided with this creativity. This sexual exploitation would eventually follow female artists into their overall brand, not just in videos and would help to create a standard for women in the music industry. Using sexual content as a theme in music videos is something that has never really faded, however, owning female sexuality has changed.

Madonna was one of the first female artists to harness this sexuality. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, “She like MTV was viewed as a passing fancy. ‘Madonna will be out of the business in six months,’ a Billboard editor pronounced, because ‘her image has completely overshadowed her music.’ This quote is the ‘Dewey Defeats Truman’ of music video, disproven by Madonna’s seventeen consecutive top ten hits. She did this not by making her image secondary to her music, but by combining them until they were inseparable.” It was through this combination that she was able to exude her femininity and sexuality as power instead of degradation to brand herself. Madonna used her sexuality as no other woman had, she didn’t play it safe for fear of controversy but instead used her image as a means to brand herself as an artist. This hypersexualized “pop star” image is something that we have seen time and time again in contemporary pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé. However, we see it in more than just music videos now – we see it in commercials, social media, and performances. Music video allowed the female image to be whatever it wanted, and Madonna wanted to own her sexuality rather than let it objectify her.

Britney Spears is another example of owning this sexuality, just twenty years later. From the very start of her career she was accused of being over sexualized, especially because she was still a teenager. Her first music video for her hit single “Baby One More Time” was controversial enough without the music video accompanying it. The video portrayed Britney Spears as a schoolgirl with a mini skirt and tied button up that exposed her midriff. The reaction to the video was to be expected, but Britney Spears did not let it control the style of her videos to come. Her sexual nature continued in her videos for songs “Oops!...I Did It Again” in 2000 and “Toxic” in 2003. In an article written by Stan Hawkins and John Richardson, titled, “Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation, they write, “Spears strategies are inherited directly

from Madonna who undoubtedly cleared the way for the next generation of female pop stars. At the dawn of a post-Madonna era of pop, the issue of the female as confidential sexual agent has much to do with females asserting their own desires, an aspect of popular feminism that has not been without its problems.” Britney Spears, throughout her career, has been able to use her sexuality as a means to brand herself, which would not be made possible without female icons like Madonna using the music video as a vehicle to drive their marketing.

MTV No More

Starting in the mid-90s, MTV’s focus in music began to draw a close. They began specializing in reality shows such as *The Real World* and music videos just didn’t seem novelty anymore. The shift on the network also coincided with advances in the Internet and it’s growing interest in music, with innovations such as iTunes in 2003 – the first digital music store. Two years later in 2005, we saw the invention of YouTube, which was initially created as a platform for general video sharing. However, just as music had begun to be shared illegally, music videos began being shared on YouTube. MTV was originally airing the videos that made their way onto YouTube and this began another copyright battle.

Record labels were furious because they were not getting any money from YouTube, which defeated the whole purpose of having a music video. Record companies attempted to ban the videos from the platform, which wasn’t very easy considering how popular the site was amongst its millions of viewers. Of course this tactic did not work which left YouTube with the task of creating a way for record companies to profit from the videos on their website. YouTube who was owned by Google a year after its creation, developed a system that would put an ad on every music video owned by a record company.

Vevo, a joint venture between the three major record labels in 2009 was also created in response to the copyright issues. The labels figured that they should be the ones to share official videos on YouTube's platform as well as showing them on their own website - in this sense they created an online library for every music video ever created. Thus, creating a 24hr, wherever, whenever platform to watch an unlimited amount of content – essentially it was the new generation's MTV. Creating this database for YouTube expanded the audience available in one platform infinitely. MTV was always accused of sticking to one audience which narrowed what content was available to that audience. The creation of YouTube and Vevo eliminated those barriers, making the audiences incredibly diverse.

The technological advances in content sharing have only furthered the concept of video in music industry. Social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have harnessed the very essence of what MTV created for the music industry. Artists are able to promote their own content with the press of a button on a platform of their choosing. Videos are watched millions of times in a matter of days. The amount of content presented on platforms of today have shown how much, as a society, we value media in conjunction with music.

Conclusion

MTV's introduction to society changed the way the music industry approached marketing an artist. Showing black artists such as Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie proved that black artists were powerful amongst a variety of audiences, not just their intended ones. Having black artist in regular rotation also broke the cycle of discrimination in popular music, emphasizing the importance of equal representation in the music industry. The artistic qualities presented in Michael Jackson's first videos showed how quickly the music video was evolving in the presentation of popular artists.

Taping new genres like rap meant new audiences for MTV but more importantly, for artists themselves. Rap was a turning point in the music video scene with influencing more than just artistic expression, but the way society embraced attitudes and appearances represented in the videos. Harnessing this within music videos became crucial to the identity and brand of those artists.

The concept of branding a female artist wasn't much different from branding a rap artist. Since the music video's conception, women had been used as sex symbols in an effort to draw attention to the artist. However, female artists such as Madonna, took control of that over sexualized image in an effort to market themselves that way. Owning that sexual image paved the way for the empowered female pop stars we see today – making it a standard for female artists in the music industry.

With advances in Internet technologies, MTV was no longer the industry go-to platform for the music video. YouTube and Vevo showed how technology could create a space where music videos existed indefinitely – showing the evolution of music video in marketing. Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are a continued evolution of the direction of the music video and its role in the visual image of an artist.

Music videos changed the perception of society and their acceptance of music beyond the audio. Creating a space for music to flourish as audiovisual created a society that valued image that became crucial to the development of an artist's success. Airing the first music video in 1981, MTV created a society and therefore a business, which valued the visual image of an artist equally, if not more importantly than music itself.

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