



Monday, Dec. 26, 1983

Sing a Song of Seeing

By Jay Cocks

Rock videos are firing up a musical revolution

"Have you seen the new Michael Jackson song?"

—One ten-year-old to another, on a Manhattan subway

And you may find your self living

in a shotgun shack

And you may find yourself in

another part of the world

And you may find your self behind

the wheel of a large

automobile

And you may find yourself in

a beautiful house, with a

beautiful wife

And you may ask yourself—

Well. . .how did I get

here?

—David Byrne, *Once in a Lifetime*

You may also find yourself in the Schaumburg Snuggery. For navigational purposes, it will help to know that you are 21 miles northwest of Chicago. Not the twilight zone exactly, but not the main stem either. With a little imaginative set decoration, the Schaumburg Snuggery could be converted to a roadhouse from a John O'Hara novel; a juke joint from the Big Band era; a belly-up beer parlor with a platform for a three-piece oldies combo; or the only place in America where no one has heard that disco is dead. A perfect period set—for any period—if it were not for those screens.

There are eleven of them, some as big as a wallboard, others as small as your home tube. They are not there to fill the Schaumburg Snuggery with guzzlers who want to watch a weekend of football. Those eleven piercing rectangles all over the place are strictly for music. People dance and drink and date, all while seeing music.

Yes. Seeing.

Michael Jackson. David Byrne and Talking Heads. Billy Joel. David Bowie. All of them, and dozens more, reeling and rocking across those eleven screens in a serenade of sensory overload. The place is packed. "We haven't played a record since last June," says the Snuggery's John Clausen, whose video disc jockeys play tapes the way radio deejays spin platters. So rock on, Schaumburg Snuggery. You may be just a secondary target in the great video blitzkrieg—the vidblitz—that has shaken up Hollywood, salvaged the record business and set up a whole new way of responding to music. But at least you're tuned in. Wired. When the global village starts to rock, you'll be right on the fault line.

Increasingly, and perhaps irreversibly, audiences for American mainstream music will depend, even insist, on each song's being a full audiovisual confrontation. Why should sound alone be enough when sight is only as far away as the TV set or the video machine? Whole generations have had their brains fried with a cathode ray tube, a condition that creates a certain impatience and shortness of attention when limited to aural input. Posterity can rest easy—as Billy Joel points out, "Beethoven didn't have no videos, and he's been hanging in there"—but for rockers, popsters and soul brethren, video will be the way to keep time with the future.

Video is manna on magnetic tape to rock performers and, even more, to the companies that make money from their music. The whole business had topped off in 1978, when 726 million records and tapes were shipped to a rock-sotted world. The next year, the bottom fell out. Revenues plunged 10.2%. Not only was music caught in the general economic clinch; there was a feeling that everything had peaked, maybe even played itself out. Punk and new wave had created much press excitement, but never really broke through to a wide audience. Radio was hidebound by tightly formatted playlists: same sounds, same rhythms, in the same familiar rotations. Radio was the time-honored conduit to keep the music flowing, but it was becoming antiquated.

It was clear that something new was needed. It was not quite so clear that the very something was already there, waiting to be turned on like a simple . . . television set. While the record business hit the skids, home video and cable television were perking along. New means for old dreams.

There was no single pioneer, no moment of signal inspiration. The vidblitz began before anyone knew the planes were flying in formation. Illustrated songs, little three-or four-minute clips, began to rain down on television and clubs in late 1980. Some of them were concert performances, shot and edited with perfunctory flash; others were like surrealistic visual riffs on the song, head comics for beginners, production numbers soaked in blotter acid. A technological catchall, video quickly became a generic name for these detonations of sight and sound, as those little items played on a phonograph were named for the way they were transcribed or recorded.

Now, at latest count, there are 200 programs all across the country that do nothing but show rock videos. MTV is a cable network entirely given over to the playing and perpetuating of rock video, not only as a new form but as a fresh commercial force. It is the hottest basic cable operation in history.

"Since the beginning of time—1956—rock 'n' roll and TV have never really hit it off," reflects Keith Richard of the Rolling Stones. "But suddenly, it's like they've gotten married and can't leave each other alone." One wonders if anyone worked out a prenuptial contract; there are some impressive numbers involved in all this. When it went on the air in August 1981, MTV was carried on 300 cable outlets, capable of reaching 2.5 million homes. Now it is hitting 2,000 cable affiliates and more than 17½ million households. In 1983, according to a just released study by Industry Analyst Mark Riely, overall record sales should hit \$3.77 billion, up 5% from last year. MTV, which pulled down approximately \$7 million in ad revenue for the first 18 months of its life, will cart in more than \$20 million by the end of 1983.

On the underside of the bottom line is the music, and for those who do not like to study the numbers, there is Duran Duran, an affable, uninspired British band currently aglow with success. Says Norman

Samnick, senior vice president of Warner Communications, which is MTV'S proud parent: "I think Duran Duran owes its life to MTV." Duran Duran, in the person of Synthesizer Player Nick Rhodes, agrees: "MTV was instrumental in breaking us in America." Even the record industry could beam in on the phenomenon when it noticed that the Duran Duran album, *Rio*, was being sold out at half the record stores in Dallas and was gathering dust in the other half. A check of the local television listings showed that parts of the city that were wired for cable and carrying MTV were the very same parts where the album was flourishing.

No one needs cable to see Duran Duran or Michael Jackson anymore. Duran Duran has put out a "video album." The wise fathers at Sony have issued one of their new Video 45s (cassettes with twelve to 20 minutes of playing time) featuring still more Duran Duran material. Last week a tape of Michael Jackson's exuberant *Thriller* video went on sale. Also on the cassette was a documentary chronicling the making of the quick flick and several scenes of Michael cavorting variously on a Motown special, through his *Beat It* clip and, at age eight, in front of a home-movie camera. This nifty one-hour package goes for \$29.95.

All right, all right, it must be admitted: Michael Jackson is a special case. He may be the hottest single in show business right now. He is a supremely gifted performer, the Fred Astaire of video. But no one is too big for a video boost. *Thriller*, the megabit Jackson album, had already sold more than 2 million copies in the U.S. when the first video, *Billie Jean*, hit the clubs and the air waves. The album went on to sell more than 10 million additional copies. Jackson was on such a streak that he could, with impunity, spend an estimated \$1.1 million for the sassy 14 minutes of *Thriller* video, which allows him to put on all manner of baroque monster makeup and boogie with the living dead.

This seems like a hefty slice of cash for what many people consider essentially a promo item, but MTV, though it gets its clips gratis, paid \$250,000 for the exclusive rights to show the documentary, from which it lifted the *Thriller* video intact; Showtime paid \$300,000 for pay-cable rights; and Vestron Video reportedly plunked down an additional \$500,000 to market the cassette, in which Jackson has what the folks in business affairs call "a profit participation." Not only that, the *Thriller* album, already out for a year, went into the holiday season selling about 200,000 copies a week. After *Thriller* had been on MTV for only five days, album sales went up to 600,000.

That is a prime instance, not only of star power, but of video energy. No one can resist its gravitational pull, and there seems to be less and less reason even to try. It might help to know the numbers—63% of MTV's audience, for example, is under 25—but statistics often tell less about a phenomenon than simple observation. Check out one of the year's biggest hit movies: *Flashdance* has the shameless energy of a prototypical rock video. Look at how the kids are dressing: off the shoulder, like Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*, on the razzle, like Michael Jackson in *Beat It*, or like Boy George in *Extremis*. Students at Holy Rosary Academy in San Bernardino, Calif., are by no means atypical. They learn the latest by watching groups on videos doing dances like the Centipede and Popping.

Electra Records made only 15 videos last year; this year it has made 43. The few video holdouts, like Bruce Springsteen, remain exceptions who are becoming increasingly isolated. Almost every major rocker has made a video and sent it into the pipeline: MTV, local and network rock programs and clubs. You can dance as you watch in New York and San Francisco, as well as at the Schaumburg Snuggery. At Flip-It in Bayside, N.Y., customers get a haircut with a jolt of video rock. At the Panic House in West Hollywood, Calif., patrons can eat to videos, which seems appropriate for an establishment that bills itself as "a Franco-Japanese restaurant of the future." Up the coast, groovies of all ages can "rock and bowl" at Park Bowl, hard by San Francisco's Golden Gate, where a 9-ft. by 12-ft. screen hangs above the 22 lanes. "The normal league bowlers don't think much of this," confesses Manager Gilbert Klein.

At its core, rock video is the kind of cultural shotgun wedding that delights the heart of any aging McLuhanist: rock, radio, movies, music, video, new technologies and new marketing tilting the popular culture onto an angle so it can, if so ordained, slip off onto a whole new course. "The musician in me really resents having to interpret my music into something visual," says Billy Joel. "But the thing that outweighs all of that is that video is a form of communication. Why not use every means of communication available?" Joel has communicated extremely well—his videos are among the genre's most elaborate and effective—but his new commitment to the form, as well as his excellence at it, shows the flak of a born survivor. It is not necessary to be a pioneer, as David Bowie was when he started making videos back in the early '70s. It is only necessary to know that at the moment, and likely for the future, hearing a song will be fine, but only seeing will be believing.

So . . . roll the tapes.

THE HISTORY-AT-HOME-IN YOUR SPARE TIME VIDEO

Hands up, class: Who remembers Scopitone? No one? Well, it's a tough question. Scopitone jukeboxes were European imports, vintage early to mid-'60s, which played, for a deposit of 25¢, a faded, grainy color picture of, say, Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini with some Neapolitan pop star mouthing the lyrics. It was difficult to determine in what language the lyrics were being mouthed; the sound track was often English, but the lip calisthenics were unmistakably Mediterranean.

It took full-size movies more than a decade to catch up with the dramatic potential of rock 'n' roll. Two films were instrumental in breaking the barrier: Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), with its hippie rock, and Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), in which the urban raunch of the Rolling Stones and the Ronettes was used the same way Luchino Visconti used opera.

Movie musicals are the other historical touchstones: the grand ballroom turns of Astaire and the sidewalk acrobatics of Gene Kelly in essence. But in fact, and in direct lineage, nothing connects the video present with the movie past so directly as three films made in England. There were the two kinetic musicals that Richard Lester directed for the Beatles, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), and *Performance*, the definitive rock-'n'-roll nightmare of 1970, wherein Co-Directors Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell had a pop star, played by Mick Jagger, swap identities with a hood. Jagger's centerpiece number was a malevolent and mystical barrage of imagery that could be every rock-video director's tapsource and textbook. The movie did not seem so much to impact as simply to implode. The effects can still be seen, 24 hours a day, on MTV.

THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES DOCUMENTARY VIDEO

Now these words from David Mallet, who has directed several hundred videos for the likes of Bowie, the Boomtown Rats and Roxy Music: "If someone from outer space arrived and you played him a record, he might say, 'I can hear it, but why can't I see it?' " You can rest easy now, Spaceman.

Any space case could see that at this tender point in their gestation, videos are a hyper hybrid of commercials, cartoons, concerts and selected short subjects. Record executives look for the high road but follow the hard line. "Rock video is terrific," says Gil Friesen, president of A & M Records, "but it is the music itself that creates the excitement, whether the music goes out over MTV or radio. Music is the ultimate power." John Kalodner of Geffen Records agrees: "Rock video isn't the art form. Rock video markets the art form."

The videomakers tend, with suitable modifications for ego, to go along with this sort of businesslike evaluation. Simon Fields, head of the Los Angeles branch of London's Limelight Productions, has produced more than 300 videos, and says, "We have to remember we are making a sales tool. These are little commercials. It is our job to make an artist look good." Even so, the skill of the videomakers often seems secondary to the music they visualize. Says Mallet: "You can make a good video of a bad record,

and it doesn't do a thing. And you can make a bad video of a good record, and the record will sell anyway. A corollary is that it's very difficult to make a good video of a bad record. For some reason, if the record doesn't hang together, the pictures won't either."

Videomakers loot every resource for visual vocabulary. A random selection of a dozen clips could easily show influences as diverse as René Magritte and Orson Welles, *The Road Warrior* and *The Three Stooges*. Videos are often just as frenetic on the screen as on the sound track. Directors scrape and scramble to pack in the imagery, like so many soda jerks trying to push a quart of French vanilla into a pint container. "The problem is compression," says Julian Temple, who has made some 60 videos, including a current dazzler of the Rolling Stones' *Undercover of the Night*. "You have to layer each shot with a lot of meaning. When you see a video the first time you should get the overall idea. When you see it again, you should get a little more, and a little more again the third time. It's like the time-release cold capsule."

Videos often seem just as plentiful and, comparatively, just as costly. Their average budget is about \$20,000 to \$40,000, and the majority are shot in a day or two. That sort of speed, and per dollar value, has its appeal for such film makers as John Landis, Mike Hodges and Bob Rafelson, who have worked within the slower, costlier Hollywood system. Tobe Hooper (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Poltergeist*) shot Billy Idol's *Dancing with Myself* in two days, edited it in a week, and saw it on the air two weeks after that. "You can have fun and experiment and try new things with rock video," Hooper says. "The medium is so immediate."

Although lean budgets and tight production schedules are still the norm, such exceptions as *Thriller* and the Paul McCartney-Michael Jackson *Say Say Say* are stirring interest. Every major record label now has its own in-house video department. Video budgets are getting to be as hotly negotiated as salary increases whenever a performer's contract comes up for renewal. "A video indicates to an artist a level of acceptance and prestige," says Gil Friesen. Says Len Epan, general manager of Polygram Records' video division: "Videos are collectible and deserve to be purchasable. Right now music video is paid for with marketing funds. I'd like to see video financed through sales of the clips themselves."

Video looms so large now that it is putting pressure on the performers it is meant to serve. Rickie Lee Jones doesn't much like what she sees on MTV ("The videos are like old Monkees shows. They're nonsense, a real waste of time and money"), but she is now writing a new album "as it should be done. I'm writing the video as I write the songs." Olivia Newton-John actually hired a video writer to run up a script for an album that will be planned around the resultant scenario. Songwriters will receive a précis and be asked to compose to order.

"I've written songs sometimes just thinking about a visual," says Billy Joel. Notes Ellen Foley: "Video is a luxury and a freedom. You're instantly the star of your own movie." David Byrne of Talking Heads, one of the relatively few musicians who also directs, is at work on an album-length video, but offers some words of general guidance and caution. "I tend to like to have relatively few visual links to the lyrics of the song. I feel that you pigeonhole the song that way, that you detract from the lyrics by interpreting them. Images in *Burning Down the House* have to do with the music, not the lyrics. The images of the fire and the house link to the words, but the house is never burning. That would be a cliché."

Getting serious also means getting down to business and avoiding the abundance of visual bromides that pelt down on most videos like a fine acid rain. There are honorable, even commanding exceptions (see box), but the majority of clips now in circulation are labored ephemera with heavily imitative associations, fully worthy of one executive's dismissive characterization as "this year's satin jackets." Observes Temple: "A lot of videos steal surreal images from places like *Zoom* magazine and the French *Vogue*."

It is the props that get to Gerald Casale, co-founder and video director of Devo, one of the first and funniest of new-wave video bands. "Directors take these songs by groups who have nothing to say, and try to contrive a handle by repeatedly using an object and implying it is some kind of totem. The number of girls on MTV picking up wine glasses and lockets and earrings and breaking them or stepping on them with high heels cannot be believed."

If the pervading silliness is worrisome, there are matters of even greater impact implicit in the vidblitz. Although Keith Richard readily admits, "You can always enjoy dressing up and leaping about for a few minutes," he wonders where struggling beginners will get the means to do it for the camera. "If new bands have to worry about the cost of making a record, and also about making a video, how is that going to weigh out? What about the few who get a lucky crash on a video and sell a record—how much does that have to do with the record itself?"

That will be a tough call, but the trend is already established. Says Greg Geller, vice president of RCA Records: "Personal appearance has always been a factor, but since the advent of videos it has become crucial." Says Dan Beck, merchandising director for CBS Associated labels: "One of the reasons Cyndi Lauper was signed was because she'll be a great film performer." An executive at CBS, which distributes Portrait, is even blunter. "Lauper had the vocals as well as the visuals, or she wouldn't have been signed."

THE MTV VIDEO

The following objections to MTV are widely heard. It is arid. It is racist. It is all fattened up on white bread and too low on funk. The hosts are a carefully vetted collection of bubble brains.

And then there is this: that for all the new technology, and the increasing availability of video goods to the general consumer; for all the local programs, and NBC's weekly Friday Night Videos; for all the new clubs and old joints and even the Schaumburg Snuggery; for all the new ways and new places to see music videos . . . MTV is still, for this moment, the place to be. It is not just the major leagues, it is the league, almost unto itself.

Not only has the success of MTV forced radio to play a wider variety of music—to "open its playlists," as industry slang puts it—it has itself assumed both the aspect of radio and much of its influence. "MTV is the largest radio station in America," says CBS Records Vice President Frank M. Dileo.

If MTV has a driving force, it is probably Robert Pittman, 29, a former radio program director who formatted stations to fit the tastes of the listeners it had, and the listeners it wanted. He did the same thing when he started to develop MTV in mid-1980. "Where is the Woodstock generation?" Pittman asks. "They're all old and bald." Pittman, who is suited and blow-dried, went after what he called "the TV babies. The set is part of our lives, we want it to respond to our every need and desire." He corralled an ad agency that promptly recycled a famous cereal slogan of the early 1960s ("I want my Maypo!") and transformed the message into a new catch phrase, "I want my MTV!" Most important, Pittman conducted the sort of sociological surveying that turns statistical science into show-biz witch doctory, with footnotes. "MTV was the most researched channel in television history," boasts Robert Roganti, MTV's vice president in charge of ad sales.

All the research indicated to Pittman that the world—especially the young world—was ready to listen, watch and dance to rock television. "Kids around 18 use music to define their identity the way people in middle age use cars and homes," he says. "We've moved from the antimaterialism of the 1960s to the 1980s, which is material-oriented." Pittman, in essence, used music as most radio stations have done for years: as a marching band for materialism.

MTV also understood from its statistical read-outs the sort of music that its audience wanted; for the first months of its life, black musicians on MTV were about as scarce as Sunrise Sermonettes. Before

Michael Jackson's Billie Jean appeared on MTV last spring, Columbia Records threatened to withdraw all its tapes from the channel. "We can't be all things to all people," insists MTV Programming Chief Les Garland. "It's not an issue of the type of music or the color of who plays it. It's programming, pure and simple." Things have loosened up. MTV now plays Prince, Eddy Grant, Clarence Clemons and Donna Summer, and only last week added four more black artists. But the situation is still less than ideal. Says Carlos de Jesus, program director at New York's WKTU-FM: "MTV says their programming is just format. But they have no equivalent competition, so there's no equivalent place for black music to go."

MTV receives an average of two dozen new tapes every week and insists that it will play all of them, as long, in Les Garland's words, "as they have no gratuitous sex or violence, are technically sound and feature rock-'n'-roll music." The executives, not the deejays, make the choices, and researchers hit the phones, logging approximately 3,000 survey calls each week. Response helps determine how long a video stays on the air, and how frequently it will run. Lauper's Girls Just Want to Have Fun, for example, is breaking in with "light rotation" (one or two plays a day). Herbie Hancock's kinetic Rockit and Duran Duran's Union of the Snake rate "heavy rotation," which means four to five plays in 24 hours.

With all the heat and excitement, then, and the increased cash flow to the record companies, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that MTV is not yet in the black. Supplied free at first to cable services, it now costs cable operators 10¢ to 15¢ per customer per month. It may be a little early to expect a profit; no one is even sure how much it costs Warner-Amex to run MTV every year. (The best educated guess is \$30 million.) Jack Schneider, Warner-Amex Satellite Entertainment Co. president, predicts profits "some time in 1984," but is vague about numbers. MTV chases advertisers, but, says McCann-Erikson Vice President Paul Green, "the channel's format is so distinctive. The question is whether you're going to create an ad just to run on their channel—is it worth it? More and more the advertisers are saying yes, but it will take time."

KRAPP'S LAST VIDEO

Imagine some intrepid young director mounting a revved-up revival of Samuel Beckett's classic, with the scrofulous Krapp wheezing his memoirs onto videotape. It is a daunting prospect, but not perhaps (discounting the good taste of the author's literary agents) an entirely unlikely one. Video has already reached the stage, in Beatlemania for example, but it is practically inundating Hollywood.

Blame it on Flashdance. A seemingly impossible combination of a feminist Rocky, a bar girl Fame and Jane Fonda's Workout, Flashdance was planned before MTV even got on the air, and was in production when MTV first started to catch on. Critics, nevertheless, delighted in enumerating the movie's improbabilities and disparagingly pointed out its resemblance to a rock video. None of that seemed to trouble the paying public, which has forked over nearly \$93 million to see Flashdance in the theater, an additional \$47 million for the sound track and some \$8 million for the privilege of owning the video cassette and getting down and getting groovy in the privacy of their homes.

The plotting in Flashdance was as loose as the dancing, but, says Dawn Steel, the Paramount executive in charge of shepherding the film, "it was not designed to be a video movie. It happened to have a modular structure. The modules were interchangeable—they were even moved around in the editing—and that's what made the movie adaptable to MTV." Indeed, the theme from Flashdance, fitted out with appropriate clips from the movie, was an MTV smash. The Flashdance phenomenon was a confluence of good commercial instincts and some savvy guesswork, and now that Hollywood has found a new formula, indeed helped create one, it will not let go.

Virtually every major director of videos (Mulcahy, Steve Barren, Bob Giraldi, Brian Grant, Paul Justman) is in the throes of making a major studio feature. Warner Bros. Vice President Mark Canton

describes the studio's upcoming *Vision Quest* as *Rocky* and *Flashdance* meet *The Graduate*, and says, "A movie has to feel like sound." Miles Copeland, head of I.R.S. Records and Video, has put together a women's rock group made up half of actresses, half of musicians. The actresses are learning music, the musicians are learning to act, all for a Columbia project called *Exceptions to the Rule*, "a cross," according to Copeland, "between *Fame* and *Caged*. The women play music as therapy in a prison."

Movie screens will be as full of rock as the home tube. One of Hollywood's hottest movies for summer '84 is Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire*, with a title rerouted from Bruce Springsteen, a score featuring songs by the *Blasters* and Tom Petty, and some costumes designed by Giorgio Armani, all helping to spin out a hellish story set in the future imperfect. Even sooner, viewers can sample a fine, tough, sexy new movie called *Reckless*, with tunes by Romeo Void and Bob Seeger; a fake documentary called *This Is Spinal Tap*, directed by Rob Reiner, which chronicles with legitimate hilarity the American tour of the world's loudest and stupidest heavy-metal band; and *Footloose*, a kind of contemporary rock fable about a young man who comes to a benighted town in the Midwest where rock-'n'-roll music and dancing are forbidden. The director of *Footloose*, Herbert Ross, has considerable familiarity with the musical genre (he directed *Funny Lady*, *The Turning Point*, *Pennies from Heaven*), but felt that he needed a little updating. Ross's homework was watching rock videos.

For the future: sharper sound, better production, more finesse with image and story, more time as performers move away from the clip to the album-length format. All these are easy enough to predict, with certainty. But it is not easy to see where this will end. Indeed, there is the strong sense it may not end at all, that the forms will keep mutating, that the big screen and the small will shape, share and shift sizes, and that music will be the common ground.

"At the moment," says Brian Grant, "video is the new kid in town, and the big boys are playing with all the little boys' toys. I think that the future lies with the third-and fourth-generation directors, the children who will grow up with videos." It is worth noting that those people will be perhaps just a little impatient with merely seeing songs. They may very well want something different. Something more.

Stay tuned.

—By Jay Cocks. Reported by Peter Ainslie and Adam Zagorin/New York and Denise Worrell/Los Angeles

- Find this article at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,926425,00.html>

Copyright © 2013 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.