



**PARENTAL  
ADVISORY**  
MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN AMERICA

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"Written with the voice and fervor of a true music fan, *Parental Advisory* is exceedingly readable, informative, and enjoyable. It should appear on the required reading list for every high school civics course."

—Nina Crowley

## “ I WANT MY MTV ”

### MTV and Music Videos

**The introduction of novel fashion in music  
is a thing to beware of as endangering  
the whole fabric of society.**

—Plato

**A**fter the birth of rock and roll, the evolution of music video is among the most significant events in the history of music. However, when MTV was launched in August of 1981, staffers had to travel to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to view the channel's debut (featuring the infamous first video shown that evening, "Video Killed the Radio Star"), because cable operators in their home base of Manhattan didn't think the channel would amount to much of anything. At the time, the creation of MTV was such a nonevent that it was largely ignored by the press, and it received no headline exposure during its first three months on-air.

MTV was born before cable television blossomed. Cable in the 1970s did not feature specialty channels like CNN, the Golf Channel, or Nickelodeon; instead, it featured retransmission of broadcast signals to areas where normal signals were weak. With the advent of movie channels and a few other original programming channels for cable, the big operators (such as MTV's parent,

Warner) started to conduct research into programming ideas that might prove to be effective.

Warner executives developed a channel that was targeted toward fifteen- to thirty-five-year-old fans of an emerging marketing tool created by record companies to promote artists: music videos.

Until then, music and television were a strange marriage. Both the music and television industries sensed that ratings and promotional potential existed if popular rock acts could be brought onto television variety shows. When Ed Sullivan, not considered a big fan of rock music and its performers, began to schedule hot rock and roll acts regularly on his television show, he was rewarded with an incredible boost in ratings, all because America's youth flocked to the television to catch a glimpse of their idols performing live. Since the evolution of rock as a popular medium, television had tried to create specialty programs that could exploit rock's popularity by adding that enticing visual component. In the coming years, that visual component would be refined even as it defined society and culture.

In the 1950s, Lucky Strike's *Your Hit Parade* featured a group of actors pantomiming story lines to the accompaniment of the week's seven most popular rock songs (selected, of course, by Lucky Strike's advertising agency). Several years later, Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* featured teen dancers shakin' their groove things to the current hits.

By the 1960s, television producers were attempting to capitalize on rock's popularity by creating new television variety shows like *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo*. Those shows featured "safer" popular music (such as the Righteous Brothers) and were hosted by popular movie or television stars (like Jerry Lewis or Zsa Zsa Gabor). However, the combination led to low ratings. *American Bandstand* was the only show with staying power. Also during the 1960s, television produced its first creation aimed at rock audiences: Don Kirshner's prefab group and show *The Monkees*. Television networks also began a trend of offering rather benign musicians opportunities to stage their own variety shows (such as *Sonny and Cher* and *Donny and Marie*).

By the late 1970s, American television's attempts to latch on to mainstream rock coattails consisted of two basic formulas: the

dance show (e.g., *American Bandstand*) and the featured musical performance (live or lip-synched). Popular music-themed shows in the 1970s were, again, *American Bandstand* plus *Soul Train*; *In Concert*; *Midnight Special*; and, to some extent, *Saturday Night Live*.

It was during the 1970s that record companies began to reexamine television as a serious alternative to the high costs of concert tour support and promotion. Companies began to produce ready-made performance and conceptual videos that were distributed to various television programs. While the music video concept did not really take off in the United States, the idea blossomed in England, where television shows like *Top of the Pops* and *Ready! Steady! Go!* ate up these promotional clips. It's worth noting that the popularity of music videos in Europe is cited as the reason that many of MTV's early success stories were British: There simply were more videos available from English artists.

But television was unpopular with many musicians. In addition to poor sound quality of television broadcasts, artists were regularly asked to edit song lyrics to conform to the rules of network Standards and Practices departments. Producers of *The Ed Sullivan Show* asked the Doors and the Rolling Stones to change song lyrics, even suggesting the replacement words. The Doors' Jim Morrison agreed to a lyric change backstage, but then sang the original lyrics on television. Mick Jagger, lead singer of the Rolling Stones, insisted that he didn't alter his lyrics during their appearance but he actually mumbled the lyric, making it unintelligible. During a taping of *American Bandstand*, Curtis Mayfield was surprised to learn that producers had edited certain phrases from his song "Pusherman." This lack of enthusiasm on the part of the musicians, plus the large costs involved in producing videos, left the pool of available clips relatively small.

During these early years, video availability was a big problem. The average Top 40 radio station in the United States has a playlist that features about 300 songs each week. MTV's initial rotation was about 125 videos. Thus, MTV featured many unknown bands—not from any altruistic desire to break new music but because American record companies' hesitation to produce and provide video clips forced the channel to play nearly everything available. Adding to the frustration was cable's lack of popularity

in major metropolitan areas. That fact made MTV a hard sell to advertisers, who were slow to buy time on an unknown network—especially a network they could not even view themselves. MTV was a huge gamble. But the channel's originators felt they had a concept that could not fail.

The concept of MTV was anything but what it appeared to be on the surface. MTV was meant to be cool. It was designed to look spontaneous—like something that had just popped up from a cool nightclub, college fraternity house, or the basement of someone you'd want to have as your best friend. The veejays (mostly former FM radio disc jockeys or bit actors) rehearsed their patter about the videos with the goal of making it seem off-the-cuff and *unrehearsed*. They were encouraged to ride out mistakes to add to the DIY feel. Sets were meticulously constructed to have a thrift-store look. Graphics used in MTV positioning promos and imaging were cutting edge, flashy, and meant to overload the senses with a feeling of hip euphoria. To appeal to viewer desires for social change and the need to buck the establishment, MTV devoted air-time to trendy causes like USA for Africa and Rock the Vote. MTV knew what its target demographic thought was cool, and that's what MTV delivered.

But under the young, hip exterior was a corporate machine that would have shocked many early fans and viewers. MTV's commitment was to itself and to its own brand preservation. In the words of television critic Tom Shales:

Political and social content is almost entirely missing from MTV because it is built on the illusion that rock music is a political and social system in itself; that the world is divided into pro-rock and anti-rock forces, that to be a fan of the music or of particular groups is somehow to stand for something.<sup>1</sup>

MTV wasn't trying to buck the establishment—MTV was the establishment. According to one record-label executive, "The purpose of MTV is not to bring culture to the great unwashed. The purpose of MTV is to make money for MTV."<sup>2</sup>

Today, MTV and its various owners have turned it into a veritable cash machine—turning yearly profits upward of \$100 million. These profits are generated from advertising revenues and success-

ful branding efforts: MTV caps and jackets, *Beavis and Butthead* merchandise, *The Real World* books, MTV-themed compilation CDs, and so on. What has gone into creating that brand is no happy accident.

Former MTV researcher Marshall Cohen once said, "We believe [MTV] was the most researched channel in history."<sup>3</sup> While the service was still in its conceptual stage, MTV polled hundreds of teenagers and twenty-somethings to see if the idea would fly. Each week, fifteen hundred to three thousand phone surveys were conducted by the network to identify the video clips favored by target listeners, which videos they wanted to view more (or less) often, and what their opinions were concerning MTV and its programming.

MTV's attention to detail paid off. A poll of high school students several years after the channel's debut found that 85 percent of those with cable regularly watched MTV; 80 percent of a separate survey group reported viewing MTV more than two hours each day.<sup>4</sup> Once record labels noticed that MTV sold records, they began to pour millions into video production. MTV became a phenomenon; however, MTV's strong image also was a burden, because its importance in the music business eventually placed it squarely in the censors' view. While MTV did not produce the videos, as the messenger it was considered guilty by association.

### The Case Against MTV and Music Videos

Almost since its inception, MTV has been lambasted for the imagery it airs. During the 1980s, a rash of academic studies concerning music videos appeared. When it came to race, gender roles, and violence, the results were none too flattering. One study found that men in music videos were usually portrayed in stereotypical male working roles: firefighters, mechanics, and doctors. Men on MTV comprised 94 percent of the police officers and 90 percent of the business executives. Women were portrayed in stereotypical roles as well: cheerleaders, secretaries, and librarians. Ninety-five percent of all characters of color were portrayed as athletes, entertainers, or other non-white-collar roles.<sup>5</sup>

According to the National Coalition on Television Violence, a majority of music videos contained excessive violence. Videos that the NCTV found particularly disturbing included Pat Benatar's "Anxiety," "You Might Think" by the Cars, "Come Dancing" by

the Kinks, T-Bone Burnett's "Murder Weapon," "Fight Fire with Fire" by Kansas, Lionel Richie's "Penny Lover," and "Eat It" by Weird Al Yankovic. To emphasize what he considered to be positive images on MTV, NCTV head Thomas Radecki identified several artists he thought should be applauded for the "prosocial" values in their videos. Among that group were the Romantics, Donna Summer, U2, and Missing Persons (whose lead singer paraded through the video wearing a revealing bikini made of clear plastic tubing and discarded scraps of vinyl). In viewing these videos, it is apparent that interpretations of what constitutes violence and "prosocial" values are highly subjective.

One group suspiciously absent from much of the debate concerning music videos is the Parents Music Resource Center. While the PMRC initially lobbied heavily for warning labels displayed on a screen whenever video clips containing violent or sexually explicit lyrics or imagery were shown, the group backed down when it realized it was fairly powerless to control MTV. Federal Communications Commission guidelines for cable channels are far more lenient than for traditional TV broadcasters, and any action by MTV had to be voluntary. In an attempt to defuse the "Washington Wives" interest in MTV, the network invited PMRC representatives to visit their offices to discuss the standards and practices employed in video selection. Eventually, the attention given to music videos by the NCTV and PMRC had a chilling effect on MTV, which began to reject or request edits for a significantly higher percentage of submitted videos. When this action began, MTV was in a heated battle of its own, trying to save itself from the wrath of censors.

### Censoring MTV

"You have to understand the pressure MTV is under," stated one former MTV exec. "If cable operators are pressured by the townships they're in, they'll put the pressure on MTV. If they really get in a battle, they'll consider jerking the channel."<sup>6</sup> While MTV was a runaway hit and a powerful force in the music industry, it had an Achilles' heel: carriage. Since first coming to the air in 1981, MTV found carriage by cable subscribers to be an uphill battle. Many cable providers resisted adding the network, because extra channels required extra cable capacity and distribution equipment. The

cable companies were understandably hesitant to sink their profits into those kinds of investments. MTV first caught on in the suburbs and rural areas where cable was most popular, but it had a tougher time gaining carriage in major markets. While MTV did well in Wichita, Indianapolis, and Spokane, the large advertising agencies were located in major cities like Los Angeles and New York—areas slow to begin airing the network.

As MTV grew and carriage became less of a pressing concern, the issues quickly switched to maintaining distribution points during the explosion of the cable industry and weathering the controversy kicked up by the NCTV and other groups. A single decision to remove MTV from a cable system could translate into permanently lost access to hundreds of thousands of homes, easily eliminating entire markets. In the view of its detractors, MTV "the messenger" was just as flawed as the videos it presented. MTV's first sign of trouble came in the little town of Emporia, Virginia.

Shortly after Pembroke Cablevision added MTV in the summer of 1983, Roger Wilcher, the supervisor of youth activities at a local Baptist church in Emporia, felt that something should be done about it. Wilcher found the network "vulgar and distasteful" and thought that adults had an obligation to provide some "moral guidelines."<sup>7</sup> He began to lobby the city council to remove MTV from the cable system. In turn, the city council passed a resolution requiring Pembroke to remove the network from its standard cable offerings, but it allowed the cable operator to offer MTV as a premium service for an extra ten dollars a month. Few were happy with the council's decision—Wilcher and his friends wanted MTV completely removed from the cable system; network viewers were now required to pay an additional fee for a service they didn't object to; and MTV had lost access to more than 1,500 homes. A survey later determined that of the 1,659 Pembroke subscribers, only 28 percent wanted the service restricted.

The following year, 1984, saw several other attacks against MTV. Mormon bishop and landlord Leo Weidner banned MTV from the cable system in his Provo, Utah, apartment complex. He believed that MTV was a bad influence on his tenants, who were mostly students from nearby Brigham Young University. Weidner thought that music videos were "pornographic," even though he admitted he had never seen one. In May of that year, Surgeon Gen-

eral C. Everett Koop threw his opinion into the ring during a speech at a Southern medical college. He claimed that video fans had become "saturated with what I think is going to make them have trouble having satisfying relationships with the opposite sex . . . when you're raised with rock music that uses both pornography and violence."<sup>8</sup> Koop's statements were widely quoted, though he had no scientific evidence to support his claims.

On the East Coast that July, two born-again Christian women circulated a petition demanding the removal of the "decadent, morally degrading, and evil" video music network from their local cable system in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Local officials tried to offer a compromise: a channel-blocker that could be installed in any home to prevent MTV's signal from entering the television set. This solution did not satisfy the crusaders, and MTV was eventually removed from the cable system.

The channel-blocker compromise was a little more successful in Texarkana, Texas, after the city's board of directors objected to the sight of Cher's leather-thong-covered, tattooed buttocks flashing on their televisions in her clip for "If I Could Turn Back Time." Dimension Cable System offered the single channel "traps" to its 22,000 subscribers, which seemed to please the opposition. In the ensuing years, there have been only forty requests for the blocking device from Dimension subscribers (that's less than two-hundredths of one percent).

A major battle ensued when Tele-Community Antenna (TCA)—serving 420,000 subscribers in Texas, Mississippi, and Arkansas—decided to drop the music network in the summer of 1991. TCA labeled the channel as "borderline pornographic" and claimed to have received complaints from parents, teachers, and local government agencies. Following the ban, several local groups began actively campaigning to have the network restored to their cable systems. An Amarillo, Texas, radio station produced a pro-MTV rap song, and several petition drives were conducted to get back their MTV. Because almost half a million homes were at stake, MTV heavily invested in advertising to support the protesters who were trying to get the channel restored. TCA quickly caved under the pressure, and MTV was back on the system two weeks later.

A similar situation occurred in November of that year when Sammons Communications tried to replace MTV with the less

provocative Video Jukebox Network on its fifty-five cable systems in nineteen states. Sammons initially wanted to switch MTV to a pay service, emulating the situation in Virginia eight years earlier. MTV refused, fearing the loss of advertising revenue. Soon after Sammons dropped MTV, several groups circulated petitions and organized protests against the cable giant. MTV again stepped in, running local television ads featuring Paula Abdul and Phil Collins, asking listeners to demand the return of the service to their cable system. Four months later, Sammons restored MTV.

### MTV as Censor

There is a duality to MTV. Although it has taken some serious knocks from censors over the years, MTV has itself been a censor, both to control its product and to reduce the attacks it receives as messenger.

When videos arrive at MTV to be considered for air, the channel requires that they be accompanied by a lyric sheet, both of which are then reviewed by MTV's Standards Department (created in 1984 in response to the criticism MTV was enduring). From 1984 until 1989, the Standards Department consisted of one person, who had complete control over every MTV video, promo, commercial, and imaging spot. In 1989, the Standards Department was expanded to include five people. Most of the additional staffers also served on the Acquisitions Committee, which forwards all submitted videos to the Standards Department after screening them for formatting considerations.

Guidelines used by the Standards Department, though inconsistently applied and completely open to subjectivity, rule out videos showing drug use; excessive alcohol consumption; explicit, graphic, or excessive sexual practices; gratuitous violence (such as knifings or physical restraint); or derogatory characterizations of ethnic or religious groups. In the words of one MTV exec, "naked women running around or throwing babies out of trucks would not be permitted." MTV has also tried to fend off criticism by airing some videos only late in the evening or through the late-night hours, as was the case with Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time" and Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back." MTV itself recognizes the inconsistency inherent in its standards and practice guidelines. According to an MTV spokesperson, "Where it gets tricky is

drawing the line. It's never a black-and-white issue. There's a lot of gray stuff. Is that too much of Cher's ass? Somebody has to decide."<sup>9</sup>

An additional duty of MTV's Standards Department is to police the appearance of product logos in videos. An MTV viewer can easily notice that logos are blurred out of videos and shows like *The Real World*. "The idea behind not having product endorsements is to differentiate the videos from the commercials," explained MTV's Tina Exarhos. However, MTV's true motives may be slightly different. With the costs of producing a major label video starting at about \$100,000, it wouldn't take long before artists and their record companies began to consider the inclusion of product placement or endorsements to underwrite the expense—similar to product sponsorships of major concert tours or artists appearing in commercials. For example, it is not a coincidence that Apple's Macintosh computers seem to be the computer of choice in many motion pictures and television shows. Apple pays big money to put them there and would probably do the same with music videos if given the chance. In fact, many companies would.

Another way MTV controls music videos is by demanding re-edits. If MTV doesn't like something in a video or if it objects to lyrics, the entire clip is returned to the record company for another try. In 1984, MTV demanded edits to one out of every ten videos aired; by 1994, that number had grown to one in three, with some videos returned as many as six times for edits.

### What's So Terrible About Condoms?

By 1989, the world was aware of AIDS, and educational efforts were in full swing to halt the spread of the disease. Also that year, a little-known garage-punk band, the Fuzztones, released their first American album, *In Heat*. The group's label, Beggar's Banquet (distributed by BMG), commissioned a video for the group's song "Nine Months Later." Upon review by the MTV Standards Department, the video was rejected for unacceptable sexual innuendos in the song's lyrics. Specifically, they objected to the third verse:

Listen boys, to these words of wit.  
I said it's not attached to you, you're  
attached to it.

Well if you don't wanna live this life of  
shame,

Be sure to wear your rubbers when it rains.  
And when it rains it pours!

According to the band's frontman, Rudi Protrudi, "The message of the song was quite clear: 'Hey, kids, wear condoms!' We were the first and only band to promote condom use."

MTV said that it would air the video, but only if the lyrics were changed to something more acceptable, like "raincoats" instead of "rubbers." Protrudi feels that the song's rejection was intended to make an example of the Fuzztones. "It was a smokescreen," says Protrudi. "MTV was getting a lot of pressure from conservatives to remove all sex from videos. At the time, no one in the U.S. had heard of the Fuzztones—so we were an easy target. They never would have asked Madonna to change that lyric."

Protrudi felt that MTV used a double standard in its judgment of the video. "Safe sex is pretty much what MTV is about. They have commercials for condoms, specials about safe sex—so what's so bad about the word 'rubbers'?"

"I don't think there was any moral decision involved at all; whoever has the most money gets the loudest voice. This is a 'funny' song, not a 'dirty' one—that's the last thing I ever thought it would be. But somebody did."

After receiving intense pressure from their record label, Protrudi and the group relented and rerecorded the lyric. MTV approved the revised video but aired it only once.

The list of videos that MTV has returned for edits might surprise some viewers (see "Videos Edited for MTV," p. 95). For example, Culture Club's video clip for "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" aired in Britain with its featured jury of black-faced minstrels. MTV demanded the scene be cut before it was aired. The rerecorded



The Fuzztones—their video for "Nine Months Later" was rejected by MTV in 1989 because it contained a reference to condoms.

clip ignited the band's career in the United States—sans the Jolson-esque jurors. Before MTV added David Bowie's clip for "China Girl" to its rotation, a nude beach scene was replaced. The clip for Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Relax" was returned four times by MTV before the video was aired. Even the Christian rock band DeGarmo & Key, one of few Christian acts featured on MTV, failed to make it past the Standards Department. Their video for "Six, Six, Six" featured a scene in which the Antichrist burst into flames.

MTV has asked for edits based on lyrics also. It insisted that the Fuzztones change the lyrics for their song "Nine Months Later" from "Well if you don't wanna live this life of shame, Be sure to wear your rubbers when it rains" to "wear your raincoat."

A smaller category are the videos that are so far gone with imagery or lyrics that MTV flat-out refuses to air them. Probably the most famous example of this type of deletion is Madonna's video for "Justify My Love." The black-and-white video caused quite a stir when it was released: nudity, gay and lesbian foreplay, sadomasochism, cross-dressing, and group sex. The video was originally scheduled to debut as part of an MTV "Madonnathon" in November of 1990. Once MTV viewed the finished product, they refused to air the clip. In a statement to the press, Madonna called attention to the media's double standard: "Why is it that people are willing to go to a movie and watch someone get blown to bits for no reason and nobody wants to see two girls kissing or two men snuggling?"<sup>10</sup> The incident wasn't all bad for Madonna; following the controversy's coverage in the press (including an airing of the unedited video on ABC's *Nightline*), her record company released the video in the consumer market and sold half a million copies the first month. Madonna refused to edit the video, and it still does not appear on MTV.

Other artists who refused to edit videos have seen their clips end up in the circular file: The Rolling Stones' video for "Under Cover of Night" was refused because it depicted violence (after being aired on MTV for two weeks), Public Enemy's "Hazy Shade of Criminal" was passed over for including a riot scene, and "Taste It" by INXS was turned down as well. On only one occasion has MTV reversed a ruling by its Standards Department: Neil Young's "This Note's for You."

## Videos Edited for MTV

**Y**ou might be surprised at the list of popular videos that were initially rejected by MTV for lyrics and imagery. Here's a sample:

Berlin	"Sex"
Bon Jovi	"Living in Sin"
Cars	"Hello Again"
Culture Club	"Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?"
David Bowie	"China Girl"
Duran Duran	"Girls on Film"
Frankie Goes to Hollywood	"Relax"
Golden Earring	"Twilight Zone"
Joan Jett	"Bad Reputation"
John Cougar Mellencamp	"Let It All Hang Out"
Queen	"Body Language"
Ramones	"Psychotherapy"
Rolling Stones	"Neighbors" and "She Was Hot"
Serious-Lee-Fine	"Nothing Can Stop Us Now"

Young's song and the accompanying video were meant to parody the ever-increasing number of product endorsements by musical celebrities. The video contained impersonators of Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston hawking Pepsi and Coke, and it was based partially on an Eric Clapton commercial for Michelob. The lyrics read, "Ain't singin' for Miller, don't sing for Bud, I won't sing for politicians, ain't singin' for Spuds. This note's for you." After scheduling the sight-unseen video for a MTV world premier on July 1, 1988, MTV pulled the plug when the Standards Department saw it. MTV explained that the video violated its policies regarding product placement because the clip



Even such uncontroversial acts as pop rockers Bon Jovi found themselves editing their videos to meet MTV's standards.



showed the logos of the products it was parodying. Young wrote a terse letter to MTV, calling them "spineless" and asked, "What does the 'M' in MTV stand for—music or money?"<sup>11</sup> MTV eventually relented, and Young's video went on to win the MTV Award for Best Video of the Year.

As it is for many institutions choosing to censor, the biggest problem with MTV's use of "standards" in videos is its lack of consistency in implementing these policies. While MTV will censor a Culture Club video because it might offend African-Americans, it does not censor Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing," which repeatedly refers to homosexuals derogatorily as "faggots." And speaking of homosexuality, Madonna's video for "Justify My Love" is censored for depicting same-sex cuddling and kissing—yet MTV displays heterosexual couples engaged in the same activities. Neil Young is banned from MTV for showing product logos, yet videos by DJ Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince have displayed product logos with no attempts made to cover or remove them. Although MTV confined Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" to evenings only, the network had aired a similarly themed "Big Old Butt" by L.L. Cool J during daytime hours just two years earlier. MTV is also more likely to request edits from unknown artists than from established ones.

According to MTV spokesperson Carole Robinson, "our guidelines are fluid and open to interpretation so that each video can be reviewed on a case-by-case basis."

Some industry analysts suggest that a new artist's sales can increase by as much as half a million copies if he or she gains exposure on MTV. With numbers like that, it's no wonder that artists and labels are anxious to please MTV and that MTV easily wields near-complete control over the music video industry.

However, it should be noted that MTV does not hold a clear monopoly over the censorship of videos. In 1991, both Country Music Television and its parent company, The Nashville Network, banned Garth Brooks's video for "The Thunder Rolls." Although the networks had been airing the video in heavy rotation, the clip was pulled because executives felt that the themes of domestic violence, revenge, and murder were not up to network standards. Brooks eventually edited the video, claiming he had intended to release an edited version all along.

### MTV and Race

There is one area in which MTV can be found guilty of shortsightedness rather than of censorship: race. During the early eighties, many artists, record companies, and industry insiders declared MTV racist for refusing to play videos by black artists. "God forbid people should be exposed to blacks on cable," joked A&M Records' Jeff Ayeroff.<sup>12</sup> But in this instance, MTV was neither racist nor censorious, it was simply late in realizing the crossover potential of artists such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Lionel Richie. Not to say that there is no racism in music or music videos (for example, producers of Donna Summer's video for "She Works Hard for the Money" were told by label execs to include a white family in the clip's plot), but rather that MTV's programming *policies* are not racist.

From its inception, MTV adopted many principles common to commercial radio, especially a concept that gained a huge amount of radio programming popularity in the eighties: "narrowcasting." Narrowcasting is the idea that a radio station (or video music channel) should program itself to appeal to one specific music genre, thus strictly aligning to the demographic most associated with that blend of music. Radio fragmented into R&B, country, oldies, alternative, AOR (album-oriented rock), CHR (contemporary hits radio), AC (adult contemporary), and others. In the nineties, the concept was further refined when these categories were broken into several subcategories, each of which targeted a unique listener demographic.

When MTV began, it had its eye firmly fixed on fifteen- to thirty-five-year-old whites with high disposable income. The safest bet to hit that demographic was straight-ahead AOR—Rock with a capital R. Artists such as Lionel Richie and Rick James did not fit this mold. To claim that MTV was racist is like criticizing The Nashville Network for failing to air the New York Philharmonic or blasting Black Entertainment Television for refusing to play Jim Nabors.

Regardless, Rick James spoke about the absence of black artists on MTV in 1983, when he told the *Los Angeles Times*:

I'm just tired of the bullshit. I have sold over 10 million records in a four-year period . . . and I can't get on the channel. I watch

all these fluffed up groups who don't even sell four records on a program that I'm being excluded from. Me and every one of my peers. It's like taking black people back 400 years.<sup>13</sup>

MTV countered that while James's music was indeed popular, it was not popular with MTV's bread-and-butter demo: the rock music fan. The MTV viewer didn't see Rick James as rock, so MTV was not going to play his videos.

James's interest in MTV was simple: "I figure if they played my video I could sell hundreds of thousands more records than I do now." According to Manny Sanchez, marketing director for Franklin Music, "Forget this black/white thing. The issue is 'green.'" And that's true. The real issue of black artists on MTV was money, wrapped in the banner of civil rights and race.

Well-intentioned artists such as David Bowie and Bob Seger chastised the music channel for failing to play more black artists. During an MTV interview, Bowie suddenly started quizzing veejay Mark Goodman about MTV's programming policies.

Black artists truly crossed over into MTV with the huge success of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. When *Thriller's* first single, "Billie Jean," was released in early 1983, it quickly jumped to the top of the *Billboard* pop singles charts. Still, MTV would not air the video. It is rumored that CBS Records officials became so frustrated with MTV's refusal to play the song that they threatened to pull all CBS videos from MTV (including such staple artists as Billy Joel, Journey, and Pink Floyd) if MTV didn't add "Billie Jean." The pressure tactic, if it occurred, worked, and MTV began a long involvement with Jackson and his video catalog. Jackson's success on MTV finally sent the message that black artists had tremendous crossover potential, eventually paving the way for many others.