

I hate my EmpTV.

With endless *Real World* whinefests and boring claymation wrestling rings, one has to wonder what happened to MTV. Katherine Turman goes in search of music on Music Television.



The cry seems to have changed from the pleading entreaty of "I want my MTV!" to the pissed-off vitriol of "I HATE my EmpTV!" The network that spawned Madonna-bes, and a decade later, Gwen-abes, responsible for making and breaking careers (remember—or not?!—those Def Leppard or Candlebox vids?), has more than its fair share of detractors. Most of them bemoan the fact that the M, which stands for music, in case anyone has forgotten, has been replaced by the Pucks of the *Real World*, the fresh-faced *Road Rules* whiners, and a couple of sock puppets. Look at a sample of MTV's daily schedule for January 1999: You get an hour or so of music videos—Jams, say—sprinkled between *LoveLine*, *Sifl & Olly*, *Daria*, *Beavis & Butt-Head* (yes, still) and back-to-back-episodes of *Road Rules*. That is, of course, unless you're up from 2 to 7 a.m., when the longest and coolest variety of undisturbed music videos run. Presumably, most of the youthful MTV target audience is slumbering during those hours. And things ain't gonna get any better for music video purists.

You'd think that 14-year-old Tami from St. Paul, Minnesota, might be a typical MTV

watcher. Well, she admits that "every so often, I have nothing to do and turn on MTV—much to my dismay to find worthless repeated videos—and I would say [I watch] maybe an hour a day if even that." Although she believes that "MTV is really one of the deciding factors of what trends stay around and which fade," she gets her musical information from outlets other than MTV. "At Ozzfest '97 and '98 I became aware of new bands such as Snot [and] Incubus. Then I'd buy the CD. I heard of Limp Bizkit from Warped Tour '97. I never hear of any good bands on MTV until they do something illegal, [like] get arrested, drunk, lawsuits, death, etc."

Speaking of Epic band Incubus, it used to be every young band's goal to get on MTV. Now, says guitarist Mike Einziger—currently touring stadiums opening for Black Sabbath with Incubus—videos aren't as crucial. Einziger recalls the videos by Twisted Sister, Paul McCartney, and Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (which cost a cool \$1.5 million to make). Yet his band's first clip, "Take Me to Your Leader," garnered only minimal airplay on The Box and M2—the actual all-music video channel started by MTV that hasn't yet spread to cable.

However, the guitarist says of his grass-roots metallic-funk band, "We didn't expect it to be played. I look at MTV the same way I look at radio: if it's working for you it's working for you. It's stupid to chase it. If they want to play your video, they'll come to you and ask for one. If ours get played on underground, cable access shows, that's cool."

The switch from a large variety of hip, creative videos and new and underground bands to more original, youth-oriented programming, and colorful, disposable pop bands, however, is sadly understandable from a business point of view, though most of MTV's angry viewers couldn't care less about the business side. They just want a tasty dose of Korn and Limp Bizkit with a dose of the band Sugar, not Spice Girls, on top. But bucks are the bottom line, and MTV is a business that wants to stay in business.

Amiable Irishman Dominic Griffin was a popular cast member on the second season of the *Real World*, housed in Venice, California, with his TV roommates. Post-*Real World*, Griffin had a development deal with MTV, where he would pitch show ideas to executives and was privy to certain West Coast MTV meetings. He notes that most of the music decisions were made in the main

New York office.

"I remember one meeting where they went, 'We need the next *Beavis & Butt-head*,' which is like saying we need the next *Seinfeld*," laughs Griffin. "They also wanted a game show, and this is an honest-to-God quote, I swear...they said, 'We want something with a wheel.' You'd have serious conversations about a wheel."

Now, as a soundtrack columnist for the music trade magazine *Hits* and as producer of the syndicated radio show *Rockline*, Griffin is involved in both the record company and on the band side of the MTV world. Take the story of the Toadies, the Texas band who broke big on their third single—and they'd made two pricey videos for their virtually unheard and unseen first and sec-

on such a trend-setting-like it or not!-station. Even MTV's inane venture into filmdom with the dunderheaded comedy *Varsity Blues* saw the flick come in at #1 for weekend box-office stats.

Griffin quotes more stats: "Radio does sell, but getting MTV is like getting the No. 1 Top 40 station in the country." Sugar Ray, for instance, a good-looking, colorful bunch with the radio hit "Fly," saw massive MTV support boost their sales beyond Platinum. And take another Atlantic Records act, Kid Rock. "MTV is behind Kid Rock right now, and he's selling about 12,000 a week with no alternative radio," observes Griffin. Save touring and previous fans, you'd have to imagine that at least 75 percent of Kid Rock's album sales are likely due to MTV.

feature rap groups from the Philippines and other close-by countries, Kasem explains.

"The boy bands from Europe, like Code Red, were huge, and they played more music there," Kasem, 26, affirms. "The quality control was not as good," she furthers, explaining that they had "a show for an hour every day where the VJ could do whatever they wanted. No script. Every day. That would never fly in America." Consequently, you had bad comedy skits, singing, and inanity. "We're not *Saturday Night Live*, we're not the *Groundlings*. It was horrific," she confesses with a laugh. Although she found MTV an amiable, well-paying employer, others who've been given the shaft in one way or another beg to differ, noting a lack of loyalty and low pay from the relative-

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ond singles. "They said to me, 'We bought two Ferraris in the wrong color,'" relates Griffin, "because they'd spent a half-million dollars on videos that weren't seen. That would have been '96. Now, [bands making] videos are not automatic anymore."

Numerous unnamed record label executives concur, noting the ultimate, omnipotent importance of MTV on a band's sale and image. They sadly agree that they can't rely on the network being a near-given as band marketing tool anymore. There's much less music programming, and the musical trends that MTV themselves impose and currently set are much narrower and pushed harder. With a play list that encompasses a mere 50 videos at MOST...got that-24 hours a day seven days a week with only 50 videos in rotation!-the chances are slim to none for an unknown band, even signed to a major label and on tour, to get airplay. Still, hope springs eternal for band hopefuls.

There's no denying that the young, quick-cut look of MTV heavily influenced "regular" TV and film, and that even President Clinton considered the network a viable-enough news outlet to grant in-person interviews. Who wouldn't want exposure

Rumors still run amok that in the '70s there was "payola," where record companies would "bribe" radio stations to play their acts. Today, most insiders doubt that there's any form of payola involved in getting bands on MTV. "To be quite honest, I don't think there is. MTV needs the record companies; the record companies need MTV," says one executive who asks to remain anonymous. "MTV just went through a rebirth phase where they just went from a very alternative to a more Top 40 music-driven channel over the past two years. They also changed a lot of the upper execs. Who knows what favors are pulled here and there. These are big corporations and I honestly don't think you could [hide huge sums of money for payola]. I hope that doesn't sound naive."

Like bacteria, the insidious growth of MTV has spread worldwide—there's an MTV Russia as well as outlets in Australia, India (where it reaches 7.7 million households!), Brazil, Japan, Latin America, and New Zealand, among other places. Cute, clever American actress/host Kerri Kasem was a VJ on MTV Singapore. While it has the same basic structure as the U.S. version, including mostly American bands, there's less hardcore gangsta rap, though they did

ly young network. So, want to know how much the actors in the second season of *Real World* made? "It worked out to around \$300 a week," recalls Griffin. "I was there 24 weeks, so when it all evened out, I took home somewhere around \$5,000."

Not bad, but considering MTV's large audience, hardly the tens of thousands an episode granted even lowly sitcom actors. In its defense, MTV is indeed a young network, with eyes on becoming (maybe, someday) on par with an ABC or CBS. Griffin notes that during his tenure there, "they had plans to turn it into a real network. There were always complaints about the videos, but for a network to develop as a business, it could not only run videos. They wanted to be a gauge of pop culture." Enter the *Real World*, fashion models as hosts, and you've got MTV as sort of an E! Channel for the under-20-somethings.

What are the options for MTV haters? Well, online, check out the MTV "Hate Page" on the Internet. Postings include: "The main purpose of MTV is to generate interest by young people so that large corporations can sell those young people consumer goods." Or "MTV is NOT about empowering young people! MTV is NOT

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The Roxy

9009 Sunset Blvd.; 310.276.2222

Feeling a little nostalgic for your favorite, tacky '80s bands like Warrant, Slaughter, or Poison? Well, chances are you can catch them playing shows at The Roxy alongside decent bands gone mysteriously awry like The Black Crows, or up-and-coming local Los Angeles talent. Despite the fact that recycled bands of yesteryear retire here, don't be too quick to judge this all ages, landmark music venue and bar. Back in the '60s and '70s, The Roxy hosted live concerts by rock gods like The Doors and Jimi Hendrix, but over the years has been relegated to a haven for leather pants-wearing, pasty-faced, long-haired rockers. Just when all seemed lost, it looks as though it's on the brink of a rebirth. In December, Hole played a secret show in the club's relatively small confines and put a little sizzle back into the place. The incredible sound system and intimacy the Roxy has to offer music lovers makes this one of the best small venues to see live rock 'n' roll in the city.

Atlas Supper Club

3760 Wilshire Blvd.; 213.380.8400

Anything goes on any given night at the gorgeous, richly decorated hotspot frequented by straight, gay, and transvestite cabaret lovers. One night, you're swaying your hips to sultry Latin sounds; the next you're being carried away by live Caribbean music or the seductive sounds of a '40s-style lounge singer. The great thing about this spot—besides the fact that it's one of the only places in Los Angeles where you can see a fabulous live show reminiscent of the days before torch singing was a lost art—is its ever-changing repertoire of musical acts. The only drawback to Atlas is that even though dinner is served there nightly, once the entertainment gets going, the service practically comes to a screeching halt. It seems the waiters and waitresses are big fans of the live music as well and aren't good at groovin' and servin' at the same time.

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about fairness, equality or brotherhood." Or such online pleas as: "Bring back Headbanger's Ball...or at least reruns!" Indeed many metalheads seem to long for the halcyon days of Whitesnake, David Lee Roth, and Ratt, and compared to N' Sync, who wouldn't?

Or the anti-MTVers can always head north. Guitarist James Black of Canadian band Finger Eleven has MuchMusic to watch when he's home, Canada's answer to MTV. "MTV seems to be a lot more about building celebrities; MuchMusic is more about playing music videos," he observes. Thus, Finger Eleven didn't make a video for "Quicksand," the first single off their new album, when five years ago, a video for a debut single would have been mandatory. "It's like flushing money away; you spend a lot of money and there's a good chance it won't be played on MTV because they're so picky," the guitarist explains. When watching TV in the U.S., Black considers MTV the "default channel."

In yet another country dwells Silverchair bassist Chris Joannou, who admits that he doesn't even have cable at home in Australia. But he places a "large chunk of importance on videos in America. I mean, how many millions of people see a song at once when it gets played on MTV?" he asks. Although radio was the first to catch on to the band's premiere record, Frogstomp, for their new, third album, *Neon Ballroom*, Silverchair made a video for "Anthem for the Year 2000." Joannou isn't exactly thrilled with the process, either. "I don't find making videos very exciting," the bassist confesses.

As older viewers switch to VH1—not for older pop, but for cool programming such as VH1's well-done *Behind the Music*, *Storytellers*, and the fun *Rock Jeopardy*—ironically, VH1 is now ahead of the curve. For MTV haters, though, the solution is simple. As the first video to air on MTV in 1981 prophesied, "Video killed the radio star." And the answer is...drum roll, please...try out music as it was originally meant to be experienced, with your ears, not your eyes. Besides, your own mind is probably a better visual director than the person behind the camera for the latest Backstreet Boys clip.

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