

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Golden Age of MTV — And Yes, There Was One by NPR Staff

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MTV, or Music Television, is a popular American television channel. However, since its initial airdate in 1981, the channel's content has changed drastically over time. This informational text explores MTV's history and its time of peak popularity. As you read, take notes on how MTV's content changed over time.

[1] "Ladies and gentlemen, rock 'n' roll."

MTV went on the air with those words, a minute after midnight on Aug. 1, 1981. The first video was, of course, "Video Killed the Radio Star," by the Buggles.

Few people saw the fledgling¹ network; it was carried by cable operators in Kansas City, but not New York or Los Angeles. But within a couple of years, MTV had grown into a behemoth² of the music industry.



Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum have compiled a new oral history of the network, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*.

"MTV IDs, bottom of the hour" by Fred Seibert is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

[5] Tannenbaum tells weekends on *All Things Considered* host Laura Sullivan that when MTV was launched, music videos were almost unknown.

"In fact, if you had said to someone in 1981, 'Do you want to watch a music video?' the person would have said, 'I don't know what you're talking about,' because the phrase didn't actually exist."

MTV struggled during its first few years. Conservative³ cable operators often refused to carry the channel.

"They thought that MTV was a bunch of coked-up rock and roll fiends, and they were right in a way," Marks says.

The company was just a few bad months away from going under, until several ad executives cooked up what became a legendary ad campaign featuring rock stars yelling, "I want my MTV!"

1. something that is getting started in a new activity
2. something enormous, especially a big and powerful organization
3. **Conservative (noun):** a person who has traditional values and is opposed to change

- [10] "That really was the turning point, that and *Thriller* were the two things that kept the network afloat," Marks says.

Thriller caused a controversy at lily-white⁴ MTV. The network came under fire for its lack of black artists, but executives worried that their viewers just wouldn't like Michael Jackson. They changed their tune once the ratings came in.

"They weren't idiots," Tannenbaum says. "Once they saw the ratings go up, they realized that they could program black musicians."

Jackson led to Lionel Richie, Billy Ocean and other black musicians, though leery⁵ network executives had to be persuaded all over again when rap became popular.

MTV's impact was immense during the 1980s. It made artists like Madonna and Guns N' Roses into stars. But if you turn on MTV today, you'll have a hard time finding any videos at all. The network began to back away from playing music videos in 1992, the year Marks and Tannenbaum chose to end their book.

- [15] "One of the signature things that happened that year was that Bill Clinton was a constant presence on MTV in 1990-91, and he was elected president," Tannenbaum says.

"Once you've helped elect a U.S. president, are you gonna go back to playing Winger videos?" Marks adds.

That year also marked the debut of the first reality show, *The Real World*, which had a huge impact on the television industry.

"It's very easy to trace the line from *The Real World* to Snooki," Tannenbaum says. "It's an alcoholic, crooked line all the way there, but MTV quickly realized and learned that narrative television, even reality TV, rated better than music videos."

Other networks jumped on the reality show bandwagon.⁶

- [20] "I think *The Real World* was the last point where MTV could be considered revolutionary," Tannenbaum says.

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4. a term that refers to a place or organization with no representation from people of color

5. **Leery** (*adjective*): cautious or wary

6. an activity or cause that has become fashionable or popular

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Over the past few years, MTV has become more focused on making money rather than promoting artists.
 - B. MTV failed to reach its true potential by refusing to widen its variety of artists and content.
 - C. Viewers of MTV long for the channel's previous focus on music videos rather than the reality shows they show today.
 - D. MTV's evolution over the decades has changed the way people experience music and television.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "MTV struggled during its first few years. Conservative cable operators often refused to carry the channel." (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "'They thought that MTV was a bunch of coked-up rock and roll fiends, and they were right in a way,' Marks says." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "The network came under fire for its lack of black artists, but executives worried that their viewers just wouldn't like Michael Jackson." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "MTV's impact was immense during the 1980s. It made artists like Madonna and Guns N' Roses into stars." (Paragraph 14)
 - E. "The network began to back away from playing music videos in 1992, the year Marks and Tannenbaum chose to end their book." (Paragraph 14)
 - F. "That year also marked the debut of the first reality show, The Real World, which had a huge impact on the television industry." (Paragraph 17)

3. How do paragraphs 11-13 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. They emphasize how MTV failed to promote black artists.
 - B. They show how MTV changed to become more racially diverse.
 - C. They reveal the genres of music MTV tended to play.
 - D. They highlight how Michael Jackson rose to fame.

4. Which statement best describes the relationship between viewers' reactions to MTV and its content?
 - A. MTV ignored what viewers wanted in favor of what advertisers wanted in order to fund their channel.
 - B. MTV consulted their viewers about what they wanted to see and hear before airing artists and shows.
 - C. MTV took viewers' reactions into consideration when deciding on the artists and shows to air.
 - D. MTV played the artists and reality shows that they enjoyed despite their viewers' reactions.

5. How does the discussion of music videos and reality shows help readers understand MTV's influence? Use evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Since MTV's golden age, the Internet has become more popular. Do you think the Internet had an impact on MTV's changing content and overall success? Why or why not?
2. In the text, the author describes MTV's move from music videos to reality shows. Why do you think reality shows were more popular among viewers than music videos? Do you watch reality shows? Why or why not?
3. MTV struggled in its initial years. How was the network able to succeed? Do you know of any other TV channels, shows, or businesses that have been able to reinvent themselves to stay relevant over time?