Video in the machine: the incorporation of music video into the recording industry

JACK BANKS

Music video has become an increasingly integral component of the music recording business over the past three decades. Major US record companies with international divisions have made music clips since the 1970s to promote their acts in the UK and continental Europe where television shows were a more important form of promotion for recording artists. However, record labels did not make a full commitment to music clips until after the premiere of MTV in August 1981 as a 24-hour US cable programme service presenting an endless stream of music videos. As MTV's popularity blossomed in the early 1980s, music video revitalised a troubled record industry suffering a prolonged recession by prompting renewed consumer interest in pop music and successfully developing several new recording acts like Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and Boy George with provocative visual images.

Most record labels gradually established divisions to co-ordinate the production of video clips for their artists and the distribution of these clips to major exposure outlets such as MTV. Record label reliance on music video grew so extensive that video clips became considered a necessity for an artist to achieve commercial success in the pop market. While only twenty three of the top 100 hit singles listed in Billboard's 'Hot 100' chart had accompanying videos in May 1981, the number of singles with videos increased to eighty-two in May 1986, and rose even further to ninety-seven of the top 100 hits by December 1989 (Williams 1989). Despite occasional grumbling about the costs and limited benefits of music clips, the record labels continue to invest heavily in them, spending about $150 million a year on clip production by 1994. The labels still consider music video important for developing new artists and promoting established stars (Borzillo 1993).

This article examines how music video has been incorporated into the US music industry and affected the practices of record companies. Record labels often simply co-ordinate clip production by hiring outside directors and production firms to make clips. The sometimes contentious relationship between the labels and these video clip makers is explored. The labels have developed certain promotional strategies for music video which will be examined. The major record companies' complicated relationship with exposure media like MTV is reviewed, with an emphasis on attempts by these companies to become vertically integrated in order to control exhibition of music clips. Music video has also influenced the record labels' relationship with artists, modifying the terms of recording contracts and
influencing the labels' criteria for selecting new acts. Finally, music video has also reinforced the lopsided balance of power between the dominant majors and marginal independents. The obstacles and opportunities that music video pose for independents are surveyed.

**Video music incorporated into record companies**

As video music gradually became an institutionalised part of the record business, the major labels incorporated this cultural product into the organisational structure of their companies. At some labels, video music operations were subsumed within pre-existing departments such as at A&M Records where video music was managed by the label's marketing department. Video music is often assigned to the label's promotion department since music clips are perceived foremost as an effective way to promote artists. Other labels established separate divisions with the sole mandate of developing video music, like PolyGram Music Video. As music clips gained stature, some record labels shifted towards this latter approach, rather than treating video as an ancillary function of other departments. For example, Atlantic Records consolidated its video music activities into one area in 1987 (Bessman 1989a). Music video functions at the major record labels can be divided roughly into three areas: production, promotion and retail distribution. Some labels combine these areas into a single centralised department, like PolyGram Music Video which produces and distributes music programming for television and home video, while other labels disperse these operations into different divisions.

Label divisions with responsibility for video music production oversee the making of video clips for their artists. The labels act as a selective 'gatekeeping' force in the production of videos by deciding which of its artists will be featured in music clips and which songs from the artist's album will have accompanying videos. The record companies' funding for videos depends upon a music genre's current prominence on major exposure media, most notably MTV. Record companies paid for few videos for Afro-American artists in the early 1980s when MTV played almost no black music, but substantially increased funding for videos for these acts in the late 1980s and early 1990s when MTV provided more airplay for black performers and other outlets like Black Entertainment Television (BET) emerged featuring R&B and rap (Darling 1981; Newman 1992).

Video promotion departments use video clips to get favourable public exposure for their artists. These divisions distribute a label's video clips to music programme services and also plan marketing campaigns for artists that often include promotional contests on MTV or other television shows. These executives make arrangements for their label's artists to be guests on outlets like MTV or BET and develop short promotional spots featuring the artist to air on these services.

Most major labels use their extensive distribution systems to distribute videos as well as audio music products. As the market for music video grew more successful in the late 1980s, some labels established divisions to develop the retail market (McGowan 1988). Music related titles in home video include the vidclip compilation, concert performance, and music-oriented film and documentary. In this market, some of the major labels take advantage of their status as subsidiaries of media conglomerates by developing music video titles in co-operation with the parent company's established home video division.
Record label relations with clip producers and directors

Record company executives hire producers and directors to make video clips for specific songs by label artists. Directors and producers describe the music video business as an informal one with few formal rules or guidelines (Russell 1994). However, certain general trends emerged. The labels often solicit bids from production companies for video clips using a method called ‘fixed bidding’ where the label establishes a set budget and then requests companies to submit a script providing a detailed description of their proposed concept for the video (Dupler 1985b). The record label ideally reviews the submitted scripts and selects one company to produce the video.

However, producers object to how record companies conduct this bidding process (Russell 1994). Lenny Grodin argues that the record label practice is ‘unethical’ because the labels appropriate ideas provided by production companies without payment (McCormick 1985, p. VM16). According to Grodin, the labels ‘can read a dozen good treatments, hire one person, and then suggest elements that they’ve picked up from other treatments’. These producers also are irritated by the practice of soliciting multiple bids for a video and leading each production company to believe it was given the job.

Once a record label commissions a production company to make a video, the parties sign a contract obligating the firm to produce the video for a certain pre-determined budget within a specified period of time. According to Ken Walz, the contracts are slanted in favour of the record labels’ interests, saying ‘Contracts with the record companies are terrible. They say “We’ll give you your budget, and we want a video, no matter what. You have no rights; you’re a hired hand.”’ (McCormick, 1985, p. VM16). Producers are often required to pay for any expenses exceeding the allocated budget. Video clip makers say these budgets are too low, and the contracts generally do not provide for royalties for the producer or director if the video clip is sold as a retail product.

Producers and directors, except for those with superstar status, have limited bargaining leverage with the record labels during contract negotiations, compelling the video clip makers to consent to contracts weighted in favour of the record companies. The highly competitive state of the video music business prevents most production companies from demanding too much from record labels who can easily find other firms willing to produce a video on their stringent terms.

Music clip budgets steadily increased throughout the 1980s, levelling off in the early 1990s. According to various trade magazine reports, the average budget for videos rose from $15,000 in 1981, to $40,000–50,000 in 1984, and $50,000–60,000 in 1988, remaining at $60,000–80,000 in the 1990s. Video budgets increase for larger established firms and successful recording artists.

Record label executives also limit the creative latitude of video clip makers. When a record company commissions a video clip, the label often provides the producer with strong direction about the content and visual style of the proposed music video. Producers are frequently expected to make videos that visualise scripts or storyboards developed by the label video departments. The labels also express preferences for either ‘performance’ videos that portray groups performing the songs in a straightforward manner in front of the camera inside a studio or at a concert, or ‘concept’ videos that illustrate stories or abstract themes often with a surreal appearance. In 1988, record companies preferred conventional performance
videos rather than more ambitious and imaginative concept-oriented clips, believing that performance videos more effectively establish the image of an act (Farber 1988). However, while labels encourage performance videos, Pat Aufderheide (1987) notes that record companies prefer visuals of bands lip-synching to prerecorded music rather than tapes of artists singing ‘live’ at concerts. Record companies want video clips to feature the same studio-recorded music on albums in order to promote album sales.

Some video producers and directors allege that the record labels discourage creative and innovative productions, favouring conventional videos more likely to be aired by major video music programme services like MTV. Mat Manurin, a clip director, says that record companies have a conservative influence on videos, claiming ‘they’re really afraid of trying something different, though there are exceptions’ (Farber 1988, p. V3). Labels encourage producers and directors to pander to MTV’s tastes by making videos that have the same visual style and content as videos that received heavy play on MTV in the past. Frequent plagiarism of popular videos on MTV created a series of hackneyed visual clichés that regularly recur in video clips, such as rising smoke, smashing glass and scantily clad women.

These video clip makers charge that the creativity of music videos suffers because record labels consider music videos solely as commercials rather than artistic endeavours in their own right. John Beug, vice president of video at Warner Bros, seems to accept this diminished conception of music clips, saying ‘you have to maintain a perspective about what [the video maker] is doing. You’re making a three-minute marketing tool. It’s like designing an album cover. We’re not making “Gone With The Wind”’ (Russell 1994, pp. 40–1). Yet director Josh Taft responds that music video has its own artistic integrity: ‘We’re making a creative piece of visual marketing that has a life of its own, and should be treated as that. It’s not just a cog in a wheel’ (ibid.). Kaplan (1987) reports that some video clip makers experience significant tension with the record companies over the content of clips. Moreover, directors and producers suggest that increasingly intrusive record label involvement in production matters undermines the personal creativity of those involved in making the music clip. Producers and directors of music videos see a direct relationship between the budget and the degree of creative freedom they are afforded in the making of the clip, with record label interference growing exponentially the larger the budget (Newman 1991; Farber 1989).

**Video clip promotion**

The labels’ general objective with videos is, of course, to increase the retail sales of their artists’ music through widespread distribution of the artists’ videos on music television shows as well as other sites, like nightclubs and music stores which display music clips on monitors. However, the record companies use videos in more specific ways to help develop their artists. Video clips establish and cultivate a certain image for an artist. Video producers attempted to develop a wholesome, clean-cut image for the pop group New Kids on the Block through their videos, while Bryan Adams’s videos were designed to endow the performer with a tough, manly character. Videos are used to modify an established performer’s public identity as well. Madonna regularly reinvents her persona through her videos becoming at various times a trashily dressed boy-toy, a reincarnated Mari-
Incorporation of music video into the recording industry

A primary function of videos is to introduce a label’s new talent to the public. Music videos are not expected to boost sales of new acts immediately, but rather are used as part of a long-term promotional strategy designed to familiarise consumers with emerging artists (Dupler 1985a). However, this strategy is often undercut by the increasingly hit oriented major programme services like MTV and VH-1 that limit exposure for new music by unknown artists. Videos are used to make commercial radio more receptive to playing certain songs by label artists. When radio stations refuse to play a current single, record companies often heavily promote the video for the song hoping that prominent play of the clip will encourage radio stations to add the single to their playlists (Bessman 1989b). Videos can sometimes help sustain music listeners’ interest in a song even when radio will not play it (Kaplan 1987).

Promotion departments that distribute video clips to television shows developed several strategies to heighten their clips’ promotional efficacy. Most importantly, executives provide MTV with copies of recent videos and vigorously lobby the channel to add these to its current playlist. Video play on MTV is considered crucial for many mainstream rock and pop artists. Labels also distribute their videos to several regional and local programme services which help establish a new act. Promotion executives selectively distribute videos for certain genres of music to video shows featuring these specialised genres, like programs on the cable services The Nashville Network and BET. The labels limit distribution of their clips to certain favoured shows because of the fear of overexposure, worrying that excessive television play of a video clip might diminish public interest in an act.

Vertical integration in music video

The record labels have collaborated with MTV to gain greater control over the distribution and exhibition of music videos. By 1985 MTV signed contracts with most major record companies allowing MTV to choose 20 per cent of the company’s annual video clip production for its exclusive use (Goodman 1984; Seidenman 1984; Terry 1984; Sippel 1985). The labels had the right to place another 10 per cent of its own videos on MTV’s playlist. The mutually beneficial arrangement allowed MTV to pick video clips featuring hit singles and major recording stars for its exclusive use that would probably increase its ratings, while record companies could get guaranteed exposure for their artists that might not otherwise get airplay. MTV also provided cash and advertising time to the major labels for the rights to exhibit both exclusive and non-exclusive videos. These contracts generally specified a term lasting no longer than three years and were then usually renewed by MTV and the labels after periodic negotiations (MTV Networks 1984).

The primary objective of these accords was to control jointly the emerging distribution system for clips. These agreements created a degree of vertical integration through contractual agreement by forging links between the production of clips (commissioned by labels) and the distribution of clips through exposure media (MTV). These contracts were a way that record companies could get exposure for their artists while also insuring the stability and strength of MTV. The pact provisions led Peter Hall to question whether MTV would become 'Monopoly
TV, a powerful promotional tool that is contractually obligated to roll whatever product the [labels'] A&R departments favor, regardless of whether the audience agrees.’ (1984, p. 48). These agreements created a formal structure for a type of ‘payola’ arrangement where media outlets agreed to play certain artists requested by the record companies in exchange for certain favours, much like illegal payola in radio.

The exclusivity contracts were subject to numerous legal challenges and investigations which examined whether MTV and the labels violated applicable antitrust laws. However, none of these actions altered these companies' arrangement. In 1991, all major record labels had exclusive contracts with MTV Networks Inc. except Virgin, Mercury and PLG, with MTV making total annual payments from $10 million to $15 million (Newman and McAdams 1991). By 1994, RCA and MCA discontinued their exclusive agreements with MTV, but other labels including Island, Elektra, Atlantic and Geffen records still had MTV-only videos.

The major labels' co-operative relationship with MTV clearly provided these record companies with a reliable national forum for hawking their artists’ music. Yet, recently the majors indicated that they are dissatisfied with their current degree of control over music video programming and are taking various steps to acquire their own music shows around the world (Banks 1995b, 1996). In early 1994, four of the six major labels developed plans to start their own global music video services that would directly challenge MTV (Jeffrey and Pride 1994). The original backers for this proposed venture were Time Warner, Sony, PolyGram and EMI Music, companies that collectively supply 63 per cent of music videos shown on MTV (Landler 1994).

The prototype for this operation was to be Viva, a cable music programme service in Germany that began in December 1993 (co-owned by these four major labels and a German businessman) to challenge MTV Europe (Weinert 1993). The labels want to expand the channel to other parts of Europe and Asia. In 1995, four major labels purchased one-half of the music channel V on the satellite service STAR TV in Asia, while PolyGram purchased one-half of MTV's Asia channels. The four labels that own Viva announced plans in 1994 to compete with the original American MTV by launching a music channel in the US. With the later addition of Bertelsmann Music Group (BMG) to the consortium of major labels in June 1994, this new music service would be jointly owned by five record labels that together dominate the international recording industry, controlling 80 per cent of the $11 billion global market in 1994 (Anon 1994; Jeffrey 1994; Landler 1994).

By creating their own worldwide music video channels, the labels would achieve complete vertical integration through ownership, producing the video clips and exhibiting them on their own program service. This gives the labels direct control to promote their acts however they wish without the autonomy of an independently owned service. However, the Antitrust Division of the US Justice Department launched a preliminary investigation into the proposed venture in July 1994 to determine if the label-owned channel would lead to ‘anti-competitive practices in the music-video industry’ (Robins 1994). Fearing an expensive legal battle, these companies decided to drop plans for a music video channel in the US in July 1995. However, several of the major labels are tentatively considering an alternative plan to launch a US music service in the future (Atwood 1995).
Role of exposure media in record label’s promotional strategy

Music programmes like MTV have a symbiotic relationship with the record labels that generally encourages them to co-operate in promotional campaigns for their artists by providing regular airplay of videos. The clip shows and the record labels have a common interest in promoting videos by popular artists. Frequent airplay of videos of hit songs can increase the television show’s audience ratings and ultimately expand advertising revenues. Similarly, for the record company, broad exposure of a video can help create an audience for a label’s artist.

However, the ultimate objectives of the programme service and the record label are not synonymous and at times lead to divergent interests that impede the label’s promotional strategies. Media outlets need programming that will get high audience ratings to increase advertising revenues, while the record companies seek public exposure for their acts. The conflicting nature of these objectives is most pronounced for music videos by unknown and emerging artists. Major programme services are often reluctant to play videos by new artists because these clips are unlikely to attract a large audience initially. In fact, in recent years major music media like MTV and VH-1 shifted towards video play of hit songs by established artists while shunning videos of new artists. This aversion to new music creates a perennial predicament for the labels that seek to provide their new artists with opportunities for exposure.

Because of MTV’s need for higher ratings, the channel increased its emphasis on non-music programming (Strauss 1995). MTV’s audience ratings dropped severely in 1985 and stagnated for the rest of the decade, leading the channel to alter its programming to recapture viewer interest. MTV moved away from continuous play of video clips and instead strived to become a more all-encompassing ‘lifestyle’ channel for its young targeted audience. The channel increasingly presented a variety of shows without music clips on various topics of interest to the typical MTV viewer, like comedy, politics, fashion, movies, sports and sex. Goodwin (1992) describes this as MTV’s ‘third phase’ from 1986 to the present that is characterised by a move toward a more traditional television schedule of regularly scheduled programmes. The programming shift did not drastically increase MTV’s audience, but did stem the steep fall in ratings. The record labels were distressed that the increasing emphasis on these shows meant less time was devoted to airing video clips that promoted their acts.

Exclusivity pacts with MTV provide the record companies with a partial remedy for lack of exposure for their emerging artists because MTV must play some videos specified by the labels that usually feature new acts. Still, the labels have limited control over exposure media. MTV only has to play a limited number of their videos and the record companies have no formal influence over other major outlets like BET.

The labels’ relationship with video music shows is analogous to their relationship with commercial radio broadcasters, in that radio stations are dependent upon programming provided by the labels, but cannot be compelled by the labels to air specific songs or artists (except through illegal payola schemes). Because of this limited influence, the labels developed a ‘lobbying’ strategy for video clip shows similar to their approach for radio. The labels’ video promotion departments contact programmers at major programme services and try to persuade them to add the videos to their regular playlist.
Video displaces touring in promotional strategies

Before MTV, the record labels regularly financed tours for their new artists to cultivate a following. In the 1970s, record companies often required artists to do a series of live performances concurrently with the release of a new album to increase sales of the artists’ records in a local area. However, by the early 1980s the major labels largely stopped subsidising tours (Puterbaugh 1983). Record labels became sceptical about the promotional benefits of tours and questioned whether live performances really increased record sales. Label executives’ enthusiasm for tours was also dampened by rapidly increasing tour expenses and mediocre concert attendance that limited revenues. This disenchantment with tours combined with the growing popularity of video music gradually led the major record labels to favour video music over live tours as a way to promote their artists (Goldstein 1983).

In the early 1980s, concert promoters predicted gloomily that music video would eventually undermine touring by artists. Music consumers, it was argued, would prefer to watch their favourite artists on television in the convenience of their own homes rather than pay to see a live concert. However, programme services such as MTV did not adopt an adversarial approach to tours, but developed a supportive stance towards live performances by actively promoting tours by featured artists. MTV, VH-1 and other services publicise upcoming tours through on-air promotions and special programming involving the artist. For instance, MTV and VH-1 gave extensive publicity to the Rolling Stones’ 1994 Voodoo Lounge tour, incessantly hawking concert souvenirs in home shopping programmes.

The growing prominence of video music did have an impact on artists’ live performances, but not in the manner predicted. Music video did not destroy concerts, but instead influenced the form and content of actual performances. Pop stars often attempt to replicate the imagery, special effects and choreography of their videos in live concerts. Madonna and Michael Jackson both stage elaborate concerts that recreate prominent scenes from their videos. These attempts to make concerts resemble video music productions by the artist make some live performances more rigidly structured and pre-planned, draining the concert of any potential spontaneity. Artists make use of their videos in various ways within their concerts, such as presenting music clips in lieu of an opening act. The centrepiece of the stage for concerts by Duran Duran, a group whose commercial success was largely created by video music, was a $300,000 ‘video wall’ consisting of forty-nine video monitors that played segments from the group’s videos during the performance. Jon Pareles observed that video music had a pronounced impact on concert audiences as well as the actual tour performance, remarking that audiences at concerts by artists who are known primarily for their videos behave passively as if watching television (Aufderheide 1987).

MTV and music video had an especially pronounced influence on heavy metal and promotion tactics used for this music genre. Heavy metal benefited from MTV’s prominent play of this music in the early 1980s. The video channel helped bring heavy metal into the pop music mainstream and played a key role in the broad commercial success of several heavy metal bands, including Def Leppard, Ratt and Van Halen (Vare 1985a).

Heavy metal was able to take swift advantage of the video music form because the visual presentation of this genre’s musicians had always been a central
attraction of heavy metal with the gaudy clothing and outlandish behaviour of bands. Prior to MTV, heavy metal acts unable to obtain radio play were promoted through constant touring and fan magazines featuring large colourful photos of the groups. As MTV gained popularity, video music gradually became an important element of the labels’ promotional strategy. Label promotion executives reasoned that a catchy single played on radio and a flashy video presented on MTV were the primary elements needed to establish a new heavy metal band (Ptacek 1985). This reliance on music video was momentarily interrupted in 1985 when MTV announced plans to cut back drastically its air play of heavy metal. After its ratings plunged, MTV restored heavy metal acts to its playlist and their videos were especially prominent in 1987 (Goodwin 1993).

Artists’ contracts with record companies

Provisions concerning music video were incorporated in record label contracts to let the labels recover their expenses on video production from their artists. This section examines some basic features of recording contracts (examined in more depth in Frith 1981) and how these relate to music video. Contract terms largely depend on the artist’s relative commercial success at the time of negotiations. New, unknown artists usually sign ‘standard agreements’ heavily weighted in the record label’s favour. Jeff Berke, an attorney specialising in music and entertainment law, claims that in the typical contract, ‘the record company promises little, charges all expenses back to the artist, grants itself the sole option to decide whether the agreement will continue, and often won’t even guarantee the release of the first record’ (Berke 1988, p. 9). New artists generally accept the label’s terms because they are anxious to get any recording contract, while more established artists are in a better bargaining position because the labels want to retain successful acts.

Two provisions of recording contracts apply to music video: artist royalties and recoupment of label expenses. The royalty rate determines the gross revenues an artist receives from disc and tape sales. The artist’s royalty is a percentage of the retail sales of their music products. Royalty rates for different recording formats vary, with compact discs having a lower rate than cassettes. The royalty percentage for artists increases with their degree of commercial success: new and mid-level acts receive about 12 per cent to 14 per cent, and superstars get from 16 per cent to 18 per cent, while a select few like Madonna get even higher rates (Zimmerman 1991a; Holden 1991, 1992).

Recording artists do not receive all of their royalties because labels deduct the album’s production and promotion costs from the musician’s gross royalties. The artist’s actual income from album sales, the net royalties, is any amount remaining after these debts are subtracted from gross royalties. Some artists and industry lawyers complain that the record labels drastically inflate the costs of marketing and promotion, overcharging recording artists for this expense (Zimmerman 1991a). Because of the high costs of producing and marketing an album, the artist may not receive any income from royalties even if an album sells 100,000 copies (Shore 1983). Record labels spend on average $150,000 to $200,000 to market an album, and pay from $50,000 to $100,000 for a video to promote a single from the album. This is in addition to the album’s production costs which average almost $250,000.
Record labels try to recover their expenses on video music by incorporating the costs of video production into this conventional structure of recording contracts. In mid-1983, the major record companies began including clauses in contracts that deduct a portion of the cost of video clips from the artist's future gross royalties derived from sales of the album related to the music video (Foti 1983). The actual percentage of the cost of the video clip deducted from the artist's royalties varies greatly, although the labels generally try to recover at least 50 per cent.

The party that initially pays for the production owns the music video. When the record company finances a music video, it owns the production and keeps all profits derived from the future exploitation of the clip. Yet, the record companies claim exclusive ownership rights to a video even after they recover production expenses from withholding artists' royalties. Some claim that the record company does not deserve sole ownership because the artist paid for part or all of the production costs through these royalty deductions.

The record labels make money from these clips that they own by charging television shows licence fees for the right to exhibit their videos and selling the clip as part of a compilation in the home video market. The licensing agreements have become especially lucrative for record labels: Frith (1993) points out that record companies generate more revenue from licensing rights to television programmes like MTV than from retail sales of music clips to consumers. The record companies do not share this revenue with their artists even though these musicians partially financed the videos, prompting some acts to pay for the productions themselves. Musicians who finance their own videos and retain ownership can lease the music clips to their labels for promotional purposes and also receive income from retail sale of clip compilations. Yet while ownership is advantageous, new artists often lack the money to pay for their own productions and continue to rely on record labels to finance them.

The artist's degree of control over the content of their music videos depends to a large extent on the relative commercial success and financial self-sufficiency of the act. New acts with limited income that are financially dependent upon their record label for all forms of promotion, including music videos, have limited influence over the content of video clips and decisions about which songs will be featured in videos. The record label maintains final control of the clip's content as the legal owner that initially financed its production. After establishing some degree of success, artists are more able to renegotiate future contracts which stipulate an enhanced degree of creative control over their videos. Moreover, established artists with hit albums are often wealthy enough to finance their own videos, providing them with ownership and control of the video. However, even top recording stars frequently defer to record label requests to edit videos to gain airplay on services like MTV and VH-1 (Banks 1995a, 1996). Some artists do stand their ground: Madonna refused to change her video for 'Justify My Love' to satisfy MTV. Lewis (1990, 1993) argues that many female artists like Cyndi Lauper and Pat Benatar have been especially successful in exerting creative control over music videos to express their own views and identity.

Influence of video music on artists' careers at record companies

The increased prominence of music video and MTV also influenced the record company's criteria for signing artists to recording contracts, emphasising the
Incorporation of music video into the recording industry

importance of a musician's visual appearance. Since MTV gained widespread popularity, the major record labels tend to sign artists with an attractive image. Dan Beck of Portrait Records acknowledged that 'Cyndi [Lauper] was signed because she'll be a great film performer' (Kneale 1983, p. 1). Other popular performers like Madonna and Grace Jones were granted contracts because of their provocative visual appearance. Conversely, artists with musical talent who lack a visually appealing image are less likely to receive a contract. 'I have two bands that I'm managing that would have been signed four years ago,' explains Larry Mazer, manager for heavy metal groups Kiss and Cinderella. 'Now nobody will commit. The labels tell me that they won't get on MTV.' (Goldberg 1990, p. 62).

MTV itself is biased against videos with unattractive performers, admitting that it refused to play a video for 'Woodgoblins' by Tad, a hard rock guitarist, partly because Tad was judged to be too ugly (Pareles 1991). The channel is also less likely to play videos by ageing rock performers, favouring the young, pretty and beautiful that are more photogenic.

Once an artist is signed to a label, the prospective commercial success of that artist increasingly depends on the act's visual image; musical talent becomes a less important consideration. Holden (1990) reports that seven of the best-selling recording acts from 1988 to 1990 became successful mainly because of their appealing music videos, naming New Kids on the Block, Bobby Brown, Paula Abdul, Hammer, Milli Vanilli, Madonna and Janet Jackson. Joe Jackson, a musician who is deeply disillusioned with music video, says that the stress on video devalues the musical abilities of artists: 'Things which used to count, such as being a good composer, player or singer, are getting lost in the desperate rush to visualize everything. It is now possible to be all of the above and still get nowhere simply by not looking good in a video, or, worse still, not making one' (Denisoff 1989, p. 263). Holden concurs, saying 'the wedding of pop music and video has shifted the balance of power between a song and the image of its performer' (1990, p. H1) where the latter is now paramount. Yet while music video certainly helps develop an artist's image, clips are not always essential for success. Three songs from Garth Brooks's album, *Ropin' the Wind*, reached the top of *Billboard*'s country music singles charts even though Brooks made no videos for these songs.

Performers with minimal technical skill or musical talent are able to create hit songs with an attractive video and assistance from an adept producer. Any deficiencies in an artist's vocal or instrumental performance can be remedied through extensive audio mixing by studio engineers. Pat Aufderheide (1987, p. 124) notes that Madonna's vocals are heavily processed by a production staff to enhance her own 'reedy' voice.

The rise and fall of the pop group Milli Vanilli dramatically illustrates the increasing importance of visuals and relative insignificance of an artist's musical abilities in popular music. The overwhelming success of Milli Vanilli's debut album that sold more than six million copies was largely attributed to the group's attractive presence in videos. Abbey Konowitch, formerly of MTV, explains that Milli Vanilli's video, 'Girl You Know It's True' was added to the channel's playlist while the group was still unknown: 'We played it three or four times a day and made them stars. Milli Vanilli in an interview said they feel seventy to eighty percent of their success was attributable to MTV' (Goldberg 1990, p. 118). Yet, after the group sold millions of albums and was awarded a Grammy for best new artist of the year, Milli Vanilli was exposed as a fraud that did not sing or play any of their
own material. Milli Vanilli achieved commercial success largely on the basis of their stylish looks and dancing abilities that were elaborately displayed in the group’s popular videos. Until their deception was uncovered, the group’s lack of talent was no barrier to their success in the record business.

While the record labels publicly condemned this particular ruse, the importance of video music combined with enhanced audio engineering capabilities encouraged the development of a new division of labour in the music industry in some instances where off-screen studio musicians create a song which is lip-synched by camera-ready performers who appear in the video. Numerous instances were reported in recent years where successful recording acts were accused of not actually singing their own songs. Underpaid background vocalists charge that their voice was used for the lead vocals for songs credited to other performers in the spotlight. Martha Wash, a full-figured former member of the Weather Girls, accused several groups of using her voice for the lead vocals in songs without appropriate credit or financial compensation. In each of these cases, the videos for these songs featured an attractive performer lip-synching Wash’s lyrics. Music clips for C&C Music Factory presented faux lead singer Zelma Davis mouthing Wash’s words, while Katrin Quinol performed in music clips for the dance group Black Box although the songs were again Wash’s (Duffy and Flick 1990; Staples 1990; Zimmerman 1990b). Paula Abdul and New Kids on the Block, performers that relied on appealing videos for their success, were both accused by associates of not singing many of their own songs, but instead having anonymous vocalists perform them (Neely 1991; Reibman 1992). Both acts denied the charges.

Many allegations of lip-synching involve recording artists from the dance music genre which can be traced back to its historical antecedent of the 1970s, disco music, where producers regularly created short-lived, one-hit acts from anonymous studio vocalists. However, music video with its emphasis on visual presentation and image further weakened the importance of authenticity in popular music, prompting a growing number of acts with attractive performers mouthing the singing of uncredited vocalists in the shadows that lack an acceptably alluring image.

The heavy media attention to allegations of lip-synching led to a public backlash, with a lawsuit filed against Milli Vanilli for deceiving their fans and state governments introducing bills that would require the disclosure of lip-synching in concerts. Some industry observers claimed that people were repelled because lip-synching and producer manipulation betrayed music fans’ trust in performers who were supposedly expressing their own feelings and ideas in music. Ironically, MTV, which initially encouraged the growth of this practice through its emphasis on image over substance, exploited this backlash and the growing public preference for authentic recording artists in its programming. The channel launched the hugely successful series of *Unplugged* concerts where artists perform without any electronic amplifications or enhancement to showcase their natural musical talents. Still, Grossberg (1993) claims that music video has contributed to the decline of an ideology of authenticity in rock culture where the subjective construction of a performer’s identity becomes more apparent.

**Music video at independent and major record labels**

Music video today has become institutionalised as a necessary form of promotion for recording artists. This requirement of music clips to showcase artists reinforces
the relations of power between the half dozen major record companies that overwhelmly dominate the music business and independent labels that operate on the fringes producing artists whose music is either too specialised or avant-garde for the majors. Major record labels are vertically integrated companies with their own self-contained production, manufacturing and distribution operations, while independents usually only have production operations, contracting with other firms to provide the remaining industry services (Blatt 1992). Independent record labels have historically played a vanguard role cultivating and introducing new music genres and artists into popular culture. The majors market more mainstream, conservative music to attract a broad audience. Frith describes an interdependent relationship between these firms where ‘independents develop new forms of music [and] the majors tame them’ (1991, p. 66).

In the past decade, independents were threatened by a strong movement towards concentration of ownership in the record business as many prominent labels were acquired by majors, giving these large companies greater control over the range of popular music (Hilburn and Philips 1992, Zimmerman 1989). As a result of a series of acquisitions and company failures, the record business became highly centralised, with six major record labels each owned by multinational conglomerates that were responsible for 93 per cent of all albums released in the US by 1991 (Browne 1991). These six companies are Sony, MCA, PolyGram, EMI, BMG, and Warner Music.

In this environment where independents struggle to survive, music video presents certain advantages as well as obstacles to these smaller companies as a form of promotion. While several independents use the video form in an innovative, creative manner providing valuable exposure for their artists, the costs of video music production create problems for these labels. The average cost of a music video commissioned by major record companies is $60,000 to $80,000, which is far more than smaller independents can pay. Independents lack the financial resources of the major labels to underwrite the expense of video music production and distribution on a regular basis. Yet, the conventional wisdom of the industry holds that clips are generally necessary to develop a commercially successful song or artist. Without the competent production and distribution of video clips, the artists of independent labels may not receive the essential exposure needed to generate public interest in an act. Thus, the necessity of music video creates a dilemma by increasing the minimum promotion budget for an act which independent labels may be unable to afford.

Some independents confront this dilemma by producing videos with a limited budget (Dupler and Bessman 1988). Mammoth Records made eight clips in 1992, an increase from only two the previous year, while Earache US, another independent, commissioned fifteen videos between June 1991 and June 1992, an increase from six the prior year. As the quantity of their clips grew, the budgets further shrunk. Music videos made by many independent labels now have minuscule budgets between $1,000 and $6,000. ‘Most of our clips are made for between $2,500 and $6,000,’ says Jim Welch, president of Earache US. ‘That’s nothing when you compare it to other people’s video budgets, but we’ve found that you can get the same amount of play no matter how much you spend as long as it’s a cool video.’ (Buckley and Newman 1992, p. 44). Music clips for Touch and Go Records cost even less, an average of $1,000 to $1,500, a modest budget made possible because the label solicits novice directors to make their productions for a minimal
fee. Besides the budgets, the independents pay additional costs for duplication and shipping that increase their outlays.

Yet even when independent record companies are able to finance and produce a video for an aspiring new artist, these labels have difficulty receiving exposure for clips on major outlets, notably MTV. MTV Networks Inc. is highly integrated with the major labels through contractual agreements which provide guaranteed access for the majors' popular and emerging acts. Besides these pacts, MTV has a conservative programming policy that primarily features established acts already signed to major labels. MTV and other prominent national programme services are also less likely to play the low cost videos made by the independents because these often have a primitive, raw production quality that is perceived as too unpolished for commercial television, even though the videos may be highly creative and innovative. MTV and its sister service VH-1 prefer to play videos with higher budgets that come from the major labels because these clips usually have higher production standards and a more glossy 'professional' visual appearance even though the content may be trite and banal.

As a result of these factors, almost all video clips presented on MTV, the premiere showcase for music video, are by artists signed to major record companies. According to the results of a Billboard survey, of the 131 artists featured by MTV in one 24-hour period, only two clips featured artists signed to independently distributed labels: James Brown with Afrika Bambaataa by Tommy Boy records and Johnny Winter of Alligator records (White 1984). In the 1990s, MTV occasionally plays videos by independent labels on its speciality shows featuring a certain type of music like rap or alternative rock. However, representatives of independent labels say that in general MTV rarely plays their videos, preferring to showcase major label artists (Zimmerman 1990a, Buckley and Newman 1992).

The exclusion of independent labels' artists from MTV's playlist is a powerful impediment to the independents' marketing strategies because of the video channel's unparalleled clout in the industry. If MTV refuses to play an act's video, that artist may have difficulty reaching a national audience. Moreover, music stores may be unwilling to stock titles by acts signed to independent labels until they see the acts on a prominent national outlet like MTV. This obstacle is magnified by VH-1's similar reluctance to play independent acts.

However, while independent labels are usually unable to get their videos played on MTV and VH1, they often have better success with regional and local music video shows that are more willing to air these clips. Bruce Duff of Triple X Records says, 'every now and then we get one on [MTV], but if they don't play it, we'll get eighty other local and regional shows, pools, and other national outlets' (Buckley and Newman 1992, p. 44). Many independents rely on video promotion companies to get their clips played by these music shows.

**Conclusion**

Music video and MTV have certainly had an extensive, far-reaching influence on the recording industry. However, for the most part, these influences seem to have amplified existing features of the business. The visual appearance of artists has always been important, with pre-teen fan magazines and early television shows like *American Bandstand* encouraging record labels to sign attractive acts with a distinctive visual image. Music video and MTV take this emphasis on image to an
extreme, making labels more concerned with signing artists that will look good on MTV even if they have minimal musical talent. Labels have usually signed new artists to atrocious recording contracts. Music clips have been incorporated within this structure where acts must pay for video costs out of royalties while the label retains ownership of the clip. Record companies’ relationship with video clip makers is similarly exploitative.

Historically, the labels tried to gain a measure of control over commercial radio through lobbying strategies and illegal payola schemes. These practices were extended in the video age with similar lobbying activities with music television shows, exclusivity contracts with MTV, and plans by some major labels to own their own music video programming. And finally, music video has reinforced the relations of power between majors and independents. The majors have taken advantage of the capital intensive nature of music video and collusion with MTV to retain their dominance in the industry, although independents are able to produce some inexpensive videos that get limited regional play to promote their acts.

Endnote
1. This paper is adapted from portions of Monopoly Television: MTV’s Quest to Control the Music by Jack Banks with the permission of Westview Press.

References
Atwood, B. 1995. ‘Majors eye new option for vid channel’, Billboard, 22 July, p. 5
1995b. ‘Does the world want its MTV?: a historical survey of MTV’s quest to build a global audience’, paper presented at the International Communication Association Association Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico
1996. Monopoly Television: MTV’s Quest to Control the Music. (Boulder, Colorado)
Bessman, J. 1989a. ‘Credit Atlantic success to videos’, Billboard, 4 February, pp. 50, 70
1989b. ‘‘One’’ plus MTV equals wider Metallica’, Billboard, 18 March, p. 57
Darling, C. 1981. ‘Labels see video as force to be reckoned with’, Billboard, 14 November, pp. 58, 64, 69
Denisoff, S. 1989. Inside MTV (New Brunswick, New Jersey)
Duffy, T. and Flick, L. 1990. ‘Milli Vanilli didn’t start the fire’, Billboard, 8 December, pp. 4, 89
Dupler, S. 1985a. ‘Targeting the video’, Billboard, 28 September, pp. NT3, NT8
1985b. ‘Rolling the credits’, Billboard, 21 December, p. 30
Farber, J. 1988. ‘Director’s view: creativity and innovation harder to come by in ’88; MTV, labels, music itself to blame’, Billboard, 12 November, pp. V3, V8
1989. ‘Budget genius’, Rolling Stone, 10 August, pp. 99, 100
Foti, L. 1983. ‘New act pacts take vidclip $ from royalties’, Billboard, 2 July, pp. 1, 58

Goldberg, M. 1990. ‘MTV’s sharper picture’, Rolling Stone, 8 February, pp. 61–4, 118

Goldstein, P. 1983. ‘In rock to be or not to be may depend on MTV’, Los Angeles Times, 2 August, pt. 6, pp. 1, 6

Goodman, F. 1984. ‘Krasnow says Electra will sign with MTV’, Billboard, 25 August, pp. 1, 70


Kaplan, E.A. 1987. Rocking Around the Clock (New York)


Landler, M. 1994. ‘Will MTV have to share the stage?’, Business Week, 21 February, p. 38


MTV Networks. 1984. Form 10-K for the US Securities and Exchange Commission

Neely, K. 1991. ‘Backup singer sues Abdul over vocals’, Rolling Stone, 30 May, p. 25


Pateck, G. 1985. ‘Majors return to nuts and bolts of pre-MTV metal marketing days’, Billboard, p. HM3

Puterbaugh, P. 1983. ‘Concert-611 blues! Long, cold summer’, Rolling Stone, 15 September, pp. 45, 53


Seideman, T. 1984. ‘Four labels ink vidclip deals with MTV’, Billboard, 23 June, pp. 1, 67


Terry, K. 1984. ‘MTV claims it has video deals with four labels; exclusivity may be double-edged sword’, Variety, 20 June, pp. 57, 60

Vare, E. 1985a. ‘MTV threat threatens to cast metal back into dark age–with gold lining’, Billboard, 27 April, p. HM4

Weinert, E. 1993. ‘Four majors said to back Viva’, Billboard, 21 August, p. 40, 41


Incorporation of music video into the recording industry

1990b. ‘That synching feeling: Vanilli not alone?’, *Variety*, 26 November, pp. 66, 68