

In 1984, MTV decided to throw itself a party, solidifying its place in music and pop culture. Now, 40 years after the network launched, the annual Video Music Awards are the last remaining vestige of the MTV's original ethos.

BY JOHN RUSSELL

TURN ON, TUNE IN, ROCK OUT

When someone says “MTV,” what comes to mind? For years, the tableau that surfaces for me has been this completely random moment that happened on live TV after the 1995 Video Music Awards. The show was over and Kurt Loder—stiff, grumpy, *elderly* Kurt Loder—was trying to interview Madonna on this platform that MTV News had set up outside of Radio City Music Hall. Madonna is about to say something when an object comes flying over the top of her head and clatters to the floor in front of her.

“Hi, Courtney,” Loder chirps.

Apparently, Courtney Love is on the street below throwing the contents of her purse—Chanel compacts, etc.—at Madonna.

“Should we let her up?” Madonna asks.

“Yeah!” Loder says, clearly loving this moment of '90s television gold that has literally fallen into his lap.

“Whatcha doin’?,” Love asks when she finally joins them. “Am I fully interrupting?”

The conversation that follows is the opposite of whatever cultivated, controlled, agenda-driven interview Madonna’s publicists agreed to. It’s entertaining. They compare shoes, talk about dating rock stars, and actually, Madonna seems like she might be enjoying herself? Maybe a little? The whole thing is unhinged, spontaneous, iconic: Madonna, the provocateur, upstaged by someone whose very presence breeds chaos. Courtney just wants

to talk, and good god, what more did the MTV viewing public want, in 1995, than to be a fly on the wall while Madonna and Courtney Love had a chat?

There are, of course, plenty of VMAs moments that are more iconic than this one—and most of them occurred during the actual show: Madonna performing “Like a Virgin” in 1984; Madonna performing that song with Britney (and Christina and Missy Elliott) again in 2003; Kanye and Taylor Swift in 2009! But to me, Madonna and Courtney and Kurt (Loder) is peak VMAs. That moment epitomizes the truly thrilling pop culture chaos that the show has always promised—which, of course, has been the promise of MTV from the beginning.

By 1984, MTV was a legitimate cultural phenomenon. What started in the wee hours of August 1, 1981, as a low-budget cable operation that few saw outside of New Jersey had, in the span of a few short years, become a generation-defining force. The slogan “I want my MTV”—which featured in early ads encouraging kids to call their local cable companies and demand they carry the fledgling network—itsself became iconic.

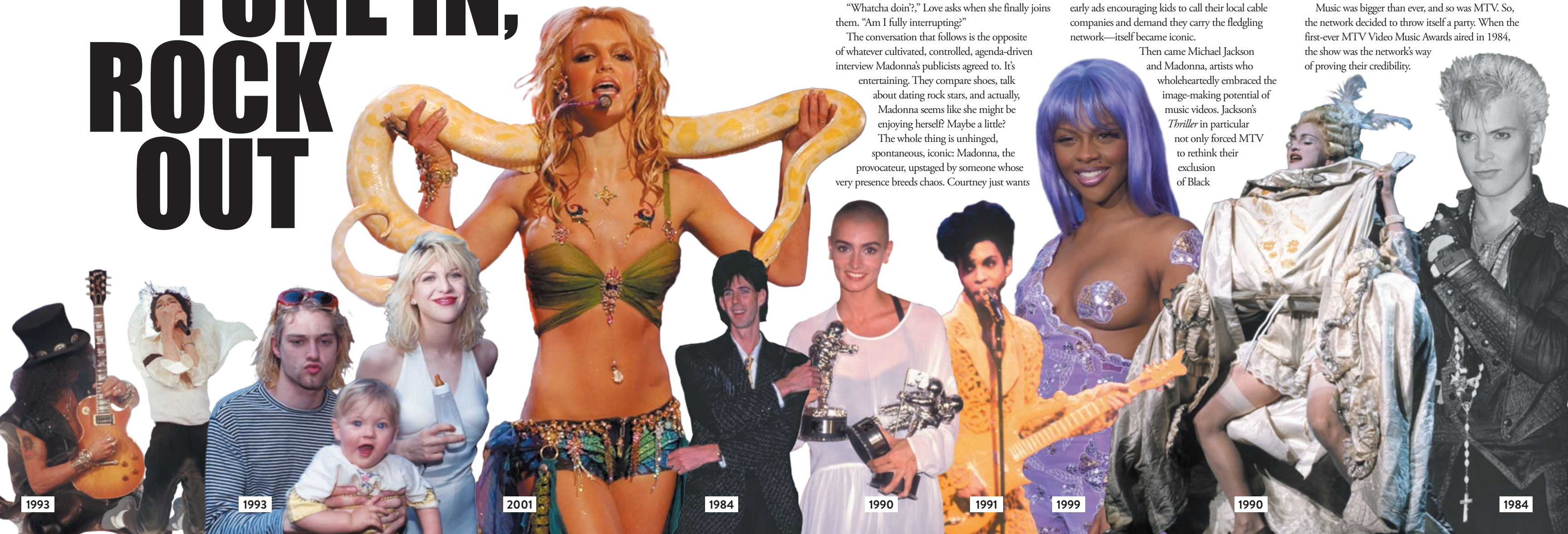
Then came Michael Jackson and Madonna, artists who wholeheartedly embraced the image-making potential of music videos. Jackson’s *Thriller* in particular not only forced MTV to rethink their exclusion of Black

artists from their rotation, but also showed the world that videos could be more than just half-hearted commercials for a single. They could be epic. They could be cinematic. Record companies now viewed music videos as a worthwhile investment, and were willing to pour money into making them. Consequently, MTV no longer had to scrounge for content.

And people were watching. “For kids growing up in the '80s, particularly if you were suburban and white, this was your window onto popular culture,” Amanda Ann Klein, author of *Millennials Killed the Video Star: MTV's Transition to Reality Programming* tells *Grazia USA*. “And not just music, but all popular culture.”

By 1984, “We’re really in the MTV era,” author and *Rolling Stone* Senior Writer Andy Greene tells *Grazia USA*. “It was the year of the mega-album. It was *Born in the USA*. It was *Purple Rain*. It was Cyndi Lauper. It was ‘Like a Virgin.’”

Music was bigger than ever, and so was MTV. So, the network decided to throw itself a party. When the first-ever MTV Video Music Awards aired in 1984, the show was the network’s way of proving their credibility.



1993

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They could get actual movie stars like Dan Aykroyd and Bette Middler to host, and actual rock stars like ZZ Top and Rod Stewart to show up and perform. (Remember, this was 1984.) They could fill Radio City Music Hall with the biggest names in the music industry, along with the record label execs who signed their checks.

“An awards show—even the most chaotic of awards shows—still connotes a certain amount of class, of organizational ability, of just put-togetherness,” *Billboard*

Deputy Editor Andrew Unterberger tells *Grazia USA*. “It was

kind of MTV’s way of saying that they had arrived as a cultural institution.” At the same time, the Video Music Awards filled a crucial gap in the market. By the early ’80s, the Grammys, the most obvious precursor to the VMAs, had become notorious for honoring legacy acts instead of what was new and fresh.

“The biggest consumers of music were teenagers and young people, and they weren’t being catered to by the Grammys or the American Music Awards, really,” explains Greene. “When the VMAs started in ’84, it was just finally honoring the music that kids were listening to. And that was a real innovation.”

But even more than the awards, people remember the performances. The bar was set high from the start: Madonna’s performance of “Like a Virgin” at the inaugural VMAs, in which she rolled around onstage, hiking her white wedding dress up to reveal her garter belt, shocked everyone. “She was still new at that point,” Klein recalls. “People weren’t sure—Who is this person? Has she just destroyed her career? And of course, it was exactly the opposite. It was what launched her.”

Nineteen years later, Madonna created headlines again when she joined Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera onstage at the 2003 VMAs for a medley of “Like a Virgin” and “Hollywood.” This time, Spears and Aguilera were the writhing brides, Madonna the black-clad groom. When she kissed both younger singers—though only the smooch with Spears was given its due on camera, as MTV’s producers, eager to stoke scandal, cut immediately to ex-boyfriend Justin Timberlake’s

reaction—the media once again, and somewhat provincially, lost their collective effing minds.

For Sidney Madden, co-host of NPR *Music’s Louder Than a Riot* podcast, no performance tops Beyoncé’s at the 2011 VMAs. That year, the singer performed “Love on Top” from her fourth solo album, *4*. At the end of the number, she unbuttoned her purple sequined tuxedo jacket to reveal her an obvious baby bump. “I remember her opening up that tuxedo jacket and her face just being so aglow!” Madden tells *Grazia USA*. For an artist as notoriously private as Beyoncé to use the show as a launchpad not just for a new album, but for a totally new phase of her life, shows the significance of the VMAs, even as late as 2011. “It always had that essence of, anything can happen!” Madden says.

Of course, that chaotic energy has also made for some supremely uncomfortable moments. The media narrative of Fiona Apple as an unstable basket case took root in large part thanks to her 1997 acceptance speech for Best New Artist, in which she called MTV’s whole dog-and-pony show “bullsh*t.” And when Kanye West rushed the stage to interrupt Taylor Swift’s 2009 acceptance speech for Best Female Video, it ignited one of the most cringe-worthy and exhausting celebrity rivalries ever.

Indeed, not every memorable performance is remembered fondly. Madden cites Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke’s 2013 performance of “Blurred Lines,” as a prime example of the VMAs as a showcase for appropriation. “The mass media really ran with the fact that she ‘twerked’ on Robin,” she explains. “They acted as if she invented the move, when truly it’s Black women in the South who invented it.”

The performances may be what inevitably

becomes legendary to the public, but there are even more tall tales of the fights and debauchery that’s taken place backstage over the years. “What happened on stage was interesting too, but it wasn’t the whole sum of the even,” according to Unterberger. “It was only a small part of it, really.”

Authors Rob Tannenbaum and Craig Marks devoted an entire chapter of their book *I Want My MTV* to behind-the-scenes VMAs gossip alone: Mötley Crüe’s Vince Neil punching Guns N’ Roses’ Izzy Stradlin; Bobby Brown allegedly dropping a bag of cocaine onstage; Anthony Kiedis of the Red Hot Chili Peppers trying to lick Cindy Crawford’s armpit.

“Having all these major presences in the same building has a kind of really uncomfortable tension to it,” says Unterberger. “It ends up resulting in some of these explosive moments. And that’s great. The VMAs have kind of their own mythology to them.”

It’s almost a cliché at this point to say that MTV no longer plays music videos. The shift toward original programming, and ultimately reality TV, that began in the mid-’80s has fully metastasized. This summer, on the network’s 40th anniversary, the internet had a field day with the fact that rather than recognize the milestone, MTV aired its now-standard 24-hour block of reruns of its viral video-clip show *Ridiculousness*.

Klein, whose book tracks this evolution, suggests that the VMAs were, in some ways, MTV’s first step toward the mega-network it would become. The show was,

after all, one of the first that MTV produced. “It’s not too long after that that MTV starts to go from kind of being amorphous, music videos all the time to having a schedule, having these shows happen at the same time each day,” she explains. “It represents this idea that MTV is not just the radio. It’s going to have content that isn’t just music videos.”

Video-centric shows like *Dial MTV*, *Headbangers Ball*, and *Yo! MTV Raps* made way for magazine-style shows like *The Week in Rock* and *House of Style*. Then came *The Real World* and *Road Rules* and *The Osbournes* and *Laguna Beach* and *The Challenge*. The rest—along with music videos, really—is history.

Yet, the VMAs persist. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they had every reason not to, MTV managed to pull off a remote, largely pre-taped show. And the stars continue to show up.

This year’s host, Doja Cat, presided over a night at Brooklyn’s Barclays Center that featured performances by Camila Cabello, Olivia Rodrigo, Shawn Mendes, and Machine Gun Kelly, among others. Justin Bieber returned to the VMAs stage for the first time since 2015. And if viral moments are the measure of awards show success, let’s talk about Lil Nas X’s VMAs debut. ...

Meanwhile, the impact of the

VMAs can be seen in the many niche awards shows that have cropped up in the decades since they debuted. Nickelodeon’s Kids Choice Awards, Fox’s Teen Choice Awards, and the BET Awards all owe something to the VMAs. “I think it showed a lot of networks that you should do your own awards show; that it’s a really smart way to have a grand event, to bring in big ratings, to bring big stars on,” Greene says. “Before the VMAs, the Grammys and the AMAs were the only things that honored music on TV. And now there’s so much more.”

Despite awards show ratings continuing to plummet across the board, no one I spoke to thinks the VMAs are going anywhere any time soon.

“It’s the one night a year that people are guaranteed to talk about MTV,” Unterberger explains. “It’s tough to give that up.”

“If nothing else, it feels like this is what MTV has to say for the year,” Madden insists. “Whoever they put in that Breakout Artist category, whoever they put in that [icon] category, whoever they present

to be the fan-voted choice—that’s when MTV as a network can still assert their influence.”



2010



1984



2014



1997



2011



2015



2009

