

The New MTV Generation

by Miles Clements

It always begins with a quick profile while the birthday girls and boys saunter around the family mansions, arms outstretched and faces all smiles at the mention of their possessions. The camera follows them through their houses: closets full of designers like Chanel and Louis Vuitton, garages housing the newest Mercedes or BMW. From there, the kids usually are taken on shopping trips to New York or Paris or the nearest luxury car dealership. Inevitably, it all ends the same way: each of the kids throwing a fit over an invitation or a car or their grand entrance in hopes that their party will top its predecessors—and that it will make for an entertaining episode of MTV's *My Super Sweet 16*.

Now in its fourth season, *My Super Sweet 16* is a reality show that follows the planning and execution of exorbitantly rich teens' Sweet 16 parties. Usually the son or daughter of a family of wealth, the teens desire every luxury, demanding to be flown to the party in a helicopter or carried in atop an elephant. As is perhaps expected, the show ends up being entertaining because of its ridiculousness. Ariel, the daughter of an oil tycoon and one of show's most recent birthday girls, proclaimed with bubbly glee: "I love oil. Oil means shoes and cars and purses." A kind of overwhelming naïveté informs *My Super Sweet 16*—the show is vapid, materialistic and feckless and representative of nearly all the worst afflictions of modern American society.

But people watch it. I've watched it. And chances are that if you fit into the network's vast teen or early-twenty-something demographic, you've watched it too. Although shows like *My Super Sweet 16* have caused MTV to be written off and derided as irrelevant in today's culture, there is something of value in the program and the network, something that is still tangibly important.

What that is, however, isn't some list of bands that MTV has discovered in the past months or even years—it's the fact that the network is self-aware and knows full well that it's no longer a musical tastemaker. Instead of clinging to its former self, MTV has remained culturally relevant by staying nimble, by accepting its shift from musical tastemaker to cultural documentarian. Thus, by using its line-up of reality shows and documentary-style programming to forge a new identity, MTV has moved with the culture, no longer serving just as a disseminator, but also an archivist patching together the otherwise fractured youth culture into a saleable package—one that, like it or not, is still important to its youth market.

To properly gauge and analyze MTV's crucial programming shift, attention must first be given to the network's past. Part of what made MTV so influential in its early years was the climate in which the network existed. If someone wanted to discover new music prior to MTV, there were two primary options: the radio and print media. While both forms certainly provided enough variety and influence to remain important, the problem was that neither format allowed its consumer to actually feel as if he or she were actually getting to know a band. With radio, listeners could know a band only through sound, leaving all sorts of images to the imagination. With print media, readers and viewers could only know a band through static images and text, making motion and sound and soul exclusive to live performance. Thus, for MTV, there was a distinct void that it sought to fill, one that would combine all of these factors into an energetic and novel form that could attract a young, influential audience.

So when the network launched on August 1, 1981, it set out to do just that. Its first moments began with a now iconic scene: an astronaut hopping across the moon and planting MTV's fluttering neon flag in the rocky soil. The graphics were all but ripped from punk's cut-up, do-it-yourself aesthetic. The network's sets looked rough and unfinished—mock walls of bricks, haphazard piles of records and exposed sections of concrete. And as far as programming went, the network came off more like a shabby cable-access channel than a cultural trendsetter. There were only a few music videos in rotation, with the Buggles' tune "Video Killed the Radio Star" gaining heavy airplay. It was all meant to seem edgy and urban and young. And it did.

And that was crucial to MTV's early success. Although revisionists often look back at MTV's early footage and claim that the network was simply beginning its elaborate cultural posturing, MTV was decidedly authentic, as its good-enough-looking VJs stumbling over lines and pushing up-and-coming artists garnered tremendous amounts of attention. Because of this, MTV became extremely influential even in its early years. One of the best and earliest examples of this is MTV's impact on the New York band the Talking Heads. At the time of MTV's launch, the group was a critical success with a handful of albums already receiving glowingly positive reviews. But Talking Heads' increasingly experimental mix of post-punk, funk and world music was largely misunderstood by the mainstream audience. That is, of course, until the band's clip for "Once In A Lifetime" began receiving heavy airplay on MTV. The video, which saw frontman David Byrne contorting himself in his trademark large-shouldered suit, was quirky, engaging and fun. Sales of the band's album *Remain In Light* quickly spiked and "Once In A Lifetime" made its way onto Billboard's "Hot 100" chart. All because of MTV.

MTV's dominant tastemaking continued through much of its early history, with shows like *120 Minutes* and *Yo! MTV Raps* setting trends in alternative music. Routinely airing established underground bands like New Order and the Jesus and Mary Chain, *120 Minutes* also served as a launching pad, most notably for the world premiere of the video for Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—a song and video that would go on to irrevocably alter both underground and mainstream rock. Similarly, *Yo! MTV Raps* served as a mouthpiece for what was the still burgeoning hip-hop scene, with artists like Run-DMC and Tupac Shakur regularly appearing on the program and casting the mold for today's chart-topping hip-hop scene.

But even as MTV continued to develop and refine its role as musical tastemaker, the network also began experimenting with non-music programming. Launched in 1992, *The Real World* is the quintessential example. Framed around seven diverse and carefully chosen strangers, the pioneering reality show places its cast in a house and at a job, then follows their every interaction over the course of the following months. The early seasons of the show, with its inaugural season set in New York City, proved raw and magnetic. Quite often the cast members' diverse backgrounds and lifestyles came to a head, resulting in arguments and fights. And what made and still makes the show fascinating are those moments of heated interaction. Whether falling victim to homophobic or racist slurs, love connections or bitter shouting matches, the cast members almost always engage in high-energy interaction. But aside from that source of entertainment, the show became massively popular because it documented youth culture in a way that had not previously been successfully accomplished or even truly attempted.

Some of the show's success, however, must also be attributed to the climate in which *The Real World* began. Framed by sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* and *Roseanne* and dramas like *Reasonable Doubts* and *Civil Wars* that all catered to an older audience, *The Real World* almost exclusively addressed the needs and desires of the youth generation. And while there were some notable exceptions, like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, no other television program at the time

illuminated the cultural tensions and emotions of the youth generation as *The Real World* did. And with the youth market already attracted to MTV's alternative sensibility and tastemaking, *The Real World* was a smart move—both in business and ideological terms. *The Real World* was one of the first reality shows to gain a faithful, nationwide audience and is currently MTV's longest running series. It is a very profitable show, as well, with production costs running much lower than traditional sitcoms and dramas. Not only that, but it was also a tipping point for the network, serving as a watershed moment for MTV's shift to reality-style programming.

Indeed, what followed in the success of *The Real World* was a cavalcade of shows that emerged from a similar model. But while a host of dating shows and prank shows began spinning off from *The Real World*'s success, there was one show that more closely mirrored *The Real World*: *Road Rules*. Directly tied to the style of *The Real World*, *Road Rules* placed another group of carefully chosen and diverse strangers in an RV and sent them on a road trip and through a gauntlet of challenges and contests. Although still airing in various incarnations, *Road Rules* has never had quite the same sustained success as *The Real World* because of the former's eventually disposable novelty. Nevertheless, what made and continues to make *Road Rules* popular is exactly what made *The Real World* a success—its moments of emotional outbursts and (occasionally overwrought) human frailty.

But today, critics attack *The Real World*, *Road Rules* and MTV's other reality programming. They say that the shows are no longer relevant because their current incarnations are empty, sex-fueled and overly staged. They also say that the network has completely abandoned its role as an important cultural tastemaker, instead inheriting the mantle of the vapid, materialistic youth of America. And there is some truth in that. Current seasons of *The Real World* depict more roommate romances and drunken, shirtless squabbles than moments of genuine tension, the moments in which very real racial, sexual and cultural conflicts erupt and, more often than not, are resolved. But arguing that that fact completely delegitimizes *The Real World* is shortsighted because that argument takes the show, and MTV as a whole, out of its historical context. If it were not already for *The Real World*'s pioneering style and content, many of these critics might very well see what *The Real World* is doing today as cutting-edge and powerful instead of tiresome and shallow. Because *The Real World* has been so influential and popular, it inevitably created a backlash, one that sought to discredit the show's value. Granted, not all of the current seasons of the show carry the same weight as those original episodes, but that is not to say that they are hollow, empty or devoid of any true documentary aspect. Only when the current episodes are taken out of the show's historical context do they seem insignificant.

What these critics must also realize is that with the Internet now serving as the dominant medium for music, it would be impossible for MTV to remain the tastemaker that it once was. While once novel and entertaining, music videos are now more disposable than ever as they can be rapidly distributed via websites like YouTube. Because of this, MTV has lost its exclusive role as the distributor and tastemaker of music videos. Instead, bands are able to release their videos directly to their fans and, in the case of smaller independent bands, are also able to circumvent the corporate music world's media power structure. Not only that, but the Internet's revolutionary effect on music has further altered MTV's status. Instead of tuning in to the channel to gauge the new and upcoming bands, those eager to discover new music can simply log onto any number of websites and be only a few clicks from new music. Indeed, an entirely new musical ecosystem has been created with the popularization of Apple's iPod music player and iTunes software that has undercut the traditional musical tastemakers such as MTV.

So to criticize MTV for not maintaining its role as a purveyor of new, breaking music is rather ridiculous when the Internet has completely altered the way in which music is distributed and discovered. If MTV were to attempt to maintain its former role in the music world, it would likely fail and invite even more ridicule. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that MTV has shifted to its current lineup of primarily reality-style programming and its new role as cultural documentarian. With the popularity and success of *The Real World* and the dramatically different musical landscape, MTV had every reason to make the shift.

And though MTV's current slew of dating shows, namely *Date My Mom* and *Parental Control*, all but deserve the slandering that has been lobbed at MTV, there are many programs on the network that rise above that. One such show is *True Life*, a documentary-style program that chronicles the lives of various teens and twenty-somethings in relation to each episode's theme. Although the show does occasionally document trivial and banal themes like the pursuit of Prom Court and the trendy obsession with dogs, most episodes transcend the expectations of MTV's reality programming and countless other television programs.

One such episode, titled "I'm Dead Broke," profiles three young people struggling to make ends meet: Alexa, an 18-year-old dropout forced to work paycheck to paycheck as a waitress; DeMarlon, a 19-year-old who sees joining the Army as his only road out of poverty; and Sandra, a 22-year-old raised on welfare and trying to string together minimum-wage jobs to be able to move into her own place. Over the course of the episode, Alexa is fired after a manager sees her smoking marijuana, DeMarlon's family is evicted from their home and Sandra is barely able to secure an apartment with her boyfriend Armaan. Aside from Sandra's successful move, the episode is heartbreaking. The living conditions portrayed are horrific: trailers with cracked and peeling walls, rooms packed with dirty sheets and laundry. What's more is that these conditions and situations are not just that of Alexa, DeMarlon and Sandra—they are the conditions of over 35 million Americans living below the poverty line. Thus, what this episode of *True Life* does is illuminate the poverty crisis. For most of the network's middle-class viewers, poverty will probably never be an issue. So for the millions of Americans that are dealing with this crisis, *True Life* and MTV are in effect serving as their mouthpiece, injecting their story into the country's collective consciousness. And whether or not this inspires action against poverty, it at the very least provides the knowledge of its existence, something that not many other television programs are even brave enough to address.

Then there are shows like *MADE* and *Juvsies*. *MADE*, for example, takes a generally high-school-aged participant and offers to help turn him or her into whatever role is desired: sometimes a star athlete, other times a musician or artist. Although the show's participants are often interested in the transformation for superficial reasons, the show almost always takes on a greater significance by crossing traditional high-school social lines and breaking down the barriers of those involved in the episode—even if it is just for a television show. *Juvsies*, which is a relatively new program, follows the lives of troubled kids in juvenile hall. The show is sometimes frightening, but oftentimes quite heartfelt in its depiction of the troubled children. Of course, critics of both of these shows claim that they, like many other reality shows, are overly staged. But regardless of whether or not what is portrayed on these shows stays with those who are involved, both provide examples and sometimes inspiration for the countless kids who watch the shows.

But while programs like these are widely acknowledged as the luminaries of MTV's current programming schedule, shows like *My Super Sweet 16* are what cause the network to be ridiculed most. These shows are derided as vapid pieces of mindless entertainment that promote

empty-headed materialism and conspicuous consumption. And much of that is true. Regardless of the show's intentions, its depiction of the teens' wealth surely has an effect on its viewers. What this argument overlooks, however, is that many of the show's participants would likely be throwing these lavish parties even if they were not profiled on *My Super Sweet 16*. Many of the families that have appeared on the show are of such wealth that spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a Sweet 16 party is something that would occur regardless of the network's six-figure requirements. Even so, MTV is simply serving to document something that would be going on regardless of its involvement, something that is horribly fascinating for a number of reasons.

Most curious among those is *My Super Sweet 16*'s newest role as watchdog. Thanks to the show, Gary Milby, the oil tycoon father of recent birthday girl Ariel, was found to be misusing funds. With Milby already owing \$1.3 million to the state of Arizona and various investors in his oil business, officials were shocked to see Milby showering his daughter with jewelry and even a new BMW on her episode of *My Super Sweet 16*. Of course, Milby, like critics before him, has publicly written off the show as staged and fake, claiming that he had very little to do with the planning and execution of the party. But the fact is that nothing Milby says can wipe away the damning footage from the show, which is marked by Ariel's continued naiveté. Walking past some of Milby's oil wells, she remarked: "It smells like money, daddy!" MTV may no longer smell like Teen Spirit, but thanks to Ariel, it at least smells like something.