

## Empty Visions?

'I want my MTV' eventually became the opening line of a hit song (Dire Straits' *Money For Nothing*), but the slogan was first heard five years ago, in advertisements for MTV: Music Television, the world's first all-music cable TV channel, based in the USA.

Rock stars like Mick Jagger and Pete Townshend leered into camera and implored American kids to demand the new service from their local cable station: 'Call your cable operator now, and say, 'I want my Emm tee vee!' As the service celebrates its fifth birthday this year, it is now as much a part of the US pop establishment as Jagger and Townshend.

MTV has already had an impact beyond its size. The station is available to nearly 30m Americans, although recently less than 1% have been tuning in. However, MTV's real impact is the 'gatekeeping' role it plays in the US pop market.

In its early years the service was credited with breaking British 'new wave' music that had hitherto been considered too radical for American radio. Bear in mind that this crusade was headed by the likes of the Thompson Twins and Howard Jones but, still, MTV's playlist in those days was more innovative than radio. The appeal of the British bands came from the striking visual impact of their videos, whose popularity with MTV exerted an unseen influence on British pop, as it boosted the fortunes of some acts – and not others – in a key international 'territory'.

But the innovation that established MTV has waned. Nowadays its playlists are indistinguishable from its radio counterparts. MTV's lifeline to young middle-America sustains old wave British rock from the likes of Yes, ELP, and Genesis; while 'alternative' music is pushed out from the prime-time slots into late Sunday and Monday night shows.

One positive shift, though, has been the increase in black music on the station. MTV was accused of racism in its first years of life. Black acts were almost entirely absent, while white acts playing soul or funk were aired – provided their rendition was sufficiently lame. These days more black faces can be seen: rock-orientated dance music from Prince, Michael Jackson and Tina Turner has found a firm place, alongside the m-o-r sounds of Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston.

But MTV's real saviour has been Run DMC – wholesome black lads who sugar their raps with heavy metal guitar, and denounce drugs, crime and all things immoral. Their duet with white rockers Aerosmith (*Walk This Way*) created the perfect MTV cross-over and received heavy airplay all summer long.

This 'play safe' strategy has taken much of the early buzz out of the format. And the impact on record companies in Britain and elsewhere can only be negative, because they must sign and market acts with one eye on the crucial American market.

MTV's originality lies in its significance for television, not music. Perhaps it heralds a new attitude to TV consumption, or perhaps it consolidates existing patterns; either way, the episodic structure of MTV is best experienced casually, paying attention sometimes to sound or vision only and dipping in from time to time for more concentrated viewing. You don't sit down and watch MTV, you absorb it; videos, ads and zappy graphics flash across the screen in an unremitting flow, 24 hours a day, almost unbroken by the discrete 'programmes' we expect from broadcast TV.

The 'VJs' (Video Jocks) who used to pop up between each clip are now seen less frequently, giving the channel an even greater sense of having no authority or anchor. But this approach lends itself to extremely uncritical coverage of pop. You won't catch the VJs displaying the kind of cynicism that leaks out of *The Tube*, *Whistle Test*

or from John Peel's occasional and incongruous *Top Of The Pops* appearances. The VJs love just everything.

This abdication of criticism is not nearly as common on American TV as many people think but it does represent a cross-media trend towards the fusion of advertising and product. MTV is at the centre of developments like *Miami Vice* (working title: *MTV Cops*), *Sigue Sigue Sputnik*, and the growing corporate sponsorship of pop, where the relations between product and promotion are increasingly indistinct. Everything on MTV is a promotion – from the station ID, through the advertisements, to the videos themselves, which advertise other products.

What are we to make of the politics of MTV? Left verdicts have veered from the outrageously optimistic assertion that music video pioneers a radical subversion of realist broadcasting ... to the usual condemnations of lyrics and image. But it is no use bemoaning the ascendancy of the image on MTV, since visual style has always been at the very heart of pop. And left efforts to 'analyse' pop narrative are often no more convincing.

In the US this summer progressives and feminists debated the meaning of Madonna's hit *Papa Don't Preach*, and its video (featured heavily on MTV). Its critics say the song and the video preach an anti-abortion line, telling young girls to 'keep their babies'. But facile content analysis like this is no more helpful than the overblown formalism of the post-modernists, who embrace the anti-realist impulse in music video, while neglecting its uncritical core.

Some critics see hope in the imminent demise of MTV and pop video. But MTV has been expanding. Last year the media corporation Viacom International bought the channel from its original owners Warner-Amex (as part of a \$570m package) and quickly established a second service (VH-1) for older viewers, featuring more black artists (strictly m-o-r)

and oldies like Neil Diamond and the Moody Blues. This is a shrewd move, catering as it does for the increasingly important older audience for pop, who no longer go out to gigs, but still seek the excitement of pop performance.

Ironically, the new boundary-breaking service has found a surprise success story in reruns of the *Monkees* TV series. The *Monkees* have just completed a lucra-



MTV video jocks

reunion tour of the US, and CBS are about to shoot a remake of the series, using new actors. How can a 60s bubblegum group who were considered hopelessly uncool at the time become the cult heroes of the 1980s? The answer lies partly with pop video and MTV. Many of today's stars have achieved fame precisely because of their miming and 'acting' talents, and failure to play on your own records is no longer considered a breach of trust (Frankie Goes To Hollywood *boast* about it).

MTV has helped to change the way we think about pop and performance. And its influence extends way beyond the cabled living rooms of the USA. MTV has also spawned European imitators, some of them very pale indeed, like the Virgin Records/Yorkshire Television venture *Music Box*. My hunch is that MTV is here to stay, and may eventually find its way onto the deregulated airwaves of the UK. We might sneer that empty visions make the most sound; but they also attract the most advertisers, too. ●

Andrew Goodwin



Sauce for the goose and stuffing for the gander

## Homage to Turkey

Most people think that Christmas has lost its religious meaning. Most people are wrong. Christmas is still about religion but the object of worship has changed. On December 25 millions of people will pay reverent homage to... the Turkey. Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without the ritual that surrounds the buying, preparing and eating

## Yuletide Groove

Since the advent of recorded music the yuletide groove has proved an indispensable item in the grand repository of Christmas ritual. Such rites as the family viewing of the bumper, super-tinselled *Top of The Pops* and the sound of Bing Crosby groaning for his supper on *White Christmas* (for many years the best selling record of all time), have all added pungency to the traditional sticky cocktail of Dickensian sentiment, modern consumer-mania, and timeless excess.

Predictability is at the heart of the season, nowhere more so than in record racks offering

(especially the eating) of the Big Bird.

But as with most religions there are non-believers, converts to another way. In this case they're called vegetarians and from being a persecuted minority they are steadily growing in number and influence. My local butcher, to whom I am a stranger, reckons his turkey sales have been falling off in recent years (a bit like church attendance) and it's estimated that there are over a million non-flesh eaters in Britain today.

Why not join them this Christ-

Harry Secombe's *Golden Hour Of Christmas Favourites*, Chas And Dave's *Cockney Christmas Knees Up* or this year's choir boy wonder warbling carols. Then there will be the re-re-re-release of Ono/Lennon's *Happy Christmas War Is Over* and the strident adenoidal twang of Slade's Noddy Holder assuring you once more that 'Here it is...'

Penning an addition to the Christmas canon is an ambition nursed in the unlikeliest hearts - witness Wham's *Another Christmas*, or even Chuck Berry's *Run Run Rudolph* - though the prospect of cash registers ringing in the snow remains a powerful artistic incentive.

The accepted classic remains *Phil Spector's Christmas Record*; the likes of *I Saw Mommy*

mas? Apart from the moral, economic and health reasons for not eating meat, do you really want to sit around on Christmas Day with a stomach full of flesh while the wrecked carcass sits accusingly in a pool of congealing grease?

But what about the rest of the Christmas ritual - all those other things we put inside ourselves during the season of goodwill? Every year newspapers and magazines are stuffed full of advice on eating and drinking at Christmas. Thousands of column inches either urge us to excess or tell us how to deal with its unpleasant results. Do we need this advice? Do we need to be told that a mixture of Guinness and Advocaat will induce nausea? About as much as we need three helpings of Christmas pudding - but that never stopped anyone.

Now the curious thing about all this advice is that *everyone* reads it and *everyone* ignores it - as demonstrated by the large numbers of people rolling around full of Guinness and Advocaat on Christmas Eve. In spite of knowing this I'm going to offer my own advice. Read on and put an end to Xmas misery.

Make a list of typical Christmas fare. Go through the list and delete everything you haven't consumed since last Christmas. Say goodbye to; roast turkey, chipolata sausages, mince pies, Advocaat, British sherry, selection boxes, dates and Christmas pudding. You can eat whatever is left on the list. Plus, if you really can't resist it, one small Advocaat. Merry Christmas. ● *Brian Hill*

*Kissing Santa Claus* and *Frosty The Snowman* were never to sound the same after being fed into the Spector Wall Of Sound. The result has the Ronettes and The Crystals baying into the night while a thousand sleigh bells are jangled in the Grand Canyon.

In comparison most other Christmas concepts are patchy, unsatisfying affairs, though the Motown Christmas LP from 1964 can't help but provide some splendid moments - too bad the Jackson Five's *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town* from 10 years later isn't likewise available.

The Beach Boys surfing *Little Saint Nick* provides the only standout on their 1964 seasonal offering, and Frank Sinatra singing *Oh Little Town Of Beth-*

## Round Midnight



Moody blues at midnight

Set in the smoky jazz clubs and seedy hotel rooms of fifties Paris, Bertrand Tavernier's fictionalised bio-pic of ageing jazz saxophonist Dale Turner (Dexter Gordon) centres on the drink-ravaged musician's friendship with obsessive fan Francis (Francois Cluzet).

Befriended, supported and encouraged by Francis, Dale lays off the booze, plays some gigs at the now legendary Blue Note club, and starts composing and recording again. Tavernier's free-flowing narrative, and the blue-grey tones of Bruno de Keyzer's photography evoke the sweaty intensity of the live gigs, and testify to the eloquence of the largely non-verbal communication between Dale and Francis - theirs is a friendship forged out of a mutual love for jazz music.

But you don't really need to know anything about jazz to appreciate the film: you just need eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to feel. Because *Round Midnight* hits just the right note every time. ● *Nigel Floyd*

*lehem* is a little like Norman Fowler wishing those on the dole a happy Christmas; scarcely credible. Frank is better sipping a Martini on *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas*.

Personally I'll settle for the oddball cool yule of Babs Gonzales *Be Bop Santa* from 1955 with its lines about a santa dressed in red cashmere dispensing Dizzy Gillespie records and books on jive. For the other side of the Christmas story - those in the manger, not in the inn - Victoria Spivey's *Christmas Morning Blues* from 1926 remains the saddest story you'll hear on record, and also the best sung.

They really don't make 'em like that anymore. ● *Neil Spencer*