works to the proto-videos played on video jukeboxes and as shorts preceding feature-length films. It was only with the passage of time, and the steady growth of interest in the form as cultural effluvium and market force, that the diverse lines of inquiry banded together to create what we now know as the music video.

CHAPTER 1

Music Video in Fugue

For as long as music had been a fundamental aspect of human cultural expression, its enjoyment had been inextricably intertwined with the experience of watching a performer physically produce musical sound. Whether strumming a guitar, beating drums, bowing a violin, or using the vocal chords to turn out sound, the means of musical production had always been immediately present and immediately visible. A performer’s body language, the way he stood, danced, held his instrument—these were fundamental aspects of the musical experience, every bit as important as the sounds themselves. Until the twentieth century, and the rise of technologies of reproduction that allowed music to emerge, as if disembodied, from the belly of machines, rather than from the hands and throats of human beings, the notion of separating music and the musician was a nonsensical one. With few exceptions (the player piano springs to mind), it was illogical to think of music as existing separately from the people and the instruments that created it.

The rise of radio in the early twentieth century, and of recordings made available for commercial purchase, changed the equation drastically. For the first time, music could be enjoyed alone, in the privacy of one’s home, or out in public without the mediating presence of musicians. Music, like so much else, became a commodity, a formerly ephemeral, fleeting object of momentary pleasure now available for commercial purchase.

Concomitant with the rise of this technology, efforts were made to reunite the separated segments of the musical experience, seeking to mechanistically realize nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner’s dream of the gesamt-kunstwerk, the total artwork, combining the heretofore disparate strands of artistic endeavor. By this logic, if technical know-how could take the work of musicians in a studio, or onstage, and preserve it for posterity, then perhaps a
visual record could be preserved as well. Beyond mere mechanical reproduction, the hope was to organically reunite sound and image, creating a new art form that activated, and heightened, all the senses. The problem of reuniting sound and image, of capturing the musical experience in its entirety, led to a wide range of experiments with what would eventually come to be music video. While none of these experiments reached the critical mass that propelled the music video in its current MTV incarnation, short-lived unions of image and sound, like Soundies, Snader Telepictures, and the Scopitone, are worthy of attention, if only as reminders of roads ultimately not traveled.

From the outset, the notion of bringing sound and image together was a musically grounded experiment. It was no accident that the very first talking picture, in 1927, was a musical—Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*. For the film industry, the burgeoning musical format was a means of demonstrating the quality of its technology, able to capture the tonal nuance of song. Musicals also became the financial and emotional cornerstones of the burgeoning sound film, their exuberant frivolity a balm for Depression-scared audiences. Musicals’ juggling of imaginative musical numbers and (sometimes only slightly) more realistic intermediary sequences meant that a space had been carved out, inside Hollywood’s most treasured products, for the expression of unfettered fantasy. Musical sequences were discrete short films in and of themselves, often possessed of unique sets, costumes, camera angles, and performers distinct from the prosaic, nonspecialized films of the scene.

The Hollywood musical’s influence on the music video cannot be overlooked, its innovations written into the DNA of the medium. Look at a musical number like those in the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers film *Top Hat* (1935), and you will see the prototype for dance videos to come; elongated sequences like the “Girl Hunt” from *The Band Wagon* (1953), or the closing ballet of *An American in Paris* (1951), were hints of what epic videos like “Thriller” would soon attempt. More broadly speaking, the movie musical’s emphasis on the musical number as discrete performance would inexorably lead to the music video, by process of a winnowing down to essences. If audiences flocked to movies for the delights found in their musical numbers, then short films composed entirely of musical numbers were sure to be a smash success. With that rationale in mind, Paramount and other studios made a large number of musical shorts, starring major performers like Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, and Duke Ellington, intended to be shown before features. The logic was sound—it merely took another fifty or so years to come due.

The Hollywood musical was not the only hotspot where music and image could mingle. Animation was another preferred medium for innovators kicking the tires of the new sound film, investigating its capabilities, with none more influential, or unique, than German filmmaker Oskar Fischinger. Originally trained as an architect, Fischinger’s motion-experiment short films of the 1930s brought a builder’s mentality to his scored short films. Tightly synchronizing his films’ movement to their accompanying music (usually new recordings of short classical pieces like Paul Dukas’ “Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” for which Fischinger’s films were intended as advertisements), Fischinger shorts like “Study 8” (1931) and “Composition in Blue” (1935) featured dancing geometrical shapes—whizzing circles, squares, and diamonds, and wiggling lines. Fischinger was a gifted painter, and at times his films resemble live-action versions of the geometric abstraction of Mondrian or Kandinsky. At other times, their simplicity, and the elegance of their motion, make them precursors to the intricate movie credit sequences of Saul Bass. Fischinger was convinced he was inventing a new, scientific, nonverbal film language through his forms, and while that never came to fruition, his films are remarkable as proto-music videos. Fischinger’s drawings in his motion studies are so perfectly synchronized to their chosen music that what appears onscreen seems to be summoned by the very musical notes themselves. Looking by turns like archery targets, voltage meters, cylinders, and Kenneth Noland circles, the figures of “Composition in Blue” dance across the screen in unerring harmony with their musical accompaniment.

Fischinger had sought for years to collaborate with composer Leopold Stokowski on a hybrid project. Stokowski would provide the music, Fischinger would furnish animation to accompany it, and the union of two such kindred souls would create a film greater than the sum of its illustrious parts. Stokowski liked the idea, but ended up taking it to Walt Disney, who laid the groundwork for what would come to be *Fantasia* (1940). Stokowski convinced Disney to hire Fischinger to animate the opening sequence of the film, set to Bach’s “Toccata in Fugue.” In what would become a wearyingly familiar routine in Fischinger’s abortive Hollywood career, his work was tampered with by the Disney design committee, who voted to alter nearly all of it.

Bits and pieces of Fischinger can still be seen in the final version of *Fantasia*, described by Jim Farber as “the first unintentional long-form music video.” “Toccata in Fugue” bears witness to the influence of Fischinger’s dancing geometric shapes and taste for abstract design. *Fantasia* is a grab bag of visual styles, one for each segment of the film, with some considerably more successful than others. The Mickey Mouse–starring “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” is charming, with sound and image superbly coordinated, while the playful romping of lovestruck animals to Beethoven’s “Pastoral Symphony” is downright tedious. Broken up into discrete segments, with each introduced by famed composer Deems Taylor, *Fantasia* was an avatar of the coming music-video genre in more
Life During Wartime

With new technology allowing for the projection of moving images onto a small screen, the stage was set for a new class of jukebox that combined music with short movie clips. The Soundie, child of World War II, was thus born, making its way into bars, restaurants, and nightclubs across the United States in the early 1940s. Between 1941 and 1946, when the Soundie boom began to wane, soon to be made entirely obsolete by television, thousands of short-form music videos were produced—mostly of blues and jazz acts, novelty performers, and comedians. Soundies were played back on the Panoramic Sound, a tall, squat apparatus paneled in dark wood that resembled an audio jukebox, with its screen positioned where the carousel of records would normally be visible. The Soundies used celluloid for playback, a medium not intended for continuous play. When combined with the technologically advanced but very maintenance-heavy Panoramic, the Soundie was not a form designed for the long haul. (In the 1980s, when the video jukebox made a brief resurgence with the Startime Video Muzzikboxx, the machines experienced similar durability problems).

Appearing mostly in nightspots, and charging ten cents a throw, Soundies were delightfully low-class, simultaneously able to imitate their cultural superiors (like the movies) while also, as nonteatrical releases, exempt from the Hays Code, free from the shackles of overly aggressive supervision. Soundies reflected the passing trends and fads of the moment, ranging from the zoot suits and tight slit skirts of jazz-happy hepcats to the aquatic hijinks popularized by cinematic swimming stars Esther Williams and Johnny Weissmuller.

As commercial products, Soundies advertised their performers, but they were also themselves for sale, subject to the approval or disapproval of customers able to vote with their dimes. Often shot by the same handful of directors (including Josef Berne and William Forest Crouch), the bulk of Soundies, much like their MTV grandchildren, sought to dazzle. Be it comic pratfalls (famed silent comic Harry Langdon makes a guest appearance in “Beautiful Clothes (Make Beautiful Girls”), exhibitions of dancing skill, or the sight of chorus girls’ long legs, Soundies were desperate to capture their viewers’ attention. Like slimmed-down versions of the musical numbers from Hollywood, Soundies featured the same Art Deco sets, tuxedo-clad musicians, and Busby Berkeley-inspired geometric dance patterns familiar from countless musicals. Regrettably, they also feature much the same brand of racial prejudice so wearily familiar from feature filmmaking of the 1940s: in Raymond Duke’s “Solid Five,” a phenomenal African-American dancer performs a solo routine whose frenzied roboticism presages the tightly controlled popping and locking of hip-hop breakdancing. The unstated rules of humiliation regarding the presence of African-Americans onscreen, though, demanded that he appear dressed as a bellhop, taking away with one hand the measure of dignity it had granted with the other.

In a manner that would be eminently familiar to any contemporary MTV watcher, Soundies were primarily concerned with selling sex. Leggy chorus girls and bashful bobbysoxers in short skirts are regular presences in Soundies, often every bit as blatant in their role as eye candy as any contemporary hit video’s backup dancers. Soundies promised the caress of beautiful women, for everyone from Langdon in “Beautiful Clothes,” to the cop on the beat in Eppy Pearson’s “Tabby the Cat,” to the old codger of “Hoosier Hot Shots.”

There were other kinds of videos, too, ones that emphasized Soundies’ small part as a cog in the vast entertainment apparatus of a country desperate to get its mind off the war raging overseas. Roller skaters, winter-sports shenanigans, and animated frogs all served as diversions, but occasionally even Soundies were required to approach the unapproachable: “Hands” is a solemn reminder to weary laborers of the crucial work of hands in the war effort—typing, praying, dialing telephones, and the like. “Hands” includes surprisingly explicit footage of wounded soldiers, their mangled hands reaching heavenward in supplication, before ending with one final hand, this one closed into a fist to knock back the Japanese soldier hell-bent on killing Americans. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” weary American soldiers march with an extra spring in their step, knowing that women are knitting much-needed clothing for them back at home. Never quite as successfully escapist as they professed to be, Soundies were the soundtrack to a nation at war, depicting a carefree youth culture that could not, by virtue of world war, fully exist. Its occasional forays into strained seriousness were reminders that Soundies were, for better or for worse, fantasies of a carefree American life that did not yet exist.

Rock the Jukebox

Snader Telescriptions named after their director, George Snader, were filmed musical performances sold in blocks to television stations to fill gaps in their programming. Making their biggest splash between 1950 and 1954, by which time television had grown entrenched enough to schedule a full day of programming, eliminating the need for filler material, the Snaders (shot on 35mm
film with live audio) were for the most part visually unremarkable live performances constricted to a single set. Adding to the blandness, multiple Snaders were usually shot at the same time, only distinguished, at best, by a change of costume. Snaders did feature a wide variety of white, African-American, and Latin artists, violating the unwritten rules that stipulated strict separation of the races onscreen. Artists like Nat King Cole, the Ink Spots, Peggy Lee, and Bob Willis all made Snaders, as did more offbeat acts like Herb Jeffries (a Latin crooner with a bird perched on his shoulder, singing from the heart of a tropical forest) and the Bob Mitchell Choirboys (a group of ten-year-olds in Huck Finn straw hats performing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm”). The Snaders were notable for their lack of T&A: in comparison with Soundies, they are remarkably prim, and remarkably staid.

Most Scopitones, by contrast, seemed to take place at parties, where well-scrubbed boys and fresh-faced girls gathered and frolicked. These videos were primarily concerned with the nature of young people at play—dancing, making music, making out, and, above all, enjoying their vigorous bodies. The videos themselves enjoyed the vigorous bodies, too, marking an unabashed return to the sensual abandon and lustful eye of the Soundies. Nonetheless, there was a certain awkwardness to some of the videos produced, as if they had not quite figured out the nature of the endeavor just yet.

Scopitones were the invention of a French division of Philips, which sought to bring short-form music clips to a youth audience in France via placement in bars, cafés, and restaurants. Unlike the prudish Snaders, Scopitones never intended to be about much else other than beautiful flesh, their awakening to youth culture cohabitating with an awakening to sex as cultural revolution and marketing opportunity. One can sense the influence of the American youth-rebellion films of the 1950s on the French Scopitones (which later made a brief foray into the United States)—their inclination to rebellion, their romance with outlaws, their bodice-bursting sexuality. And yet, the French-produced Scopitones are delightfully charming and weightless, a Gallic variation on Rebel Without a Cause that owe more to Jacques Demy than James Dean. Freddie Bell and Roberta Linn’s “For You” is a Wild West hoedown with girls in Daisy Dukes unabashedly shaking their moneymakers, while Johnny Hallyday’s “Noir C’est Noir” features leotard-clad backup dancers doing ballet pirouettes. Joi Lansing’s “The Web of Love” has Lansing living out the drama of her song’s lyrics in literal fashion—trapped in a giant spider web, roasted under a low flame by hungry cannibals, and mauled by a distinctly human slithering snake—all this while appearing in an array of skimpy, seductive costumes. The delightsfully unhinged scenario for “Mother Nature, Father Time,” from R&B singer Brook Benton, is seemingly at odds with Benton’s lovelorn ballad. Like a team of Vanna Whites to Benton’s Pat Sajak, a series of women outfitted in skimpy costumes helpfully point out signs illustrating the song’s lyrics. Benton, emoting manfully, performs in a realm entirely disconnected from the campy, perky women, only occasionally deigning to acknowledge, with a wink and a nod for the audience, the surreal silliness of “Mother Nature, Father Time’s” scenario.

Scopitones’ initial success in France prompted a slew of imitators, including the Italian and British Cinebox and the American Colorsonics. Neither of these were particularly successful, and even the original Scopitones were out of business by 1967. In the U.S., Scopitones were allegedly a Mafia-run business, an intentional money loser intended to tighten the mob’s grip on nightclubs, restaurants, and other urban establishments.

The Scopitone shorts echoed a similar, prior flowering of youth culture across the ocean in the United States. Early-1950s films like The Wild One (1953), with Marlon Brando, and Rebel Without a Cause (1955), with James Dean, had established the nature of the burgeoning teenage rebelliousness, rock and roll films before rock and roll. Youth-culture films like Blackboard Jungle (1955), The Girl Can’t Help It (1956), and Jailhouse Rock (1957) marked rock and roll’s newly central place at the nexus of youthful energy, musical innovation, and anti-authoritarian impulse. These movies celebrated rock and roll as something vigorous, dangerous, and quintessentially now. Blackboard Jungle, the first film to feature rock and roll on its soundtrack, only had a rock song (Bill Haley & the Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock”) over its credits, but The Girl Can’t Help It (featuring a raucous Little Richard) and Jailhouse Rock integrated performance into the body of the films themselves. Elvis Presley’s performance of the title song in Jailhouse Rock looks now, to our eyes, like a proto-video, with Presley and his pals dancing on a jail set—swinging on cell doors, dancing on mess-hall tables, and playing on swings. The film codes the performance as part of the narrative itself (in which Presley plays an up-and-coming singer), but the inventiveness and energy of “Jailhouse Rock” overwhelm its ostensible intentions, becoming the most electric aspect of this otherwise staid film.

I’m Looking Through You

As with so many other things, the Beatles were innovators in the music video. Intended as a quick cash-in on their overnight success, the Beatles’ first film, A Hard Day’s Night (1964), directed by Richard Lester, was an accidental comic classic and a key precursor to the music video. Beatles songs provide a wall-to-wall sonic carpet for the film, and Lester artfully moves the music from background to foreground and back again. Lester turns the musical numbers into discrete short films, less about the stately strumming of guitars than dazzling, unhinged expressions of
male camaraderie, clever hijinks, and Marxian physical humor. “Can’t Buy Me Love” is the most brilliant of all, a series of crane shots swooping over the four Beatles running, jumping, and leaping through a field. The Beatles’ performances in A Hard Day’s Night, even the ones that are studio-bound, are remarkably loose—in part because of Lester’s roving, impetuous camera work, and in part because he sets the Beatles’ cheeky personalities free. “Can’t Buy Me Love” and the rest of the songs from A Hard Day’s Night take a substantial step forward in the formation of the music video by virtue of their anarchic illogic. Feeling no need to justify themselves, Lester’s proto-videos run amok in the fields of the silly, the surreal, and the comic. Needless to say, these qualities, in many ways, made Lester the godfather of the music video.

Burned out by the endless touring and television commitments that were a requisite of mid-60s rock stardom, the Beatles sought to promote their latest singles without facing screaming teenagers, inane interviewers, and insipid countdown shows, and hit on the idea of shooting promotional films and sending them out to television in their stead. Compared to Lester’s work in A Hard Day’s Night and Help! (1965), these clips lack visual panache; however, when placed side by side with the uninspired video work of their late-60s peers, videos like “Penny Lane” and “Strawberry Fields Forever” manage to capture some of the group’s chaotic cheeriness, taste for comic non sequitur, and, above all, their understanding that videos, like any other outgrowth of popular culture, sell themselves on the basis of strong, clearly defined personas.

Working with director Michael Lindsay-Hogg (who would later direct an intriguing pair of videos for the Beatles’ rivals the Rolling Stones), the four Beatles gathered in a West London sculpture garden in May 1966 and shot clips for their two latest singles. “Paperback Writer” and “Rain” (the two videos are essentially halves of the same whole) seek to capture something of the Beatles’ flair for zany humor side by side their newfound gravitas as rock statesmen. “Paperback Writer” emphasizes the caught-on-the-fly quality of its footage, with clappers and other technical equipment intruding into the frame. There are also self-consciously arty touches, like the close-ups of each Beatles’ sunglasses, but “Paperback Writer” and “Rain” are among the first true music videos because of their underlying logic, one that would serve as the unspoken underpinning of music videos to come: each shot of the videos was an independent contractor, providing its own dose of cool, rather than playing a part of a larger whole. By later standards, “Paperback Writer” and “Rain” are very slow, with long, sustained shots of the Beatles lost in thought; nonetheless, they established the groundwork for what was to come.

Among later Beatles videos, both “Penny Lane” (1967) and “Strawberry Fields Forever” (1967) assemble an array of clever ideas, but they leave their designs unbuilt, the final products little more than a tangled heap of good intentions. In the former, Lennon, walking down the street as a Penny Lane bus cruises by, runs into his bandmates and the quartet leap onto awaiting white horses. They ride through the streets and into the forest, where they sit down to a meal, waited on by eighteenth-century noblemen. The bewigged gentlemen bring the band their instruments, and they play their song in the great outdoors. “Penny Lane” is speckled with clever touches, from the unexplained presence of the noble waiters to Paul McCartney’s odd, threadbare-royalty coat, but the pieces never quite fuse into a full picture.

The same part-versus-whole dichotomy plagues “Strawberry Fields Forever.” Taking place in the same woods from “Penny Lane,” “Strawberry Fields” arranges the band around a peculiar musical instrument seemingly growing out of an aged oak tree. This odd instrument, whose strings extend like a spider’s web from its casing into the lowest branches of the tree, becomes the centerpiece of “Strawberry Fields’” surreal vision, in which John Lennon leaps into the tree to tighten the strings and the band drible paint along its trunk-body. Nature and technology fuse together in the video, forming an unclassifiable new hybrid, but the overarching significance of such an improvement on God’s design is left unstated, swallowed up by “Strawberry Fields’” tendencies toward enthusiastic meaninglessness. The Beatles’ videos laid the table for future music-video experiments in symbolism, but their own symbols were, for the most part, muddled and unclear.

The influence of A Hard Day’s Night spread beyond the Beatles and into the work of their imitators. Turn on any episode of the Beatles-biting rock and roll sitcom The Monkees, which ran on American television from 1966 to 1968, and, almost inevitably, there would be a montage set to one of their songs, in which the band horsed around on the beach, rode dune buggies, or battled baddies. These interludes are music videos of a sort, rarely advancing the plot in any significant way. Instead, they channeled the spirit of the Beatles and Lester to invest their prefab, television-created band with some of the effortless hip and charm of their legendary older brothers. In taking Lester and the Beatles’ innovations from A Hard Day’s Night and bringing them to a mass television audience, The Monkees (and the band’s drug-addled 1968 film Head, directed by Bob Rafelson) laid the foundation for the future intersection of television and music video. In fact, one of the original Monkees, Michael Nesmith, would become a music-video pioneer in his own right.

The Beatles were far from the only major act of the 1960s to shoot promotional videos. Between 1968 and 1970, the musical promotional film came into being in a form similar to the contemporary music video, with the Doors, the Animals, the Byrds, and others making mostly utilitarian clips that chose not to
engage, as the Beatles had, with the artistic potentialities of the form. Seeing the videos as filmed stand-ins intended for use on countdown shows, the bands (and more often, their labels) made videos that themselves literalized their function, being little more than taped performances. Often, these clips were taken from performances on American television shows and were meant to be played on countdown and rock-and-roll shows around the world. There being little outlet for them in the U.S., these proto-videos were almost never seen stateside. Other videos were shot by record labels for promotional reels intended to be broadcast in record stores, marketing meetings, or at music conferences. A third brand of music video was put together by European television networks for broadcast on countdown programs, occasionally making their way back to the U.S. These often involved uniting the music with completely unrelated footage, in the interest of limited time and limited funds. Some hesitant attempts at breaking out of the live-performance box were quite enjoyable; the Exciters’ “Tell Him” (1962) has the R&B group singing to the animals at the local zoo, serenading the polar bears, swans, and gorillas, and the wildlife seem to enjoy it—the video ends with a bear standing up and applauding the show.

Pink Floyd chose to imitate the absurdist, anarchic humor of A Hard Day’s Night, while appearing slightly more unhinged and less telegenically good-natured than the Beatles. In “Arnold Layne” (1967), the band lugs a manequin up a hill, watching in dismay as its body steadily falls apart over the course of the journey. Its head pops off, but the mannequin nonetheless manages to tip its cap to the audience. Apparently enjoying animate, near-human objects, Pink Floyd pats around with a scarecrow in “The Scarecrow” (1967), treating it as their newfound mascot on a meandering tour of the English countryside. “See Emily Play” (1968) also finds the band out of doors, horsing around in a public park, playing imaginary drums, and batting an imaginary cricket ball. It was oddly endearing, albeit bizarre, to see so reclusive a band do their best to make like the Beatles. As the announcer at the beginning of “The Scarecrow” said, “Pink Floyd … have taken their improbable psychedelic colors into the open air.”

The Who and the Kinks made the Lester-esque collapse of genre the primary subtext of their forays into the music video, borrowing heavily from the loose charm of A Hard Day’s Night, with both the former’s “Happy Jack” (1966) and the latter’s “Dead End Street” (1966) beginning as one thing and ending up something entirely different. “Happy Jack” opens as a tense heist film, with the Who a team of safecrackers racing the clock to pull off a dazzling theft. In the middle of the action, with the outcome hanging in the balance, lead singer Roger Daltrey is distracted by a cream pie on a side table and the band winds up rubbing pie in each other’s faces, hair, and clothes. Caught unawares by a police officer on the beat, they pie the cop and dash off into the night. “Dead End Street” stars the Kinks as top-hatted pallbearers lugging a coffin through the streets of London. Pausing momentarily to rest their weary arms, the band are shocked to see the coffin’s lid pop off and the supposed corpse dash off down the street. For the remainder of “Dead End Street,” the band chases after their former burden as he flees into the urban maze. For both the Who and the Kinks, the music video was an opportunity to illustrate how well they had studied the lessons of A Hard Day’s Night.

Underground

Also initially appearing as part of a feature film, similarly using the services of a top-flight director, Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (1967) (directed by D.A. Pennebaker) was the first music video to build on, rather than imitate, Lester and the Beatles’ triumphs. Appearing in the midst of Pennebaker’s Dylan documentary Don’t Look Back, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is a bracing dose of fresh air, made up of equal parts avant-garde New York filmmaking and trademark Dylan detachment, as he literally and figuratively tosses away the words to his song. (Beginning a trend that would bear much fruit in later years, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” also inaugurates the celebrity cameo, with Beat poet Allen Ginsberg lurking at the video’s edges for no discernible purpose.)

Dylan stands in a New York City alley, holding a large stack of oversized flashcards on which the song’s lyrics are written. In time with his singing, Dylan pulls the relevant card off the pile, holding it up to the camera before throwing it to the ground. The video’s drama revolves around the way Dylan rides the song’s beat, running ahead and falling behind in his dispersal of the cards. Dylan coyly looks away from the camera, only occasionally meeting its glance. Insouciantly beyond caring whether this miniature drama is of any interest to viewers, Dylan automatically renders it fascinating by way of his devil-may-care attitude. Black-and-white and grainy, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” looks and feels like an emanation from the world of underground film, worlds away from Dylan’s contemporaries’ overpolished performance clips.

If Lester’s Beatles videos would come to define the highest early realization of music video’s capacity to charm and salesmanship, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is its avant-garde counterpart, unabashedly intellectual and cool, where “A Hard Day’s Night” was physical and warm. Dylan and the Beatles’ early video work established the twin poles from which later music videos stemmed, but each also contained traces of its opposite. Never a pure medium to begin with, the music video, in years to come, would oscillate between the example set by its
two most immediate forebears, but would also grow to realize that it was all part of the same game of salesmanship. Frosty or inviting, Ph.D or GED, the music video's ultimate purpose was to advertise and in advertising, no approach was superior to another, unless it was a more successful seller.

**Sons of the Silent Age**

The music video henceforth grew in two very different fields, with the interests of two diverse groups dovetailing in the eventual format of MTV and its siblings. Major corporations, having invested in the burgeoning cable-television industry, found themselves starved, above all, for content. In a rapidly growing television universe, niche programming was the order of the day, and where niches did not yet exist, they had to be created. Music, still an overwhelmingly non-television-friendly medium, had to be shoehorned into cable TV, and promotional music videos were the safest bet. It was television, and not the music industry, that made the initial push for a music-video channel; the labels, cautiously conservative to the point of financial blindness, refused to believe that the music video could be anything other than a money loser and a passing fad. The music industry were followers, not leaders, in music video, and skeptical followers at that. Hesitant to commit serious money to a medium they believed was of dubious commercial or aesthetic value, and which they were required to provide free of charge, the record labels adopted a wait-and-see attitude to the music video, refusing to invest heavily at the outset. It was the cable-television owners, they of the gaping holes in their station lineups, who believed most strongly in music videos as a potential windfall in attracting young, upwardly mobile viewers.

Besides the corporate investors (who included Warner Brothers and American Express, the initial investors in MTV), the other group of dreamers who believed in the music video were the artists themselves. Musical groups of the mid-to-late-1970s, emboldened by the success of the previous decade's acts in crafting short films as promotional tools, and means of artistic expression, sought to harness music and film together even more closely. In addition to its functional use as a second-unit band, making the rounds of the countdown shows, the promotional video also served as yet another canvas for performers to paint on. Musicians had never been limited to music alone as a means of expression; album covers, photo sessions, live shows, costumes, and even interviews had been opportunities for performers to design a look, or shape an aura, for themselves. Standing at the nexus of film, television, and advertising, the music video was, at times, each one, and as combination album cover, photo shoot, and promotional appearance, also something fundamentally new: a form of visual art equally dedicated to the huckster's come-on and the artist's sincere appeal.

Not quite commodities themselves, music videos were short films in the service of other commodities, made not to be sold themselves (for the most part), but to sell other products: albums, T-shirts, posters, and the like. The music video, therefore, was merely the latest in a long line of recording industry promotional techniques, all designed to increase the labels' bottom line. For the musical acts themselves, however, the video was about more than money. While there had been many precedents as promotional tools, there had been few in the realm of artistic enterprise; for performers like Dylan and the Beatles, the music video had been not merely a fill-in for the latest *Top of the Pops*, but an exciting, challenging, wholly new art form to tackle.

Taking off from the advances of "Subterranean Homesick Blues," some later videos borrowed the Dylan clip's charming sense of humor, while others adopted its avant-garde detachment. Captain Beefheart's "Lick My Decals Off, Baby" (1970) took the tone of a late-night television commercial, its offscreen announcer's orotund pronouncements providing a sonic overlay for the barrage of eccentric images onscreen—disembodied hands, masked terrorist types silently playing their instruments, a foot nudging white goos onto an empty stretch of macadam. "New on Reprise, it's 'Lick My Decals Off, Baby'"—the very title of the song belying the strained seriousness of the announcer's efforts at shilling. Masked Bay Area oddballs the Residents also viewed the short film set to music as an opportunity to engage with their inner freak. "Land of 1000 Dances" (1975) is a deranged amusement-park ride through their brains, crammed full of deviant imagery. Giant lasers careen around a polka-dotted floor, KKK aliens in papier-mâché masks bang drums and dance like stereotypical African savages, and a woman and a skeleton dressed all in black dance on a stage dominated by a giant swastika. The band's "One Minute Movies" (1980), codirected by the group and Graeme Whiflet, are similarly absurdist, a set of four conjoined sixty-second shorts: "The Act of Being Polite," "Perfect Love," "Moisture," and "Simple Song." In "The Act of Being Polite," tuxedoed eyeball-men and women cuddle in bed and a heart is smashed by a metal pole; in "Perfect Love," a zhubby guy lies on his bed watching the Residents on a television with staticky, jumpy reception; and in "Simple Song," the Residents dance around with a pig's head. The "One Minute Movies" are casually, deliberately avant-garde in much the same way "Subterranean Homesick Blues" had been, choosing not to make a big fuss about its aliens, eyeballs, or masked dancers, or about its complete and utter strangeness.

In between the two Residents videos, a growing number of late-70s punk and New Wave performers, along with non-American acts already accustomed
to the idea of making videos, got into the game. Barnes and Barnes’ “Fish Heads” (1980) is every bit as unhinged as “Land of 1000 Dances,” its protagonist unnaturally attached to his pet fish heads—taking them to the movies (where the fish wears a miniature green fedora), planting them in his front yard, bringing them to the beach. Commander Cody’s “Two Triple Cheese, Side Order of Fries” (1979) takes place in a fast-food phantasmagoria, its hamburgers a lurid shade of purplish pink and all manner of culinary perversions taking place in the establishment’s back rooms. Commander Cody’s left-field anthem leads the oppressed burger-flippers of the world to rocking out, and its dancing French fries evinced an interest in anthropomorphism it shared with the near-schizophrenic enthusiasm of “Fish Heads.”

Devo were the Residents’ best of them, their videos a riotous jumble of found footage, masked freaks, and sci-fi mash-ups. The band, whose videos were directed by bassist Gerald Casale, and assisted by Chuck Statler (who would later work with Elvis Costello, Madness, and Nick Lowe), were the first to release a long-form video album and the first to include extramusical sound in their video (in “Whip It”). Taking Luis Buñuel, Russ Meyer, and Stanley Kubrick as their inspiration, clips like “Satisfaction” (1978), “A Worried Man” (1979), and “Beautiful World” (1981) star the band as blue-collar workers adrift in a nightmare world of sexual frustration, geopolitical insanity, and topsy-turvy cultural dislocation. Devo were the house band for the end of the world, reveling in the chaos and fragmentation of a planet adrift. “Beautiful World” gradually spins out of control, its nostalgic 1950s futurism steadily poisoned by images of death and destruction: World War I trench fighters, bridge collapses, Ku Klux Klan rallies, Southern police beating civil-rights demonstrators. “It’s a beautiful world for you—not me,” the song determined, and the video ended with the ultimate punch line to the cruel joke of the civilized world’s ceaseless brutality—a nuclear explosion’s slowly spreading mushroom cloud. “A Worried Man” appears to take place in the same five-minutes-to-midnight world, with the band as radioactive-waste workers whose bodies take on an unnatural nuclear glow. It was not merely the geopolitics that had gone off the rails; life at home was no more comforting. Adults chase off adolescent lovers, birds with rolling pins in “Satisfaction,” consumerist ambitions turn yuppies into mindless uniformed drones in “Freedom of Choice” (1980), and in “Love Without Anger” (1981), married dolls have a knock-down, drag-out fight that culminate in a headless Barbie and legless Ken. Devo were the masked court jesters of the nascent punk-rock movement, their videos jocular affirmations of the Sex Pistols’ motto—“No Future.” Casale’s videos are capable of turning their satiric guns on the band’s relative obscurity as well; the purple-tint “Girl Want” (1980) celebrates a wholly imaginary Devo-mania, with hordes of screaming teenage girls freaking out at the band’s every move. “Whip It” (1980) is the band’s best video of all, a delirious homage to the movie Western and sadomasochism, and a testimonial to their skills with a lash.

Elvis Costello’s “Accidents Will Happen” (1978) is low-rent Pop Art, dropping the singer into a series of line drawings sketched on graph paper fleshing out the theme of accidents: lurking banana peels, crushed sunglasses, spilled ketchup, and the like. Directors Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton (who would later make the superb videos for Miles Davis' “Decoy” and Tom Tom Club’s “Genius of Love”) divide the screen into boxes, each possessed of its own funky energy; delicately sculpted ink lines in motion indicated the sweat flying off the singing Costello and out of the boxes, liberated to the frame at large. Blondie’s videos were never as high-concept or artsy, concentrating mostly on keeping sexpot lead singer Debbie Harry front and center. Along with Devo and the Residents, though, Blondie were one of the first American groups to fully embrace the art of the music video, even before MTV came along and made it worth their while to do so. Blondie’s late-70s videos were low-budget goofs, a series of raging parties punctuated by Harry’s posing and flouncing. Mostly directed by David Mallet and Keef, Blondie’s videos were the flipside to Suicide’s sour, menacing “Frankie Teardrop” (1978); for them, life in “Ford to New York: Drop Dead” Manhattan was one onestop bash.

Five Minutes to MTV

British stadium rockers Queen made what would become one of the most famous clips of the 70s, and the video often incorrectly referred to as the first music video, for “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1975), directed by Bruce Gowers. The misconception was understandable, for “Bohemian Rhapsody” was one of the first promotional clips to truly look like a music video. This was partially a product of attitude, but it was also a reflection of its aesthetic choices. Neither an imitation performance clip, meant to fool audiences into thinking they were watching a live performance, nor a self-consciously artsy project, “Bohemian Rhapsody” (its mise-en-scène inspired by the cover of the band’s Queen II album) is simultaneously glorious and silly in a manner that would soon grow very familiar. “Bohemian Rhapsody” was also one of the very first examples of a music video playing a major part in the promotion of a pop single.

Gowers’ video begins with Queen silhouetted against a gray-sky background, each member of the quartet filmed from a low angle as the lights come up and they sing in unison. There is something unquestionably silly about these images, some combination of poofy rock-star hair and unbridled theatrics that add up to hilarity, but the showmanship of lead singer Freddie Mercury rescues
the video from any accidental resemblance to a Monty Python skit. “Bohemian Rhapsody” favors the lap dissolve as its means of transport, appropriate for a song that bounces restlessly from one musical style to another over the course of its six-plus minutes. The video serves to explain the song, rendering its convoluted aural density intelligible for the television audience. Turning each voice into a physical presence, the video establishes “Bohemian Rhapsody” as a dueling song for voices. The band’s four members appear onscreen for the more vocally intricate sections, then multiply to infinity as the production grows yet denser. Voices appear and disappear onscreen in an extended dramatization of the song’s call-and-response, eventually overlapping into one unified whole. At the heart of the video is the relatively straightforward footage of the band in concert, with Mercury prowling the stage like a caged tiger, rubbing the mike stand between the legs of his silver lamé jumpsuit. The infinity of faces from the song’s interlude wash away, replaced by the simple, powerful footage of the live band. “Bohemian Rhapsody” teaches its viewers how to hear the song, sifting out each element of its complex mix and making the entire process of its assembly a visually stimulating event.

Later Queen videos built off the innovations of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” with “Bicycle Race” (1978) employing tints and multiplying effects familiar from the earlier video, mixing concert footage with cheesy insert shots. “I Want to Break Free” (1984) turned the band into a crew of desperate housewives, straining at the bars of their tastefully appointed shared home. All four members of the band dressed in drag for the video, but it was clear that only Mercury truly loved the opportunity to play dress-up, and his hirsute drag queen in a leather miniskirt, simultaneously thrusting her vacuum across the carpet and winking at the camera, is the comic highlight of the video.

As always, Queen were masters of the widescreen emotion, and their kitchen-sink drama of mundane middle-class drudgery fireballs into a mass demonstration, with a quasi-mythical nude warrior blowing a clarion call on his trumpet and thousands of flashing lights heeding Mercury’s impassioned cry in concert. “Radio Ga Ga” (1984) begins large, using then-cutting-edge technology to insert the band into the backdrops of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (a music-video touchstone; see Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” chapter 4). The glowing, otherworldly radios in most every scene of the video were symbols of both totalitarian dystopia and the slumbering potential for rebellion, with the trudging workers below summoned by the sound of Queen’s anthem (itself a complaint about the sad state of contemporary rock radio). Eventually, the band’s white-clad fans thrust their fists into the air in unison, their spirits raised by yet another Queen call to arms. In Queen’s videos, the band always managed to triumph over grubby, unpleasant reality.

AC/DC, even more so than Queen, dedicated their videos to celebrating the joys of raucous, unhinged, anarchic performance. In videos like “ Jailbreak” (1976), “Highway to Hell” (1979), and “You Shook Me All Night Long” (1980), the Australian hard-rockers were lascivious rebels loosed on their guitars, attacking authority with the same panache and brute force with which they attacked their instruments. “Jailbreak” and “You Shook Me All Night Long” took the impetus to include mini-narratives within their frames, opening the door a bit wider toward the full flowering of the music video as independent art form.

Taking things one critical step further, David Bowie realized that video could become an opportunity for rock stars to put on (and remove) a dizzying variety of masks. Musicians had formerly turned to acting in feature films to express the multiplicity of beings trapped inside them, struggling to emerge, but now that same role-playing could be a vital aspect of the musicmaking process itself. The Beatles had gotten the game started, but they had stopped halfway, playing cartoonish versions of themselves in their videos, for the most part. Refusing to be so easily essentialized, Bowie took on a profusion of roles, leaving even his most ardent fans a bit confused as to who, precisely, he might be. Video became an indispensable aspect of Bowie’s profusion of quicksilver changes, documenting and preserving each incarnation for a potential galaxy of television viewers unable to catch his elaborate, theatrical live performances.

An ambiguous regard for gender and sexuality lies at the heart of these 70s Bowie videos, with multiple clips emphasizing the homoerotic intensity of his persona. The tint-heavy “Jean Genie” (1972), directed by Mick Rock, had Bowie shirtless, in a gold dog collar, while “Life on Mars?” (1973) emphasizes his androgynous, entrancing charm with close-ups of his mascara-painted eyes. “Be My Wife” (1977), directed by Stanley Dorfman, presents a “natural,” unencumbered Bowie, his guitar swung around behind his back when not being played, as if to appear before us entirely naked. Bowie toys with the camera—meeting our gaze and then mock-coply turning away from it. “Heroes” (1977) changes the script slightly, with Bowie in profile gazing piercingly, swooningly, at some offscreen presence, making the dangerous passion of the song’s lyrics, with lovers embracing at the Berlin Wall, into the unstated drama of the video.

The gay undertones of these videos never came right out and announced themselves, but they were to be seen everywhere, from the prominent use of makeup to the flamboyantly androgynous clothing to the hints dropped by Bowie’s sexually ambiguous lyrics. “Boys Keep Swinging” (1979), directed by David Mallet, brings the subtext substantially closer to the surface. The video takes place at a transvestite’s fashion show, where flashing fluorescent lights illuminate cross-dressers taking off their wigs and wiping off their lipstick, and a trio of trannies (including one church-lady type) serve as Bowie’s backup
singers. At least some of the women appeared to be played by Bowie himself, only adding to the video’s gender-bending confusion.

In “D.J.” (1979), directed by David Mallet, Bowie messes around with the turntables and head phones in his psychedelically washed-out study, then hits the streets, where he saunters with some newfound friends, makes out with a male well-wisher, and does a quick two-step with a middle-aged female passerby before returning to his lair and letting loose some destruction on a wayward mirror and amplifier. Throughout, Bowie makes love to the camera with unrelenting zeal—embracing its gaze and demanding its undivided attention.

“Ashes to Ashes” (1980), the most distinctive clip of Bowie’s career, casts him as a medieval jester drifting helplessly between the past and the present, lost somewhere between the earth and his home. Shot in bleached reds and pinks, like a damaged photo negative, this clip, codirected by Bowie and Mallet, is structured around surprising juxtapositions of character and mise-en-scene: the jester, along with his queen and noblemen, walks along an empty beach, while a bulldozer rumbles behind them; a space traveler in a suburban kitchen; a medieval nobleman and prom queen providing backup vocals to Bowie, dressed in heroic fashion, with flowing hair and white robes. “Ashes to Ashes” has a lonesome Bowie trapped between personas like a time traveler trapped between stars. Looking out of place wherever he was, his forlorn mien and heavy, ashly makeup tell us that having played so many parts, he found that the tragic clown, doomed to endless, joyless performance, might be the one closest to his heart.

The Residents, and later Devo, had made the music video a storage unit for glorious non sequiturs, taking Bowie’s advice not to neglect the visual aspect of rock stardom. With music videos emerging at the same moment that video art was making its first forays into museums and galleries, the boundary between the two subgenres grew blurred. Groups like Suicide, existing at the fringes of the New York music scene that would spawn punk rock and New Wave, made videos that themselves could have been on display at the Museum of Modern Art alongside Nam June Paik and Jonas Mekas films. Their “Frankie Teardrop,” shot on Super 8 in the streets of New York City, directed by Paul Doughtery and Walter Robinson, and running more than ten minutes, was willfully obscure in intention, choosing aura over narrative. It also owed a clear debt to the avant-garde films that were its near-contemporaries, looking more like Hollis Frampton or Michael Snow than “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Water imagery abounded in “Frankie Teardrop,” but far from being soothing, its surfaces seemed to augur impending violent death, conjoined as they were with shots of James Dean, Nixon masks, yellow and red lights splattering across the frame, and pulsing waves of static. Images of dolls and babies swarmed the screen, but the ceaselessly throbbing water coursed over them as well, erasing their faces in the process. The song itself was a fractured urban nightmare about the deranged Frankie, who is “gonna kill his wife and kids.”

The video functions as a series of abstract images intended as a gloss on the lyrics’ explicit narrative. Each image adds another piece to the puzzle, from statues of saints to caged rats to figurines depicting the crucified Christ. The water, simultaneously veiling and revealing all, is the liquid in which the video’s angst and unfettered trauma swims, a slowly building tidal wave soon to break over land. If the imagery itself only hints at the nature of the violence soon to occur, it was unisstinating in its implications for us, its spectators: “We’re all Frankie,” the song told us, and the video ends with shots of industrial New York, followed by hundreds of Manhattan pedestrians streaming along a midtown sidewalk. There was a dark, ugly side to the city; yes, but even worse, there was an unseen brutal side to ourselves, hidden in the false placidity of daily life. “Frankie Teardrop” ends with a freeze-frame on a man’s face, one that had already been seen earlier, and marked as a likely Frankie. In the freeze-frame, the light and dark halves of his face are in perfect balance. Looking a little closer, it becomes clear that we are looking at not one image, but two; two shots of this man’s face superimposed on each other, as if to give us a double look at the same face. The evil lurking inside the city had buried its way inside Frankie, and it would burrow its way inside the rest of us as well, if we were not careful.

Having been in on some of the earliest music-video experiments as a founding member of the Monkees, it was no surprise that Michael Nesmith would take to the form as a solo artist as well. Nesmith had orchestrated the video show *Pepclip* for the Nickelodeon cable channel in 1977 (the latest in a line of music-video shows that included Manhattan cable’s *Nightclubbing*, USA’s *Night Flight*, PBS’ *Soundstage from Chicago* and *Austin City Limits*, *NBC’s The Midnight Special*, the British Kenny Everett Video Show, which was directed by future video auteur David Mallet, and the syndicated *Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert*), and had sought unsuccessfully to begin a full-fledged music-video channel of his own. Nesmith had initially been included in Warner Amex’s plans for their cable channel, but he was rapidly cut out once it became clear that Nesmith’s idiosyncratic aesthetic tastes would never jibe with his corporate masters’ bottom line. His 1977 video *Río* (directed by William Dear) is a riot of competing textures, ranging from garish color to black-and-white to rudimentary special effects. Its Brazil-love crammed dancers in Carmen Miranda headdresses, fruity-looking mixed drinks, and oceanfront love into one overstuffed frame. “Río’s” kooky good humor has Nesmith awkwardly dropping Mike stands, desperately searching for his lost shoe while winging around the dance floor with his lady friend, and flying into
outer space like an absurdist Superman. Along with “Bohemian Rhapsody,”
“Rio” was one of the first harbingers of a commercially accessible, middlebrow
video style, one that looked back to the Beatles, and even Soundies, and for-
ward to twenty-four-hour music video channels to come, as well as video
shows like Night Tracks (TBS), Friday Night Videos (NBC), and Nick Rocks
(Nickelodeon).

It would be MTV, though, that would revolutionize the music industry, cre-
ating a new wave of video-driven superstars and permanently changing the
rules for performers and labels alike. The twenty-four-hour music-video chan-
nel created demand where none had previously existed and, in the process, per-
fectly encapsulated the essence of an era. The desire for endless visual
stimulation that MTV satisfied would be lambasted by the conservative gate-
keepers of culture, but the music video was an emblem of a culture in hyper-

drive, constantly in search of its next fix—for better and for worse.

CHAPTER 2

Television Vaudeville

In the early years of its ascendance, when MTV was the cable channel du jour,
and teenagers and academics alike buzzed about the form's revolutionary
potential, the music video grew at an ever-increasing clip. This growth came
both in the overall output of music videos within pop culture, and in the size
and scope of individual videos. In the early 1980s, the music video had its era of
possibility, going from perennial also-ran to linchpin of the music industry,
surging in cost, production values, star quality, and skillfulness.

During the 80s, performers lived and died on the strength of their videos,
and it is no coincidence that many of the era's biggest stars were also its savviest
videomakers. Madonna, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, U2—these artists
were among the first to grasp the nature of the new medium, harnessing its
power for their own benefit. Those who were unable to do so, for the most part,
were left behind. The rise of the music video was a key turning point in the his-
tory of pop music mythmaking, moving the heretofore secondary quality of
image-making to front-and-center position. This image-centrality was a god-
send for performers like Madonna, who were selling themselves as much as
their music, and a one-way ticket to oblivion for musicians who failed to wrap
their heads around the music video's demands.

When MTV debuted in 1981, its goals were relatively modest. The channel
was intended as a visual equivalent to the album-rock radio stations then
flourishing in almost every American market. Like those radio stations, MTV
was designed to serve an almost exclusively white audience, with its musical
selection determined, and limited, by genre. In its earliest incarnation, MTV
conceived of itself as a national radio network on television, exposing its
audience to singles lurking just below the heavy-rotation playlists of album
rock stations. It is essential to understanding the rise of MTV to realize that