

## Chapter 2

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# "I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO PLUG IN A LIGHT"

MUSIC VIDEOS (ONLY THEY WEREN'T  
CALLED THAT) IN THE 1970s

**T**HE ALLIANCE BETWEEN MUSIC AND PICTURE, WHICH went a long way back, took a different perspective in the '70s. Low-budget video novices were influenced by experimental filmmakers: Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, the Kuchar Brothers, and Bruce Conner, who spliced together existing film footage like a cinema DJ, and was hired by Devo, pre-MTV, to create a video for their song "Mongoloid." The *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis, writing an obituary for Conner in 2008, noted the wide influence of his "shocking juxtapositions and propulsive, rhythmically sophisticated montage," and concluded, "MTV should have paid him royalties." Later on, music videos would reflect the influences of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Shining*, *West Side Story*, film noir, Russ Meyer's breast-laden film farces, and Saturday-morning cartoons. But here at the beginning, they were bold and wild.

**DAVID MALLET, director:** Music video was a medium that was not regarded at all. It was like lavatory paper. In England, they were referred to as "fillers." That was an insult.

**JERRY CASALE, Devo:** Videos were a curiosity at best. The record company thought we were stupid for using promotion money to do low-budget videos. "What's *that* for?"

**DAVID MALLET:** The first time anybody put film to music satisfactorily, in my opinion, was David Lean in *Brief Encounter* [1945]. The second time I noticed it

## Chapter 3

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# “WE WERE JUST IDIOTS IN HOTEL ROOMS”

JOHN LACK, BOB PITTMAN,  
AND THE CREATION OF MTV

**I**F MTV HAD PLACED A HELP-WANTED AD, IT MIGHT HAVE read: “Novice TV station seeks employees. Ideal candidates must love music, be willing to work long hours and drink a lot, and have no prior TV experience.”

It might seem odd that most of the network’s original staff had little or no TV background. If you needed brain surgery, you wouldn’t hire a doctor who just months ago was selling aluminum siding. But MTV wasn’t brain surgery. Many of its most important founders came from radio backgrounds, which freed them from abiding by the existing rules of the TV industry. (On the other hand, it also meant they were bound to the existing rules of the radio industry, which soon proved to be an impediment.)

A successful start-up requires dedication and imagination, but not necessarily expertise. Steve Wozniak, the tech wizard who cofounded Apple Computer with Steve Jobs, has recalled that in the early days of the company, when he didn’t know how to design a floppy disk or a printer interface, he’d make something up, “without knowing how other people do it.” He added, “All the best things that I did at Apple came from (a) not having money and (b) not having done it before, ever.” Similarly, MTV had little money and less experience. If there was a corporate culture, it was based on confidence and pugnaciousness, traits that began at the top of the company’s masthead.

In November 1979, *Billboard* magazine’s first Video Music Conference, a four-day event at the Sheraton-Universal Hotel in LA, brought together most of the nascent industry’s pioneers. Todd Rundgren and Michael Nesmith showed