

WE WANTED OUR MTV

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

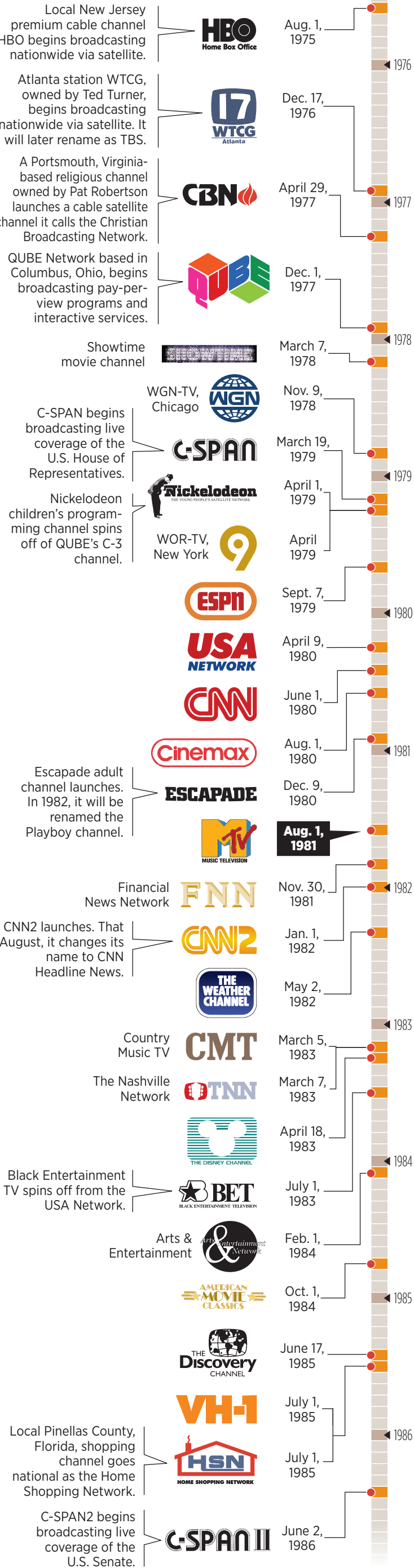
It’s difficult to remember a time before music videos. But before 1980, very few bands chose to promote their music via short video films. And no wonder: *How would they be seen?* YouTube was still a quarter-century away.

That’s what made the launch of MTV on Aug. 1, 1981 — 45 years ago — so radical. There was suddenly a cable TV channel that played music videos nearly 24-7.

Suddenly, every single had to have a video. And every pop music lover had to see it.

THE EARLY DAYS OF CABLE TV

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, cable operators added channels and networks as they became available. Here are some of the most notable ones:



A CABLE CHANNEL SHOWING MUSIC VIDEOS, 24/7

MTV launched just after midnight on Aug. 1, 1981. While a montage of stock NASA footage of Apollo 11 and the launch of the first space shuttle played onscreen, one of the founders of MTV, John Lack, announced: “Ladies and gentlemen: rock and roll.”

The first video shown was “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the Buggles. Next up was Pat Benatar’s “You Better Run” and then “She Won’t Dance With Me” by Rod Stewart.

Playlists were awfully limited at first: When it launched, MTV had only a few hundred videos in its library of tapes. Technical expertise was also in short supply. Viewers often saw dead air while network employees shuffled the videos that were reportedly stored on VHS video-tapes.

In order for MTV to seem more like a friendly rock radio broadcast, five hosts were hired

to serve as DJs — MTV called them VJs. In addition to introducing videos, the VJs offered up music news, conducted brief interviews with rock stars and read through concert lineups. The VJs became huge stars — in some cases, bigger than

the stars they interviewed.

The marketing folks at Viacom struck gold a year later with a promotional campaign in which famous rock stars would look into the camera and proclaim: “I want my MTV!” The campaign went viral in a big way, before anyone used that term. Before long, huge names like David Bowie and Mick Jagger were participating.

The campaign became such a trope that Sting sang “I want my MTV” during the fade of the 1985 Dire Straits single “Money for Nothing.” Which, completing a circle of zen, found plenty of airtime on MTV.



The original five MTV VJs: Front row, left to right: Nina Blackwood, Alan Hunter, Martha Quinn and J.J. Jackson. Rear: Mark Goodman.



The first video played on MTV on Aug. 1, 1981: “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the Buggles.

MTV EVOLVES INTO REALITY TELEVISION

A number of musicians began making elaborate videos in order to gain more plays in the high-visibility venue that was MTV. Madonna, Peter Gabriel, ZZ Top and Duran Duran built up their 1980s fan bases with exposure on MTV.

An early criticism of the network was a lack of diversity: The thinking, at the time, was that by chasing young, white viewers, MTV could bring in major TV advertising revenue. And they were right, to an extent. But there was plenty of revenue to be made from chasing viewers of other races as well.

The breakthrough came in 1983, when the network chiefs at MTV took a chance on a truly terrific music video by Michael Jackson for his new single, “Billie Jean.” The song was a huge hit, leading MTV to add more videos from other Black artists such as Prince, Donna Summer, Eddie Grant, Rick James, Billy Ocean and Lionel Richie. Jackson’s next video, released later that year — “Thriller” — was a huge hit on MTV.

In the world of television, success breeds copycat success. MTV would launch VH-1, an “adult contemporary” format channel in 1985 — the first of several sister channels for the network.

In an effort to try things in addition to music videos and news, MTV launched, in May 1992, a unique series in which eight young adults — total strangers, carefully selected to mimic the channel’s target audience — were forced to find a way to live together in a New

York City apartment while cameras filmed them around the clock. “The Real World” would be the first successful “reality TV show,” running for 614 episodes through 33 incarnations over the next 25 years.

And it would pretty much slam the door on the 24/7 music video concept. Before long, MTV would be full of “reality” shows. And not long after that, music lovers could find and view any music video they wanted via YouTube.

But for a while there, everybody who loved popular music wanted their MTV.



Madonna’s 1985 MTV ad

MTV’S SISTER CHANNELS

VH-1	M2	VH-1 SMOOTH	MTV S	VH-1 UNO	PALLADIA
LAUNCHED: JAN. 1, 1985	LAUNCHED: AUG. 1, 1996	LAUNCHED: AUG. 1, 1998	LAUNCHED: AUG. 1, 1998	LAUNCHED: AUG. 1, 1998	PURCHASED: JAN. 16, 2006
THEN: Adult contemporary music	THEN: Commercial-free pay channel for pop music videos	THEN: Smooth jazz	THEN: Spanish language	THEN: Aimed at Latino viewers	THEN: Live concerts and music programming
NOW: Mostly “reality” shows	NOW: MTV 2 Aimed at young adult men	NOW: MTV CLASSIC Oldies videos	NOW: MTV TR3S Spanish language	NOW: MTVU Aimed at College viewers	NOW: MTV LIVE Videos, concerts