

The Most Influential Videos of All Time

By David Dale
December 18, 2004

Bob Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.



Related

- [Pop goes the video](#)
- <http://www.videocure.com/>
- http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/weekly_article/stylus-magazines-top-100-music-videos-of-all-time.htm
- http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/36588/Staff_List_100_Awesome_Music_Videos
- <http://www.rockonthenet.com/archive/1999/mtv100.htm>
- <http://www.fabricoffolly.com/2006/10/top-10-best-music-videos-ever-possibly.html>

Take this list as the start...add to it.

1 Subterranean Homesick Blues, Bob Dylan 1965. Dylan stood in an alley, with poet Alan Ginsberg in the background, and displayed cards of the lyrics. "It was not performed - that was what was remarkable about it," says Narelle Gee, programmer for the ABC's rage. "This is still one of the most picked videos by our guest programmers. The Strokes think it's the coolest thing ever."

2 Dancing Queen, Abba, 1975. Abba pioneered the "promo clip" as an alternative to touring, and this is their most parodied. It's ostensibly a performance in a Stockholm dance club, designed by Lasse Hallstrom to show The Blonde and The Brunette at their sexiest.

3 Bohemian Rhapsody, Queen, 1976. As melodramatic as the music, the clip uses mood lighting, smoke and mirrors to deify the band. Science Daily's online encyclopedia says the clip defined "the complete visual grammar" for future studio performance videos.

4 A Long Way To The Top, AC/DC, 1977. (Driving round Melbourne on the back of a truck with a bunch of bagpipers proved a band doesn't need a studio to create visual impact.

5 Ashes to Ashes, David Bowie, 1980. The psychedelically-coloured clowns, ballerinas and lunatics established the imagery for a generation of "new romantic" clips.

6 Video Killed The Radio Star, The Buggles, 1981. Set in a tinselly sci-fi future, with the band as mad scientists, this fantasy launched MTV in America and identified the moment when "Pictures came and broke your heart".

7 Girls on Film, Duran Duran, 1981. Banned by the BBC, this clip used female nudity, now a standard device, to launch a band whose career derived from their mastery of the video. Duran Duran's founder, John Taylor, says now: "I think it was a basically a cheap, blatantly exploitative device on behalf of our managers just to get us some publicity I remember being a bit embarrassed. You put a bunch of guys in a room with a naked girl and it turns them into idiots. It wasn't a great experience for any of us."

8 Once in a Lifetime, Talking Heads, 1981. David Byrne as a twitchy preacher showed how singers could portray comic characters instead of pretending to perform.

9 Talking to a Stranger, Hunters and Collectors, 1982. Richard Lowenstein's gritty portrait of the Australian outback led Michael Hutchence to hire him for INXS's videos.

10 Every Breath You Take, The Police, 1983. This sumptuous study in black and white, with Sting on double bass, won Best Cinematography at the inaugural MTV awards.

11 Thriller, Michael Jackson, 1983. John Landis's 15 minute mini-movie about mutating monsters raised the stakes for ambitious directors, but didn't take itself too seriously: "No one dead (or undead) was harmed in the making of this."

12 The Power and the Passion, Midnight Oil, 1983. Proving that politics and pop can mix, Peter Garrett did his spastic dancing in front of flashing commercial images and the sign "I love a plundered country, a land of corporate gains".

13 Money For Nothing, Dire Straits, 1985. This computer animation launched MTV Europe and satirised working class male attitudes to pop stars: "That ain't workin', that's the way you do it, You play the guitar on the MTV".

14 A-Ha: Take on Me, 1985. This partly animated, partly filmed tale of a girl dragged into a comic strip showed the multimedia possibilities of the form.

15 Sledge Hammer, Peter Gabriel, 1986. This early claymation work by the Aardman team, later of *Wallace and Grommet* and *Chicken Run* fame, won nine MTV awards.

16 Addicted To Love, Robert Palmer, 1986. Since the bands are only pretending to play their instruments, why not have aloof models pretend to play instead, and make a black and red fashion statement?

17 Walk This Way, Run-DMC and Aerosmith, 1986. In adjoining rooms, white rockers compete with black rappers, and ultimately smash through the wall to make a merger. The visual metaphor was the wedge that forced hip-hop into MTV.

18 Express Yourself, Madonna, 1989. The most expensive video made to this point, directed by David Fincher in art deco style borrowed from the silent classic *Metropolis*, it just pips Madonna's other video triumphs - *Like A Prayer*, *Justify My Love* and *Vogue*.

19 Jeremy, Pearl Jam, 1992. This anthem of anguish about bullying and teen suicide, which ends with a blood spattered schoolroom, provoked such controversy that the band made no more videos for six years.

20 Smells Like Teen Spirit, Nirvana, 1993. The surging energy of a school audience going out of control introduced Seattle grunge and pulled the focus back to performance.

21 Sabotage, the Beastie Boys, 1994. With this parody of 70s cop shows, director Spike Jonze brought slapstick humour back to a medium taking itself too seriously.

22 Come to Daddy, Aphex Twin, 1997. This horror tale of an old lady terrorised by children drew English director Chris Cunningham to the attention of the queen of avant-garde clips, Bjork, who said: "When the Aphex Twin video happened, everybody knew 'Here comes a genius' and were getting really really excited." Cunningham went on to turn Bjork into a white robot in *All is Full of Love* and Madonna into a black witch in *Frozen*.

23 Praise You, Fatboy Slim, 1999. At the end of a decade in which videos had started to cost millions, DJ Norman Cook, aka Fatboy Slim, decided he hated the medium because "all the good videos had been done". Then Spike Jonze made this cheap and clunky "documentary" about an amateur dance group busking outside a cinema. The simplicity and humour earned it the votes of MTV viewers as "the best video of all time".



Michael Jackson in *Thriller*;
Fatboy Slim's *Praise You* and
Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*

24 Weapon of Choice, Fatboy Slim, 2001. Spike Jonze changes style again, and wins six MTV awards for showing Christopher Walken as a burnt-out businessman inspired by the music to fly across a hotel lobby.

25 The White Stripes, Fell In Love With A Girl, 2002. Just when you thought all media had been tried, director Michel Gondry used Lego blocks to animate the drummer and the guitarist. It took 15 animators six weeks, and started a Lego revival.

26 OK Go, Here it Goes Again, 2006. It remains the band's only single to chart on the Billboard Hot 100, where it entered the Top 40 at #38, mostly due to the music video, which includes the band dancing on treadmills, which became a staple video of YouTube.

27 Shitdisco, Ok, 2007.

28 N.E.R.D.'s, My Drive Through,

29 The Verve, Bitter Sweet Symphony,

29 Coldplay, The Scientist

30 Nina Simone, My Baby Just Cares For Me, 1987

31 Unkle, Rabbit in your Headlights

32 Outkast, Hey Ya!

33 Just, Radiohead

Pop goes the video

December 18, 2004

Related

- [The Most Influential Videos of All Time](#)

Monsters that mutated, preachers who twitched, virgins who vogued ... Music videos used to be so cutting edge. Now they're just bad ass boys with bling, bikini babes and soulful strummers. Is the MTV era over and out, asks David Dale

The tiff between Eminem and Michael Jackson was trivial in itself, but awesome in what it revealed: that the golden age of the music video is over.

In the 1980s, Jackson was a pioneer in changing the promo clip into an art form, setting creative standards with *Beat It*, *Billie Jean* and *Thriller*. Eminem's clips, notably *The Real Slim Shady*, extended the adventure into the noughties.

But the latest effort by the would-be-black current king of rap sent the would-be-white former king of pop into a fury. Eminem's *Just Lose It* includes parody scenes in which Jackson's nose falls off and he sits on a bed with children. Jackson declared it was "inappropriate and disrespectful to me, my children, my family and the community at large" and asked TV stations not to show it. Most of them ignored him.

Then came the deconstruction. Elizabeth Bird, a professor of anthropology at the University of South Florida, said Jackson was foolish to worry about Eminem's latest bit of mischief, because music videos have lost their power as trendsetters.

"He'd probably be better just to ignore it," she told *The Chicago Sun-Times*.

"Music video is now just one of many forms of popular culture. In that great era of Michael Jackson in the 80s, it had a tremendous impact because it was just so different and novel and it was speaking directly to that generation. Now it's there, it'll have an impact, but I don't think music video is anymore seen as cutting edge, where new and exciting things are happening."

Oh mama, can this really be the end? Is the most influential medium of the past two decades about to join the fax machine in the bin labelled "great passing fads of history".

The music video is, after all, the phenomenon that named a generation. People aged 40 to 60 are Baby Boomers, people aged 30 to 40 are GenXers, and the cohort between 13 and 30 is The MTV Generation. If Boomers are self-absorbed and self-indulgent, and Generation X is apathetic and alienated, then MTVers are defined by their preoccupation with visual glamour over intellectual rigour and by attention spans so short they demand the whole story in three MINUTES.

The Australian novelist and social analyst David Malouf believes modern society's obsession with fame coincided with the rise of the music video. "Celebrity belongs to the moment, to passing show," Malouf writes in a recent issue of *The Griffith Review*. "So far as its promoters, the media, are concerned, replaceability is part of the deal.



Winning formats: Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*; David Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes* and Kylie Minogue's *Come Into My World*.

"Immediately recognisable, immediately replaceable - that is the ideal, since in a world that is measured in a nanosecond, where in the average MTV clip the eye has to take in several dozen images in the space of a minute, our minds are trained to be impatient, our attention span is brief. Under these circumstances, as Andy Warhol quipped, 15 minutes of the public's attention is about as much as even the most appealing of us can hope for."

But now, if Professor Bird is right, the music video is at the 14 minute mark. The clip has eaten itself, as commercialism replaces creativity. This is symbolised by the way MTV, once the primary purveyor of exciting imagery to the world, has become "an outlet that promotes expensive videos financed by major labels to the exclusion of almost everything else", according to *The Chicago Tribune's* music writer Greg Kot. "The art of the video has become a parade of half million dollar copycats, and underfinanced indie bands or risk-taking artists don't have a chance."

To look at the Top 50 singles on ABC television any Saturday morning this month is to understand the point Kot is making - and to be depressed by the sameness of it all. It's a three hour cavalcade of soulful girls strolling through forests; slutty girls strutting through nightclubs; sensitive guys strumming guitars and muscular guys displaying their bling (baggy clothes, chunky jewellery).

The only refreshment is a comedy turn called *1985*, in which the American band Bowling for Soup dress up as video stars of the past - Robert Palmer and his models in *Addicted To Love* and Aerosmith and Run-DMC in *Walk This Way* - and reminisce about the Golden Age. They sing of a woman who laments: "When did reality become TV? When did Motley Crue become classic rock? And when did Ozzy become an actor? Please make this stop, and bring back Bruce Springstein, Madonna, way before Nirvana, there was U2 and Blondie and music still on MTV".

That song could bookend the era that started with *Video Killed the Radio Star*, the clip by Aussie director Russell Mulcahy with which the MTV network launched itself in 1981.

It articulates the increasingly common view that the clip as an art form is flatlining - a view shared by Ed St John, managing director of the record company BMG (which releases the *Australian Idol* winners). He says overexposure has turned music videos into "wallpaper", because "kids have become addicted to this diet of high-production-value crap."

St John, who leaves his job next month when BMG concludes a merger with Sony, is one of the few industry executives to have observed the entire lifespan of the music video. Most international commentary connects the Golden Age with the American arrival of MTV in 1981, but St John says Australians were doing great clips long before that, because of the need to supply material for the ABC show *Countdown*.

He remembers getting excited in 1977 by the sight of AC/DC performing *It's A Long Way To The Top* on the back of a truck with bagpipers, and as the 80s rolled in, he was seeing mini-masterpieces on *Countdown* almost every week. Now the vital signs are fading because "everybody plays music videos, even the *Today Show*". He's lucky if he gets excited - or even surprised - by one clip in 20.



From top: Run-DMC and Aerosmith's *Walk This Way*; Robert Palmer's *Addicted to Love*; The Police's *Every Breath You Take*; Michael Jackson's *Beat It* and Madonna's *Express Yourself*.

St John won't say how many videos BMG produced last year, nor how much was spent on them, but other industry sources suggest that the total across all record companies would be close to 200, at a cost of close to \$7 million. In addition, the record companies would have imported more than 1,000 clips of overseas performers, for distribution to TV stations. The video may be dying as an art form, but expenditure on it keeps growing every year, because the record companies are trapped.

"It has become an albatross around the industry's neck," says St John. "In the US, as boring and generic as they are, music videos are costing up to a million dollars each to make.

"Here it can be \$100,000. With one act - I'm too embarrassed to name them - we spent close to that on a video, and when we looked at it, we didn't like it and we had to start all over again.

"Most of them cost forty or fifty thousand a time, and that makes it hard to break even when you're launching a new act. It can be a barrier to entry for the great little band from the suburbs.

"I'd rather spend the money on making the music better, but if you want to have a hit, get played on top 40 radio like 2Day and Nova, you have to have a video."

He still sees videos that delight him - recent work by Gwen Stefani, Eminem, and Outkast, for example - but they are international superstars who can command budgets of a million dollars. In Australia, he says, record companies would love to make their clips fresh and different, but there's a high burnout rate among the best directors: "These guys come out of film school with four or five great ideas, and start making a name for themselves. But their price goes up at about the same rate as their creativity goes down, and so many of the videos end up looking the same."

One of America's most influential clipmakers, Daniel Pearl, says that in the early 80s when he started (and won the inaugural MTV cinematography award for *Every Breath You Take*), an original video could multiply the sales of a hit record by five.

Nowadays, he notes on the website of the International Cinematographers Guild, "it seems like there's more of a tendency to knock off other people's ideas, and MTV is more conservative. Some of the artists watch MTV and they want you to emulate shots they like.

"But you can overcome all of that. When I started directing, I swore I wouldn't rehash other people's films. I just let my mind roam freely, listen to the track, write the treatment and see where it takes me."

Pearl offers this explanation of why clips are thought to shorten the public attention span: "Videos have to be very complex in structure, because the average viewer sees them 20, 30, 40 or more times. We look for ways to photograph the unphotographable and hold onto the attention of our audience, not for just one viewing of a video, but repetitive viewing of the same video.

"As well as quick cuts, we use quick camera moves and kinetic light effects to further the pace. Rich blacks, splashes of bright light, unusual contrast ratios, underexposed areas in the frame, these are our ways to achieve a similar complexity in the visuals, hoping to entice the viewer to find more with repeated viewings."

These techniques have become standard in 21st century moviemaking, exemplified by the two *Charlie's Angels* films directed by the former videomaker McG (Joseph McGinty Nichol), who treats a feature film as a collection of four minute sequences densely packed with action or comedy images.

Australia's hottest clipmaker of the moment is James Hackett, who won Best Video in the 2004 Aria Awards for The Dissociatives' *Somewhere Down The Barrel*. He says the way to avoid pessimism about the current condition of the clip is to ignore the Top 50.

"There are many more videos being made now than in the 80s, so there's proportionately more crap," he says. "If you only look at the top 50 singles, you're going to see a lot of it. But there are still islands of creativity in this sea of crap."

He points out that people over 16, who enjoy more challenging entertainment, tend to buy albums, while the buyers of singles are much younger. The record companies tailor their promo clips to this younger audience -- hence the repetitious imagery of the top 50. "I'm not criticising young people but it's just a fact of life that a 20 year old has better taste than a 10 year old."

The 20 year olds, he says, are buying music DVDs, which are giving a new life to the work of imaginative directors. The industry remains a "warm church" for art school graduates (like himself) who might otherwise starve in garrets. That's not to say he could survive on music videos alone - his company makes most of its money from work on commercials and TV show title sequences (like the semi-animated opening of *Enough Rope* With Andrew Denton).

Hackett's videos are experiments with animation (his *Somewhere Down The Barrel* has been compared with the 80s classic *Sledge Hammer*). He says he was particularly inspired by Terry Gilliam (of Monty Python and such movies as *Brazil* and *The Fisher King*).

He has two current heroes: the British director Chris Cunningham, who burst into the business in 1997 with a scary video for Aphex Twin called *Come to Daddy*, and then created a robot romance for Bjork in *All is Full of Love*; and the French director Michel Gondry, who animated a White Stripes song with Lego blocks, turned Kylie Minogue into an Escher puzzle in *Come Into My World*, and then directed the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

The success of these directors, Hackett argues, shows there's still plenty of room for imagination in the video business. "It's not the novelty it was in the 80s, but it's far from dead," he says. "It's just settling into its proper position within popular culture".

Australia's greatest living scholar of the music clip, Narelle Gee, agrees. Trained as a schoolteacher, she's been the programmer for the ABC's weekend show *Rage* for the past eight years, and a devotee since the show started in 1987. On any weekend, 850,000 people watch some part of her program (and a further million dip into the competitor on Channel Ten, *Video Hits*).

"The music video is still the most powerful medium for launching a new artist," she says. "It's crucial for getting the name known and therefore for selling records."

"On the radio you can hear a song 100 times and still not know who the artist is. When you see the artist, you know what to ask for. People may be doing a lot more listening to music on their Ipods, but they've usually seen the video first."

Every week she examines around 40 new clips to determine the content of *Rage*'s Friday night edition, seeking originality, humour, and a feeling that "the video is a great work of art in its own right". Most weeks she finds something that excites her, even when most mainstream pop material is "just colour and movement".

"The area that I do agree is stale and dull is American hip hop/R 'n' B," she says. "It's bling bling, champagne, cars, bikini girls, all mind-numbingly similar. It's dominating Australian single charts and is also being copied by some young Australian artists."

"And the rock video has always been plagued by guys-standing-in-warehouses-with-guitars syndrome, but it is definitely alive and well as a genre. There are still fantastic original videos happening all the time. This year Green Day, Rammstein, The Hives, Franz Ferdinand, Steriogram, Eskimo Joe, The Dissociatives have had brilliant, innovative stuff out."

"Music video does go through periods of staleness but then fresh life always seems to appear."

Gee disputes the proposition that the age of the music video began in 1981 with the launch of MTV in America. Short promotional films of musicians performing (or miming to recordings) have been made since the 1940s, but in the mid 1960s Bob Dylan subverted the form by refusing to mime when he made a clip for *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. He was filmed in an alley holding up cards that displayed some of the lyrics.

T

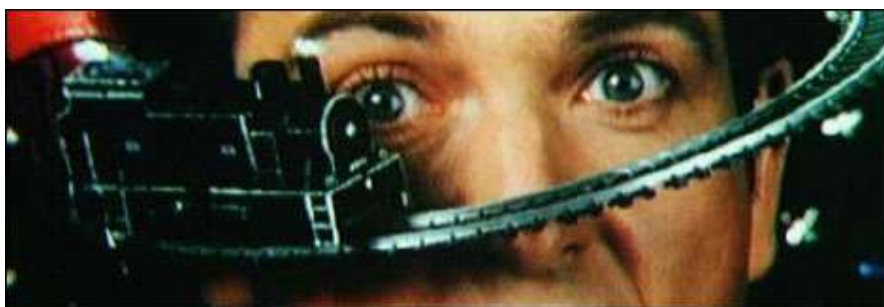
If we define a music video as a visual experience that transcends the sound, then *Subterranean Homesick Blues* was the first. It liberated performers from the obligation to mime and directors to experiment with new ways of blending images and sounds. The advent of MTV in America and *Rage* in Australia simply gave the artists a bigger gallery in which to display their work.

All of which makes "the MTV generation" a wider demographic than is normally acknowledged - the age group from five to 55, in fact.

Anyone who has watched music on television since the 1960s has been conditioned by the experience. If the legacy of the video has been a shortening of the national attention span, then we should rejoice in it, according to James Hackett. It's not simply that "our minds are trained to be impatient", as David Malouf put it. It's part of the process of human evolution.

"Over the decades of watching videos we've absorbed a massive visual language," Hackett says. "Young people can now discern meaning very quickly from audiovisual material. I don't see what's wrong with developing a new skill."

So as its golden age ends, it's time to acknowledge that the music video has changed us forever - and for the better. We can't rewind, we've gone too far.



The music video may hardly be in top cultural form at the moment, with both the channels previously known as Music Television and Video Hits 1st becoming bigger misnomers by the day. But even if these previously monolithic video outlets don't seem to care too much about spreading the gospel anymore, in actuality, possibilities for video watching are arguably greater than ever. Deluxe cable channels like MTV Jams and VH-1 Classic are living up to the 24-hour-a-day music promises previously made by their parent channels, and with larger and more diverse playlists than ever before. And far more miraculously, with the advent of YouTube, video freaks finally have the capabilities to view almost any video they want, whenever they want. Music video democracy is at an all-time high.

With that in mind, we here at *Stylus* have democratically selected our humble and largely unofficial picks for the 100 best videos ever made, and are presenting them here, fully equipped with YouTube links for your viewing pleasure. Our list spans over four decades of music videos, from Bob Dylan & D.A. Pennebacker's arguable creation of the art form in 1965 right up to a barely month-old Hot Chip video by Garth Jennings. We'll be unveiling 20 a day, so be sure to check back throughout the week to keep up. Relive some of your favorite music video memories, and hopefully make a few new ones as well, as we count down the greatest hits of the music video medium.

--- [[080-061](#)] --- [[060-041](#)] --- [[040-021](#)] --- [[020-001](#)] ---



Tue: 06-20-06

100 Awesome Music Videos

Staff List by Pitchfork Staff

If it seems like lately we've been slower than usual to answer your e-mails or update in the morning, we might claim it's because we've been revamping our website. But honestly? We've been spending hours enjoying YouTube, falling in love with the music video all over again.

So now we're making use of our video-inspired sloth, sharing 100 of our favorite music videos; simply, dozens of clips that, for various reasons (because they're so good, because they're so bad, because they feature the Jacksons imagining themselves as gigantic golden gods sprinkling gold dust on humanity), we enjoy watching and hope you'll enjoy as well.

When selecting the following vids we decided to chuck anything from the [Director's Label Series](#)-- virtually everything on those collections would be obvious candidates for a list like this-- and stick to clips roughly from the MTV era. Crucially, they also all had to be on YouTube-- we prefer giving you the chance to see a clip to simply talking about one. Best to check these out early and often, then-- it *is* possible that some record label funcrusher could come around and wrinkle his nose at us pointing you all to a commercial for his company's product.



[Top 20 best music videos ever](#)

As linear music television continues its slow but inexorable decline, the music video has found an unlikely saviour in the form of the free video sharing website. To quote [YouTube's About page](#), what "originally started as a personal video sharing service...has grown into an entertainment destination".

Whilst [EMI](#) continues to attempt to hold back the tide, the other three majors are finally starting to get with the programme and all have licensed their catalogues to YouTube in exchange for a slice of the ad revenue and the ability to police the site of copyrighted material.

All of which is just a preamble to me listing the twenty best (IMHO) music videos of all time and, Blogger beta willing, embedding them in this page.