



## Music Video

by Carla Williams

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Music video, since its mainstream debut via the cable television network MTV in 1981, has been primarily a Top-40 music format. Gay and lesbian content within the standard three-minute constraint was rare in the early days, but with more openly gay, lesbian and bisexual artists that situation has gradually changed.

MTV and its sister station, VH1, which targets an adult contemporary audience, cater to popular tastes, and the production of music videos, an expensive promotional tool with virtually no other media outlet, has largely remained the reserve of major-label artists.

While the 1980s saw the rise of androgynous artists such as Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics and the openly gay transvestite Boy George of Culture Club, whose images were all over the airwaves, videos with specifically homosexual, non-theatrical characters were scarce.

One notable early exception, however, is the work of heterosexual artist Bruce Springsteen, whose video for "Tougher than the Rest" (ca 1988) features live concert footage interspersed with vignettes of couples made at venues on his "Tunnel of Love Express" tour. The video includes both gay and lesbian pairs interspersed with heterosexual couples as representatives of the artist's fans. Early on, Springsteen included this explicitly homosexual imagery with neither fanfare nor exploitation.

On the other hand, an ambiguity toward explicit sexual themes marks the content of many early videos produced by gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists. For example, Indigo Girls' first video "Closer to Fine" (1989) depicts Amy Ray and Emily Saliers performing and singing with little or no interaction.

It was played on MTV (and later VH1), and the Grammy-winning duo became one of the first acts on the channel's emerging "Unplugged" program. At the time, Ray and Saliers were not closeted but neither were they "out" in the mainstream press.

The 1990s witnessed the beginnings of more deliberateness on the part of artists in depicting their own sexuality in their videos, yet this openness did not always translate into MTV or VH1 airtime and sometimes led to censorship.

4 Non-Blondes, for example, scored a huge radio and video hit with their 1991 song "What's Up," and while promoting the song lesbian lead singer Linda Perry displayed a "dyke" sticker prominently plastered on her guitar for a performance on "Late Night with David Letterman"; but the group's video was merely a straightforward yet colorful depiction of alternative rock-and-roll with no reference to homosexuality at all.

Indigo Girls' video for "Joking" (1992), a montage of several sexually ambiguous people interacting and regrouping with one another, received virtually no airplay even though it explicitly deals with, in Ray's words, an "idea about androgyny within relationships and how a relationship is a relationship regardless of what sex you are."

Their 1995 video "Power of Two" opens with an image of male lovers embracing and includes both lesbian and heterosexual pairs throughout, but it received very limited VH1 play.

Lesbian chanteuse k.d. lang, who came out in *The Advocate* in 1992 and more spectacularly in a cover story in *Vanity Fair* in August the following year, has produced numerous videos that have played in heavy rotation on MTV and VH1, yet none include depictions of lesbianism.

Similar is the case with Melissa Etheridge, who came out nationally at an inaugural dinner for President Clinton in 1993. The videos for her blockbuster record "Yes I Am" (1994) include "Come to My Window," featuring actor Juliette Lewis, but none show lesbian relationships.

Tracy Chapman's number one hit "Give Me One Reason" from 1996 subtly implied that the singer was addressing the female bartender depicted in the video, though the narrative was resolved with a straight couple.

Also in 1996, bisexual singer Meshell Ndegéocello's video "Leviticus: Faggot," featuring a butch Ndegéocello interacting with black gay men, was immediately banned upon its release, presumably because of its depiction, mirroring the song's lyrics, of parental gay bashing, faith-based opposition to homosexuality, prostitution, and suicide. Despite its initial censorship the video is now available to view on Ndegéocello's website.

Among openly gay and bisexual male artists, Elton John has persistently adhered to a neutral mainstream aesthetic, a tactic used by many aging yet popular singers in which younger, attractive performers enact the video narrative while the star merely exudes his or her well-honed persona.

George Michael's post-coming out video "Outside" (1998) was an MTV exclusive. The video addresses Michael's homosexuality head-on through a parody of his arrest in a Beverly Hills park restroom on charges of soliciting a male undercover police officer.

The video also features Michael dancing around dressed, Village People-style, as a macho cop while also portraying two other males dressed as cops kissing passionately. MTV played both a censored (blurred kiss) and uncensored (late-night airings) version.

While the sometimes-bisexual singer Madonna receives the most attention for her videos depicting both bisexuality and homosexuality, from her cavortings with men and women in "Justify My Love" and "Music" to her remake of Don McLean's "American Pie" in which gay men and lesbians are depicted kissing in unsensationalized moments, numerous other heterosexual recording artists including Lenny Kravitz and Aerosmith have upped the titillation factor in their videos by gratuitously depicting women together in sexual situations.

Singer Marilyn Manson resurrects Boy George by way of "Dope Show" (1999); like Michael's "Outside" video, "Dope Show" features a scene of males dressed as police officers in sexualized couplings while the overall video depicts the heterosexual Manson wearing an androgynous costume that features women's breasts.

As programming on video stations has begun to include fewer videos and more serial programs and films, the message from the video channels, if not from the artists, appears mixed.

In January 2000, MTV introduced their "Fight For Your Rights: Take a Stand Against Discrimination" campaign with the documentary "Anatomy of a Hate Crime--Matthew Shepard." At the same time, virulently homophobic rap artist Eminem won the MTV Video Awards Best Video of the Year for his song "The Real Slim Shady," which includes explicit slurs against gays and lesbians.

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