

The Death of Pop-Up '80s

The Day the Popping Stopped

The demon despots who run MTV called down from their aerie atop the Viacom Bldg.—hovering like a crippled Death Star over Times–Disney Square—and told me the 80s had died. *Pop-Up '80s*, strangled like a mutant bastard in its baby sling.

America had spoken: Enough. Thirteen episodes—enough. Thirteen episodes of *Pop-Up '80s* that were supposed to slide lubriciously into an orgy of 80s nostalgia. A clamor for Culture Club. A caterwauling for Kajagoogoo.

The Nielsen-watchers at MTV Networks searched the numbers for clamor. Scoured the daily ratings for caterwauling. Nothing. And I put down the phone, looked out at T–D Square and remembered how it began.

Billy Squier was lost in the building. The auteur of 80s make-out chic—the man who mystified a nation with “The Stroke” and shed no light with “In the Dark”—was wandering alone through the catacombs of VH1.

Remember the 80s? You slipped a Flock of Seagulls tape into a \$300 all-metal Walkman; watched the Challenger disperse in the midst of a *Hill Street Blues* rerun; clipped on a pair of deely-boppers and descended into Danceteria, high on New Coke and the death of *Family Ties*.

And Boy George said: *Time is like a clock in the heart*. That clock is atomic; it does not stop. So now the 70s thing was over, the 80s were in. *Wedding Singer* was a hitlet, *The Love Boat: The Next Wave* had impressively assaulted the seas—and I

was head writer for a half-hour tv show called *Pop-Up '80s*.

It was the first official spinoff from VH1's ubiquitous *Pop-Up Video*. You know *Pop-Up Video*. You've seen it in the gym. Music videos enhanced by caustic captions. “Gwen is often mistaken for Madonna in public” (during No Doubt's “Don't Speak”). “Seal meat is low-fat and has a ‘beefy’ flavor” (Seal's “Crazy”). Etc.

Since popping into the cableverse in October 1996, *Pop-Up* has revived the world's blandest network and become a weird backdrop to the cultural moment. The show's twinkle co-creators, Tad Low and Woody Thompson, froth onto *Oprah* and *Access Hollywood*, pocketing sound bites like, “Music videos are dead!” and “We're changing the way people watch tv!”

Our headquarters 42 floors over Times Square is a riot of camera crews. *Entertainment Tonight*, *Today*, Bryant Gumbel's half-shut *Public Eye*—we pantomime goosed-up staff “brainstorming” sessions for them. (Real staff meetings are as low-watt as yours.) We're quaintly “popped” in the pages of *Entertainment Weekly* and *Newsweek*, usually described as “snarky.” No, we don't know what it means.

First things first: Of course everything on the show is true; and yes, we know the “bloop” sound is annoying.

I started last year as one of *Pop-Up*'s two full-time writers. Now there are 12 hacks on two teams and 10 more child interns, researchers and other MTV-bred kids whose precise job descriptions are a little murky. We just popped a rerun of NBC's *NewsRadio* and there are rumors of a movie.

I was handed five writers, three researchers and a directive: “Inform and amuse.” Okay. At 32, I was the oldest on the squad; I actually remembered the 80s. They were nice kids, my team. Tom: a curly-coiled Irish Catholic with a knack for lady-love. Liz: the office pin-up and a congenial worrier. Kathy: our square-glasses grrr-in-a-band. Scott: who cowrote the last episode of *Beavis and Butt-head* and is going places. And Chris: sideburns, producing credits, all that.

Picking videos for the show, our first criterion is speed. *Pop-Up* viewers have to read; we comment on images; if they whizz past like a Hanson on Zotz, you've flipped to *South Park*. Happily, 80s videos are sloooow.



T.S. HART

BY MARTIN KIHN

And they're low-fat. A typical big 90s video burns a week of pre-production, two days' shooting in L.A. and costs \$250,000. Fifteen years ago, a *wunderkind* like English director Russell Mulcahy could toss out a gem like Billy Joel's “Pressure” (electric chair, splashing water) and another Joel video (“She's Right on Time”) in 40 hours. Cheap videos need explanation. Pregnant wives show up as extras (M's “Pop Muzik”). Lead singers' pants split on camera (Def Leppard's “Photograph”). Bands lipsynch the wrong language (Nena's “99 Red Balloons”).

Our scripts are built from behind-the-scenes information. Everything else (bad puns, band bios, gratuitous Mr. T pics) covers up holes in our info. So a *Pop-Up* writer's day is spent waiting for callbacks from directors, producers, wardrobe people, bass players. VH1's cozily p.r.-ish relationship with the labels makes it hard to get permission even to ask an artist for an interview. But for the 80s show, the network's more relaxed; Why should they care if we harass some blast from the past?

Researching Blondie's “Rapture,” I tried Deborah Harry at home. A chain-smoking cabbie picked up the phone. Spat some greeting. Dissolved into a hideous cha-cha-cha of coughs. I tried to explain myself, she barked out, “Call Chris,” and that was that. Back in high school, I had her face pinned to my bedroom door.

“Chris,” of course, was Chris Stein—Deborah's ex-lover and band-mate. His phone rang forever, but we poppers are persistent. He finally answered, dazed. He didn't ask me how I got his number. He didn't ask me anything. He launched into a half-hour diatribe on Japan and video games and how he'd been screwed by his label and how he didn't have as much money as he thought he should have, considering how big Blondie was, and—I don't know. Other stuff. I stopped listening.

Not every ex-star has been so cratered by retirement. Beside Debbie's picture on my door was one of Martha Davis, attitudinal lead singer of the Motels. Tom tracked her down in Ventura, CA, in the midst of moving houses. She's a grandmother now, almost saccharine-sweet, thinking of hitting the road again with a band called Martha Davis, Jr., and stuffed with self-deprecating charm.

Her memories could have been clearer, though. She apologized: “The 80s—they were wild, wild times.”

Wild, wild times can breed mild, mild men. Like Cy Curnin. Cy was the lead singer of the Fixx, midlist British synthsters who spawned five U.S. Top 40 hits (“Saved by Zero,” “One Thing Leads to Another”). We expected to find the Fixx living in trailers, rolling their regrets into big honking doobies. But Scott found Cy in a Park Ave. floor-through palace, overseer of a gorgeous family with two kids at Dalton, a thriving hat-making business and a spanking home studio. Cy's rich enough to afford eccentricities—like the huge sea-monkey “biosphere” habitat by his living room door.

I don't know, but the difference between Cy and Chris Stein might be wisdom. Far from tortured into a pretzel of regret, Cy is urbane. He summed up the 80s: “Nothing lasts forever.”

We move on, or we are moved on. Some 80s hitmakers found redemption on the safest path: They went back to their roots. Taco was found in his native Germany, starring in stage musicals—as he was 20 years ago, before some evil genius record exec heard him singing “Puttin' on the Ritz” and decided that song had what it took. Kim Carnes (“Bette Davis Eyes”) was in Nashville, writing songs for other people, ferrying her daughter back and forth to school. Chris rapped with Devo's Jerry Casale on the set of a grunge video he was directing.

The saddest 80s story we unearthed belonged, appropriately enough, to AIDS. Holly Johnson, co-founder and charismatic prince behind dance-hit wonder Frankie Goes to Hollywood, was unwell. He whispered to me over transatlantic phone lines. Barely audible. “I'm a painter now,” he choked. He was paid \$200 a month by his label even when “Relax” sat at number one in England. I don't think he invested.

Billy Squier wasn't sick, at least. I finally found him ambling downstairs through sister-station Nickelodeon and herded him up to meet the staff. What's he like today? I'll say this: If you ever envy a rocker, check back in 10 years. Clenched and unclenched hands, face a tilt-a-whirl of paranoia. Stars don't fade, they crash and burn.

After a short on-camera chat, we packed up the tapes and steered Billy toward the elevators. One of the kids intercepted him with a Polaroid. Pictures were taken—people young enough to be Billy's children, posing with him like they actually knew who he was.

“It's Billymania,” I said.

Billy smiled.

Then he said, so quietly the whole snarky staff had to lean in to hear him: “It's nice to be reminded, sometimes.”

Apparently not. *Pop-Up '80s* premiered in late April. By May it was canceled. The 80s are dead. Again. After I found out about the cancellation, I turned on the 72-channel wonder-cable in my office and surfed. What did I find? The Dow is up—record territory. Right-wing Paki-haters run the city, flailing “welfare cheats.” Wall Street baby traders spend \$1500 on a bottle of wine. A president worn thin by a surly special prosecutor with an agenda. Cocaine love-a-thons...kids getting dumber...a warming Earth...athletes misbehaving...

And it struck me: Why we aren't ready for 80s nostalgia. Why a show like *Pop-Up '80s* was 10 years too early.

The 80s—they aren't over.

The 80s are now.

