

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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## A Date that Changed Our World.

A recent essay in the *New York Times*, prompted by the July celebration of Independence Day, put forward the ten days that *really* changed American history. The point was that nothing much actually happened on Thursday, July 4, 1776. The Colonies had voted independence two days earlier; the document wasn't signed until a month later. When John Adams predicted that the "great anniversary festival" would be celebrated forever, from one end of the continent to the other, he was talking about July 2.

The real dates of significance, suggests Adam Goodheart, should include such days as **June 8, 1610**, when Lord De La Warr arrived with a fleet bringing supplies to a struggling Jamestown, ensuring that what we now know as the southeastern United States did not end up in the French or Dutch empire; **June 20, 1790**, the evening when Thomas Jefferson invited Alexander Hamilton and James Madison to dinner to broker the deal to situate the nation's capital on the Potomac and to have the federal government take on the war debt of the thirteen states, establishing the primacy of the central government; **February 15, 1933**, when a wobbly chair caused the bullets from anarchist Giuseppe Zangara to lose his balance and miss hitting President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, thus preserving what would come to be known as "The New Deal" as well as the move toward internationalism; **March 2, 1955**, when Claudette Colvin, age 15, refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, but was not deemed the right person for civil rights leaders to rally around (as she became pregnant shortly after her arrest), leading them to pursue a legal case with a woman by the name of Rosa Parks, allowing a young man by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., to emerge as a leader; and **August 20, 1998**, when most of us were absorbed by the Monica Lewinsky affair, the United States fired 60 cruise missiles at Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and missed killing Osama bin Laden by as little as an hour.

Let's also consider **August 1, 1981**, a date which marks its twenty-fifth anniversary this month. On that day, a television network dedicated to the young and the music they love kicked off at midnight with a video of British band The Buggles' *Video Killed the Radio Star*.

It was the day MTV was born.

Reflecting on the cultural impact of MTV is almost a cottage industry. Perhaps it is enough to consider *USA Today's* assessment of some of MTV's key moments:

\*September 14, 1984. Madonna's sexually suggestive performance of *Like a Virgin* in 1984's inaugural Video Music Awards, noteworthy for helping cement her reputation as a risqué performer and setting the stage for even more risqué MTV VMAs shows to come.

\*March 11, 1986. The network set up shop for spring-break shows and entertained scantily clad women with games, celebrity hosts and hot music, essentially making it one big frat party, taking voyeuristic TV to new heights and normalizing an open sexuality.

\*May 21, 1992. A "reality" series, *The Real World*, premieres with the premise of seven strangers picked to live in a house, work together and have their lives taped. Now in its 17<sup>th</sup> season, RW has tackled social issues such as abortion in a way that has shaped the hearts and minds of millions.

\*September 19, 1994. Lil' Kim showed up at the Video Music Awards in a one-shouldered purple number with an exposed breast covered by a pastie, which Diana Ross then cupped and jiggled as they presented the award for best rap video.

April 12, 2000. The reality series *Jackass*, about a group of guys performing dangerous stunts for laughs, premieres. Acts included frontman Johnny Knoxville voluntarily sitting in a full port-a-potty as his friends proceeded to tip it over. Soon copycat stunts were being performed by youth across the country, often to their physical danger.

March 5, 2002. *The Osbournes* premieres, following the foul-mouthed antics of metal demigod Ozzy Osbourne (frontman for Black Sabbath), his manager wife, Sharon, teenage daughter Kelly and son Jack as they go about their daily lives, winning MTV its first prime-time Emmy.

August 28, 2003. Madonna once again performs her hit *Like A Virgin* with Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears at the Video Music Awards, ending with an open-mouthed kiss with Spears, perhaps the most famed same-sex kiss on national television.

February 1, 2004. During Super Bowl XXXVIII in Houston on CBS, Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson performed a duet of his *Rock Your Body*. Near the end of the MTV-produced set, Timberlake tore off part of Jackson's costume and revealed her right breast, adorned with a sun-shaped nipple shield.

Martha Quinn, one of the five original "VJs," reflects "We were rebels with a cause, and we had the rock 'n' roll generation and the television generation behind us." Now, with around 100 channels and over a billion viewers, MTV does not reflect youth culture; it creates it. Or as founder Bob Pittman presciently stated in a 1982 interview, "If you can get their emotions going, make them forget their logic, you've got them. At MTV, we don't shoot for the 14-year-olds, we own them."

Todd Gitlin has written of the new supersaturation of the media, what he calls the "media torrent." This "torrent" determines what we see, and what we don't; what we think about, and what never enters our mind. "All media work us over completely," Marshall McLuhan warned. "They are so

pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered.

So we mark twenty-five years of MTV.

Twenty-five years of having our 14-year-olds owned.

James Emery White

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