

Music video rebound: Technology, creativity keep fans tuning in

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MTV may be better known now for reality shows, but the music video industry it spawned 30 years ago is in some ways more vibrant than ever — and still providing the marketing kick artists need to sell music.

That's in part because television has become just one avenue for reaching viewers. The ability of consumers to access videos at their own convenience has caused a surge of video-on-demand streamings at YouTube, artist Web sites and [CMT.com](#).

Music videos were once thought to be on the wane when cable TV outlets such as MTV, VH1 and CMT started filling the day and prime time with more reality shows, movies and re-runs of old sitcoms.

And as record labels shrank, so did the promotional budgets that paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for each video, including location, hair and makeup, wardrobe and production.

“A lot of people talked gloom and doom, about a lot less videos coming our way,” said Sarah Trahern, senior vice president of programming for [Great American Country](#), which is owned by Knoxville-based [Scripps Networks](#) and devotes 95 percent of its programming to country music.

Now, she said, labels are more strategic about when they release a video. Videos for new artists may only get made if and when their music gets traction on radio, or they could release one early to create a brand, as [Warner Bros.](#) did for new artist Whitney Duncan.

“It used to be the standard that videos didn't come out until the label invested the money. Now artists are investing money on their own because they see the value in it,” GAC president Ed Hardy said.

Beginning Oct. 2, CMT will premiere nine videos by country stars Carrie Underwood, Tim McGraw, Kenny Chesney, Keith Urban, Sugarland, Reba McEntire, Miranda Lambert, Billy Currington and Michelle Branch.

“Big New Music Weekend” is a promotional push to kick off the big fourth-quarter holiday selling season, said Jay Frank, senior vice president of music strategy for CMT, which is owned by MTV Networks.

“Knowing that the music industry can use as many good promotional jolts as it can, about a month ago we thought, ‘What can we do to help that out?’” he said. “... We get ratings, artists get sales and everybody walks away happy.”

While the networks have been criticized for not giving much time to videos, the numbers don’t necessarily bear that out. Between Jan. 1 and Aug. 31, CMT played 17,463 music videos, according to Mediabase. During the same time period, Great American Country played 43,349, more than twice as many.

“We have focused our strategy on being a country music destination,” Trahern said.

While video blocks still make up most of CMT’s morning hours, afternoons and evenings target viewers with shows like “Extreme Makeover Home Edition,” “Trading Spouses,” “The Singing Bee,” “My Big Redneck Wedding” and “Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?” currently dominating the lineup, said Nashville media analyst Robert Unmacht.

“What’s the target here? Redneck women,” he said. “I see a lot of non-country on CMT. They’re selling demographic, and their marketing side be damned.”

CMT’s Frank said videos are just one part of the mix.

“You can pull up YouTube on your phone. You don’t have to sit around and wait for it to come on TV. The videos are always there, but the reality is that for most of the TV viewing day, viewers have told us they don’t want all videos. It’s really about the right strategic mix.”

Most labels are eager to get their artists airtime, whether through videos or interviews and performances on the two dominant country music networks.

While they no longer routinely fork over six figures for any artists on their label, inexpensive technology has allowed creative directors to make videos for thousands of dollars, rather than hundreds of thousands.

“There’s definitely a revived interest in videos,” Frank said. “But the days of just easily making a six-figure video are largely gone.”

The convergence of television, the online space, video on demand and mobile devices has contributed to a different aesthetic for making videos, some of which now incorporate those media.

Toby Keith’s video for “American Ride” is a fan favorite and pokes fun at American pop culture and current events, cleverly referencing Wall Street, Washington, fire-breathing talk show hosts and a sedated reality TV-watching public in a fast-moving animated montage.

Randy Houser's video for "Boots On" incorporates footage of 4-year-old Drake Dixon singing the song and jamming on a guitar-shaped flyswatter, while in his car seat. The youngster's performance had been captured by his nanny and turned into a viral video on YouTube.

Some young stars, such as Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood, have embraced videos as a way to tell their stories in a visual medium that allows them to express their dramatic flair.

Underwood's "Just A Dream" video allowed her to morph from a happy bride to bereaved widow within minutes, and Swift's "Love Story" video is an elaborate retelling of a Shakespearean romance complete with castle and a ball with dancers in period costumes.

"A-level artists want to make A-level videos, and the labels will do everything in their power to accommodate them," said filmmaker Todd Cassetty, whose production company Todd Cassetty Welding Service has shot four specials on the making of Swift's videos for GAC.

Such artistic flights of fancy also must help the bottom line, though.

"Now you can sell them on iTunes, and you can actually make back some of your money whereas before you couldn't do that," Cassetty said.

Releasing a clever video can lift sales of a single by 20 percent to 50 percent. After CMT put the Trailer Choir's video for "Rockin' the Beer Gut" in heavy rotation, sales of the single increased from 2,000 downloads per week to 10,000 downloads per week, and the video spent more than a month as one of CMT.com's top five streamed videos.

It's good business for networks, too.

GAC has performed well for Scripps, which bought the cable network five years ago. In the second quarter, GAC improved its daytime viewership among its target viewers of 25 to 54 years olds by 13 percent over last year and grew 34 percent on weekends, Trahern said. It also has more than doubled the households it is seen in, from 27 million five years ago to 57 million today.

And CMT's Frank said video ratings are up 20 percent over last year.

"For the third quarter we're looking at our best numbers for music videos," Frank said. "Online is having a huge year over year increase, video on demand has seen tremendous growth."