



From “Illustrated Songs” to the Music Video: A History of Sound and Image | Lesson Plan | Soundbreaking

Uncover how the relationship between sound and image has shifted throughout the history of recorded music using this lesson. Students will learn about talkies (the first moving picture with sound), musical shorts, television, and how the rise of MTV brought that relationship to a culmination.

Lesson Summary

Until Thomas Edison first recorded sound in 1877, sound and image were always experienced as one. It had been that way since music was first made. One saw a performance as one heard the music, whether it was a neighbor playing guitar or an orchestra in a concert hall. But suddenly, with the advent of recording technology, a listener could replay just the sound from a performance, and a performance that had already past. It was nothing short of a revolution.

It may be, however, that there is a human desire to see as one hears. For just as soon as Edison’s invention revolutionized the experience of listening, the audience for those recordings wanted to see something as they listened. When technology for moving pictures emerged in the 1890s, those images were immediately applied to music. Some suggest that the first music video was created in 1894 by Joseph Stern and Edward Mark, who set a recording of their song “The Little Lost Child” to a moving slide show and marketed it as an “illustrated song.” Though the average American did not yet own equipment to play a recording of the song, over 2 million copies of the sheet music of “The Little Lost Child” were sold.



The first talkies—films with sound—were also musical in nature. The 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, which featured the acting and singing of recording star Al Jolson, was the first to synchronize sound and image. After several decades of separation, it seemed that sound and image had been restored to their original relationship, arriving to the audience’s eyes and ears together. But more was coming.

Musical shorts, such as the 1929 Bessie Smith film *St. Louis Blues* featured in this lesson, used a song’s lyrics as the basis for a short scene starring the performer and other actors. Because the present-day “movie theater,” at which one attends a single film, was not yet a fixed concept, these shorts would play along with feature films and even other forms of entertainment such as live dancers, musicians and comedians. In the 1940s, visual jukebox machines moved film into new locations, allowing users to pay a nickel or a dime for a three-minute soundie like the Louis Jordan film of *Caldonia* seen in this lesson. With the emergence of television, new opportunities extended what was possible for sound and image. On *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* a young Ricky Nelson began performing songs at the conclusions of the show—and the audience hungered for more. These are just a few examples among many.

However much musicians embraced the possibilities of film, up until this point, the videos made were almost always visitors add-ons to other programs. Musicians appeared before they made feature films, as guests on TV shows and performers on portions of variety shows, but music videos had no permanent home of their own. Until the launch of MTV on August 1, 1981.

The 24-hour-a-day music video programming of MTV gave musicians and their audiences a platform to fully explore the experience of sound and image. In this lesson, students will investigate the ways musicians used video before MTV, then consider how MTV changed the way artists have exploited the surprising territory where sound meets image.

Learning Objectives

Essential Question:

How has the relationship between sound and image shifted through the history of recorded music, and how did the rise of MTV contribute to this change?

Know (knowledge):

- The history of sound and image in film formats such as illustrated songs, musical shorts, soundies, and television shows and music videos
- How the relationship between sound and image changed in the age of MTV
- Details of the creation of MTV and its historical emphasis on the visual
- How musicians adapt to the heightened importance of visual elements in popular music
- How the human senses of vision and hearing inform one another to create meaning
- How music was influenced by the rise of television and the increasingly visual culture in the 20th century

Be able to (skills):

- Develop literacy in relation to reading images
- Analyze the interrelationship of word and image
- Relate changes in popular culture to changes in the socio-political climate

Media Resources:

David Bowie and Rock and Roll Characters - [Video](#)

Bessie Smith, *St. Louis Blues* Musical Short - [Video](#)

Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five, *Caldonia* - [Video](#)

Ricky Nelson on The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet - [Video](#)

Annie Lennox and the Musician's Image - [Video](#)

Madonna and the Music Video - [Video](#)

The Divine Ms. MTV - [Video](#)

For additional lesson plan materials, please visit the [Lesson Resources at TeachRock](#).

Introductory Activity

1. Distribute [Handout 1: Sound and Vision](#) and break your students into three groups. Have one member of each group open the [Soundbreaking Sound and Vision TechTool](#) on a computer or phone. Assign each group one of the TechTool buttons, A, B, or C, each of which represents a different soundtrack for the image. Have the three groups complete the handout individually.

After completing the group assignment, have everyone come together and share their findings as a class. Allow each group to explain their answers to the numbered questions on

the handout before playing the clips with their group's soundtrack, A, B, or C for the whole class.

Now ask your students the following questions and keep a list of their answers on the board:

- How and where do you discover music? (Encourage students to think about the platforms on which they find music such as YouTube, iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, Pandora, the radio, etc.)

Once you have a list of sources of music discovery, ask your students:

- How many of these sources are visual? How often do you hear a new song without seeing imagery that is created with it?
- How do you think music videos change your listening experience?
- Imagine yourself in 1953, long before the internet and even before the TV was common in American homes: How would you have gotten your music? Would the experience be more or less visual?
- Now imagine living in 1853, before the rise of the recording industry. Would you ever hear music without also seeing the musicians who were performing it? How might recorded music have seemed strange to a person at that time? *(Encourage your students to recognize that throughout human history sound and vision were connected. The advent of music recording in the early 20th century, however, separated sound from vision for a period.)*

Learning Activities

Now [Play Clip 1, Soundbreaking - David Bowie and Rock and Roll Characters](#) and ask students:

- At the opening of this clip, Brian Eno states that David Bowie populates his songs “with characters that clearly aren’t him.” In what ways do you think the visual medium was an asset to a musician such as David Bowie? In what ways do you see him taking advantage of the visual and its theatrical possibilities in this clip?
- Do you think David Bowie was unique at the time in thinking of his music in visual and theatrical ways?

Distribute [Handout 2: Sound and Image in the Era of Recording Technologies](#) and read it out loud as a class.

Tell your students that you will now view examples of some of the early music videos detailed in [Handout 2. Play Clip 2, Bessie Smith, St. Louis Blues Musical Short](#) and ask your students:

- In what ways does this clip integrate sound and image? Describe what you see happening.
- How do you think the plot you see here reflects the lyrics you hear Bessie Smith sing?
- Why do you think audiences would want to see the plot of song lyrics on film as opposed to just hearing the song? *(Students should recognize that these shorts bring film and music together. For people enthralled with the movies that were still a new and exciting phenomenon, these music films could generate a similar excitement, entertain them and also encourage the audience to buy music recordings.)*

- Overall, what purpose do you think a musical short like this served? *(Encourage students to understand that it allowed audiences who might otherwise never get the chance an opportunity to see Bessie Smith perform. And also, this would increase her record sales.)*

Show [Clip 3, Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five, Caldonia](#) and ask your students:

- How would you describe the plot of this video? (It is the documentation of a band performing.)
- How would you contrast this video with [Clip 2 - Bessie Smith](#)? What differences do you see in the ways it is staged?
- Which video seems more like a movie? Which aims simply to capture the energy of a great performance?

Tell your students that in 1948 less than one percent of homes owned a television set but the number swelled quickly, rising to over 50% in 1954 and over 80% in 1958. From TV's beginnings, music performances were featured in many ways. Show your students [Clip 4, Ricky Nelson on The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet](#) and ask:

- Is this a concert? How would you explain what you see Ricky Nelson doing here?
- Why do you think *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* would write a musical performance into the fictional plot of a show? *(Encourage students to consider that beyond the entertainment value of Nelson's performance, the tv show presented a way to deliver a song to listeners in the absence of a dedicated music program.)*

Divide your students into pairs and distribute [Handout 3: The Rise of MTV](#). Have the groups read the handout, study the images and then consider the included questions. Then ask the class:

- In what ways do these slides seem similar?
- What are all of the people you see on the rock video stage doing?
- What angle are these photographs taken from? Who would see the artists from this perspective?
- How might you compare these to early music videos you viewed earlier in this lesson? Do you think the concept for these videos is more closely related to *St. Louis Blues* or *Caldonia*? Why? *(Students should recognize that these images show something similar to Caldonia in that they capture the experience of seeing a band from the perspective of the audience.)*

Now play [Clip 5, Soundbreaking - Annie Lennox and the Musician's Image](#) and ask your students:

- What do you think Dave Stewart was reacting to when he suggests that he didn't want his videos to feature a "normal band playing guitars"? How would you contrast the Eurythmics videos in this clip with the videos and slides you viewed above? *(Students should note that in contrast to the slides just viewed, Stewart wished to further embrace the possibilities of film.)*
- Why do you think Stewart would want to make a music video that "had nothing to do with pop music"? What art forms was Stewart inspired by? *(Encourage your students to consider Stewart's mentions of surrealist film directors in this clip as part of his ideas for music videos as a medium different from music and that being different would make his group stand out.)*

- In what ways do you think MTV’s “all music video” approach might have enabled The Eurythmics to focus less attention on performing instruments on camera? (*Students might suggest that it was known that anyone on MTV was a musician, and this gave artists creative leeway in their videos.*)
- Having seen The Eurythmics, and thinking back to [Clip 1 - David Bowie and Rock and Roll Characters](#), in what ways do you think an artist might make use of MTV to create a sustained interest in their music? (*Encourage your students to contrast the images of musicians playing live with the characters and stories created by other videos. Do they think an artist who plays a different character in each video might be more interesting than an artist who just plays guitar or sings on stage? Why?*)

Have your students return to their groups and each take out a blank sheet of paper. Instruct the class to create a list of the main characters in [Clip 6, Soundbreaking - Madonna and the Music Video](#). After showing the video once, have each group member pick one of the video’s main characters to focus on while you show the video a second time. This time, each group member should keep a list of the symbols—clothing, dancing, cars, etc—associated with each character. After showing the video a second time, give each group a few minutes to discuss the lists they’ve created. Then discuss the following as a class:

- How would you describe the plot of this video?
- Do you think the plot of the video is directly related to the lyrics of the song?
- Who is Madonna in this video? Do you think this story is biographical? Why or why not? (*Note to teacher: Madonna Louise Ciccone is a classically trained dancer from Bay City, Michigan.*)
- What visual cues did you see that helped to establish the character of Madonna?
- Who are the two main male characters in this video?
- What visual cues did you see for the photographer character? What did they tell you about him?
- What visual cues did you see for Madonna’s other male suitor? What did they tell you about him?
- In what ways does the *Borderline* video embrace the new “prioritization of the visual” created by MTV? (*Students should note that the video creates a heightened narrative structure for the song.*)

Show [Clip 7, Soundbreaking - The Divine Ms. MTV](#) and ask your students:

- Does the Madonna in any of the videos in this montage seem to be the same character you saw in *Borderline*? Is she the same character throughout this montage?
- We hear Madonna referred to as “the queen of MTV” in this clip, in what ways do you think she embraced the visual culture of the channel and used it to her advantage?

Culminating Activity

Summary Activity:

Ask your students:

- The industry executives in the clip suggest that Madonna “understood the power” of the music video, what do you think she understood most? (Students should note that

Madonna embraced change and the ability to reinvent herself through the fictional power of the music video which enabled her to stay fresh and adapt to changes in popular culture over a significant period of time.)

- In what ways do you think MTV differed from the earlier outlets for sound and image? Do you think MTV changed the way people think of music videos? Or was it just a new form of a similar idea?
- Do you watch music videos? Where? How have videos changed as the places people view them have changed?

Extension Activity:

Open the [Soundbreaking Sound and Vision TechTool](#). Draft a short script for a video to accompany each of the three soundtracks. Then write a paragraph about what guided your decisions for your script. Explain how the music affected what story you told for each video.

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