

3. Diffusion Platforms

ROCK 'N' ROLL IS THE EUROPEAN LINGUA FRANCA

French Rock Is Like English Cooking

Let me begin with a short recapitulation of what we have established so far about the ideological shift. When MTV launched in Europe, its audience was made up of rock fans whose identity was moulded by a particular ideology overlain by a particular sense of geography (whereby the USA and the UK constituted one entity). The rock ideology was a value-system full of contradictions but nevertheless had become a powerful schema for organising the way audiences, musicians and record companies thought about music. Founded upon the belief that Anglo-American rock and soul is the most authentic sound and therefore superior, it became the principal ideology that governed a whole generation of fans and music-industry practices, and the reason behind the international dominance of Anglo-American music. This state of affairs meant that major record companies (or 'the majors') organised what they called their 'priority' policies around the production and promotion of Anglo-American acts at the expense of local repertoire. As far as the majors were concerned, Anglo-American acts had the biggest crossover potential from niche to mainstream markets on a global scale, and therefore commanded the greatest resources.³⁵

This policy has often been criticised for not giving equal treatment to local acts, but the truth was that rock fans *believed* in the superiority of Anglo-American artists; anything else was second-rate and historically, 'local acts' rarely made it internationally. Take Johnny Hallyday. Despite his megastar-status and enduring career in France, Hallyday, 'the French Elvis', never made it beyond francophone markets. Even Cliff Richard (once dubbed 'the English Elvis') a native English-speaker (and therefore 'authentic') never succeeded in matching his international fame with that of the King himself. Elvis was cool. Cliff Richard... less so. Singing in English never helped non-Anglo-American artists, either. This trend, beginning in the 1950s, continued well into the early 1990s until MTV set about breaking the mould.

Closely related to the belief in authenticity was another powerful legend: the idea that a feel for a certain kind of musical tradition was culture-bound, which is best summed up by the saying 'French rock is like English cooking.' Laugh you might, but I've heard this one many times in interviews with some of the

most influential people in the music industry, in their attempt to explain why local European audiences did not like their neighbour's music. Whether that was French *variété*, German *Schlager* or an Italian San Remo-style ballad, it rarely sold beyond markets that shared a language. These genres were also ridiculed for being 'cheesy' by local rock fans. The few successful exceptions to album-oriented rock (AOR) at the turn of the 1990s included U2 (Irish), The Scorpions (German) and Roxette and Europe (both Swedish); most European fans simply failed to realise these groups were not American.

MTV in this period was often accused of 'American cultural imperialism', which was incorrect. The combination of ideologies and music practices had already moulded music tastes among fans. I mentioned earlier that Omladinski Program (the Yugoslavian radio station where I was a host) played only select rock music (in English, *obviously*), subscribing to the British independent music press to be in touch with new bands. In our search for an alternative identity, we did not play Bruce Springsteen because the mainstream media did. Similarly, cool French radio stations of this era only played rock at the expense of French music, much to the despair of regulators, obsessed with their beloved quotas. For example, Skyrock, one of the most popular French radio stations, played up to 95 per cent English-speaking music. The clue was in their name, of course (they did later change their policy, favouring French rap and R&B, but in the early 1990s, the French rap scene was barely existent, save for MC Solaar).

English was not just the language of rock – it was the language of hip. In fact, MTV occasionally experimented with the use of local language. For example, they introduced a show with links in Flemish (prioritising Belgium was simply a matter of cable penetration rather than any national favouritism – it was among the highest-cabled countries in Europe at the time). This was, alas, in vain – MTV fans in Belgium didn't like it. Part of MTV's appeal was the use of English as the channel's first language. VJs from a European country were cool because they were on MTV and spoke English. If Marcel Vanthilt, a Belgian VJ from the first generation of MTV Europe presenters, had spoken Belgian lingo, he would have been the 'token Belgian'. That he spoke English made him a cool ambassador for Belgium. On MTV, Belgium thus became cool in the eyes of the viewer; surely there were other cool Belgians like Marcel? With the next generation of VJs, it was taken for granted that English was the common language, but these were the kinds of battles fought when the idea of European youth first became a reality. This was not a matter of imperialism. English was the language of rock

'n' roll because rock was a genuine expression of a shared culture among its fans. In contrast, attempts at imposing a common language such as Esperanto had no meaning beyond books.

To assert its cool identity, MTV faced a great challenge. In search of a new sound with crossover potential, MTV began to experiment with its musical playlist. This, in turn, challenged rather than pandered to the majors' policies. Here again, MTV critics had quickly assumed – without evidence – that MTV Europe would automatically endorse the majors' policies and promote their priority acts, undercutting regional and local record companies. This did not make sense simply because, to establish its brand, MTV's commercial imperative was to assert itself as a leader in music. This meant that MTV needed a sound that was distinctively new (to shape the channel's 'alternative' identity); not Anglo-American (to give it a European feel); and full of crossover potential (so that it appealed to its culturally and linguistically diverse audience).

At first, MTV began to promote European artists who had had local chart success – especially francophone acts, partly due to Belgium (rather than France) being a highly cabled market. These included: Patrick Bruel, Etienne Daho, Mano Negra, Les Nègresses Vertes, Mylène Farmer, Gypsy Kings, Khaled (*raï* artist of Maghreb origin), Lio, Les Rita Mitsouko, Niagara, Vanessa Paradis, rapper MC Solaar, one-hit wonder designer Jean Paul Gaultier, Sinclair, Alliance Ethnique and more. In some cases French artists had more exposure on MTV than on local rock-oriented radio. For example, the booking agent of Mano Negra at the time credited MTV for being more adventurous than French radio stations. The band scored their greatest export hit in 1990 ('Mala Vida') thanks to MTV. The channel was the first to play the accompanying video (back in 1988) before the band secured a major record deal. Similarly, Niagara's MTV-sponsored tour sold out venues in Scandinavia, Germany and Holland. In fact, Niagara somehow made it as far as Sarajevo where they were guests on one of my Omladinski Program shows, followed by a gig. However, in spite of MTV's efforts, none of these acts managed to establish an international career to match that of the Anglo-American acts. MTV experimented with other charts (Italian, German and Scandinavian) but the result was the same. Take the German megastar Herbert Grönemeyer and the French megastar Vanessa Paradis. Both were local 'priorities' in their respective countries and both recorded albums in English to boost their international careers. But despite their exposure on MTV, neither made a significant impact outside their native countries. In fact, Paradis's English

album, produced by Lenny Kravitz, sold fewer copies in France than her previous ones recorded in French.³⁶ This lack of success was related to European audiences' tastes. Local artists within the AOR genre did not cross over – end of story...