

Style Blog

The best totally-not-planned ‘shockers’ in the history of the VMAs

By [Lavanya Ramanathan](#) August 30

If you have watched a music video in the past decade, you probably did not watch it on MTV, a network now mostly stuck in a never-ending loop of episodes of “Teen Mom.” This fact does not stop MTV from continuing to hold the annual Video Music Awards, and it does not stop us from tuning in.

Whereas this year’s Grammys [were kind of depressing](#), we can count on the VMAs to be a slightly morally objectionable mess of good theater. (MTV has been boasting that it has pretty much [handed over the keys to Miley Cyrus](#), this year’s host, after all.)

[\[VMAs 2015 FAQ: Where to watch the show, who’s performing, red carpet details\]](#)

Whether it’s “real” or not doesn’t matter. Each year, the VMAs deliver exactly one ugly, cringe-worthy and sometimes actually surprising event that imprints itself in our brains, never to be forgotten. Before Sunday’s show — and before Nicki Minaj probably delivers this year’s teachable moment — here are just a few of those memorable VMA shockers.

1984: Madonna sings about virginity in front of a black-tie audience

It was the first VMAs, Bette Midler (*who?*) was co-hosting and the audience back then was a sea of tux-wearing stiff. This is all-important scene-setting for a groundbreaking performance by young Madonna, who appeared on the top of an oversize wedding cake in what can only be described as head-to-toe Frederick’s of Hollywood. She sang “Like a Virgin.” [According to Billboard](#), it wasn’t so much the song that was distasteful so much as Madge’s writhing around on the floor, exposing her underwear to the crowd. Some even called it the end of her career. In truth, it probably set the tone for every VMAs since.



1994: When Michael Jackson kissed Elvis Presley's daughter

The dress code had loosened by the time Lisa Marie Presley and the King of Pop appeared as a happy couple in the opening minutes of 1994's broadcast. What better way for the VMAs to pander to the increasingly rowdy crowds by having these two pose for the kiss-cam and prove how real and totally unscripted their relationship was? Except that executive producer [Salli Frattini told Entertainment Weekly](#) later that the whole idea was presented to the couple (kiss and all) ahead of time. That has been a running theme in so many of the surprises over the years — the feeling that they're probably not authentic at all.



2003: When Madonna kissed Britney Spears

Back when Madge still had the capacity to shock — or, perhaps, back when we still could be shocked — this open-mouthed expression of lady love was all anyone could talk about for days after the VMAs.

In *The Washington Post*, the kiss that seemed to shock America (pictured at the top) was described as a “truly yecky moment: The sight of oversexed old Madonna tongue-kissing oversexed young Spears. It didn’t seem outrageous or sultry; it smacked of desperation.”

2007: Britney Spears’s stumbling performance of ‘Gimme More’

Desperation trended for years at the VMAs, but never more than when producers tossed Spears to the dogs in 2007. After a spate of personal mishaps (all voraciously captured by the paps in the burgeoning years of TMZ and gossip blogs), Spears attempted to refocus the attention on her music with a bikini-clad VMAs performance. It did not go well.

She wobbled repeatedly, gave the crowd none of her former energy and then was subjected to all sorts of misogyny over the figure she cut in a sparkly two-piece (nevermind that she was the mother of two). This is the first time, however, [someone decided to called out MTV for orchestrating the debacle](#) when it booked the sloppy performance

as the night's opening sequence: Kanye West told Sirius radio, "Man, they were just trying to get ratings, and they knew she wasn't ready and they exploited her."

Britney Spears - Gimme More VMA 2007 [HD]



2009: Kanye West butts in when Taylor Swift was totally having a moment

Many were quick to try to put Britney behind them, but they weren't so generous with West's own stumble. We're not sure why, exactly, this became the VMAs moment that will never die — President Obama [even weighed in](#) — but it did. West, who had been proudly waving around a bottle of Hennessy and then-girlfriend Amber Rose on the red carpet earlier in the evening, ran up the stairs as a then-teenage Swift earnestly accepted her Female Video of the Year award and told the world that, basically, Beyoncé deserved it more. But given what West already knew about the VMAs and the whole disaster-equals-ratings equation, it's hard to buy that he didn't know what he was doing.

2011: Beyoncé's big baby reveal

The singer had already turned up on the VMAs red carpet and let a few savvy photographers in on her secret hours earlier. But that didn't seem to steal of the thunder from her performance of "Love on Top." Taking the already annoying "pregnancy reveal" trend to the next level, Bey ended her athletic turn on the song by dropping the mike, unbuttoning her blazer and rubbing what was an unmistakable belly where we all *know* previously there was nothing but a stomach that resembled a washboard. This is one of the few VMA surprises that could be described by

this reporter as pleasant, by the way.

Beyoncé - Love On Top (Live at the MTV Video Music Awards 2011)



2014: Miley Cyrus sends a proxy to accept her VMA

Let's just skip the ugliness of 2013 and go straight to another happy "surprise" from the history books: When Cyrus sent "Jesse" to accept her award for "Wrecking Ball" on behalf of homeless youth. Sure, he was objectively as good-looking as a model, and the cameras remained stuck on a slightly overwrought performance by Cyrus for most of his speech, but it was pretty moving television. "Though I may have been invisible on the streets," he told the crowd, "I have a lot of the same dreams that brought many of you here tonight."



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