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Waiting for OK Go: MTV Awards' Existential Moment

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NEW YORK, Aug. 31 -- We wait -- and wait and wait -- for the quintessential MTV Video Music Awards moment. And it arrives, by our estimate, at 9:07 p.m. That's when the highly synchronized foursome of OK Go brings down the house with the first live performance of the group's YouTube charmer "Here It Goes Again," a rousing dancing-on-treadmills routine.

What does it say about the VMA that the show's highlight was inspired by a music video that took off not on MTV but on the Web?

Two things.

One, the VMA, held at Radio City Music Hall on Thursday, still knows how to put on a show. (More evidence: Vampy Britney, in a live feed, asking a busy K-Fed: "Where's the baby?" Al Gore, to wild applause, giving a short lecture on the effects of global warning. And comedian Sarah Silverman telling Paris Hilton she's too fat.)

Two, the VMA is more pop-culture spectacle, Us Weekly on the tube, than a celebration of its namesake.

Sure, the Moon Men trophies were handed out to the likes of Panic! at the Disco (video of the year), the All American Rejects (best group video) and Chamillionaire (best rap video). But, really, viewers don't tune in to one of cable TV's biggest shows to find out who takes home the honors. Not even this year's addition of ringtone of the year. (Fort Minor's "Where'd You Go" won.)

Now in its 23rd year, the VMA tries to stay ahead of the pack of more buttoned-up awards ceremonies by inviting an eclectic mix of performers, presenters and guests who keep the folks at People, Us Weekly and Star gainfully employed. This year's host was the indefatigable Jack Black -- he sings! his eyebrows dance! he dresses like Elvis with a hangover!

With new albums to promote, Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, the Killers and a very fierce Beyonce all performed, using the VMA plugathon to target that hyperkinetic, iPodding, YouTubing audience. (Think what you will about JT and his post-N'Sync success, when he opened the show by singing, on key, "I'm bringing sexy back," he sounded like he meant it.)

Lots of channels these days have wacky awards shows -- the TV Land Awards, the Video Game Awards, etc. -- and MTV has got to outdo the knockoffs.

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We might have seen Britney Spears's beloved K-Fed rap his little heart out at the Teen Choice Awards nearly two weeks ago. But we had to watch the VMA to see Lil' Kim, fresh out of the big house, walk onstage in an orange jumpsuit and declare, "You just can't keep a good bitch down," before presenting the best male video honors to James Blunt, who also won for best cinematography.

On the VMA red carpet, which we are allowed to roam before the festivities, we bump into the super-tanned and super-blond Hogan family -- the Hulkman gives new meaning to the word "towering" -- while Ciara, the diminutive songstress, struggles to tell us who made her slinky, glittery number. Her stylist takes our notepad and spells out "LILY ET CIE."

It's delicious to see Pink, who spoofed Jessica Simpson in her nominated video "Stupid Girls," walk the carpet minutes after Simpson does. (A surprised Pink later accepted the award for best pop video, acting like a Valley Girl.)

We almost want to whisper to Jared Leto, the actor and frontman of 30 Seconds to Mars, as he whisks by, "Lighten up on the eyeliner."

We overhear that the post-VMA party to be at is at nearby Roseland Ballroom, where Timberlake, who skipped the red carpet, will give a private concert.

Needless to say, more than a few hundred non-boldface names tried to get into the show. With two of her gal pals, 16-year-old Taylor Kieslich waited outside MTV's offices in Times Square in the early afternoon to score a free ticket. No luck. She went home.

Streets around Radio City Music Hall were closed off, and a throng of cameras crowded the headquarters of MTV News, where Suchin Pak, the Katie Couric of MTV, got to ask the Big Questions. Had we been with Pak when the winner for best female video was announced -- Kelly Clarkson won for "Because of You" -- we would have asked: Did you see how shocked Christina Aguilera looked?

About 2,000 viewers and music insiders selected the nominees for this year's categories, and last night's VMA marked the first time that viewers were able to vote for all the awards. That's good and dandy -- if you trust the aesthetic values of MTV's core audience.

Beyonce, with Slim Thug & Bun B, won for best R&B video. Shakira took the choreography trophy for "Hips Don't Lie," with Wyclef Jean. The Pussycat Dolls won for best dance video.

A.F.I. won best rock video and the Black Eyed Peas took home best hip hop video. In accepting that award, rapper-producer will.i.am thanked the folks at Blackeyedpeas.com.

But the group that stole the show wasn't up for any awards. Andy Ross, the guitarist for OK Go, didn't care who won the Moon Men. Backstage, still sweating minutes after the performance, he tells us: "Hopefully we'll be nominated for something next year."

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