The MTV Generation: 1980s Fashion

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Abstract

This is the story about Monica LaSalle’s style journey through the 1980s. The fashion and trends of the decades made a significant mark on American popular culture as well as the fashion industry as a whole. Using interviews with Monica, as well as popular culture media such as music video and television shows, this essay will analyze whether or not Monica was on trend at the right time. In particular, I will focus heavily on the introduction of the Music Television channel (MTV) and the effect that its music videos by featured artists, Madonna and Olivia Newton, had on Monica’s sense of style.

The Birth of MTV

On Saturday, August 1, 1981, the youth of America eagerly waited in front of blank television sets for history to be made. At 12:01 a.m., images of the launch countdown for the spaceship Colombia and the launch of Apollo 11 flashed across the screen as a voice, very matter-of-fact, read: “Ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll.” It was the birth of MTV. The first music video featured was appropriately titled “Video Killed the Radio Star” by The Buggles. This marked the beginning of a 24-hour loop of music videos, where enthusiasts young and old could tune in to catch their favorite musicians in action.

MTV’s target audience was teenagers, specifically from the twelve to nineteen age range. The channel dubbed these viewers the “MTV generation” (Greenberg 153). A documentary that the network broadcasted about the MTV Generation referred to the group as “young adults struggling to establish a cultural niche for themselves” (O’Connor C19). Monica LaSalle, barely a teenager when the channel launched, quickly became a part of that demographic. She looked to popular artists, such as Madonna and Olivia Newton John in particular, for inspiration in finding her own “niche” in terms of style.

Monica’s Story

Born and raised in the heart of Northeast Philadelphia, Monica LaSalle was one of ten children to Elaine, a homemaker, and Jim, a dedicated member of the Philadelphia Police Department. Monica spent her adolescent and young adult years in the decade of decadence. The 1980s marked a decade of great political, social, and economic change, but it seems that the general population tends to associate the decade with one thing and one thing only: the fashion. As the seventh of ten children, Monica struggled to keep up with the latest trends due to limited
resources. I recently sat down with her while she reflected on the good, the bad, and the ugly of 1980s fashion:

**Who or what influenced your style as a teenager in the eighties?**

Really, we all looked to Madonna. She was a pop icon and set the tone for what everyone was doing, especially in terms of style. MTV had just come out and all you saw were her videos. I wanted to emulate that. I think everyone wanted to emulate that. Every store you went into had her outfits.

When MTV first aired in 1981, its sole purpose was to display music videos twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Therefore, the youth of America were constantly exposed to these new, outlandish trends and instantly ran out to emulate their favorite new wave, heavy metal, or pop musician’s looks. It was in 1982 that Madonna emerged onto the scene with “Everybody,” first appearing on Dick Clark’s hit television series, *American Bandstand*, where she infamously claimed that her goal was “to rule the world.” And rule the world she did, at least for the remainder of the decade. It wasn’t long before young girls all over the world were imitating her cool new look.

Why did Madonna’s look become so popular? VH1 interviewed fashion industry insiders for their “1984” segment of the hit series *I Love The ’80s*, and journalist Miranda Sawyer claimed the population identified with Madonna and her style because, “it seemed like she was like you. She didn’t seem too rude. She didn’t seem too cheeky. She was attractive without being sophisticated.” Madonna’s signature style was a mix of vintage and contemporary dress, and she often found herself imitating different personas, as evidenced by her Marilyn Monroe phase (Farrell-Beck and Parsons 219). Her classic look at the release of her debut album *Madonna* consisted of lacy tops, mini skirts over leggings or capris, stacked rubber band bracelets or bangles, crucifix jewelry and bleached, permed hair. Sawyer continues in the interview with VH1 that Madonna wore “lots of bangles and too many accessories. You know, not one belt but three. Not one bangle but seventy.”

Monica LaSalle loved to mix and match her old “rags,” as she called them, with new pieces to create the effortless vintage look that Madonna captured in her dress. Madonna’s style was easy to emulate but teens like Monica were able to add their own spin to the trend through accessories such as jewelry, belts, headpieces, or shoes. Monica believed that’s what eighties fashion was all about, “expressing one’s individuality through dress” (LaSalle). She grew up in a generation where everyone wanted to stand out and be unique. Fortunately, the trend coincided with these ideals.

In January 1983, Madonna performed on a Philadelphia-based dance music reality show called *Dancin’ on Air*. She wore a long black skirt over capris, high white socks with black loafers, and a black vest layered over a white T-shirt. She was accessorized with a hat, big earrings, long necklaces and stacked rubber bracelets. The world was continually exposed to this trend through the circulation of her music videos on MTV. Videos for “Holiday,” “Borderline,” “Into the Groove” and “Burning Up”—just to name a few—feature this iconic look.
Another realm of pop culture where Madonna spread her style influence was film. Madonna starred in the 1980s flick *Desperately Seeking Susan* alongside Rosanna Arquette. Accessories played a big part in this movie, such as Madonna’s signature lace, fingerless gloves, headscarf and bold, layered jewelry. Madonna and Rosanna’s characters wore a lot of lingerie or lacy mesh tops paired with leggings and blazers, as well.

![Image of Monica in a lacy, black top paired with high-wasted shorts](image)

Figure 1. Monica in a lacy, black top paired with high-wasted shorts, 1987.

Monica hopped right on trend, starting with the hair. “You had to have the big knotty, dirty blond hair. My hair was naturally that color but I added some highlights. We went out and bought bottles of “Stiff Stuff” hairspray. It was like crazy glue in your hair. You couldn’t run a brush through it.” She even jokes that it took years to gradually “deflate” her perm and get used to the fact that she was 5 ft 9 in, not 6 ft tall. She mentioned that some of her bolder friends chose new wave hairstyles, coinciding with the androgynous trend of the time, where gender and sexuality were ambiguous.

Did you think your style was original?

No. We all knew we were emulating her [Madonna]. We would literally get ready with a picture of her in front of us, mimicking her looks. I was actually a little more toned down. Plus I didn’t have the means to buy all the accessories and this and that. But, I don’t think any of us were original. If you went to a social or a party, everyone looked alike. If you look at old tapes of Dick Clark’s American Bandstand and Dancin’ On Air, we were all the same. However, there were different variations of the style through the ages. You would see forty-year-old, grown women with bandanas in their hair, bobby socks and heels.
Though Madonna sparked the revolution, if you will, there were other key players in the music industry that influenced the trends of the decade. One of the most memorable types of attire was gym wear, inspired by Olivia Newton John’s music video for “Physical,” a popular song following the birth of MTV.

*What about the release of Olivia Newton John’s video for “Physical”?*

Wow, I think it was 1981 when that single came out, I was twelve or thirteen. I remember that video being absolutely ridiculous, with all the overweight, sweaty men dancing around. I remember it being very provocative. She is definitely who I found inspiration for my headbands. Though, Madonna reinvented the headband later with her bandanas. Olivia was wearing all of these brightly colored leotards and off the shoulder shirts and sweaters. I think that trend grew even more after Flashdance came out.

A year or so after the release of “Physical,” the movie *Flashdance* prompted a wave of cut-up, off-the-shoulder shirts and sweaters paired with leggings and legwarmers. This look was inspired by Olivia Newton John’s stylish sportswear in her video. With ten mouths to feed, a new wardrobe each year was not in the cards for Monica. She often had to wear her older sisters’ hand-me-downs. Nobody knew the difference. As she got into high school in 1983, she took up a part time job and was finally able to purchase her own pieces to spruce up her style.

One of the great things about wearing separates is having the ability to layer, mix and match, just as Madonna since her first appearance in 1983 on *Dancin’ on Air*. Separates provided endless possibility of outfits. This fad helped Monica to stay on trend given her modest bank account. She was able to tweak her hand-me down T-shirts, tanks tops, and sweatshirts to her liking. Women used cut up separates to draw attention to their toned physical appearance, in particular
their midriffs. The popularity of separates created infinite possibilities for a fashionista on a budget in the eighties.

Monica shopped at Fashion Bug, Express and the “original superstore,” Carfour. In her interview, she explained that every store you went in carried these styles. This look was easy to mimic, so people of all walks of life could be on trend, even if they did not have the resources. Coincidentally, these trends were being mass-produced at the height of consumerism during the Regan administration. Retailers knew that capitalizing on this trend would earn considerable profits. Marketing heavily focused on the youth of this generation, dubbed Generation X (Farrell-Beck and Parsons), as they were more conscious of their appearance, particularly in the realm of apparel, and willing to spend to be fashionable.

As the end of the decade neared, the style began to shift once again.

**When do you feel that the look got old? When did you see the trend begin to die out?**

Once Madonna started the whole Anti-Christ movement or whatever toward the late eighties. She became very controversial. She lost her following a little bit there with the raunchy videos she was putting out. When “Holiday” came out, she had more appeal so everyone wanted to be like her, even if her dress was a little outrageous. But with her later albums the controversy came
parents scolding their kids for mimicking her style and things of that nature. I mean, she was wearing those pointed bustiers and doing all kinds of crazy things with the crucifix and what not.

She never really set a trend as widespread as she did in the eighties. She has reinvented herself countless times over the last few decades but nothing caught on like it did back then. I think if she was as controversial as she became from the start of her career, that she wouldn’t have become a trendsetter at all. The eighties would have been totally different.

Toward the end of the decade, Monica began to tone down her look, dressing more modestly as she entered college. She recalls a conversation with one of her professors at Temple University in which she was told that employers would judge her based on the way she presented herself, specifically through dress. “The professor said, ‘dressing like Madonna is not going to get you a job, sweetie.’ I remember thinking what an idiot he was and intentionally copying her more risqué outfits for his class specifically. At some point, I matured and my style followed suit.

Figure 4. Monica with more conservative look, a simple black top with acid washed jeans, 1989.

According to Monica, the “Like a Prayer” era marked the end of Madonna’s reign over fashion and coincidently marked the end of the decade as well. Despite the controversy with the taboo video, which featured Madonna having an affair with a black man, experiencing stigmata and dancing amongst burning crucifixes, Monica still took notes from the pop star. I asked her how her father felt about this, for he was a strict and devout Catholic. She claimed that since it was so widely accepted, “he never said ‘your not going out like that.’” Although, as she looks back and reminisces, she humorously remarks that, she “wishes he would have.”
As evidenced by her story, there were many social, cultural, and economic factors that played into 1980s fashion. While Monica was certainly not a trendsetter or a pioneer of style, she was eager to keep up with MTV celebrities and her peers, and she was resourceful in doing so. Like most adults looking back on their fashion choices, Monica reminisced about the infamous eighties style with humor and perhaps a touch of embarrassment. Her desire to be on trend transcended her teenage years and at forty-three, Monica is as stylish as ever. Though she has not forgotten her humble beginnings, she can be found rummaging through the aisles of her favorite retailers to remain relevant in the fashion world.
Works Cited


LaSalle, Monica. Personal Interview. 16, July, 2013.

