

From Song Idea to VH1. Michael Bolton's "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You" and its Transformation into a Music Video

Knut Holtsträter

Power ballads and their media adaptations – whether as standalone music videos or as part of film soundtracks – are an integral part of Western popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s. From this perspective, power ballads can be understood as multimedia entities that create new meanings with every media adaptation. In this article, I will analyze the song "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You" by Michael Bolton, focusing on the lyrics and the musical form, as well as the studio recording and the music video. I will demonstrate that the song and its adaptation across different media, as well as within a specific genre context, give rise to varying meanings that are of crucial importance to Bolton's development as an artist and as a star.

Introduction

In this essay I want to address the process of a pop song production as an artistic process which incorporates various art forms and media. More than enough, we, as an audience or as scholars, witness that the meaning of a song can alter significantly when interpreted by and/or brought into different media representations. This aspect can often become a real problem in music video analyses. To synthesize these problems, I interpret the single manifestations of the production and marketing of a popular song, from the composition of a song, to a studio recording (in different versions), the official song book and the production and publishing of a music video as different artistic representations and therefore a manifestation of decisions which had to be made by the artist and her or his collaborators for that single media representation of an artistic work.

As a music historian who is invested in song studies and opera studies but also in theatre studies and performance studies the choice of Michael Bolton and "How I am Supposed to Live Without You" as a topic for this volume came quite natural to me: On the one hand, there is nearly no research on Bolton (except for a chapter by Sasha Senger in 2019) and, on the other hand, the ballad epitomises one of the genres which is the most "theatrical" imaginable in popular music research: the power ballad (which was prominently discussed by David Metzger 2012 and 2017). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of analyses of 'mainstream' pop music videos of the 1980s and early 1990s, which clearly do not aim at producing 'pop art', and there is virtually no research on MTV's sister TV channel VH1, the station on which videos like this were meant to be broadcast.¹

1 Although the literature review by Railton and Watson (2011: 2-5) certainly needs updating, their underlying arguments about the preferences and blind spots of music video research are still valid in my eyes.

In the following, Bolton's identity and persona will be examined through the various media representations of the song, with a particular focus on his masculinity and race. As will be discussed below, the attribution of the singer, the song and the music video to the soul genre plays an important role.

Bolton's and Doug James's composition of the song dates back to 1983, its first public performance was in the same year by Lisa Hartmann in the US TV drama series *Knots Landing* (CBS) (Bolton 2012:134–135). Shortly after that, still in 1983, Laura Branigan recorded the song for her second album which was a chart success.² In 1989, Bolton recorded the song two times in the studio, once for his album *Soul Provider*, and a second time as a single or 'radio edit' which entered the Billboard Hot 100 and the Billboard Adult Contemporary Music charts in October 1989 for 23 weeks and peaked both charts in January 1990.³ In the following, I will refer to the second version, the radio edit.

Bolton as Singer-songwriter

Examining the lyrics of the song allows to identify the various levels of meaning, bearing in mind that the performer of the song is also the songwriter. In his autobiography from 2012 Michael Bolton describes that in 1983 he was paired by his management with composer Doug James to work on a series of songs.⁴ James and Bolton immediately got along with each other and already worked out the basic framework of the song (i.e. the first verse and chorus) as well as the musical parts in their first session. The rest of the lyrics were finished in the next session (Bolton 2012: 134). Bolton was responsible for the lyrics. He writes that no autobiographical experiences are inscribed into the song, or in his own words, it "was not inspired by any event in my life" (Bolton 2012: 136).

However, by recording his song in 1989 in a studio and adding it to his stage repertoire, the song and its writer enter the aesthetic realm of the singer-songwriter genre, where actual person, star persona and narrative instances of the song can intermingle.⁵ In terms of production, this "singer-songwriter" constellation is a phenomenon that is well-known in genres which are heavily relying on or utilizing the tropes of artistic authenticity, realness or personal sincerity (like, among others, folk, country, rock, punk, avantgarde pop, hip hop, and, of course contemporary pop genres like bedroom pop, hyper pop or singer-songwriter).⁶ It is lesser known, though, in genres where the diversification and specialization of the production chain seems more obvious like in Tin Pan Alley and Broadway resp. Hollywood songs or classic pop, easy listening, and in the case of Bolton, 80s mainstream pop, and to be more precise, soft rock, adult contemporary music, and so-called blue-eyed soul: soul music or music with soul elements which is performed by white singers like the Righteous Brothers, Joe Cocker, Dusty Springfield, Michael McDonald, or

2 Laura Branigan sings the song in exactly the same pitch as Bolton, her vocal performance is also very impressive. See the album *Branigan 2* and as a single release (both 1983). See also Bolton 2012: 136-137.

3 Cf. <https://www.billboard.com/artist/michael-bolton/chart-history/hsi/> (accessed 17 April 2025) and Hyatt (1999: 354).

4 Bolton writes that it was in reaction to his first commercial success, the Billboard Hot 100 entry of his hard-rock song *Fools Game* in May 1983 (Bolton 2012: 132-134).

5 My approach is informed by the research of Simon Frith (1996), Philip Auslander (cf. 2006, 2009, 2015, 2021) and Allen Moore (2012). In earlier research, I discuss these concepts from the perspective of performance studies and theatre theory and combine in them with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1994), David Graver's concept of the different bodies of an actor (Graver 1997) and detailed performance analyses. My concept of persona lies at the intersection of fictions and narratives, as well as media, art forms and genres, in my opinion *persona* reveals its power when the connections between these areas lose their coherent meaning and the person is confronted with himself or herself in a specific performative situation. However, the creation of a persona that extends beyond a single performance and, in the best-case scenario, spans an entire career—and in some cases even a whole lifetime and posthumous reception—does not stem solely from direct interactions between the artist and the audience, but is the result of (often long-term) staging strategies, frequently devised not only by the artist themselves but also by their professional environment. Cf. Holtsträter 2022a: 298 and 432.

6 Cf., among others, Moore 2002 and Negus and Astor 2022.

Simply Red, just to name a few. The fact that Michael Bolton functions as a composer and performer in this mainstream context is due to his unusual career and is not necessarily the norm; like e.g. Carol King, Bruno Mars or Sia, he earned a living writing songs for other artists for several years.

When it comes to a comparative analysis of various manifestations of a song (as text, audio and video), it is useful to interrogate and differentiate between the performer's various roles, which at first glance appear to be the same in the person of Michael Bolton. Therefore, I differentiate between subject positions or personifications that come with the various layers of literary, musical and performative expression: the lyricist (Bolton as a creative artist and author of the song narrative), the protagonist (or the character of the song narrative, literarily indexed by "me" and "you"), the singer Bolton (his vocals during the studio recording in all its performative and physical dimensions), the actor Bolton (in the music video), his star image (Bolton as an object of subject of celebrity) as well as the skill-set he uses for the performance (the performer as a professional, Bolton's expertise in general). All these positions play a part in the structured and intentional utterances we understand as "music".⁷

The Song and Its Structure

Before I address the music video, it is necessary to analyse the song itself on the basis of the studio recording (i.e. the radio edit). The following example includes the song's lyrics⁸ as well as indications of the form parts of the studio recording.⁹ The ballad features an elaborate song structure with distinct form parts like an intro and outro (which both feature the then new synthesizer Yamaha DX7) and with pre-choruses that have different lyrics every time and are crucial for the development of the song's narrative. The form segments "verse-pre/chorus/chorus" are run through two times, followed by a guitar solo which gives this ballad additional time of reflection. The solo matches the form of the verse and closes with a key change from B-flat to B at its end which then leads to another pre-chorus and chorus. The whole song is closed by a short instrumental outro which recalls the intro, now in the new key B.¹⁰ This ballad has all characteristics of an 80s power ballad as described by David Metzger (2012: 439-440).

The protagonist in this song narrative is obviously placed in the present, in an everyday environment, speaks from the first-person perspective ("I, me, mine") and addresses a "you" ("your"). Within the heteronormative discourse of mainstream pop in general and specifically 1989, in a society which is shaken by the AIDS crisis, and considering a series of prominent, often nonconsensual outings in the entertainment world and thriving homophobia in general, we can assume that these undefined pronouns were (and are) to be understood as marking a romantic relation-

7 The "protagonist" refers to Allen Moore's analytical set for studio recordings (Moore 2012: 126). These constellations of subject positions may well be enhanced for personal analytical and theoretical purpose, for example Holtsträter 2022a: chapter IV. See also Holtsträter 2022b, which employs a song-based but multi-genre approach.

8 The songtext is taken from the songbook Bolton: *Soul Provider* (Bolton 1990a): 24–28 (voice & piano accompaniment in the original key B-flat, without the solo-part), and might differ from lyrics in contemporary video or streaming platforms in detail.

9 The 4:18 min. long radio edit is the one which is discussed here. The less well-known album version is 4:48 min. long. The longer album version varies the keyboard arrangement and repeats the last chorus section, with Bolton varying the melody line a little. This version can only be found on the LP and CD album, all other releases on sampler albums (like Bolton 1995 and 2009), maxi and singles for the broadcasts and as a music video and on the VHS album refer to the shorter radio edit. I assume that the longer album version is an earlier one and has been replaced by the radio edit altogether. Its formal power is so strong that even in stage performances Bolton resorts to the formal concept of the shorter version.

10 The stringency of this song form is documented by the maxi single [CBS 655397, 1998, 12-inch, 45rpm, with "How Am I Supposed to Be Without You" on the A-side and "Forever Eyes" (without album) and "That's What Love Is All About" (from the album *Soul Provider* on the B-side) where the ballad is pressed in its original form (4:14 min.), albeit on a very wide groove appropriate to the format and with correspondingly excellent dynamics and sound quality. The cover is labelled „Unverkäufliches Muster“ (promotional copy).

ship of a man with a woman or vice versa.¹¹ As Laury Branigan's recording shows, Bolton's song was not meant to be sung by a specific gender. But as Bolton's studio recording, which is the subject here, makes clear, the gender of the protagonist of his recording is male.

Obviously, the protagonist is surprised by the news that "you" wants to move away, maybe to another city. The reason for moving away seems to be a new relationship that the protagonist did not yet know about. This comes as a surprise to the protagonist because he and "you" have known each other for a long time and seem to know each other well. The fourth line reveals that the protagonist knows how to read her resp. "your" facial expression: "From the look upon your face, I see it's true."

In the pre-chorus (lines 5 and 6: "So tell me all about it, tell 'bout the plans you're makin', / tell me one thing more before I go."), the protagonist's speech gets agitated, he seems to be happy for her and asks her about her plans. With the next line (7), however, this brief episode is interrupted by a loud lament and we witness him pouring his heart out to her: "Tell me how am I supposed to live without you / Now that I've been loving you so long", an expression of a yet unspoken declaration of love, which now comes too late.

Here, lyrical content (protagonist) and vocal expression (singer Bolton) correlate. The protagonist virtually suffers a nervous breakdown when one considers the extremely high and long, wailing melody and the small breaks in register (between chest voice and falsetto) that Bolton is incorporating here so artfully, as well as the high and long downward slurs. Here, the singer Bolton is indeed at the top edge of his ambitus (D-sharp₅), that is, the vocal range in which he can still offer a coherent vocal sound in his powerful chest voice (or belt) register.¹²

The protagonist becomes aware of this in the second verse (line 12) when he says: "I'm too proud for crying / Didn't come here to break down", although that is what has just happened. Then defiantly, in the second pre-chorus, he defends his position as a daydreamer (line 16-17). But here it is no longer clear whether he is still addressing her or rather talking to himself. For the second chorus he finds his way back into the situation and addresses it loudly and repeatedly. The following guitar solo (by studio guitarist Michael Landau) fills the next section of the verse exactly once and thus replaces a possible continuation of our protagonist's lamentations. All the words seem to have been said, and here the guitar is allowed to transfer the emotional expression of the human voice into a much more delicate wheeping and onto a higher level of range and virtuosity.

The last bars of the guitar solo are used to prepare the key-change from B-flat to B. These kind of key-changes or ascending modulations are ubiquitous in power ballads at this time and could therefore be seen as a topos for the genre.¹³ These key-changes could occur in many forms – from very intricate modulations to a simple lifting of the whole musical sphere (the so-called "truck driver modulation"). What the step up a semitone provides in this case is not only that it pushes the singer Bolton further to his vocal limits in his strong chest voice resp. belting voice register, but also brings back our silently wailing protagonist (during the guitar solo probably). He is allowed to get loud once more, but with new power and a higher vocal pitch. From the point of view of the plot, everything relevant has happened now, and the "constant escalation" –

11 On the general topic of addressing sex and gender in songs, Holtsträter 2022b: 210–213.

12 He is near the range of high singers like Elton John (D₅), Sting (D₅) or Peter Cetera (D-sharp₅). For a general comparison of the vocal range of male pop singers see Holtsträter 2018: 149–151.

But he uses also falsetto, e.g. in the studio recording of the song *Georgia On My Mind* and occasionally during stage performances.

13 Barry Manilow's *Mandy* from 1974 seemed to kick-start this fashion, cf. Metzger 2012: 445. However, ascending modulations were ubiquitous in other genres before. For example, Nelson Riddle's arrangements for Frank Sinatra's mid-time swing numbers in the early 1950s used this very often, when it comes to the repetition of the AABA-part.

a term coined by David Metzger which is a central strategy for power ballads¹⁴ – is developing on the musical level, for example by extending and intensifying the expressive values through musical elements like repetition, intensification of timbre and/or the virtuosity of the performance.

This type of song form is actually quite unusual, as it is not necessarily found in popular music, but rather in classical Romantic music of the 19th century, or more precisely in musical theatre. With its alternating sequence of excitement and relaxation, addressing and introspection, i.e., the display of emotional states through various recitative and arioso sections, it is reminiscent of the dramatic progression of a romantic concert aria or opera aria. Combined with the exuberant pathos of the lyrics and the vocal excellence displayed in such arias, the power ballads of the 1980s bear many similarities to opera arias or concert arias of the Romantic era: The action stops and the heroine enters into dialogue with herself and the audience to judge what has happened, clarify her feelings, and decide on possible options for action.¹⁵

As further moments of comparison, everyday vocal expression and the communication situation of everyday speech can often help to clarify what is actually happening in a song.¹⁶ If one were to strip this “monologue” of the music and transfer the vocal expression into an everyday situation, the scene described here would be quite harsh, pathetic and awkward, the persons witnessing this situation in an everyday environment would be embarrassed.¹⁷

With this in mind, it is fascinating how Bolton’s vocal performance brings us emotionally closer to the protagonist of this song. But this is mainly due to the fact that we experience these lyrics as a musical and vocal performance, which in turn is embedded in the rules and obligations of various art forms (literature, music, musical and theatre performance), making the harsh scene more enjoyable. It is not uncommon that these layers of expression can actually contradict each other and relate to different personalities, functions and habitus. This can be described as an overlay of different representations, which are certainly intended to be contradictory; and precisely in these contradictions lies the aesthetic and artistic appeal to us, the audience.¹⁸ In Bolton’s case, it is this realm of musical style, contradictory messages, sound and habitus that unfolds his artistic potential and unique quality as a singer and performer.

Saesha Senger examined Bolton’s masculinity by reviewing his impact on rock journalism. She describes Bolton’s image at this time very generally as: „Romantically oriented lyrically yet often physically and vocally stereotypically male, Michael Bolton rose to fame in the late 1980s by combining elements of a conservative performance of masculinity with a sense of vulnerability associated more with female performers.“ (Senger 2019:77) I am not sure if this makes full use of

14 Metzger 2017: 151–153, where he deciphers the structural differences between a R&B song and a power ballad. See also Metzger 2012.

15 In addition to Metzger’s observation that the power ballad became an integral part of Hollywood’s blockbuster industry in the 1990s, it should be noted that this song form also found its way into the mega-musicals of the 1990s. The inherent “theatricality” of the power ballad, which can be found in the song form and its expressive style, contributed significantly to it finding a home on the theatre stage.

16 This is always a good entry in vocal analysis in the classroom: Asking the students for the equivalent vocal expression in a non-artistic context like everyday speech. How would the singing of Neil Young, Sting, Karen Carpenter or Grace Jones sound if we would translate it into situations of everyday conversation? And which personality and narrative situation would this vocal expression depict?

17 When discussing this aspect in the symposium “*You are beautiful, no matter what they say:*” *Sentimental Ballads in Popular Music* on 13 September 2023 in Siegen (Germany), the audience found analogies in songs from Hall and Oates which are distinctly misogynistic in describing the female “you” as unfaithful and deceitful (song like “Private Eyes” or “Man Eater”) or create situations of potential unease (like “Kiss on My List”). But in Bolton’s song, the female “you” did nothing wrong, the situation is more like in Doobie Brother’s “What a Fool Believes” where the protagonist is indulged in pipe dreams without committing himself to his beloved.

18 Holtsträter 2022a: 362–373. The fact that Bolton calls up his top notes in this piece and that the length of these notes makes the difference between success and failure can be seen in live performances later in his career, where the song does not feature the key change. Unfortunately for the entire song structure, the melody line of the guitar solo no longer has the transformative or liminal power it once had. In recordings of live shows and tv appearances from the 2000s onwards, the whole song is even transposed by a minor third to G, the singer’s top notes are then g1 and a1.

the range of connections that can be made in relation to race and gender at that time. In fact, it is possible to compare Bolton with male singers and masculinity in the genres of soul and Motown like young Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, Ray Charles, or Stevie Wonder, because these singers were not only Bolton's „inspirations and heroes“¹⁹, but Bolton himself was marketed as a soul artist – his breakthrough album had the title “Soul Provider” – and his music was understood as a modern take on soul.

Certainly, Bolton was unique in the US landscape at the time, as he (as a white singer) bridged several gaps between the genres of soul, rock and mainstream pop, thereby also combining different concepts of masculinity and male vocal expression related to the musical genres.²⁰

From Studio Recording to Music Video

The song “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You” reached its audience through many channels: Via the radio or on TV (music variety shows in programmed TV, or on music television), for example in private via mobile radio, kitchen radio or car stereo or in public spaces like bars, restaurant or shopping malls, or as a product purchased or received as a gift, for example on the album CD, LP or cassette, as a single, maxi single or on VHS. In all these contexts, the song will serve different purposes and therefore be perceived differently. In principle, however, it makes sense to look at the changes the song underwent from the studio recording to the music video, from a listening experience to an audiovisual experience. An important aspect is that the visuality and physicality of the singer is added. In this respect, it is useful to distinguish the performer's body in the understanding of the body as the site of corporeal experience and also corporeal expression (in German theatre theory: “Körper”, the body that we “have”) and the understanding of the physical or the “fleshy” body (“Leib”, the body that we “are”). The first aspect views the body, as it were, as a medium at the artist's command, emphasising their ability to perceive it consciously and to create expression through it, whether through singing, acting, dance, costume, hairstyle, or even through permanent modifications to the body (tattoos, physical fitness). These may, in various respects, prove to be the result of practice and training, and thus represent a set of artistic choices, an identification with a particular musical genre or a particular subculture. (However, the body can also provide clues about an individual's life choices beyond the realm of art, for example through the tattoos and physical fitness mentioned earlier.) “Leib”, the latter dimension, can include very different aspects of the body which are not in the hands of the artist, for example, skin colour, physiognomy, height, disability etc. but also several aspects of vocalicity (voice timbre and aspects of the vocal sound which are determined by the physical body).²¹

Indeed, Bolton was formerly on the R&B charts with a cover of “(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay” (1967–1968) by singer Otis Redding and guitarist Steve Cropper. For listeners who could not rely on a visual component (like AM and FM radio) the fact that Bolton debuted as a white person in the field of soul and therefore in the subgenre of blue-eyed soul, was often a talking point in promoting and moderating his music to a mainstream pop audience. This element of surprise may not be as comprehensible to us today, especially for Europeans who witnessed the careers of English and white multi-genre singers like Eric Burdon, Dusty Springfield, Joe Cocker, Annie Lennox, George Michael or Robert Palmer whose singing in different ways was related to US or British and/or Northern soul. But considering the structural racism of the USA, which also draws its ‘colour lines’ in the musical genres, R&B and soul was (and still is) a genre that is connotated with Black music culture.²² Tina Turner, for example, who only knew Bolton from the radio, told

19 Bolton 2012: 182.

20 For the genre of rock, cf. LJ Müller 2022: 96–103.

21 Cf. the slightly differing concepts of Graver 1997 and Fischer-Lichte 2004: 129–130.

him when they first met: “I thought you were a brother.” (Bolton 2012: 181. It was meant as a compliment, and he took it as such.) And, around 2020, reaction videos by Black Youtubers like Tim and Fred Williams where Bolton and other performers of so-called blue-eyed soul (like the Righteous Brothers or Michael McDonald) play with this expectation bias.²³

Take the skin colour of the singer as a shock for the audiences alone, add to this the eye-catching hairstyle even by the standards of the time (a long permanent wave with a lot of hair spray, which might assign him to hard rock or even “hair metal”) and the distinct features of his a narrow, beardless face, combined with a rather athletic overall appearance.

Nowadays, the video can be found in digitalised form on various video platforms. At the time of its release, however, it was available on music TV and VHS cassettes. The video cassette market apparently was so important at the time²⁴ that the music label Columbia, Bolton and his management decided to release a VHS cassette titled Michael Bolton: *Soul Provider: The Videos*.²⁵



Figure 1. VHS cassette Michael Bolton: *Soul Provider: The Videos*. CMV/CBS Records resp. SMV Enterprises/Sony Music Entertainment 49881-2, 1990. Photo by Knut Holtsträter.

22 Banks (1996: 170-174) addresses the discrimination of black musicians, directors and producers in the music video industry in the late 80s, reaching the whole spectre from low-budgeting and profiling via music genre to blunt exclusion.

23 Cepeda (2020).

24 Cf. the “music video cycle” outlined by Goodwin (1993: 43); he considers that “home video” accounted for a small proportion of revenue.

25 The copy in my possession was released in the analogue colour encoding system PAL and was therefore obviously not made for the US market but for the European market or other countries in South America, Africa or South Asia which adopted this standard. The different labels on the cartridge and its package document the change of the company ownership from CBS to Sony in that very time. The technical specifications show that this videotape was not just intended as a merchandising item or fan article but as a legitimate music record. The tape is recorded in ‘VHS hi-fi STEREO’, a format introduced by JVC in 1984 (not Super-VHS or S-VHS which was introduced 1987). In this format, the audio tracks are read, like the video track, in the same tape speed which produces a sound quality that can compete with high-quality tape and CD productions. Despite being a VHS format, the album invites you to play it on a stereo system.

The VHS tape has a playing time of approx. 38 minutes and contains the songs "Soul Provider," "How Am I Supposed to Be Without You," "How Can We Be Lovers," "(Sittin' On the) Dock of the Bay," "When I'm Back on My Feet Again," "That's What Love Is All About," "Georgia on My Mind" and the credits (with the music from "Soul Provider" as background music). Between the videos are excerpts from an interview with Bolton, which was made for this VHS production and thematises the respective song in a rather general way. Five videos feature songs from the LP release of *Soul Provider* and two, "That's What Love is All About" and "Dock of the Bay," are from the previous album *The Hunger* (1987).²⁶ All songs on the VHS cassette have also been single releases from the respective albums, and the videos were previously broadcast on TV.

This VHS video material was surely not used directly for television broadcast as professional formats such as Betamax or Betacam were more suitable for this. However, by providing a compilation of videos, this source gives a good insight into the video production and distribution practices of the time.

It seems obvious that these videos are far removed from the avant-garde approach of visual aesthetic and storytelling of Michel Gondry or David Fincher and that they do not pursue any primary subcultural or artistic aspirations; they aim at a mainstream audience and are as pleasing to the eye as a Hollywood comedy or a good TV advertising clip.²⁷ But it is important to note that the video of the song in question (directed by Greg Gold) on the VHS tape is one of the better ones in terms of production value and quality. Some videos, for example, work with models and stock footage, in some there are even logical continuity errors (e.g. in the video for 'Georgia on My Mind' the background singers change abruptly). Also, there are asynchronies, e.g. in 'Soul Provider' where a double bass is shown, but you hear an electric bass; the instrumentalists are not the original musicians, but extras, which becomes apparent, among other things, by the fact that they do not know how to play the instruments. There is another scene in which these inconsistencies are used for comic effect – a saxophone solo plays and you see a small child pretending to play the saxophone. But otherwise, these inconsistencies seem unintentional and like errors.

These videos, each produced by different directors and teams, are therefore of very different production quality and do not have the artistic and creative standards of the one discussed. And one can wonder whether their existence is justified solely by the fact that they were needed for the marketing of this music in the media landscape of the time, namely as a visual vehicle for Bolton's music on network music television.

Nevertheless, for a contemporary music video connoisseur and in the usage context of YouTube or Vimeo most of these videos look and feel very outdated and uninspiring. To get a better impression of the usage of these videos at the time, it is necessary to imagine the historical context of 1989 when this music video aired for the first time. On 1 August 1981, the US cable music channel MTV begins broadcasting with a clear approach to young urban white males listening to rock music.²⁸ In 1984, MTV began to make a profit and soon, in 1985, the MTV Entertainment Group introduced its first outlet, Video Hits One or VH1, to diversify the US market.²⁹ MTV's target group was from the age of twelve to thirty-four and in the words of Lewis (1990:33)

26 A similar re-marketing of the previous album can also be observed in the above-mentioned songbook for *Soul Provider*, where the two songs from *The Hunger* are also featured.

27 This might be the reason why these kinds of videos are left out in mostly all of the research that looks for avantgarde and innovation in music video clips, from older approaches like Hausherr & Schönholzer 1994 to newer ones like Austerlitz 2007; Keazor & Wübbena 2011; Dreckmann 2021.

28 Cf. Schmidt et al (2009: 28-29). MTV Europe was launched August 1987, first in the UK, Denmark, and Finland, a year later the franchise expanded to West Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Greece, and Norway, in the summer of 1989 Russian artists were marketed. See Banks (1996: 89-97).

29 VH1 was launched on the German cable network on May 1995, as a response to VIVA 2 but had little success and was closed in 2001. See Kurp, Hausschild and Wiese (2002: 131-132).

were subject to “the ideology of adolescence.”³⁰ The new channel VH1 was aimed at a comparatively older audience and, at the beginning, had a focus on the ‘middle of the road’ genre as well as jazz and later, after a rebranding and reformatting in 1987, ‘urban music,’ adult contemporary music (ACM) and R&B (Banks 1996: 54).³¹ The music video landscape at that time has evolved from just filming stage performances or recreating avantgarde video art and spawned its own mainstream oriented industry, enabling careers like the one of the director of the video analysed in this article, Greg Gold who also directed videos for other well-known R&B and Adult Contemporary music artists.³² Bolton was more likely to be represented with this video on VH1 than on MTV.³³ In his acceptance speech for Pop/Rock of the American Music Awards prize in the category Favourite Pop Rock Album in 1992, he thanked, among others, radio and VH1.

Like in the song “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You”, we witness the life of a couple’s relationship in the music video, but under completely different premises. The relatively calmly edited music video contains a total of three play scenes – two with Bolton and his female play partner and one with Bolton alone – as well as a musical performance, all of which are performed in the setting of the living room of an apartment. It is not quite clear if this is “his” apartment or if both protagonists share the place. (The last assumption is indicated by both of them dressing up for a concert, and after the break-up, him having his suitcase ready.)³⁴ Overall, the staging and camera work are reminiscent of older television plays.³⁵ The impression of a stage production is maintained during the video, the camera’s view is out of the (virtual) auditorium onto the stage most of the time, but constantly moves back and forth.³⁶

The stage situation framing everything is the actual musical performance of the singing Michael Bolton, he is alone on set with no band.³⁷ Into the musical performance there are three play scenes or “playlet” segments embedded,³⁸ which I would label “Strolling around alone, remembering”, “Happy Together” and “Proposal and Break-Up” (see table 1). These narratives are not shown in the chronological order of the events of the assumed plot. The video begins with Bolton strolling around and remembering the events.

30 In more detail, Banks (1996: 52-55).

31 Goodwin 1993: 136-137 interprets this time as the beginning of the “third phase” of MTV which included, among others, a shift of some middle-of-the road artists to VH1. See also Negus (1993: 58) where he explains that the “urban” radio format “has almost become a euphemism for black radio and is a descendent of the previous ‘rhythm and blues’ and ‘race’ categories.” This racial aspect of VH1 is not researched yet to my knowledge.

32 Camera by Edmund Cupcupin. Gold directed music videos for Patti LaBelle, Richard Marx, Chaka Khan, Natalie Cole, Aretha Franklin, and Smokey Robinson, was therefore skilled at staging singers. His most famous work is probably the video for “I had the time of my life,” with Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes from the soundtrack of *Dirty Dancing*.

33 However, I would argue with Ralton and Watson 2011: 45-46, that music videos do not necessarily fulfill stylistic conventions of a particular music genre (in their case hip hop music), and therefore assume that there is no archetype of a “soul music video.”

34 Senger’s interpretation (2019:125–126) that Bolton is appropriating the “feminine domestic” by performing in the stage setting of the living room might fall short because in either way the stage setting cannot be described as solely feminine. If we interpret this space as a (male) single apartment this might be the complete opposite. See Holtsträter (2022a: 216–221) where I take a look at the musical side of Playboy architecture in the 1950s and 1960s.

35 Auslander (2019: 101) relates to Fenster’s research (1993: 110) about country music videos in which “the classical storytelling style of country lyrics has been adapted to a short narrative film format.” I think that you can also find such structures in videos of other music genres that do not follow the rock aesthetic of MTV. As Fenster (1993: 112–113) describes, VH1 was instrumental in the success of country music videos. In this respect, it should be asked whether the target group of VH1 was not the actual reason for these video formats that interpret the song text as a “traditional” narrative. Ultimately, however, all music-theatrical formats on television can be used to understand these aesthetic realms. Cf. Holtsträter 2011: 285–289 and Auslander 2000.

36 The 4:09 minutes (i.e. 249 seconds) of the video can be divided into 82 shots, so on average each shot is about 3.04 seconds long. The sequences speed up towards the argument of the fictitious couple, but, in combination with the interspersed fade-outs and fade-ins, overall, it is a very calm editing sequence. The video is only dynamised by tracking shots and a constant change between larger and smaller camera angles. Only the shots and counter-shots later on in the video are reminiscent of conventional filmic means and literally push the stage space to its limits, as this is the first time we see the stage backdrop on the right, a wall with a door (to the imagined kitchen).

The playlet segments are then intertwined by Bolton’s stage performance which can be interpreted in the consecution of the narrative as a fourth segment, the phase of loud mourning after the silent remembering.

Timecode		Important events
0:00-0:59	Intro, Verse 1, pre-chorus	Strolling around alone, remembering (without singing), mixed with musical performance: Mourning
0:59-1:34	Chorus, Verse 2	Flashback episode 1: Happy Together (mixed with “strolling around and mourning”)
1:34-2:01	2nd verse	Strolling around, Musical performance: Mourning
2:01-3:57	Pre-chorus, chorus, guitar solo & key change, chorus	Flashback episode 2: Proposal and Break-up (mixed with “strolling around and mourning”)
3:57-4:09	Outro	Musical performance: Mourning

As the table shows, the form of the music video only refers loosely to the song’s structure. Two important plot elements are the segments of Bolton strolling around, remembering and singing. They frame the other playlets which can be considered as flashbacks. The protagonist’s lament to the “you” in the song lyrics is somewhat undermined in the video by being staged as a musical performance which is directed to an auditorium resp. the viewer.

Nevertheless, the motivation behind Bolton’s actions – namely his lamenting of the ended relationship whilst singing in the living room – is grounded in the narratives. In this respect, following Railton and Watson (2011: 55–61), this video can be described as a ‘narrative video’ as a whole, since the apparent performance situation of Bolton singing, which frames the play sequences, is presented as part of the narrative. All aspects concerning the lyrical content of the song are acted out by both of the silent performers in the flashback episodes. Due to this framing (and also staging), the lyrics’ content becomes a tale, and the words out of Bolton’s mouth work as (a still very enjoyable) comment of the events shown. On the one hand, this weakens the direct approach of the lyrics, but, on the other hand, takes the singer Michael Bolton out of the line of misunderstanding his words as his own. The two “Boltons” we see, the singing and the acting Bolton, diverge the drastic lyrics into one of many elements of this artistic expression.

In the interview segment on the VHS-cassette on “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You”, Bolton describes the approach to the production of the video:

“And How Am I Supposed to Be Without You, the video, [jokingly, in a low voice] ‘the making of the video’, [normal] uhm..., it was important for me, uhm... integrity, integrity is the key word, is important for me to get... the general feel of the song across. And I wanted it to be soft, I didn’t want it to be, you know, intense or abrasive or. I wanted it to be soft, sensual and emotional.”³⁹

37 In the video we hear (without a doubt) the original studio recording and not a live recording from a sound stage of the video production or a different recording which was made solely for the music video. In the context of film and video production I differentiate between “singing,” which creates a real noise which can be recorded, and “performing” which aims to mimic a prerecorded vocal production and therefore in most cases looks like actual singing. It can be assumed that, for the video production on the film set, Bolton sang to a playback of the studio recording in full voice just to show the physical effort of his singing (which is a trademark of his artistic approach and his persona). About the implications of “singing” and “performing” in a broader historical perspective and in different settings (Hollywood film, TV show) see the analyses in Holtsträter 2022a and, especially for live and pre-taped TV, Holtsträter 2015. For a systematic analytical approach see Klug 2013.

38 Fenster would probably describe these segments as a “classical narrative”. This might also fit to these scenes, but in the light of the fragmentation in the video – and also by evoking the theatrical tradition of short plays in American vaudeville – I suggest “playlet segments”.

39 Interview on the VHS cassette Michael Bolton: *Soul Provider* (Bolton 1990b), min. 7:15-8:25. Transcription by the author.

At first sight, this seems to be another promo, which usually comes with ‘making of’-segments on film or video productions on VHS cassettes – as quoted, Bolton even makes fun of it himself. But let us try to reconcile the song lyrics with what we see in the video: Bolton’s persona is depicted here as a male individual, and stands in stark contrast to the song’s protagonist, who takes on an active role. He is also sexually active and wants to establish a long-term relationship with his love interest. In addition, we can now see in the video that the singer displays a concept of physical health and strength; he is an attractive (white) man who values his appearance (styled hair, clean-shaven, wearing a suit) and who might be expected to do more in life than the protagonist of the song lyrics. Bolton and his play partner are obviously having a romantic relationship based also on mutual physical attraction. In the first flashback episode, she takes off her high heels which is a Hollywood trope for the following foreplay, which is not shown, and in the second flashback episode she wears a pyjama shirt, a signifier for having spent the night together. She then jumps on his lap and caresses his chest hair. “He” seems to have further plans for their relationship, however, and has made preparations for a marriage proposal. But then it suddenly comes to an argument, she is visibly angry and upset. The actual reason for the argument is not revealed to us. However, he makes no effort to reconcile with her but accepts his fate.

As becomes clear, the original lyrics and thus the song are put in a completely different light by the music video. The protagonist of the song and the character or persona presented here by Michael Bolton differ substantially – and not only in the paradigms which are inherent in situations when persons are acting or ‘behaving’ in performative contexts, in this case on a filmed stage. It can be assumed that the music video’s narrative of a relationship between a couple has been tailored to Bolton’s star persona (cf. Goodwin 1993: 85) and perhaps also to Bolton’s visual appearance as an attractive person. The fact that the play partner (“you”) seemingly picks a fight for no reason and leaves Bolton alone has certainly aroused some protective instincts in the female target audience.⁴⁰

Conclusion: Bolton’s White Rock Masculinity in the Genre of Soul

As the foregoing examination has shown, the audiovisual representation of a ballad can completely change the interpretation of the original song. It can be assumed that Bolton and his artistic advisors and management as well as the directors and the video team are intentionally taking a different path here than simply trying to realise the song lyrics through the music video.⁴¹

As Bolton described in the interview segment, he seems to have realised this intensity or abrasiveness that the song lyrics potentially possess. This could possibly create aesthetic short circuits between the protagonist or character of the song and the image or persona of the not yet well-known star. Bolton and his team were probably aware that some song content cannot be easily captured 1:1 in a theatrical situation or purely visual image. In this respect, the decision to make the video as ‘soft’ as possible may also have been a conscious artistic intervention in the existing art work, a decision to retrospectively modify the song and its studio recording in their general characteristics.

40 See also Senger 2019, 68-71, who analyses the aspect of the target audience and the mixed reactions to Bolton’s music and persona in detail on the basis of Bolton’s statements and the journalistic music discourse of the time.

41 In the interview for the VHS, Bolton describes finding ideas for the videos in a group brainstorming session in which the best idea prevails: “Basically, I did what I used to do when I am preparing for a video. I get input from directors... uhm ... from the people of the company, the record company who I trust. Uhm, and we start throwing ideas around. And then somebody comes up with something that is the basic theme the basic way I am performing, how we integrate the performance with the conceptual part, you know [...] Whatever it is about, we go through all of it. But then we leave room for spontaneity [...]” Interview on the VHS cassette Michael Bolton: *Soul Provider*, min. 7:15-8:25. Transcription by the author. In his autobiography (Bolton 2012) there is no information about video productions; apparently, they were a necessary part of the business and therefore not worth mentioning for him.

It is also plausible that the simplified narrative of the music video is a necessary result of breaking the song out of the Adult Contemporary genre and presenting it to a larger and global audience. These changes cannot be fully reconciled with Goodwin's 'logic of visual structure' (1993: 85-88), as they constitute neither a mere "illustration" nor an "amplification" or a "disjunction".

However, the ambiguity of the song narrative is replaced by another, far less complex plot sequence in the video with the results that only basic, even generic, conflict situations are actually adopted, namely "man & woman", "togetherness & happiness"/"loneliness & sadness", and, overall, romantic concepts of living in a couple relationship. To put it in Bolton's words: from "intense" and "abrasive" to "soft," "sensual" and "emotional."

The complexity of the protagonist's masculinity is replaced by a far simpler concept of masculinity which seems to be easily adaptable to the cultural mainstream of the time. One can ask to what extent the video interpolates different and probably antagonizing concepts of masculinity of the mainstream culture of the time. On the one hand, concepts of masculinity that are defined by physical strength and virility – the rock ideology which is (as described by Senger) propagated by contemporary rock journalism – and on the other hand a softer, more sensuous image of urban, white and heterosexual men – a "soul provider". The latter aspect in particular seems to have been a specific goal of Michael Bolton's marketing, but also—as shown in the interview—to have been in line with his own artistic intention, an intention that is reflected not only in his voice, but also in his general demeanour in interviews or on public events, which is characterized by politeness and restraint. The harshness of the lyrics is softened by various aspects at different stages of multimedia production: first by his vocal interpretation of the song and the studio production, and second by the decisions regarding the visuals and narrative of the music videos. My interpretation is that Bolton's own concept of his masculinity, as a star, and the focus on the target audience played a large part in these decisions. For further studies in this field, it surely is useful to leave the issue of rock journalism and MTV research behind and have a broader look at the many different currents in the late 1980s in the field of gender equality, to investigate songs and music videos of other male and female artists in the field of popular ballads and adult contemporary music.

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About the author

PD Dr. Knut Holtsträter
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg
knut.holtstraeter@zpkm.uni-freiburg.de

Knut Holtsträter graduated at University Paderborn und der HfM Detmold in musicology, media studies and comparative literature, he made his PhD at HfM Weimar/University Jena in historical musicology and completed his habilitation in musicology and theatre studies at the University of Bayreuth. Following various working and teaching positions at the respective universities, he has been a member of staff at the Centre for Popular Culture and Music (ZPKM) since 2015 and a member of the Department of Musicology at the Freiburg University since 2021. He is the editor of the bilingual yearbook ‘Lied und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture’. His research currently focuses on singing, intermediality and intersectionality, as well as manuscripts cultures in popular music.