

The Founding of CMT: Country Music Television

By G. Dean Daniels, Jr.

The ultra-successful cable-programming network known as CMT "Country Music Television" was created and founded by Glenn D. Daniels, Sr. from his television production studios in Hendersonville, TN. Launched at 6:19 PM CST, March 5, 1983, CMT, originally called "CMTV" was the culmination of a dream dating back to Daniels' radio station programming days and his various country music television program productions.



My name is G. Dean Daniels, Jr. and I was the co-founder of CMT with my father, Glenn D. Daniels, Sr. We brainstormed the project in secret for a few years, putting ideas together and dreaming while my father produced syndicated country music television programming and was smart enough to retain all rights to the video library materials. Those materials, known as "The Daniels Video Library" comprised the original programming of CMT along with new music videos and studio productions created during the network's founding year. The

accomplishments, daring and sacrifice of my father launched a programming giant that has successfully outlived all its later day competitors.

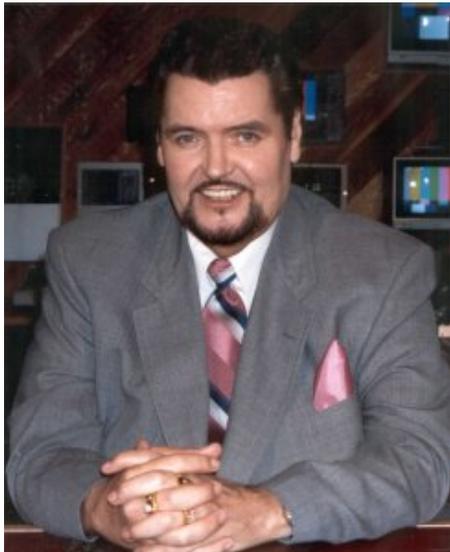
In January 1983, my father decided to put his dream into action looking for uplink services and later for investors. I spent numerous hours putting together demo videos to showcase to investors the potential of Dad's "CMTV" project. We were quietly discussing the possibilities of a "CMTV" as far back as 1981 and amazingly, considering Dad's love of conversation, we kept this idea between us, a good idea considering that The Nashville Network turned out to be looming on the horizon! My father's networking skills led him to a contact from Scientific Atlanta who recommended he contact a gentleman by the name of Mark Goldstein, an investor from Florida. Goldstein in turn knew Joe Corazzi, president of Telestar Corp., a satellite distribution company and James Padgett who represented Myron Blinder of Blinder & Robinson, then the largest penny stock company in the world.

I'll never forget that first meeting in late January of 1983 in Dad's Hendersonville, TN office, when the potential investors in his country music network came together for the first time and were literally blown away by the potential in the video sample I put together. Our latest productions were high quality with top artists, we had a video library, plus some early country music videos to give us the ability to do something no other company in Nashville except The Nashville Network could do. An agreement to proceed and a commitment from Blinder & Robinson to raise the startup capital were drawn up, the stockholder's initial funding agreement was put together and the rest is history. Ironically, Mr. Goldstein backed out at the last minute, so the joint venture team of my father's Video World Productions (the programming unit), Telestar Corp. (the distribution unit) and Blinder & Robinson (the fund raising/private placement

unit) was born. My father became the network's first president with the original contracts recognizing him as "creator and founder," a rightful acknowledgement since he started the whole process. The dream was about to become a reality and work began immediately to launch "CMTV" with the only question being "when?"

Things moved very fast over the next two months. When we received word that The Nashville Network would be launching on March 7, 1983, my father's mischievous side surfaced. In a meeting in mid February 1983 attended by Joseph Corazzi and Gerald Bartel of Telstar, my father and myself, Dad was asked when he thought we could be ready to go on the air. Dad looked at me, grinned and asked, "Dean, do you think you can put together enough program material in the next few weeks to get us started?"

I knew what he was thinking and replied in the affirmative. Dad then asked, "When is The Nashville Network set to launch?" I knew the answer from my wife Cindy, who was an Associate Producer at TNN working on the Archie Campbell series "Yesteryear In Nashville" and affirmed the March 7th launch date news I'd recently heard from her.



Dad leaned forward in his desk chair, that grin getting bigger and his eyes gleaming. "Then let's beat them on the air!" Everyone in the room cheered and we went to work, but not before swearing everybody who needed to know to secrecy. After all, we were going against a multi-million dollar competitor who could have shut us down before we launched had the news leaked. Somehow we kept that secret, which the newspapers termed "The best kept secret in Nashville." I'm amazed to this day that we pulled it off!

I jumped to the challenge and began working with our Video World Crew around the clock to put together the first hours of programming, meant to rotate in 4 (and later 6-12 and 24) hour segments throughout the day. Days and long nights passed over the next two weeks until I felt we had a comfortable number of "air tapes" to launch. Dad's strategy was simple; instead of advertising and announcing what we "planned" to do, we would simply go up with the real thing and let the cable system operators judge for themselves. This strategy proved to be a winner and a daring one at that in this age of focus groups and never-ending testing. In retrospect, it's easy to agree with Nashville insiders who have referred to my father's founding of CMT as one of the "gutsiest" business moves ever attempted in the Music City.

Finally the fateful deadline day arrived, Saturday, March 5, 1983. A satellite dish had been installed in the parking lot of Video World Productions and a remote broadcast truck from UpSouth Communications of Orlando, FL was parked outside the back doors of the studios. Tests were being made while the transmitters were being tweaked inside the production facility. Color bars went up from the satellite truck, testing the transponder on Comstar D-4 while I got the first launch tape ready for airplay. Then we waited. Something was wrong. Time passed throughout the day as our deadline slowly leaked away. Finally in mid afternoon, the engineers

told us that the extra power load on the Video World Productions facility was greater than anticipated and an ugly ground loop had developed. With that information, my father asked if we would isolate the broadcast truck from the studio power. The answer was "yes," as long as the truck ran on its diesel generator. So, video and audio cables were quickly run from the studio control room to the satellite truck. A quick test later and we confirmed the signal was clean. All systems were "go" for launch, using the truck's transmitters until the Video World production center's transmitters could be tweaked and an isolated power service installed.

My father entertained some friends and dignitaries in his downstairs office, including show host and "first on-air announcer" for CMTV Jerry Foster along with Jerry's wife, attorney John Lentz and various Video World Personnel. Joe Corazzi of Telestar was at the studio earlier but had pressing business and a plane to catch, missing the launch. Upstairs in the Video World studio control room, I stood by at the on-air Grass Valley switcher, awaiting the "green light" word to go. I had loaded the 1" videotape of the first hour on a 1" videotape machine in that control room, where Scott Yarbrough, our studio director waited to punch "play" on my command. The minutes ticked by until my mother, Johnette Daniels, poised with her ever-ready camera in hand received a phone call from my father from downstairs. She looked at me and said, "Your father said fire when ready!" I grinned at her as the moment in history that will never be equaled in my life was suddenly upon me.



"Roll tape!"

Scott hit the "play button with a five second pre-roll. I counted down, watching the preview monitor for VTR lock-up, then dissolved from the character generator displaying "CMTV" we'd gone online with an hour earlier to that first broadcast tape. The "CMTV" logo appeared on the screen with a voice-over by Nashville's top DJ (and personal favorite whom I'd recommended to my father for the job)

"Coyote McCloud" announcing that, "You're watching America's first full-time country music television network...CMTV, the Country Music Television Network!" This was followed by program host and Hall of Fame Songwriter Jerry Foster introducing an in studio produced song by country music legend Faron Young. The official time of the on-air network launch was noted by my mother as 6:19 PM, CST.

I've been asked for years the story behind the "first video." My father had known Faron Young since Dad's radio days as one of the top DJ's in Texas Country Music (he was voted "Texas' #1 Country DJ" for three years running during his top rated stint at San Antonio's KBUC 1310 AM radio station). Faron had played an interview and music program called "Nightlife" that my father produced at Video World Productions a few months earlier. Faron's performed his hit song "Four In The Morning" for the show, which seemed to sum up the long hours we had spent putting the launch programming together. So Dad, his brilliant sense of humor showing again, thought this would be the perfect "first song" to air on the network. I got the joke and agreed that launching a country music network with a country music legend made perfect sense.

Following the first hour of broadcasting, uplinking continued on the four 1" machines in our on-air tape room with an operator rotating tapes as needed. Later we would add a 3-hour 1" tape machine for commercial playback and at my father's suggestion go to using short fifteen minute spot reels to make editing and tape rotations much easier. Finally after an exhausting day, we left a night operator to rotate the on-air tapes and all adjourned for the night, excited, happy and just a bit scared of the Pandora's Box we had just opened.

Two days later, The Nashville Network premiered with my wife Cindy keeping a very low profile at the Opryland Studios! She said that cue-cards announcing "first country network" for show host Ralph Emory all had to be changed and the place was buzzing with the news that TNN, Nashville's "giant" had been beaten to the on-air punch by a grass-roots production company out of nearby Hendersonville. Cindy was responsible for producing the half-hour closing credits to TNN's full day multi-state launch party, which she did with great critical praise. She thought it lucky though that at least for that day and awhile thereafter, no one but her boss and former Video World producer Bill Turner knew that the "Daniels" in her last name was related to "those damn Daniels' guys" at CMTV!



JOHNETTE, Glenn and Dean Daniels are exuberant over the reception that CMTV has received. ParCable was the first cable system in the nation to air the new advertiser supported County Music channel.

As time has passed, a great deal of CMT's early history has been misconstrued or in some cases outright lies and fabrications have been presented as facts to financially benefit certain people who came into the company later. The "V" in CMTV was voluntarily dropped in June of 1983 after MTV/Warner Amex sued the network corporation, alleging trademark "confusion," despite the CMTV logo having absolutely no

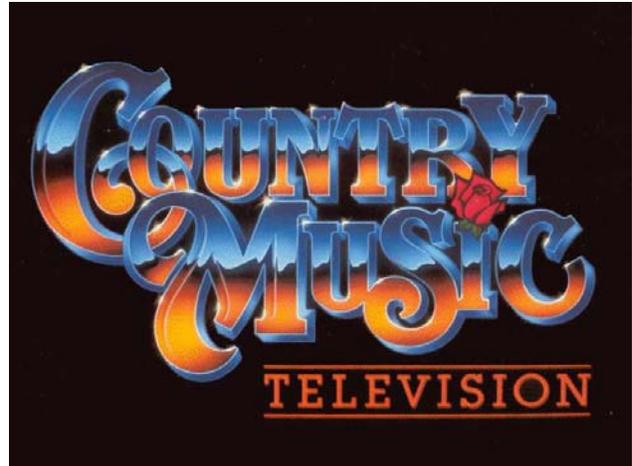
resemblance to the MTV trademark. The network became "CMT" but ran on-air for the next several months with the full name logo. The case was amicably settled out of court a few months later and the "V" forever disappeared from the network name.

A couple of other minor facts...CMT did not start with "interviews and concert footage" as has been alleged by certain misreporting sources. Proof is in the original air tapes, still in pristine condition as part of the "Daniels Video Library" archives and acclaimed by no less than GreyStone Productions, producers of "Biography" for A & E Network and the History Channel as "beautiful and amazing for the times." Interview segments in the CMT programming were

2:00 minute "Down Music Row" short-takes with the stars to add a little spice to the programming. These appeared about once or twice an hour. We actually used very little of the "Daniels Video Library," in the programming, just the top performers like Mickey Gilley and George Strait in studio video performances and later full record company sponsored music videos.

Experimental concept videos from independents and record companies filled the rest of the void, at least enough to launch with 4 solid hours of programming flipped six times a day; CMT(V) was always a 24 hour service. Within the first two weeks on the air, I had

extended programming to 6 original hours daily and by May of 1983 we were up to 12 original hours per day. All of these were flipped daily to fill 24 hours as we were marketing the network and slowly but surely gaining cable affiliates. By the June, 1983 National Cable Show in Houston, TX, we were presenting 24 hours of new programming in daily rotations. Without random access capabilities, my father's idea for a perfect stopgap solution, putting the programming on 3-song spot reels, which could be easily edited and reedited, worked like a charm.



The industry soon responded in kind to the new outlet for country music videos and our own productions simply filled the gap with "Classic" artists and some that became classics, such as George Strait. My own critically acclaimed music video "The Yellow Rose of Texas" with Johnny Lee and Lane Brody hit #1 on the Billboard charts and was seen on dozens of national television programs including "Good Morning America" and "Kasey Kasem's Top Ten." Warner Brothers Records voted "The Yellow Rose of Texas" video as their #1 Country Music video of 1984. Too bad country music video awards shows were still years away, but it certainly was not a bad start for CMT's programming efforts.

Of course the entire industry was working in new territory here with great videos, good videos and a few stinkers. It was a new art form with a lot of room for experimentation. Budgets from the record companies were slow to come around to MTV levels, but with 24-hour airings and increasing record sales, an industry was created and prospered. When CMTV went on the air, you could count the Nashville number of production companies in the Tennessee Film Commission Directory on one hand. By mid 1983, the new book came out and I counted almost 50 in Nashville alone! Marc Ball of Scene Three produced a huge amount of beautiful video productions, among other producers. I was a big fan of Scene Three's landmark work in this genre and with CMTV providing an outlet for them, country music videos began their inevitable growth into the successful genre we enjoy today.

By the end of our uplinking tenure on Feb. 29, 1984, the programming and content of CMT most closely resembled the on-air approach that continued on the air for nearly twenty years. The rest of the CMT story as it concerned the Daniels Family was not to reach a happy ending. My father lost his network in a series of profiteering and unethical maneuvers by his investment partners

that contributed to a decline in his health and his death at the age of 56 in 1992. Regardless, the sacrifices and visionary pursuit of a dream by Glenn D. Daniels, Sr. forever changed the face of country music on all broadcasting fronts for all time. His largely unsung impact on country music eventually created a billion dollar empire for those who came later to perfect his dream.