

Advertisement

FedEx Kinko's offers 49¢ color copies.

Find out more



Powered by Clickability

## MTV's 'Real World' launched a revolution

By Bill Keveney, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — *The Real World* should feel at home in the entertainment capital of the world.

As the 20th edition of MTV's pioneering reality show takes up residence in Hollywood, the unscripted genre that it started has become a cornerstone of the TV industry.

*Real World's* creator, Bunim/Murray Productions, parallels that growth with 11 reality series on the air or in some stage of production, the most in the company's 16 years.

Three are arriving this month: *Dr. Steve-O* (USA, Mondays, 11 p.m. ET/PT; it premiered last week), *America's Psychic Challenge* (Lifetime, Friday, 10 p.m. ET/PT) and *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* (E!, Sunday, 10:30 p.m. ET/PT).

By comparison, the makers of *The Hills* and *Flavor of Love*, two other major reality producers, had seven and five projects, respectively, in production this year.

BMP also has a new documentary unit, and its first film, *Autism: The Musical*, played at the Tribeca Film Festival. It will air on HBO in 2008.

Jonathan Murray, who founded BMP with the late Mary-Ellis Bunim, describes the ramp-up matter-of-factly as an evolution for the independent reality producer, which needs enough shows to justify a staff of 250 to 500 employees, depending on production.

MTV chief Brian Graden thinks revolution when describing *Real World* as "quite simply the undisputed granddaddy of modern, commercial reality television." He sees its DNA in later MTV series, including *Jackass*, *The Osbournes*, *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*.

Today's reality dramas, sitcoms, competitions and game shows "all, on some level, were inspired by the original *Real World*," he says.

BMP is sometimes called "Reality U," with alumni going on to make such shows as *The Surreal Life* and *Fear Factor*. Its influence on TV can be seen in eavesdrop-style filming in a group house, common to such shows as *The Bachelor* and *The Apprentice*, and creation of the TV confessional, standard fare on *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. Another BMP show, *The Simple Life*, was ahead of the merger of tabloids and TV, making Nicole Richie a star and Paris Hilton a supernova.

### An instant sensation

One wall inside the 20th-edition *Real World* house presents the reality-as-fishbowl metaphor, MTV-style. An aquarium with fish swimming around a HOLLYWOOD sign is surrounded by 19 video screens documenting each season of the show, which premiered in New York in 1992 and has been to such cities as Paris, London, Boston, Miami, Las Vegas and Sydney, home to Season 19 (tonight, 10 ET/PT).

The house, a signature mix of brightly colored whim and production efficiency, has its share of Hollywood fun and folly: an outdoor pool, bar and exercise area, a faux *Jaws* set in the living room and a huge neon hotel sign.

Advertisement



- [Digg](#)
- [del.icio.us](#)
- [Newsvine](#)
- [Reddit](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [What's this?](#)

merry  
texting  
and a  
chatty  
new year

GoPhone.  
Only from AT&T.

- No annual contract
- No surprise bills



Your world. Delivered. at&t

"It has to be a fantasy for the audience," says Murray, 52, giving a reporter and photographer the first tour of the house. The 20th edition will premiere in early 2008.

After years of trying to weed out showbiz wannabes in its search for seven diverse young adults, this *Real World* will feature a cast with designs on Hollywood careers.

The series began without Tinseltown fanfare. MTV, hoping to expand beyond music videos, wanted to create a soap opera.

For soap veteran Bunim and Murray, who did news and documentary work, mixing scripted and unscripted elements was an unconventional TV move. They turned a house into a set and used music, editing and other dramatic tools to create stories, but cast regular people instead of actors.

"For MTV, it was an instant smash beyond any expected scale. *Real World* has established an ethos of long-form television that informed the next 15 years of MTV programming," Graden says.

*Real World* took on the topics of race, sex, gays in the military, eating disorders, cutting and alcohol abuse, many of which had been handled gingerly, if at all, on TV. The late Pedro Zamora's battle with AIDS, depicted during the San Francisco season, remains one of its most memorable moments.

### Acclaim — and controversy

"A lot of issues raised on *Real World* were very meaningful. There has not been a lot of documentary television that engaged some of the very ordinary concerns of young people," says University of California-Riverside professor Toby Miller, whose book, *Cultural Citizenship*, addresses reality television.

The show has had its share of controversy, too, as when two castmates were arrested while on the town in San Diego and when a *Hawaii* castmate drove while intoxicated. Producers, who rarely interfere, eventually took her keys.

*Real World* paved the way for the YouTube culture, in which nearly everybody is waiting for a close-up, says Patrice Oppliger, a professor of mass communication at Boston University. But to keep the public's attention, it also has embraced the sensational.

"The glamour of it seems to be either the fights or (showing drunk women) dance on a bar or hook up with their housemates. I'm embarrassed for them," she says.

Murray, BMP's chairman and president, acknowledges a voyeuristic element but thinks the show is "purer" than many. Overall, he feels good about his shows. "I always give it the 'Can I feel good sleeping at night, and if I ran into that person on the street later, would I be comfortable shaking their hand?'"

*The Real World* spawned 14 seasons of *Road Rules* and *The Real World/Road Rules Challenge*, the latter in production for 2008, along with such shows as *Making the Band*, *Starting Over*, which won an Emmy; *The Bad Girls Club*; and *The Real Cancun*, a big-screen dud.

When Bunim was battling cancer, she and Murray began planning so the company could survive her potential death, shifting responsibilities to Gil Goldschein, 33, who headed business affairs and now is chief operating officer.

Bunim and Murray shared an office for 16 years, and when she died in 2004, he felt the loss of a business partner and friend. "She was very courageous. She was working two weeks before her death," he says. "One time, we had a meeting with Paris, and Mary-Ellis had oxygen under her desk. She took two breaths before the meeting and then put it back down."

### 'One-stop shopping'

BMP is unusual in reality because of its large size. With many divisions, including casting, music, editing and legal, under one roof, it can handle projects that many other reality producers cannot.

"They are one-stop shopping. You can absolutely leave it in their hands and know it will come out well," says Fox reality chief Mike Darnell, who brought the company on to produce *Simple Life*.

"We needed a special kind of producer for that show," he says. "There was a lot of hand-holding that had to happen."

Size helps for quick turnarounds. BMP closed the *Kardashians* deal on a Friday and began pre-production the next Monday, Goldschein says. "We've got the people to do it."

*Kardashians* follows a family that includes Kim Kardashian, another celeb with a sex tape, à la Paris, and her stepfather, Olympic decathlon champ Bruce Jenner.

E!'s Ryan Seacrest came up with the show and arranged for the family's involvement with Murray — "the Jerry Bruckheimer of reality television," E! chief Ted Harbert says — brought on to produce in a tight time frame.

*Kardashians* mixes elements of *The Osbournes*, *Hogan Knows Best* and *The Hills*, Harbert says. "It's a large, loving, warm family. There's very much a *Brady Bunch* blended-family element to it. They spend a lot of time with each other."

At the same time, sisters "Kim and Kourtney are out about town with their social lives, photo shoots and modeling things," including Kim's photos for *Playboy*.

In USA's *Dr. Steve-O*, BMP transplants a reality star from *Jackass* as the manic Steve-O prescribes assertiveness for "guys who are afraid of their own shadows," Murray says. Trishelle Cannatella, part of a *Real World: Las Vegas* ménage à trois, plays the sexy nurse.

USA wanted a producer who could keep control of Steve-O's escapades, which include a self-administered bikini wax.

BMP knows "how to walk that line of very edgy and do it in a classy way," USA program chief Jeff Wachtel says. "We knew we had lightning in a bottle with Steve-O. We wanted a producer who could keep it in the bottle."

Lifetime's *Challenge* is a contest pitting 16 self-proclaimed clairvoyants against one another to find the No. 1 psychic. In one challenge, the competitors are taken to a car lot and asked to find a vehicle owner hiding in his trunk.

BMP also recently sold its first studio game show, but Murray says it is too soon to reveal details.

Most of BMP's programs have run on cable networks, where shows can be tailored to the night's schedule. *Challenge* "fits in well" on Lifetime's schedule, says Jessica Samet, Lifetime's reality chief. It will follow *Lisa Williams: Life Among the Dead*, which features a medium.

Murray praises producer Mark Burnett for making *Survivor* a breakthrough reality hit on one of the broadcast networks, where reality is now common. (They may be looking for more reality shows if a possible writers strike takes place.)

Until the late 1990s, there was a school of thought that didn't think reality would work on the big networks, Fox's Darnell says. Bunim and Murray "were six years ahead of the curve," he says.

### Looking ahead

Murray says *Real World* is his proudest accomplishment, but he's excited about getting back to documentaries. The new division gives filmmakers financial and technical help, such as editing services, says Sasha Alpert, who oversees BMP documentaries and casting.

"When Jon and Mary-Ellis started *The Real World*, they looked at the Loud family" from PBS' groundbreaking documentary *An American Family*, Alpert says. "Reality is a more commercial version of what documentaries are."

*Autism*, from filmmaker Tricia Regan, follows children with autism who put on their own musical.

"This is a film not about experts talking about causes but a view of what daily life is like with a lot of hope and humor," Alpert says.

Murray thinks reality shows have helped make documentaries more popular by teaching people "how to watch something that's not scripted." Overall, he thinks reality is doing well.

"There's a lot of really good stuff on the air, from *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to the dance competitions to *American Idol*," he says. He likes Burnett's programs and *Project Runway*, too.

Murray sees a healthy future for his shows, including *Real World*.

"We change the cast every year and the city. MTV has a new group of viewers" growing up with the show, Murray says. "I think it could go on forever."

### Share this story:


[Digg](#)
[del.icio.us](#)
[Newsvine](#)
[Reddit](#)
[Facebook](#)
[What's this?](#)

MTV has launched a new production unit, MTV Studios and with it put in the works a batch of new shows and revivals of properties from the Viacom-owned cable channel's extensive content library. "THE REAL WORLD" The show that invented modern reality television returns to its roots. This reconnection to innocence for the trailblazing series strips away the polarization and cold anonymity of social media, the din of the 24-hour news cycle, and the facades of the instafamous culture to find out what happens "when seven strangers are picked to live in a house" stop being polite and start getting real. "MADE" The groundbreaking, Emmy-winning life makeover series returns. MTV chief Brian Graden thinks revolution when describing Real World as "quite simply the undisputed granddaddy of modern, commercial reality television." He sees its DNA in later MTV series, including Jackass, The Osbournes, Laguna Beach and The Hills. Today's reality dramas, sitcoms, competitions and game shows "all, on some level, were inspired by the original Real World," he says. MTV is ramping up production operations and getting into producing programming for other buyers with the launch of MTV Studios. It will be focused largely on developing and producing reboots, revivals and spin-offs of series from MTV's library of more than 200 young adult titles in addition to new shows, predominantly unscripted. "Daria & Jodie, The Real World and Aeon Flux all are being pitched to streaming platforms like Hulu, Netflix and Apple. While MTV president Chris McCarthy noted that the network is "thriving" on a cable platform, "it is a little bit more limiting than it used to be, so the stories that we tell on traditional cable are going to be very different than the stories that we would tell in SVOD." VH1.