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Miami Vice

No television series represented the style or dominant cultural aesthetic of the 1980s as fully or indelibly as *Miami Vice*. A popular one-hour police drama that aired on NBC from 1984 to 1989, *Miami Vice* was in one sense a conventional buddy-cop show—not unlike *Dragnet*, *Adam 12*, or *Starsky and Hutch*—featuring an interracial pair of narcotics detectives who wage a weekly battle against an urban criminal underworld. But the look and feel of the series—a mixture of flashy production values, music-video-style montages, and extensive use of Miami's beachfront locales and Art Deco architecture—elevated *Miami Vice* from standard cops-and-robbers fare to bona fide television phenomenon in the middle part of the decade. In its insistence that a TV show's style, sound, and attitude mattered more than its substance, *Miami Vice* spawned a host of imitators; sparked trends in the fashion, recording, and tourism industries; and helped transform the traditional face of broadcast television by appealing to a young, urban viewership that was, according to one of the show's directors, becoming "more interested in images, emotions, and energy than plot and character and words."

MTV COPS

Miami Vice's exploitation of the quick-cut visual style of rock music videos both reflected and consolidated the burgeoning influence of MTV (Music Television) on television and popular culture in the 1980s. Tellingly, the show originated in a short memo jotted down by NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff: "MTV Cops." Created by Anthony Yerkovich, a former writer and producer for NBC's more realistic law enforcement show *Hill Street Blues*, and executive produced by Michael Mann, who would go on to become one of Hollywood's most respected auteurs, *Miami Vice* was filmed on location in Miami at a cost of $1.3 million per episode—one of television's priciest productions at the time.

Miami Vice. *Don Johnson, left, and Philip Michael Thomas became stars as well as fashion icons playing cool detectives on NBC's* Miami Vice. RON GALELLA/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES.

Under Mann's exacting creative vision, the show's production team selected locations, buildings, and cars with a keen eye for detail, and scenes were composed in a painterly mode more akin to cinema than television. Tropical pastels—pink, turquoise, and lime green—dominated the show's color scheme, and Mann decreed early on that there would be "no earth tones." Music was also an integral part of the *Miami Vice* aesthetic: each episode featured contemporary pop songs that often served as critical commentaries on the plots (NBC paid up to $10,000 per episode for the rights to the original songs) as well as instrumental scores by Czech-born composer Jan Hammer, whose synthesizer-driven music supplied the show with its moody atmosphere. Hammer's theme song hit number one on the pop charts, as did a *Miami Vice* soundtrack album (one of several released during and after the show's run).

The show's slick depiction of Miami as a mecca for the international drug trade, an American Casablanca teeming with cocaine cowboys and drug runners, initially met with resistance from local city officials, who balked at the show's glamorization of Miami's chronic crime problems. Their fears were soon allayed, however, when it became apparent that *Miami Vice*'s emphasis on the city's striking architecture, gleaming beaches, and cultural exoticism was actually a civic virtue, enhancing Miami's public image and focusing international attention on the South Beach area. The program's opening title sequence—a montage of palm trees, pink flamingos, and bikini-clad women—played like a promotional spot for Miami's tourist industry, and by the late 1980s *Miami Vice* had contributed to the revitalization of once-decrepit Miami Beach and helped the city reclaim its image as a trendy resort playground for the wealthy and fashionable.

SEX APPEAL

At the heart of *Miami Vice*'s popularity were its two charismatic stars, Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas, who played hip undercover detectives Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs. The series rocketed both actors to international sex-symbol status, landing them on the covers of *Time* and *Rolling Stone* in the same year (1985). As an interracial police duo with a cool, easygoing buddy chemistry that seemed to transcend racial differences (on *Miami Vice*, skin color could double as just another fashion accessory), Crockett and Tubbs were perhaps the most recognizable of the numerous black-white male pairings that populated film and television in the 1980s.

The trendy, expensive clothes worn by the two detectives also formed a key element of the show's appeal. Crockett sported a casual-chic look consisting of pastel-colored Italian sport jackets paired with T-shirts, baggy linen pants, and slip-on shoes with no socks, while Tubbs wore dark double-breasted suits, silk shirts with slender neckties, and a diamond earring. The *Miami Vice* "look" soon infiltrated clothing lines in department stores across America. One company even marketed a special electric razor with a "stubble device" designed to leave a Crockett-like five o'clock shadow. To round out the effect, each detective drove a flashy car: Crockett cruised the streets in a black Ferrari, while Tubbs drove a vintage Cadillac convertible. Although such high-end amenities were explained as part of the detectives' cover (Crockett and Tubbs used cars and clothes seized from busted criminals to serve as props in their own masquerade as drug dealers), many critics faulted the show for a lack of real-

ism, pointing out that Crockett and Tubbs's lavish gear would hardly have been affordable on a cop's meager salary. Moreover, the detectives' tendency to dress in ultra-modish attire even when conducting routine, non-undercover police work served as one of many indications that *Miami Vice* generally favored visual style over logical dramatic exposition.

In addition to a supporting cast that included Edward James Olmos as the brooding Lieutenant Castillo (the role earned the actor an Emmy Award in 1985), *Miami Vice* featured a high-profile parade of unusual guest stars—rock musicians, politicians, professional athletes, and corporate magnates—whose appearances were a testament to the show's initial "hotness"; it finished number nine in the 1985–1986 Nielsen ratings. In its third season, the show's popularity dipped when executive producer Mann ordered a dramatic shift to "darker" tones. Blues and blacks replaced the earlier pastels, the plots became murkier, and NBC scheduled the series unsuccessfully against CBS's long-running soap *Dallas*. By its final season, *Miami Vice* had slipped in the Nielsens, finishing last in its time slot among the three networks, and was no longer the "hot" property it had once been. Production values declined, and the show's original visual flair grew muted. As one *TV Guide* critic noted of the show's rapid rise and fast fall, "That's the thing about cutting edges. They're the first things to get dull."

SUBSTANCE BEHIND THE STYLE

Despite its faddishness, however, *Miami Vice* did contain a marked moralistic component. Many episodes hinged on the problem of "cops who'd gone bad" and on the fact that Crockett and Tubbs, undercover vice detectives posing as drug dealers, blended in most smoothly with the criminals they were supposed to apprehend. Absorbing the world-weary fatalism and moral ambiguity of film noir, the series rarely afforded its heroes an unambiguous "triumph" over their adversaries; often what victories they did achieve were pyrrhic or outside the conventional channels of the "system."

Miami Vice was also one of the era's few shows to pay explicit attention to contemporary political controversies—the dubious efficacy of the "war on drugs," the messy contradictions of U.S. political involvement in Central America and Southeast Asia, hidden Wall Street complicity in the Latin American drug trade, and others—that highlighted the difficulties of legislating local justice in a world of competing multinational political and economic interests. The fact that this serious social commentary was often at odds with the show's more obvious worship of Reagan-era wealth and materialism (the clothes, the cars, the money) made *Miami Vice* both an interrogation and an endorsement of the dominant conservative political and cultural ideology of the 1980s.

The show's formal characteristics and its ambiguous politics made it a popular "text" among postmodern academic theorists and cultural critics who found in its pastel sheen both an ironic critique of the 1980s worship of glamour and money and a wholehearted participation in that fetishization. This so-called complicitous critique of 1980s culture prompted Andrew Ross, writing in the journal *Communication*, to dub *Miami Vice* "TV's first postmodern cop show," while other critics, such as Todd Gitlin, in his book *Watching Television*, derided the show's "studied blankness of tone" and saw in its stylized "emphasis on surface" the same techniques of enticement used to lure consumers in car commercials. Despite, or perhaps because of, its relatively short-lived popularity and brief vogue in academia, *Miami Vice* remains an illuminating artifact for scholars interested not only in the history of television but also in the visual, aural, and political texture of the 1980s.

The show's profile in the popular memory underwent a makeover of sorts in 2006 when Mann wrote and directed a big-screen, R-rated version of *Miami Vice* that amplified the dark, anti-glamorous style of the show's third season and, for many critics, stripped away much of the personality and sense of humor of the original series. Starring Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx as a terse, grimly serious Crockett and Tubbs, the movie showcased Mann's arresting visual style but earned mixed reviews and underperformed at the box office. This tepid reception, coming some two decades after *Miami Vice* first aired, seemed to exemplify the challenges of updating a groundbreaking TV series whose influence and popularity were so closely tied to a specific—and fleeting—cultural moment.

Andrew Sargent

SEE ALSO: Dallas; Dragnet; *Emmy Awards; Hollywood; MTV; Olmos, Edward James; Reagan, Ronald;* Rolling Stone; *Sex Symbol;* Starsky and Hutch; *Television;* Time; TV Guide; *War on Drugs.*

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Michener, James *(1907–1997)*

With the passing of James Michener in 1997, one of twentieth-century America's most prolific novelists and outstanding philanthropists was lost. Michener's career spanned fifty years, and his often-lengthy books were eagerly consumed by the public. His works explore locales as diverse as the South Pacific,