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MUSIC VIDEOS

'BUZZ': MTV'S BIG MESSAGE

BY JIM FARRER

MTV's new program, "Buzz," comes rattling, squealing and stomping through your cable wires tonight at 9 o'clock.

But don't be scared. This is one MTV outburst that won't simply flatten you. Rather, the half-hour show represents the network's first attempt to expand its yowling language into something sustained and articulate.

That isn't to say that "Buzz" stoops to any conventional or even logical kind of narrative. Instead, it works like an extremely long MTV promo, finding its voice purely through densely edited visual swatches and aural booms. Unsurprisingly, the show's creators, Mark Pellington and Jon Klein, are two of the network's brightest promo people.

The episode that marks their debut is actually the third that Pellington and Klein made, and it's a big improvement over the first two, which MTV may air later. Where previous attempts were slaves to sensation — they were too fast and not sufficiently focused — this time, "Buzz" manages to examine its subject matter, prejudice, in a way that's both coherent and wildly abstract.

Like all "Buzz" episodes, it

features voices from around the world. (The show is created in England.) Everyday people speak from Syria, Japan, Ghana and elsewhere. But while the two earlier episodes approached those creepy Benetton ads, where Third Worlders are simply tossed in to round out the color scheme, this time "Buzz" directly challenges that.

A whole section of the program aplices together the most rapidly promising of tourist ads, neatly confronting the media's lust for reducing world cultures to travel brochure exotica. ("What enchantment awaits you beneath the golden surface of Thailand.")

Still, in this episode, which includes a section on Japan-bashing, the most open expressions of cultural ignorance are mouthed by the speakers. "I think [the Japanese] have a deep-seated sadistic streak," says one young Brit.

The show also tosses in that old public service ad in which a Native American blows away expectations by speaking in a Swedish accent, an Asian woman in an Irish accent, etc. Likewise, the producers have included their own pointed and witty series of printed messages (à la Jenny Holzer) such as: "Ev-

everyone is a racist ... except you."

Another, more grim message reads "tribalism/nationalism/racism," making the subversive, and necessary, connection between patriotism and hatred.

Such moments are well-served, but the program's point more clearly arises when taken whole. By the end, Klein and Pellington actually wind up hinting at something rather heady about prejudice, that is: how grossly entwined it is in our sense of identity.

Their images convey the sad truth that a hefty portion of our selves is created in opposition to others, making it all too "natural" for us to lash out at anyone different. Such observations may sound more like the stuff of Bill Moyers than MTV, but "Buzz" has a unique way of making its braininess understood (or at least felt).

With its sensory-mad, nonlinear style, the show registers as a subconscious, primal experience in itself (much like prejudice, incidentally). Without shirking on the network's commitment to chaos, "Buzz" has forced MTV to start making sense.

