

## IT CREATES SUPERSTARS

“Mr. Parker [said] more people will be seeing me on these shows than I would be exposed to for the rest of my life on the [Louisiana] Hayride.”

—Elvis Presley, talking about his decision to appear on CBS Television’s *Stage Show* in 1956

## IT TERRIFIES PARENTS

“A rock ‘n’ roll band was doing it right on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Pa was frothing like a dog . . . [he] snapped off the TV but it was too late. They put the touch in me.”

—Rock singer Patti Smith, on the Rolling Stones’ first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*

## AND IT SELLS RECORDS

“[Duran Duran’s] *Rio* was being sold out at half the record stores in Dallas . . . the very same [areas] that were wired for cable and carrying MTV.”

—a *Time* magazine report on music videos

From the advent of local, DJ-hosted sock-hop broadcasts to the current national primacy of MTV, *STATION TO STATION* is the definitive history of the performances that entered our homes and radically changed our lives.

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# ***Station to Station***

**The History of Rock 'n' Roll  
on Television**

**MARC WEINGARTEN**



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***To Lynn, Samantha, and Allegra***



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## **Local Heroes**

Long before she became the high priestess of punk, Patti Smith was just another suburban misfit besotted with stringy-haired British rock stars, particularly Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. She had followed closely the steady stream of Stones hits that her local radio station had been wearing out in heavy rotation during the summer of '66, absorbed the mindless PR blather of the teen magazines ("My Dream Date with Brian Jones!"), and owned the band's entire oeuvre of singles. But nothing had prepared her for what she was about to witness on the night of September 11, when the Stones made their first appearance on that staid repository of family entertainment, *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Seven years later, she would write about her epiphany for *Creem* magazine:

"there was pa glued to the tv screen cussing his brains out. a rock 'n' roll band was doing it right on the ed sullivan show. pa was frothing like a dog. i never seen him so mad. but i lost contact with him quick . . . i was trapped in a field of hot dots. the guitar players had pimples. the blonde kneeling down had circles ringing his eyes. one had greasy hair. the other didn't care. and the singer was showing his second layer of skin and more than a little

milk. . . in six minutes five lusty images gave me my first gob of gooie in my virgin panties. pa snapped off the tv but it was too late. they put the touch in me.”<sup>1</sup>

Smith’s sexual awakening via TV was not uncommon: Seeing artists like the Stones and the Beatles and Elvis before them, on television was the stuff of a million teen fantasies, the dream made flesh. And not on some giant, untouchable movie screen, either, but in their own living rooms, where kids like Smith were free to let their young hormones rage.

Historically, too much emphasis has been placed on the role of radio as pop music’s mass cultural transmitter, and not nearly enough on television as the true idolmaker, the medium that helped shape rock’s cult of personality during the genre’s formative years. Radio may have broadcast the sound of rock, but TV supplied the iconography.

TV and rock ’n’ roll came of age at roughly the same time. The new prosperity that emerged in the wake of World War II, in an exultant America seemingly awash in nouveau prosperity, had created a burgeoning American middle class, one that reveled in the plentiful consumerist culture that could satisfy its material needs; and among those who were now sharing the wealth were teenagers. Teens were carving out an entirely new chunk of social strata for themselves; the term *teenager* itself didn’t enter the American lexicon until 1941. These postwar offspring, armed with lots of discretionary income, were eager to buy into the new spending class. By 1956 an estimated 13 million teenagers in America had a total disposable income of \$7 billion, which represented a 26 percent gain in only three years.<sup>2</sup>

Where did all that money go? Much of it was being spent on rock ’n’ roll: millions of transistor radios, records, and record players were sold in the mid-1950s, as rock became something of a mass cult, a huge growth industry whose consumers were almost exclusively under the age of twenty. This was not exactly what TV’s earliest content providers originally had in mind; the guardians of the new medium had no desire to pander to youth culture. Television and rock ’n’ roll tapped into completely different intellectual, emotional, and physiological impulses, and served divergent social functions. Because it was



designed with home use in mind, and beholden to companies trying to sell products to its viewers, television went out of its way not to offend. TV was culturologist Marshall McLuhan's "cool" medium, an entertainment vehicle that fostered a false intimacy, created an artificial sense of community, and encouraged viewer passivity—providing an ideal environment to move commerce.

TV's ultimate mission—to sell things—essentially hasn't changed over the last half century, which makes it the most culturally intransigent electronic medium ever created. We need only track the programming history of the big three networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—against the cultural and social currents that have roiled America over the past four decades to discover how out of touch TV has been in reflecting the other cultural impulses taking place "outside the box."

Rock 'n' roll, on the other hand, was created to provide the insurgent teen culture with a voice and an attitude at variance with mainstream values. It was supposed to stir things up and rage against the decade's complacent, smug ethos, not propagate the status quo. Rock 'n' roll was loud, brash, and impudent; TV was soothing and polite. Rock 'n' roll was sex; TV was violins. Rock 'n' roll was Elvis Presley; TV was Robert Young. TV was black and white; rock 'n' roll was Technicolor—it was black *and* white only in the sense that it accommodated the miscegenation of pop and R&B. If kids wanted to see youth run wild, they had to go to the movies.

*Blackboard Jungle*, the Richard Brooks film adapted from the scandalous 1954 Evan Hunter novel of the same name (*Time* magazine called the novel "nightmarish but authentic,"<sup>3</sup> while *Library Journal* warned that "conservative libraries disliking Anglo-Saxon monosyllables"<sup>4</sup> should avoid the book) was released in the spring of 1955, and provided teenagers with a potent set of rebel signifiers. The film, which told the story of a World War II vet turned teacher who stares down a pack of high school hoods, was a sensation upon its release, a cautionary tale about juvenile delinquency embraced by young viewers as a template for teenage style and attitude. It was also the first film to create a rock 'n' roll hit. Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock around the Clock," a song originally recorded in 1952 by

singer Sunny Dae, had initially been released by Haley's label Decca in the spring of 1954, but it had gone nowhere. Haley's remake was then featured over the opening and closing credits of *Blackboard Jungle*, and it became a sensation, soaring to number one on Billboard's Top 100 singles chart.

Regardless of their cinematic or narrative flaws, films such as *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel without a Cause*, and *The Wild One* (which featured a leather-jacketed Marlon Brando in the role that made him a star) spoke to the frustrations of a youth culture struggling to find its voice during an era of unprecedented blandness and conformity. TV, for its part, wanted nothing to do with any of it. Beholden to conservative sponsors, it stuck to a safe game plan.

TV experienced a growth explosion in the early 1950s. In 1946, there were about 10,000 sets in American homes. Three years later, that number had tripled, and by 1952, 27 million homes were bathed in TV's cathode glow.<sup>5</sup>

Youth culture, and rock 'n' roll by extension, eventually became too powerful for TV to ignore, and by the mid-1950s, TV had to accommodate it, if only to keep up with market forces beyond its ken. Elvis Presley's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956 unleashed something bigger than the singer's own superstardom—it represented rock's admission into mainstream culture, approved by no less a guardian of morals than Sullivan himself, whose show determined the pop cultural preferences for millions of Americans. But it was an uneasy alliance. Elvis may have driven a wedge into mainstream culture, but rock 'n' roll, despite its emergence as a major cultural force, was still the music of America's youth. TV still had to serve the entertainment needs of its 50 million or so adult viewers, who really had no use for rock. Thus, rock had to fight for every scrap of airtime that TV was willing to concede.

When TV first emerged in the late 1940s as a mass medium with the potential to take on radio's household hegemony, it was still suffering from an acute inferiority complex. TV was radio's bastard stepchild, a primitive technology with little national reach; it was, in Gerald Nachman's words, "inventing itself as it went along."<sup>6</sup> Lacking a focused mandate, and with hours of airtime to fill, television's early

program executives simply borrowed radio's time-tested formula wholesale. That meant an abundance of variety shows, episodic dramas, televised theater, quiz shows, and comedy shtick performed by the very radio acts that had popularized them in the first place.

In 1947 CBS owner William Paley scored a major coup by acquiring such giant radio properties as *The Jack Benny Show*, *Burns and Allen*, and *Amos and Andy* from their star-creators, and instantly established the fledgling network as TV's leading comedy channel. Dramas like NBC's *The Aldrich Family*, which had enjoyed an eleven-year run on radio, were adapted for TV in 1950, as were *The Goldbergs*, *The Fred Waring Show*, and *Candid Microphone*, which in its TV incarnation became *Candid Camera*. The target demographic for TV's earliest programmers was middle-class working men and housewives, since they held the wallets and purses that advertisers desperately wanted to dip into.

To that end, TV programmers were also larding the airwaves with the kind of tastefully innocuous "midcult" entertainment older radio audiences craved during the 1930s and '40s. Fine arts programming conferred instant legitimacy on TV, and gave the young medium a patina of class. As early as 1947, NBC was airing *The Kraft Television Theatre*, an anthology series presenting original dramas by the likes of Paddy Chayefsky and Rod Serling, while CBS debuted its sober-minded news talk show *Meet the Press*. In addition to broadcasting such loftily titled shows as *Author Meets the Critics*, *Pulitzer Prize Playhouse*, and *Studio One*, the three networks regularly trotted out classical music performances and broadcast operatic warhorses from New York's Metropolitan Opera House. NBC had in fact scored a ratings bonanza as early as the spring of 1940 with a broadcast of *Pagliacci* from the Met—even though they only owned a handful of station affiliates at the time.

By the late 1940s, classical radio stars such as conductor Arturo Toscanini—whose radio show with the NBC orchestra had been cut by the network due to high production costs—found new life on television, performing the works of the great composers under hot kleig lights. ABC aired shows like *The Chicago Symphony Chamber Orchestra*, and programs like *Opera Cameos* and *Opera vs. Jazz*

made minor stars out of such performers as baritone Alan Dale, who scored a hit with “Cherry Pink (and Apple Blossom White)” in 1955, and Charles Dubin. It was bad enough that viewers with limited program options had to settle for TV’s spoon-fed medicinal culture—worse, the medium’s technical limitations didn’t make it go down any easier. Trying to squeeze opera’s epic grandeur through a five-inch lo-fi TV speaker was pure folly, and the crude, clunky camera work turned otherwise serious repertory into opéra bouffe.

By 1948, as coaxial cable technology enabled linkups between major cities like New York and Washington, and with the four networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and the short-lived Dumont) now broadcasting seven days a week, more of radio’s musical stars were defecting to television, and classical music began to coexist with pink-chiffoned pop by such singers as Frankie Laine and Patti Page. By far the most influential disseminator of vernacular music on television during this era was Ed Sullivan, a powerful New York gossip columnist for the *New York Graphic* who had been discovered by CBS after hosting an amateur showcase called *The Harvest Moon Ball* in 1947. Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town*, which debuted in the summer of 1948, was TV’s first and most-watched variety show. Metropolitan Opera star Roberta Peters appeared on Sullivan’s show a total of forty-three times, more than any other performer in the twenty-three-year history of the show. Other early TV stars, such as Milton Berle and Arthur Godfrey, featured both classical and popular music performers on their variety shows.

During the early 1950s, music was ubiquitous on television, but not only by virtue of on-camera performances. Programming executives began to think of music as television’s fossil fuel—a cheap, plentiful resource that could be used across different formats. Soon the popular songs of the era were heard on quiz shows like bandleader Kay Kyser’s *Kollege of Musical Knowledge*, *Stop the Music*, and *Jukebox Jury*; on amateur showcases like *Talent Scouts* (briefly hosted by Godfrey) and *Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour*; and on shows that presented selections from current Broadway hits, such as the short-lived *Musical Comedy Time*. The music seen on network television during the early 1950s closely mirrored the Velveeta zeitgeist: it was as safe,

bland, and soulless as processed cheese. This *was* the 1950s, a time of economic bounty and social placidity, when suburban enclaves were sprouting up across the country and author William Whyte's nine-to-five "organization man" became the paradigm for working stiff.

So insatiable was the country's appetite for musical schmaltz at the time that the biggest TV music stars were virtually interchangeable ciphers, peddling time-tested standards to an older, less demanding audience weaned on radio. An accordion player from North Dakota, Lawrence Welk was a Los Angeles-based big band leader of little discernible talent, yet he managed to score a string of hits in the 1930s and '40s by tapping into the public's appetite for cornball pop with such nonsense as "Bubbles in the Wine" and "Mairzy Dotes." In 1951 he began broadcasting a musical variety show on local affiliate KTTV. Welk's "champagne music" format, a relentlessly cheerful celebration of Caucasian virtue featuring the bandleader's cast of musical do-gooders—accordionist Myron Floren, singer Alice Lon, clarinetist Pete Fountain, and the toothsome Lennon Sisters—was an instant hit. In 1955 ABC picked up *The Lawrence Welk Show* for national broadcast. The show ran until 1971 and turned Welk, TV's most ingratiating simp, into one of its most enduring and beloved stars.

An even less scintillating personality who benefited from TV's musical closed-door policy, which favored the benign over the venturesome, was Perry Como. A former barber from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, Como won a radio gig in 1944 as the host of *The Chesterfield Supper Club* on the strength of his first hit, a cover of the Jerome Kern-Ira Gershwin song "Long Ago and Far Away." When *Supper Club* made the transition to television in 1948, Como tagged along, and thus began a thirty-year run as a TV star. Como's TV exposure turned him into a major generic icon; the singer scored forty-two top-ten hits from 1944 to 1958, making him one of the biggest pop stars of any era.

A nondescript crooner whose listless vocal technique was matched only by his meek disposition, Como was TV's Platonic ideal: a nonthreatening crowd pleaser, implacable, humble, and soothing, an EveryUncle in a navy blue suit. Even the onslaught of rock 'n' roll



Perry Como, the King of Velveeta Pop. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

couldn't kill him off; Como continued to host TV specials well into the early 1970s.

While the national networks were busy clogging their pipelines with pabulum in the early 1950s, a few local affiliates on the West Coast and elsewhere began taking matters into their own hands, broadcasting dance shows to please the more diverse regional musical tastes of their viewers.

Country and western was still riding the crest of its postwar commercial boom when the hillbilly music bubbling up from the South and isolated enclaves

like Bakersfield, California, began to seep into the consciousness of urban Americans via radio. By 1949 at least 650 radio stations had integrated live country music into their programming, with shows like *Big D Jamboree* in Dallas, *Town Hall Party* in Los Angeles, and the big kahuna of them all, *The Grand Ole Opry*, in Nashville.<sup>7</sup>

Western swing music, a jazzed-up derivation of country tailor-made for tricky dance steps, was exploding throughout California as bandleaders like Bob Wills, Spade Cooley, and Tex Williams consistently sold out dance halls in cities like Los Angeles and Bakersfield. Cooley, in particular, had become a big star in Los Angeles. The amiable Oklahoma fiddler operated his own ballroom in Santa Monica, which drew between five and six thousand customers every Saturday night, for well over a decade.<sup>8</sup> He soon became country music's first multimedia star, appearing in two films, hosting his own radio show, and landing a spot on L.A.'s first commercial TV station, KTLA, in

1947. Cooley's affable personality and breezy brand of western swing kept him on the air eleven years. He then murdered his wife in 1961, which of course ended his career.

Unlike Cooley, Eddy Arnold was no hillbilly roughneck. A soggy Milquetoast who became the twangy equivalent of Perry Como, the "Tennessee Plowboy" was one of country music's biggest stars for over three decades. He began his career as a passable crooner in the style of Gene Autry,<sup>9</sup> recording a string of hits with cloying titles like "Mommy, Please Stay Home with Me" in the late 1940s; Arnold

**Spade Cooley.** (Michael Ochs Archives.com)



wound up selling an astounding 70 million albums during his career.<sup>10</sup> His down-home gentility and well-scrubbed good looks were perfectly suited for TV's older white-bread constituency, and CBS signed him up for his own show—a summer replacement, fittingly enough, for *The Perry Como Show*—in 1952. Arnold continued to crop up on TV periodically throughout the 1950s and '60s—the annoyingly well-behaved house guest who never leaves.

Television was rife with country music shows of both national and regional origin during the mid-to-late 1950s. Singer Tennessee Ernie Ford got his start hosting a local Los Angeles TV show called *Hometown Jamboree*. In March 1955, he scored a top-five pop hit with “The Ballad of Davy Crockett,” the theme from the popular action-adventure segments starring Fess Parker that were featured on ABC's *Disneyland* anthology series. That single, as well as the enormously popular “Sixteen Tons,” enabled the avuncular Ford to establish a toehold in prime time from 1955 to 1965 with no less than three variety shows, all titled *The Tennessee Ernie Ford Show*, featuring a variety of musical acts and Ford's folksy monologues. ABC's *Ozark Jubilee* originated from Springfield, Missouri, and was hosted by Grand Ole Opry star Red Foley. A musical variety show that frequently broke national stars (twelve-year-old Brenda Lee made her national TV debut on the show in 1956),<sup>11</sup> *Ozark Jubilee* ran from 1955 to 1961. Foley later tried to cash in on his TV fame and appeared as “Uncle Cooter” opposite Fess Parker in the short-lived TV series *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in 1962. Other programs, like Dumont's *Old American Barn Dance* and CBS's *Cliff Edwards Show*, traded in country's rustic authenticity for patronizing hayseed cornpone, laying the groundwork for the inexplicably successful *Hee-Haw* two decades later.

The most venerable TV music show of the decade was NBC's *Your Hit Parade*, which featured the kind of earnest, lets-put-on-a-show brassiness that 1950s TV audiences just couldn't seem to get enough of. Like so many long-running shows, *Your Hit Parade*'s format was almost too simple: a musical revue of the top seven songs of the week, plus a few older songs thrown in for good measure, performed by the *Hit Parade* cast of regulars, an ever-changing ensemble that included





A typically overblown production number from *Your Hit Parade*. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

Eileen Wilson, Gisele MacKenzie, Snooky Lanson, Dorothy Collins, and musical director Raymond Scott.

*Your Hit Parade* had, not surprisingly, begun as a radio show in 1935. It made a smooth transition to TV, primarily because the show's producers figured that if the same songs remained at the top of the charts week after week, elaborate production numbers would be necessary to keep viewers hooked. Thus, *Your Hit Parade* was the unwitting forerunner of bad music video choreography. The show worked like a charm during the bleached-out early 1950s, when the top ten was front-loaded with hits from Girl Scout divas like Teresa Brewer and Patti Page. But the show lost momentum as "Tennessee Waltz" gave way to "Be-Bop-a-Lula," and was canceled after a nine-year run in 1959. The *Variety* headline announcing the show's demise read

like an obituary: “Hit Parade Dies as Rock ’n’ Roll Takes Its Toll of Longrunner, 24.”<sup>12</sup> *Your Hit Parade* may have represented Square Culture’s last chance to monopolize the airwaves with easy-listening tripe, but its “hits revue” format would prove malleable enough that TV rock’s early pioneers would co-opt it for their own ends.

TV hit radio with an even more devastating body blow when it began mimicking the format of venerable music-driven shows like *Stop the Music* in programs like *Your Hit Parade* and *Peter Potter’s Jukebox Jury*, the latter a local L.A. show that went national in 1953. Cash-poor and glamour-deficient, radio had to start cutting corners and devising new ways to lure more listeners with fewer resources. Enter the DJ.

The initial concept of the radio DJ—an on-air personality who played records—began with an enterprising West Coast radio personality named Al Jarvis. One of radio’s earliest innovators, Jarvis was the first DJ to rate records on the air with his “Committee of 500” anointed listeners. He was also the creator, in the mid-1930s, of *The Make Believe Ballroom* for KFWB in Los Angeles, which attempted to re-create the ambience of a Saturday-night ballroom dance—a popular urban phenomenon of the time—with a stack of popular records and Jarvis’s unctuous, urbane patter. “By using commercial records, I figured, I would not only have a more diversified program, but I could present some of the world’s great stars in a produced format,” Jarvis recalled in 1975. “It was the first time their records were ever played on radio—it was the first time any records were played.”<sup>13</sup>

*The Make Believe Ballroom* was an immediate hit, but more important, it was the first DJ-driven radio show on the West Coast. Martin Block, who also broadcast a show called *Make Believe Ballroom* from New York, claimed to be the originator of the format, but Jarvis sued, and won a sizable settlement.) It was this show that codified the DJ-driven programming format and permanently altered the balance of power from singing and dancing talent to on-air “personalities” whose only tangible skill was picking records and spewing relentlessly upbeat jive between record spins.

“Al was so creative, a real innovator,” says veteran L.A. radio DJ Earl McDaniel. “He was the first guy to really exert his personality on

the air, rather than just play the records. He really set the stage for all the other Top 40 guys who came later on.”

By the late 1940s, Al Jarvis was a radio colossus pulling in a mid-six-figure salary at KFWB. He had now expanded his show to include interviews with local civic leaders, horse racing results, and “daily religious periods”—a proto-TV talk show format. When television’s creeping popularity became too pervasive to ignore, he began to explore the possibility of crossing over, lest he get lost in the shuffle.

*Hollywood on Television* (renamed *The Al Jarvis Show* in short order) debuted on KLAC-TV in September 1947 with twenty-something Betty White, Jarvis’s Girl Friday, as Jarvis’s cohost, and ran five days a week for five hours a day. With so much airtime to fill, and his booking choices hamstrung by the American Federation of Musicians temporary ban on “live” music on television (The powerful musicians union was using its leverage to wrest royalty payments from television producers; a deal was eventually worked out in 1950), Jarvis cast a wide net—celebrities schmoozed, singers like Frankie Laine (a Jarvis discovery) stopped by to plug records, a “jury” rated the week’s current hits, and White and Jarvis even engaged in silly comedy skits. “My dad was sort of like the Arthur Godfrey of the West Coast,” says his son Jerry. Jarvis also spooled “soundies,” short films featuring popular singers of the era such as Rudy Vallee and Gertrude Neisen. *The Al Jarvis Show* was the first musical variety show to feature artists “lip-synching”—mouthing the lyrics to their records—a novelty at the time that *Variety*, in its review of the show, called a “fresh and deft” innovation.

Jarvis was a notorious hater of rock ’n’ roll. When an interviewer asked him about Elvis Presley in 1956, he hewed to the usual over-thirty party line: “If he was a Negro and performed as he does now, he would be thrown in jail.”<sup>14</sup> Jarvis may have bristled when Teenage Nation overran Square Culture in the mid-1950s, but he didn’t flinch. “My dad was not a swinger,” says John Jarvis. “He was an accommodator.” Always eager to nab a piece of the action, Jarvis tried to cash in on the insurgent youth cultural movement with his own teenage dance show, *Let’s Dance*, in 1953.

*Let’s Dance* pushed all the right buttons—the show featured lithe

young things dancing to Velveeta pop, lip-synched performances by regional stars, and Jarvis's time-tested record ratings segment. Young L.A. viewers loved it, and in 1956 Jarvis was courted by ABC to take *Let's Dance* national. But there was a catch—the network's southern affiliates wouldn't tolerate any black dancers or performers on the show, and Jarvis would have to entirely whitewash *Let's Dance* if he wanted to expand his market share. Jarvis, a close friend and public booster of Nat King Cole and other black performers, refused, and *Let's Dance* remained a purely local phenomenon before it was canceled in late 1956.

Other DJs gave TV a shot. Los Angeles DJ Steve Dunne's *Picture Platters*, which premiered in December 1950, was the first music video show. *Picture Platters'* format entailed the spinning of popular records under clunky three-minute films that were intended to serve as a visual counterpoint to the records. Ambitious but inept, *Picture Platters* was short-lived. In Philadelphia, bandleader Paul Whiteman hosted a curiosity called *TV-Teen Club*. The rotund, mildly talented Whiteman had once been dubbed the "King of Jazz" among white tastemakers in the 1920s—he commissioned "*Rhapsody in Blue*" from George Gershwin and premiered the piece in 1924—but he was little more than an ethnically acceptable alternative to jazz's real African-American pioneers. By 1952 Whiteman had been reduced to presiding over dance contests and spouting catchphrases like "Real gone!" on his show.<sup>15</sup> Yet *TV-Teen Club* was an important forerunner of teen dance shows, primarily because the show's commercial pitchman—a young Dick Clark—would learn valuable lessons on how *not* to run a dance show.

*Jack's Corner Drug* was a Minneapolis-based dance show hosted by a local DJ, Gene Thayer. The show, which went on the air in September 1952 from Minneapolis station WTCN-TV, used a drug-store stage set and featured local celebrity interviews, creative promos for local sponsors, and an abundance of pop cheese. "I was really trying to make it a disc jockey show on television," Thayer recalled.<sup>16</sup>

Down South, however, music television was going gonzo. Memphis native Dewey Phillips was everything Al Jarvis wasn't—

nonlinear, eccentric, always teetering on the brink of sanity. His three-hour local radio show, *Red, Hot, and Blue*, on station WHBQ was a melting pot into which Phillips tossed in whatever styles suited his fancy—from white rockabilly and country music to black R&B and blues. Phillips was a wild man, but not in the phony way that DJs can be to carve out a niche for themselves—“Daddy-O” Dewey was the real deal. He got the job at WHBQ by setting fire to a trash can, prompting DJ Gordon Lawhead to leave his mike and grab a fire extinguisher.<sup>17</sup> Dewey then slid into Lawhead’s chair and proceeded to make radio history. “Dewey would just throw the mike on and lean back,” says Memphis native Wink Martindale, who followed Phillips with his own local radio and TV shows. “His show had no rhyme or reason. He just did whatever came to mind.”

Phillips’s wacky patois was as important to his listeners as the music. He did imitations of celebrities, hazily extrapolated comedy routines from *The Red Skelton Show*, and carried on conversations with himself. “You listened to Dewey as much for Dewey as for the music

he played,” recalled Sun Records guitarist Roland James.<sup>18</sup> Phillips may have been occasionally incoherent on the air, but he was passionate about the music he played, and that resonated with his listeners. Musicians loved him; Howlin’ Wolf, B. B. King, and Johnny Ace were friends. One of Phillips’s biggest fans was Sun Records owner



**Dewey Phillips (r) with his partner in crime Harry Fritzius.** (*Special Collections, University of Memphis Libraries*)

Sam Phillips (no relation), and when Sam wanted to test the local market with a new act he had signed named Elvis Presley, he turned to Dewey first. Phillips thus became the first DJ in the country to play Elvis on the radio, an acetate of "That's Alright, Mama," in 1954. He liked it so much, in fact, that he played it over and over again, until everyone in Memphis knew who Elvis Presley was.

In the winter of 1955, Dewey Phillips began simulcasting his afternoon radio show on WHBQ's local TV station. *Phillips' Pop Shop* aired weekdays from 3:30 to 4:30, and held what seemed like Memphis' entire teen population in thrall for that hour. It was just as maniacal and loosely structured as Dewey's radio show—perhaps even more so. He would try anything—bump his head up against the camera lens, or walk off camera altogether, spotlight the production crew while he spun records, or defer to his loony sidekick, Harry Fritzius.<sup>19</sup>

Fritzius worked as a kind of jack-of-all-trades at WHBQ, but he shared Phillips's propensity for unhinged mayhem. For *Phillips' Pop Shop*, Fritzius came up with an alter ego, also named Harry, who would dress in a trench coat, boots, and an ape's mask. Harry would then wreak havoc on the Pop Shop set without uttering a word. It made no logical sense to have Harry on the show, but Phillips didn't care; he knew it was good TV, and his young viewers understood it was all in the spirit of the music he was playing.

"One of [Harry's] routines was to open mail on the air," Pop Shop director Durrelle Durham told writer Robert Gordon. "Harry would stomp on these packages, kick them around, and then see what he had smashed. One day there was a round tube, like a Quaker Oats container, that he beat up and then held up to the lens and pulled the top off. It was a hornet's nest with live hornets in it. When the cameramen fled, no one was sure they would come back. It turned out that Harry had sent it to himself. We all had cans of bug spray the rest of the week, and that became a running gag."<sup>20</sup>

*Phillips' Pop Shop* became as beloved as *Red, Hot, and Blue*. Not even Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* could railroad it off the air. WHBQ was an ABC affiliate, and when the network requested that it replace *Phillips' Pop Shop* with *Bandstand*, the station refused.

Instead, Dewey would punch in *American Bandstand*'s picture feed on his show from time to time, just for kicks. "You had no idea where it was coming from, and they were dancing to a different song so it was all out of time," says studio executive John Fry.<sup>21</sup>

WHBQ could only hold on with *Phillips' Pop Shop* for so long, and finally relented to ABC pressure in January 1958. *American Bandstand* usurped *Phillips' Pop Shop*'s time slot, while Phillips' show moved to midnight with the less whimsical title *Night Beat*. It lasted only four nights. Apparently, Harry decided to get a little jiggy on the air with a lifesize cutout of Jayne Mansfield, and that was the end of *Night Beat*. Cut loose from WHBQ in 1958, Phillips never got his career back on track and died in the fall of 1968.

Video DJ shows like *TV-Teen Club*, *Phillips' Pop Shop*, and *Let's Dance* were the first TV programs to cater exclusively to a predominantly teenage audience. Because their rise dovetailed with the rise of the Top 40 radio format, these shows also fueled rock 'n' roll's counterrevolution nationwide.<sup>22</sup> But it was a fractious revolution, with regional personalities presiding over their own fiefdoms. A rock 'n' roll dance show wouldn't go national until 1956, and when *American Bandstand* did, it summarily wiped many local TV dance shows off the air.

## **“A Real Decent, Fine Boy”**

### **ELVIS ON TV**

By 1956, rock 'n' roll was encroaching on the turf of the Velveeta-pop mafia—Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney, and company—and there was little they could do about it, except reluctantly cede some territory. The variety shows became the battlefield upon which television's culture war was being waged, pitting the musical conservatism of the old-line radio holdovers against the raw aggression of rock's new guard. Small concessions were starting to make big waves. *The Perry Como Show* began booking more R&B and pop acts, while variety-show hosts like Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen—both of whom had little use for rock 'n' roll—split the difference by featuring R&B roughnecks as well as bland middle-of-the-road acts such as Arthur Godfrey protégé Pat Boone in the early 1950s. (Boone, who sold millions of records by appropriating R&B hits and cleaning them up for white audiences, would later get his own show on ABC in 1957.)

*Stage Show* was among the programs that periodically booked younger pop stars in order to lure younger viewers. Co-hosted by big-band leaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, *Stage Show* had started out as a summer replacement for *The Jackie Gleason Show* in July 1954. When Gleason decided to cut his variety show from an hour to thirty minutes in order to devote more time to *The Honeymooners*, *Stage Show* was revived as a half-hour lead-in in the fall of 1955.



Like so many standard-issue variety series of the era, *Stage Show's* dry-as-dust format, in which various pop singers were trotted out week after week to perform with the Dorsey band, was predicated on the belief that viewers will tolerate mediocre talent if it is wrapped in a gaudy production package. The Dorsey brothers had been huge stars in the 1940s—it was Tommy who had featured the young Frank Sinatra in his band in the earlier part of the decade—but were rapidly becoming anachronisms from an era when plastic affability and swing music were in vogue. By January 1956 ratings for *Stage Show* were sagging, and the show was in dire need of an adrenaline boost.

Enter Colonel Tom Parker, former sideshow attraction, dog-catcher, and country music manager. The offspring of carnival performers, the bluff West Virginian had been in show business since the age of ten, first as a performer in his uncle's Great Parker Pony Circus, then with his own pony and monkey act, and later with the Great American, the granddaddy of all traveling carnival shows. Parker was entranced by the itinerant life of the sideshow world he grew up in, particularly the artful cons of the carneys who suckered sailors into paying money to throw hoops onto milk bottles, shoot targets with rifles, or pitch baseballs to win stuffed bears for their girlfriends. But there wasn't much money in carnival life, and Parker left in the late 1930s to become a press agent and independent concert promoter. Using the lessons he had learned as a carnival kid, Parker virtually reinvented the way performers toured and were promoted, turning his self-sufficient operation into a lean profit machine. Country legend Minnie Pearl was one of the performers who cast their lot with Parker. "Instead of working auditoriums, we took a tent along with us and played all these tiny little towns," Pearl said in 1971. "The tent seated three thousand. We couldn't do twenty miles a day, because we'd 'strike the rag' at night after the show and then have to put it back up again in the next town."<sup>1</sup> While the tent show was en route, Parker would blitz the next town with PR material, until everyone knew his was a show that was not to be missed.

For Parker, a performer was only as good as his publicity. When he managed Eddy Arnold in the 1940s, Parker kept the Tennessee Plowboy on the road as much as was humanly possible, getting the

word out through radio appearances on popular country radio shows like *Louisiana Hayride* and making “saturation” personals, in which Parker would book Arnold in any venue that would have him. That strategy worked: under Parker’s aegis, Arnold became one of the biggest-selling country artists of the era. “When Eddy came to a town, whether it had five thousand or five million people, everyone knew he was coming,” said former Parker advance man Hubert Long. “I think if there’s any one thing that led to his success, it’s the promotion.”<sup>2</sup> Parker was also a tough negotiator: when he booked Arnold for his first Vegas gig, he insisted on getting paid in advance—an unheard-of practice at the time.

It was as Arnold’s manager that Parker first encountered Elvis Presley, who was booked on a country music tour that Parker’s company, Jamboree Attractions, had arranged in May 1955. Parker’s advance man Oscar “the Baron” Brown had first got wind of Elvis a few months prior, when Memphis DJ Bob Neal played him some of the sides Presley had cut for Sam Phillips’s Sun label. Brown then caught a local gig, and was blown away. He reported back to Parker, who kept a watchful eye on Elvis’s sales. Meanwhile, Bob Neal became Elvis’s manager, and asked Parker to help him make a deal for a concert in Carlsbad, New Mexico. That led to more Parker-brokered concerts, and a country showcase featuring another Parker client, singer Hank Snow. Parker endeared himself to Elvis and his parents Vernon and Gladys, muscled Neal out, and eventually took over every aspect of the singer’s business.

Parker picked the right time to move in; Presley’s star was rising. During his short four-year tenure with Sam Phillips’s Sun Records, the Memphis native had scored a series of regional country hits with cover versions of Junior Parker’s “Mystery Train” and Arthur Gunter’s “Baby, Let’s Play House.” Shortly thereafter, Parker convinced RCA Victor to buy out Elvis’s Sun Records contract for \$35,000—a king’s ransom at the time. With so much money riding on his new client, Parker knew he had to make good on RCA’s investment, and that it would require something more than the usual tour-stop barn burners he had organized with Jamboree Attractions. Parker also knew that he had in Elvis an artist of enormous commercial potential, someone

with enough effortless charisma to transcend even Eddy Arnold's superstar status, and he had big plans for him. Elvis, as Peter Guralnick has written, "was the purest of postwar products, the commodity that had been missing from the shelves in an expanding marketplace of leisure time and disposable cash."<sup>3</sup> Parker's vision of the future centered on "commodification through mass exposure," and that meant blitzing the big TV variety shows.<sup>4</sup>

Parker may have been a wily veteran of all the grassroots promotional schemes—the countless state fair one-nighters, the radio plugs, the personal appearances in school auditoriums and airport lounges—but Elvis could, with the right exposure, thrive without having to stoop to the level of an intrepid journeyman musician. Parker wanted to transform his regional star into the country's first multimedia phenomenon.

Soon after Elvis's first RCA Victor single, "Heartbreak Hotel," was released in January 1956, Harry Kalcheim and Abe Lastfogel, Presley's agents at show-business powerhouse William Morris, put out feelers to both Jackie Gleason's *Stage Show* and *The Perry Como Show*, which both aired at 8:00 on Saturday nights. They eventually negotiated not one, but four separate appearances on *Stage Show*, at \$1,250 a pop, with an option to pick up two more appearances. Elvis's first appearance was slotted for January 28, 1956. "If I booked only the people I like, I'd have nothing but trumpet players on my show," said Jackie Gleason at the time. "It was and is our opinion that Elvis would appeal to the majority of the people."<sup>5</sup> William Morris, by sheer virtue of their stature as show business's most powerful talent agency, had finagled a multiple-appearance package for a green artist with little national recognition. "Harry Kalcheim, who had signed Elvis, was close to everyone in the variety business," recalls manager Bernie Brillstein, who apprenticed as a junior agent at William Morris in the 1950s. "Kalcheim booked Sullivan, *Your Show of Shows*—William Morris had them all, and they were very, very tough negotiators. No one fucked with them."

The week before the first of his six *Stage Show* appearances, Presley made a quick whistle-stop tour of Texas and talked up his Dorsey show gig one night backstage with rockabilly duo Hoot and

Curley and old friend Maylon Humphries. “He was sitting around in Hoot and Curley’s dressing room, and Curley says, ‘Elvis, you’re going to make a fortune off this,’ and he looked down and took a deep breath and says, ‘Not really,’” Humphries observed, “And he named what he was getting. ‘But, you know, Curley,’ he said, ‘Mr. Parker says more people will be seeing me on these four shows’—and he didn’t say Colonel, he said Mr. Parker—‘than I would be exposed to for the rest of my life on the [Louisiana] Hayride.’”<sup>6</sup>

If *Stage Show* was supposed to be the TV appearance that would break Elvis nationally, the buzz for his first appearance was negligible. “The Dorsey brothers didn’t even know who he was,” recalls Grelun Landon, a representative for Hill and Range, Elvis’s music publishing company. To make matters worse, CBS’s Studio 50 theater in midtown Manhattan was half full due to a nasty rainstorm, and those who had sought refuge in the theater barely knew who Presley was or why they should care. “They had a houseful of people they pulled in off the streets, mostly out-of-towners,” says Landon. “I think they might have had a Boy Scout troop in there. They literally hauled ’em in off the streets.”

In fact, the older audience that night was probably more eager to see special guest jazz singer Sarah Vaughan swing with the Dorsey Orchestra. As for Elvis, he was keeping it calm and low-key prior to the show, kicking it with Landon, guitarist Scotty Moore, and bassist Bill Black. “Elvis was nervous, but he didn’t show it,” recalls Landon.

Elvis was also a TV neophyte, but he was no fool. During his short Sun Records tenure, he had traveled all over the South, honing his stage act on fairground bandstands in front of receptive audiences. By early 1956 he had already developed his full repertoire of signature stage moves—the leg shimmy, the plunging knee bends, the sly, playfully sexy facial expressions. But this was TV, and if Elvis wanted to cut a wider demographic swath, he would have to rein it in a little, which meant keeping it exciting, yet non-threatening. “Elvis was still feeling his way a bit, in terms of performing for larger audiences,” says Landon. “The gyrating hip bit and all the rest had worked so great in the South, but who knew how a national TV audience would react to it?”



**Jump around: Elvis on *Stage Show*: (l to r) Scotty Moore, DJ Fontana, and Bill Black, March 17, 1956. (Photograph © Alfred Wertheimer)**

Parker and Presley would find out soon enough. That night, after a song from Vaughan, Cleveland disc jockey Bill Randle—an old ally of Parker’s who had been relentlessly plugging Elvis’s *Stage Show* appearance on the air—came out to introduce Presley: “We’d like at this time to introduce you to a young fellow, who, like many performers—Johnny Ray among them—came out of nowhere to be an overnight star. This young fellow we saw for the first time while making a movie short. We think tonight that he’s going to make television history for you. We’d like you to meet him now—Elvis Presley.”

With that, Presley, dressed in a black shirt, white tie, and tweed jacket, emerges from stage left and swiftly cues his band into their first number, a medley of the Joe Turner R&B hits “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” and “Flip, Flop, and Fly.” During the first verse, Elvis stands riv-

eted to the same spot, his hair slightly disheveled, while Moore and Black play in the shadows over his twitchy shoulders. Presley seems uneasy in his own skin, playing out the moment without really capitalizing on it. But then during Moore's guitar solo, he backpedals toward the band, and the placid facade recedes. Elvis's pant legs begin to flap like winded sails, he ramps up the intensity of his guitar playing, and a knowing smile creeps across his face. *Now* he's having fun. The unwitting *Stage Show* audience doesn't know what to make of it all. Some titter at Presley's over-the-top moves, while others applaud appreciatively as they would a plate-spinning act. When it's all over, Presley bows and politely waves to the audience—from choirboy to live wire and back again, and in three minutes.

The media's response to Presley's *Stage Show* debut was muted: few critics even bothered to review the show, and there was no appreciable ratings shift. For country singer and friend Justin Tubb, Presley's *Stage Show* appearances never quite captured the explosiveness of the stage act: "My feeling was that they didn't capture him on the television show—of course we had already seen him in action, and it could have been envy, but he seemed a little reserved from what we had seen, he seemed a little nervous, they didn't seem to get his magnetism or charisma."<sup>7</sup>

Parker may have felt the same way. Afterward, Kalcheim put a call in to the Colonel, who was laid up sick at home in Madison, Tennessee. Parker proceeded to reel off, according to Grelun Landon, "a thousand suggestions" designed to polish Presley's TV-readiness. "This guy came back sweating," recalls Landon. "The old man was being very rough. Parker had an awful lot riding on this." When Elvis left the building that night, there was no adoring mob waiting for him, or a single autograph seeker.

The next *Stage Show* appearances followed in quick succession, as Presley continued to promote his latest singles, which RCA was releasing at a steady clip. "Heartbreak Hotel," which entered the *Billboard* chart at number 68 on March 3, hit number one on April 28 and stayed there for eight weeks. Parker's meticulously orchestrated PR blitz, of which the TV shots were an integral part, was starting to reap dividends. By the time Elvis made his *Stage Show* valedictory on

March 24, he was no longer a tentative, slightly awkward comer but a spit-shined, self-assured pro with an impressive chart record. Wearing a visually arresting white tie against a black shirt, Elvis strides confidently to the mike after Jimmy Dorsey's intro and, without looking over his shoulder, gives the band a casual hand cue. Then he gruffly punches out the first line of the Drifters' 1953 hit "Money Honey": "You know the landlord rang my front door bell/ I let it ring for a long, long spell . . ."

The band jumps in, and Elvis is off and running. This is as much a provocation as it is a promotional performance; Elvis is testing the limits of *Stage Show's* musty gentility, teasingly breaking loose with the band during the instrumental break, then gathering himself again for the vocal. It was spellbinding, and this time he had a more receptive audience. Jackie Gleason, for his part, was unimpressed, and after being hit by a barrage of negative viewer mail, decided not to exercise the option he held for more Presley guest shots. "People were not only revolted by him," Gleason observed, "but they went out of their way to tell us."<sup>8</sup>

Harriet Ames, for one, was totally blown away. An Annenberg heir and the sister-in-law of movie producer Joseph Hazen, Ames called up Hazen and demanded that he turn on the TV and check out Presley. Suitably impressed, Hazen in turn called his partner Hal Wallis in Los Angeles, who immediately arranged for a screen test. Thus, Elvis's long, lucrative, and dubious movie career was launched.<sup>9</sup>

But before Elvis was to appear in front of a movie camera for the first time, he was scheduled to perform two songs on Milton Berle's variety show. Eight years prior, the former vaudevillian had been TV's first superstar with NBC's *Texaco Star Theatre*, the massive success of which had helped popularize and legitimize the young medium. By the fall of 1955, however, he was a fading star who had decamped to Hollywood from New York in an attempt to revive his career with a new variety show on CBS produced by Jackie Gleason. Although it was one of the first color variety shows to be broadcast from the West Coast, *The Milton Berle Show* lasted only ten months.

Like the Dorseys, Berle had little use for rock 'n' roll, and had booked Elvis for a two-appearance deal at \$5,000 a pop only as a

favor to his agent, Abe Lastfogel.<sup>10</sup> Elvis and the band, on the other hand, were thrilled to perform on a show hosted by the original “Mr. Television.” Drummer D. J. Fontana was particularly excited about the prospect of meeting jazz legend Buddy Rich, who kept the pulse behind the Harry James Orchestra. But Rich and the band merely turned their noses up at these hayseed upstarts. To them, pop music performers were beneath contempt, let alone someone as willfully base as Elvis.

“We all showed up for rehearsal,” recalls Milton Berle, “and Buddy Rich walks in, takes one look at Elvis, and asks, ‘Who the fuck is this kid?’ ‘Cause Harry James and Rich, they were considered hip at the time. Elvis meant nothing to them. Harry asks Elvis if he has his books of music for the band, and Elvis tells him, ‘I don’t have any. All I need is a rhythm on the drums,’ and hands him a lyric sheet. I’ll never forget Buddy’s face. During rehearsal, I saw Buddy and Harry making faces at each other, as if to say, ‘What have we got here?’ I knew what we had.”

For the Berle show’s final broadcast, Elvis played in front of a few hundred paid-off bobby-soxers and servicemen on the windy deck of the SS *Hancock* in San Diego. “I had my intern George Schlatter go to the local high school and grab as many girls as he could for the show for five bucks apiece,” recalls Berle. “It was an old trick I learned in vaudeville. If one person clapped, pretty soon everyone’s clapping.”

Considering the firestorm Elvis was already stirring up among church leaders and other moral watchdogs, the theme for *The Milton Berle Show* that day was curiously patriotic. Berle himself was dressed in a particularly gaudy admiral’s uniform, and the curtain was made to look like an American flag. With the breeze flapping the ship’s mast and the ocean roiling in the background, Berle came out to introduce Presley:

“Ladies and gentlemen, here’s a young man who in a few short months has gained tremendous popularity in the music business. His records are really going like wildfire. He’s America’s new singing sensation, our new RCA recording artist, here he is, big reception for Elvis Presley!”

With that, the star-spangled curtains part, and Elvis appears, the





Elvis sharing a few yucks with Milton Berle during rehearsal. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

very picture of insouciant cool, dressed in a typically chiaroscuro outfit—black shirt, black pants, white tie, white bucks. Elvis reels off the first line of his current hit, “Heartbreak Hotel,” and the officers and schoolgirls hoot appreciatively. He then proceeds to squeeze every ounce of slow-burn sensuality from the song, even as his body language remains somewhat muted. It’s almost as if he’s chagrined by the show’s pretensions toward feel-good boosterism. Better to leave the deep knee plunges for a more appropriate context.

After Elvis performs “my latest single, Blue Schwede Shoes,” Berle reemerges in—what else?—clown-size blue suede shoes, declares himself to be Elvis’s twin brother Melvin, and proceeds to ham it up while Elvis reprises the song. It’s classic Berle old-school

shtick, the worst kind of vaudeville hokum, but Elvis doesn't seem to mind as he feeds Berle straight lines and feigns amusement. If this was how the Colonel was going to make Elvis a household name, then so be it. Berle, for his part, came away impressed and somewhat amazed at Elvis's sexual magnetism. "I threw a little dinner after the show on the ship," says Berle, "and all the female dancers from the show were literally fighting for Elvis. I mean, these twenty-four, twenty-five-year-olds really fighting. It got vicious."

Four months later, on June 5, Presley made his appearance on Berle's new show, but this time without the patriotic trimmings, which freed him up to unleash the primal aggressiveness of his newly polished stage act. From the first bars of "Hound Dog," it was clear that this performance would be a far cry from the rough-hewn, awkward charm he had flashed during the *Stage Show* gigs. The attire was a bit more casual this time—checked jacket and a mildly radical two-tone shirt—and so was the performance. With the band bashing out a suitably gutbucket arrangement unsweetened by Harry James's arrangements, Elvis worked the crowd masterfully—punctuating lines with a firm grasp of the mike stand, then engaging in a crowd-pleasing stunt straight out of *Minsky's Burlesque*. At the halfway mark, Elvis cut off the band, pointed to no one in particular, and dug into a half-tempo take on the chorus, his legs doing a reverse limbo toward the band while he raked the mike stand across the stage.

It was clearly meant to be a self-referential joke on his own controversial sex appeal, and Berle's audience seemed divided on how to respond to it—a lot of crosstalk is clearly audible during the performance. When it was over, Berle—every inch the paternalistic host—rushed over to Elvis and implored the crowd to give him a big hand. "How 'bout my boy?" he shouted over the din, mussing Elvis's hair. He then broke into a spasmodic faux-Elvis dance, while Elvis looked on.

Elvis's second Berle appearance was unlike anything he had previously attempted on television—an uninhibited, no-holds-barred showstopper that radiated considerable sexual heat. Even today, the "Hound Dog" performance looks a little dangerous—you can almost picture the nervous suits at NBC's standards and practices department with their twitchy fingers on the "Please Stand By" button.

The broadcast was an unmitigated success, with Berle's ratings numbers beating comedian Phil Silver's show *You'll Never Get Rich* for the first time all season. It was also Berle's last hurrah—unable to consistently hold its own against Silver, *The Milton Berle Show* was canceled a week later. For Elvis, the backlash was just beginning. This was not, after all, what TV audiences had grown accustomed to seeing on their favorite variety shows. Como, Patti Page, Frankie Laine—all had gained popularity by melding into the scenery with polite reserve and material that didn't ruffle acceptable social mores. Elvis, on the other hand, was a product of the South, where over-the-top showmanship was encouraged and rewarded, particularly among black performers. When Elvis backlash gained momentum in the wake of his second Berle appearance, a kind of reverse racism was at work—Elvis was, quite simply, too black to be a role model for white kids.

If the groundswell of anti-Elvis sentiment was largely grassroots—church groups and Bible-belt extremists led the charge—the mainstream media gave Elvis's critics plenty of cover. "Elvis was . . . appalling musically," wrote the *New York Daily News*' Ben Gross of Presley's Berle spot. "Also, he gave an exhibition that was suggestive and vulgar, tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos." The *New York Times*' Jack Gould could detect "no discernable singing ability" from Presley, while Jack O'Brian of the *New York Journal-American* made note of Presley's "primitive physical movement" and "inadequate voice."<sup>11</sup>

Colonel Parker welcomed the uproar—more press could only fuel record sales—but Presley was bemused, at least publicly. "I'm not trying to be sexy," he told Phyllis Battle of the International News Service. "It's just my way of expressing how I feel when I move around. My movements, ma'am, are all leg movements. I don't do nothing with my body."<sup>12</sup>

Steve Allen wasn't going to take any chances when the singer appeared on his show. Yet another DJ turned TV personality, Allen was television's first renaissance man, a jazz pianist, songwriter, author, and raconteur who disdained "crude" popular culture even as he reveled in broad slapstick shtick on his TV show. As for rock 'n' roll, Allen's animus was boundless. A recurring bit on *The Steve Allen*

*Show* that always got big laughs involved the comic reciting the lyrics to current pop hits in a mock-somber tone usually reserved for Shakespearean sonnets. “The very first song that I did that with was a top-ten hit in 1948 called ‘Love Somebody,’” says Allen. “It had a really stupid lyric: ‘Love somebody, yes I do, love somebody, yes I do . . . Love somebody, but I won’t say who.’ So I got screams by just reading it out loud. The one I’ve used in my live show the last few years is the Rolling Stones classic ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction,’ which has really dumb lyrics.”

*The Steve Allen Show* was in one of TV’s toughest time slots—Sunday at 8:00, opposite CBS powerhouse *The Ed Sullivan Show*—and Allen needed as much star wattage as possible if he wanted to make even a small dent into Sullivan’s enormous viewership. Which meant that booking a hot-button personality like Elvis was a no-brainer. Besides, at that point, Sullivan wanted no part of him; Elvis was clearly not the kind of family entertainer his audience wanted to see. “I remember reading stories in the papers about what Sullivan and some ministers down South were saying and it seemed greatly exaggerated and pointless,” says Allen. “Elvis now could perform in Sunday schools compared to the garbage that [rock artists are] doing now.”

Allen had originally caught Presley on the first of his *Stage Show* appearances, and was taken with him: “Suddenly, there was this gangly kid, I think he was about eighteen at the time. He obviously wasn’t a mature man like Eddy Arnold, or those other old country singers, and he really had something.” Allen may have needed Elvis for a ratings boost, but he still thought of Presley as a country bumpkin, a good ole boy made good. Allen would see to it that he wouldn’t be upstaged or outfoxed by him. “One of the reasons for the well-deserved popularity of icons like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra was that, almost without exception, they sang the greatest songs,” says Allen. “They sang stuff from great Broadway musicals, old Irving Berlin, Johnny Mercer, and Jimmy Van Husen, really great stuff. In the case of Elvis, he sang very inferior material but became even bigger than they did, so he deserves the credit. It was his own charisma, his own star quality.”

Elvis, the Colonel, and his entourage arrived at the Theatre in midtown Manhattan for rehearsals on June 17. They were debriefed by Allen as to how Elvis would perform the scheduled songs. For his current hit "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," Elvis would wear a tuxedo and tails, and for the next song, "Hound Dog," Elvis would croon to a sloe-eyed basset hound that would be dressed in a top hat and bow tie. Photographer Alfred Wertheimer, who was commissioned by RCA to take publicity shots of Elvis on *The Steve Allen Show*, listened in on that night's final run-through and chronicled it in his book *Elvis '56*: "Elvis was instructed to sing to the dog. Without the mike, he crouched down nose-to-nose with the dog and let her know, 'You ain't nothing but a hound dog.' She heard that and ignored him for the rest of the song.

"Now they had a problem. Steve wanted the hound to listen to Elvis, so he suggested that they get to know each other. The top hat and bow tie were removed. Elvis leaned over, caressed her neck, and whispered in her ear. She turned away. Elvis became intimate, speaking softly, touching her forehead with his hand to let her know she was the only one in his life. She didn't believe him. The director tried his technique, scratching her chin and speaking his own special dog language. He convinced her to put aside her feelings and be the trooper he knew she was.

"The director gave his cue. Elvis extended his hand, and she leaned forward and rested her chin in his palm. He told her again she was nothing but a hound dog, and when he had her where he wanted her, his hand holding her face close to his, he told her she "ain't never caught a rabbit." Elvis tried to keep a straight face when she turned away. Scotty, D. J., and Bill rocked through the refrain."<sup>13</sup>

It was hardly the stuff of which teen dreams were made, but Presley had put his game face on, and it was too late to stop now. After Allen and his guest stars Andy Griffith and Imogene Coca ran through a couple of desultory comedy skits and Steve Lawrence and Edie Gorme sang a number, it was time to introduce Elvis:

Well, you know, a couple of weeks ago on the "Milton Berle Show," our next guest, Elvis Presley, received a great deal of



Elvis rehearsing the "Range Round-up" routine with Steve Allen, Andy Griffith, and Imogene Coca, June 29, 1956. (Photograph © Alfred Wertheimer)

attention which some people seemed to interpret one way and some viewers interpreted another. Naturally, it's our intention to do nothing but a good show. [A dog barks backstage.] Somebody is barking back there. We want to do a show the whole family can watch and we always do and, tonight, we're presenting Elvis Presley in his—heh, heh—what you might call his first comeback . . . and at this time, it gives me extreme pleasure to introduce the new Elvis Presley. Here he is.

The "new" Elvis, tux and all, finds his way to center stage, looking like someone's reluctant date at a cotillion ball. Allen feeds him some shtick about Elvis's fans "seeing a different side of your personality tonight," then Elvis delivers the kicker:

"But, uh, I think I have on something tonight that's not quite correct for evening wear."

"Not quite formal? What's that, Elvis?"

"Blue suede shoes."

Big laughs. Applause. He's in.

Allen presents Elvis with a dubious-looking petition from 18,000 fans demanding that they want to see Elvis on television again real soon. Elvis puts on his humble cowpoke act—"I want to thank all those . . . wonderful folks, and I'd like to thank you, too." Then it's time for the first song, "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You."

Against a gaudy Greco-Roman backdrop festooned with candelabras and Doric columns, Elvis and the band (who appear in silhouette) run through his current hit with little of the intensity and urgency displayed just three weeks prior on *The Milton Berle Show*. The tuxedo seems to cosset him; he's virtually inert by his usual standards, yet his vocal is convincingly impassioned. After the song, Allen wheels out the basset hound. The dog seems bewildered and a little frightened, and Elvis tries to home in on her—grabbing her by the chin, caressing her ears, kissing her playfully. It's a patently absurd comic bit that curdles quickly, but the dog, in keeping with Allen's plan, effectively cancels out the erotically charged subtext of the song, which was originally recorded by sassy R&B singer Big Mama Thornton.

"The hound dog bit was camouflage," says Wertheimer. "I mean, the song has nothing to do with a hound dog. Now, you literally bring out a hound dog, everyone's focus is on the dog. If you sang it the way it was intended, the folks would catch on—hey, this is a bawdy song about a guy that wants to get laid."

Next up was a parody of western radio shows called "Range Round-up" with singing cowpokes Allen, Coca, Griffith, and "Tumbleweed" Presley. Decked out in chaps and a Stetson slung low over his face, Presley hammed it up with these seasoned sketch vets like an overzealous day player—enthusiastically, but just a half beat off the pace. And when Elvis chimed in on the skit's closing number, singing cornpone such as, "I got a horse, I gotta gun/I'm going out and have some fun/But I'm a-warning you galoots, don't step on my

Blue Suede Boots” while beating out the two-step rhythm on his acoustic guitar, his primitive cool had been totally denuded. “Elvis got right into it,” recalls Allen. “He was very cute.”

Contrary to the conventional wisdom perpetuated by the singer’s mythologizers over the years, Elvis wasn’t exactly an unwitting stooge in all of this. Elvis and Parker were simply giving in to the hard reality of variety TV in the 1950s, when even the biggest celebrities stooped to conquer a national audience. If millions of viewers caught a glimpse of Elvis on *The Steve Allen Show*, so what if he was upstaged by a dog? “It was no longer a question of what he wanted,” says Wertheimer. “He’d become a commodity, and a lot of people had a stake in him.”

“Since I was doing a comedy show where Ed Sullivan was doing a variety show, that was a very smart move, ‘cause it distinguished our show from his,” says Allen. “Anyway, I wanted to let him do his thing. And we didn’t touch his singing at all. I think he was happy at how pompous he looked. Elvis and the Colonel loved it, and I remember being very surprised at least fifteen years after the fact by reports to the contrary, that Elvis thought it was beneath him. That was total bull. He had the time of his life that week.” Gordon Stoker of singing group the Jordanares, who backed Elvis on this show and the Sullivan appearances, remembers things differently. “Elvis hated *The Steve Allen Show* with a passion,” he says “That’s the one thing we would never talk about. He didn’t like the tux, or the fact that we couldn’t be on-screen with him. He was burned to the core by the cowboy sketch.”

After the Allen show, Elvis returned to his room at the Warwick Hotel, where he was scheduled to be interviewed by newspaper columnist Hy Gardner for his 11:30 P.M. TV show, *Hy Gardner Calling!* which was broadcast locally on WRCA-TV. Gardner was a veteran columnist for the *New York Herald-Tribune* but a stiff on-camera presence, and the show’s split-screen conference-call format only undermined its contrived intimacy. Elvis certainly didn’t thrive under these circumstances. Physically spent from the Allen show and Parker’s punishing schedule of live gigs, his hair a mussy tangle, Elvis responds to Gardner’s inane queries with barely concealed disinterest:



*Gardner:* Is your shaking and quaking in the nature of an involuntary response to this hysteria?

*Presley:* Ah, would you say that again, sir?

*Gardner:* When you shake and you quake when you sing, is that sort of an involuntary response to the hysteria of your audience?

*Presley:* Uh, involuntary?

*Gardner:* Yes.

*Presley:* Well, I'm aware of everything I do at all times, but uh, it's just the way I feel.

**I wanna be your dog: Elvis serenades a pooch. (Photograph © Alfred Wertheimer)**



It goes on like this for the duration of the thirty-minute interview, with Gardner prodding Elvis with questions about the subversive effect his music is said to have on teenagers—to which Elvis responds, “How would rock and roll music make anyone rebel against their parents?”<sup>14</sup>—his reaction to all the negative criticism, and so on. Yet Elvis’s diffident yet deferential tone seems to win over Gardner, who tells Elvis that it’s really been “swell talking to you, and you make a lot of sense.” Another TV mission accomplished.

The *Steve Allen Show* featuring Elvis trounced *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the Trendex ratings (the precursor to the Nielsens) 20.2 to 14.8—one of the few times in the four-year history of their head-to-head rivalry that Allen ever trumped his competitor. Allen’s coup humiliated Sullivan, who, prior to Elvis’s appearance on Allen’s show, had told a reporter that the singer “wasn’t fit for family viewing.”<sup>15</sup> He had even sent a telegram to Allen the night of Elvis’s performance that was less a white-flag surrender than a call to arms: “Steven Presley Allen, NBC-TV, New York City. Stinker! Love and kisses. Ed Sullivan.”<sup>16</sup> He hadn’t changed his mind about Elvis, but he was more than willing to set aside his bias if it meant a monstrous viewership.

Unlike Allen or Berle, Sullivan wasn’t an entertainer, nor did he cultivate a strong passion for either high or low culture. What he did possess, however, was an appetite for total victory—the need to win at any cost. When Walter Winchell was the most widely read gossip columnist in the country and Sullivan was a scrappy number two at the *New York Graphic*, he would do anything to draw attention to himself, even mercilessly snipe at his nemesis in print. Now that Sullivan was finally on top—and on TV, no less—he wasn’t about to relinquish his perch to anyone, let alone an arriviste like Allen. “Allen always had the hippest acts on first,” says Bernie Brillstein. “But if you booked an act on Sullivan, you could get work for that act fifty-two weeks out of the year. You get a year’s worth of work in clubs on the basis of six appearances on Sullivan.”

A puritanical pragmatist who was never timid about censoring material from his own show, Sullivan knew the stakes were high with Elvis, whose stardom seemed to be rising exponentially with each passing week. Knowing Allen’s people were talking to Parker about a return

appearance, Sullivan peremptorily upped the ante. Where Elvis had received \$5,000 for his Allen appearance (the standard variety-show fee for all entertainers at the time was \$7,500), Sullivan was now willing to pony up \$50,000 for three appearances—an unprecedented sum.

Sullivan wasn't hosting when Elvis made his first appearance on the show on September 9. Laid up from injuries suffered in an auto accident near his Connecticut home, Sullivan hired actor Charles Laughton to host the show. Elvis wasn't there, either—his performance was piped in from CBS's studios in Hollywood, so he wouldn't have to halt production on his first film, *Love Me Tender*. Clad in a black-and-white-checkered sport jacket, Elvis, after humbly asserting that "this is probably the greatest honor I've ever had in my life," performs a polite "Don't Be Cruel" with the Jordanaires flanking him. Elvis is harmlessly kinetic; everything's in motion, but not enough to pose a threat. And it only gets milder. "Love Me Tender," arguably the wimpiest song Elvis ever recorded, may have left Sullivan's viewers wondering what all the fuss was about (after this Sullivan appearance, RCA received a million advance orders for "Love Me Tender"). Not until Elvis's appearance with his trio did Sullivan's viewers get to see exactly that. Tearing into a ferocious version of Little Richard's "Ready Teddy," he's bumptious and frisky, a restless bear cub finally cut loose from his cage. "Well, what did someone say?" remarked guest host Charles Laughton at the conclusion of Elvis's performance. " 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast'?"

Sullivan had given Elvis free rein to do what he wanted for his first two appearances on the show, but by early 1957 the antirock clamor had grown to a deafening roar among America's moral guardians, and Elvis was the lightning rod for much of the criticism. "Elvis just thought it was ridiculous," says the Jordanaires' Gordon Stoker. "He used to tell me, 'I don't make any vulgar moves, my mother would approve of what I was doing.' The Colonel didn't care one way or the other. All he was interested in was the money."

When Elvis returned for the third of his scheduled appearances on January 6, 1957, CBS's Standards and Practices responded accordingly. If Elvis was going to appear on the show, they would make him look as safe as Frankie Laine. Clad in a gold lamé vest and a silk shirt,

with the Jordanaires flanking him, Elvis is seen only from the waist up—really more from the belly button up. Which turned out to be just fine, because Elvis didn't need to push the hard sell anymore to get the suggestive message across. Ironically, he was now getting paid more money to do less work.

Elvis opened with his latest number-one hit, "Don't Be Cruel," but surely *he* was inflicting a measure of cruelty on his female fans, who sat at home expectantly waiting for the *real* Elvis to do something . . . anything. It finally comes in a halfhearted display of arm-pumping bravado at the song's conclusion, as if Elvis is determined to see if he can get away with at least *one* tiny transgressive act. "Elvis had a great attitude about the whole thing," says Stoker. "He just went with the program. If anyone ever mentioned that night, he would just laugh about it."

CBS's camera blocking might have been a blessing in disguise. Elvis's frenzied body language was already turning into the stuff of talk-show monologue jokes, and he only needed to evoke their faint echoes—a shoulder shimmy here, a roll of the eyes there—to get Sullivan's audience riled up. It was a polite crossover move, made even more explicit when Elvis again pulled off the one-two sucker punch by following "Don't Be Cruel" with a few tender gospel numbers that would mollify Sullivan's audience. Amazingly, "Peace in the Valley" almost caused as much of a stir among the network as Elvis's hips. "The network didn't want us to do a religious song, 'cause nothing like that had been done on Sullivan," says Stoker. "But Elvis said, 'This is my mother's favorite song, and I'm doing it for her.'"

Sullivan may have been a prude, but he was taken with Elvis's choirboy comportment and professionalism, and he wasn't going to let CBS have the final word on this issue. At the conclusion of the singer's last segment, Sullivan came out to shake the singer's hand and offer his powerful endorsement. "This is a real decent, fine boy," he told the show's millions of loyalists that night. "We've never had a pleasanter experience on our show with a big name. You're thoroughly alright." Colonel Parker was thrilled; this signified nothing less than Elvis's admission as a card-carrying member of Eisenhower America. From that moment on, he was no longer a cultural outcast.

"That one remark of Sullivan's meant more to Elvis's career than anything else that happened that night," says Stoker. "It put Elvis in a good light with the public."

The show was a phenomenal success, with a 43.7 Trendex rating. Fifty-four million people, or almost 84 percent of all Americans who owned TVs, tuned in. It was the most-watched program in TV's short history, and it would only be nine years before Sullivan broke his own record with another rock 'n' roll act. "I met Elvis in 1971," recalls legendary guitarist Duane Eddy, "and we were talking about all kinds of stuff. At one point, he turned to me and said, 'Remember when I did the Sullivan show and they wouldn't shoot me from the waist down? Well, the other day I visited the president of the United States, and he told me what a great influence I was on the youth of the nation. It's great how things turn out, isn't it?'"

**Elvis rehearsing with the Jordanaires for *The Ed Sullivan Show* (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**



## ***The Idolmaker***

### **DICK CLARK AND *AMERICAN BANDSTAND***

Is Dick Clark rock 'n' roll's Teen Prince or its Prince of Darkness? The usual rap on the former host of *American Bandstand* is that he is rock's most successful whitewasher, the cultural conciliator who bridged the gap between Teenage Nation and Square Culture by force-feeding false idols like Frankie Avalon, Connie Francis, and Fabian to kids suffering from Elvis deprivation (the rock idol enlisted in the army in 1958). By smoothing out rock's rough edges (as well as his own), Dick Clark harnessed TV's power as a mass medium to sell the rock myth better than anyone before or since. *American Bandstand*, writes John Jackson, was "a rallying point around which America's first teenage constituency was able to connect."<sup>1</sup>

The 1950s' most influential rock DJ was the savviest of spin doctors, and has always readily admitted as such. "I was cast as an all-American boy," he once told an interviewer, "and although I smoked and drank and swore and all of that in private life, that was not presentable for television. That was the myth that was built up."<sup>2</sup> "America's oldest living teenager" was always "America's youngest elder."

Clark may not have been a product of youth culture, but he was certainly its most skillful exploiter. Unlike Al Jarvis, Dewey Phillips, and the countless video DJs who had preceeded him, Clark was

always at home in front of a TV camera. If one examines his earliest *American Bandstand* broadcasts, one instantly recognizes that Clark's casual, unruffled grace and glib delivery were in place from the beginning. He was TV's polished emissary for an unpolished movement. That unabashed bonhomie with his viewers enabled him to become one of the most durable icons in TV history, with more hours logged on the air than Johnny Carson.<sup>3</sup> Under Clark's stewardship, *American Bandstand* lasted thirty-one seasons on ABC, making it one of the longest-running network shows in TV history.

Clark's success can be chalked up to the sexually charged fission that's sparked when kids watch other kids act cool. *American Bandstand* was more than a dance show—it was a crucial transmitter of youth cultural lifestyle choices, a template by which kids could glean cues on how to dress, behave with the opposite sex, and forge a distinct identity within the teenage crowd.

But Clark is undeniably important for reasons other than his empire-building genius, as can be shown by just a partial roster of artists who made their national debuts on *American Bandstand*: Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Jackie Wilson, Duane Eddy. At a time when television maintained a segregationist programming policy, Clark regularly invited black dancers and performers to the show, frequently in the face of considerable pressure from sponsors.

For about fifteen years, from the mid-1950s to the late '60s, rock 'n' roll dancing was as important as the music, and *American Bandstand* helped turn dancing into a national teen fetish. It was the most influential arbiter of in-vogue moves for twenty-five years, until it was forced to compete with *Soul Train* in the early 1970s. From 1957 to 1980—before MTV and cable—every sea change in rock style was transmitted to millions of kids through *Bandstand*. It's unlikely that the Twist, a pop-cultural phenomenon unto itself, would have become the sock-hop *lingua franca* of the early 1960s without *Bandstand's* formidable promotional muscle behind it. Even later movements like disco and New Wave may not have infiltrated the mainstream without Clark's help. There was a mutual dependency between *American Bandstand* and rock 'n'

roll—both needed each other for ratification and entry into the teen mindset.

Richard Clark was born in Bronxville, New York, on November 30, 1929, the son of a sales manager for a cosmetics firm—a fitting portent for a man always obsessed with his perennially embalmed good looks. Clark first discovered the power of radio when his parents took him to a live broadcast of the Jimmy Durante-Garry Moore radio program in 1942, and from then on vowed to make it his life. Musically, Clark's taste leaned toward big-band jazz and lounge-pop slicks like Perry Como and Dean Martin.

Clark's father preceded his son into the radio business when the elder Clark's brother, the owner of an ABC-affiliated station in Utica, New York, offered him a job as promotions manager. While on leave from Syracuse University, Clark performed odd jobs at the station and rapidly developed a taste for broadcasting. He got his first big break when he was tapped to read weather updates for a vacationing announcer. At Syracuse, Clark landed a job as a DJ on college station WEAR, but even then he was thinking ahead, and longed to learn the business end of radio.

Upon graduating from Syracuse, Clark landed some short-term local radio gigs, and eventually secured his first TV job at Utica's WKTV as the host of a country-western show, *Cactus Dick and the Santa Fe Riders*. Clark chafed at the show's cheesy cow-pone format, however, and longed to try his luck in a larger, more sophisticated market. Taking advantage of his dad's contacts, Clark was able to secure a radio gig at station WFIL in Philadelphia in the spring of 1952. It was a propitious move for Clark, considering WFIL owner Walter Annenberg also owned a sister TV station—the station that would eventually serve as Clark's beachhead for his media empire. At that time, however, WFIL was suffering anemic ratings, while local rival WIP was racking up huge numbers with its roster of star DJs.

WFIL hired Clark to host a show called *Dick Clark's Caravan of Music*, where he played tame easy-listening records for nearly four hours a day, five days a week. Meanwhile, over at WIP, DJ Bob Horn was getting high ratings for his far hipper *Bandstand* show, in which he breezily performed comedy shtick with his sidekick Lee Stewart





Original *Bandstand* hosts Lee Stewart and Bob Horn. (Courtesy of Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa.)

and played top pop hits for a large and loyal audience. Hungry for the kind of ratings figures *Bandstand* was garnering, WFIL stole Horn away from WIP in late '52.

WFIL-TV was in even worse shape than its radio equivalent. As one of only fifteen affiliates associated with the financially strapped ABC network, it had little programming to offer during the afternoon hours and lacked the resources to mount its own original productions. Spooling old B movies in midday didn't sit well with general manager Roger Clipp, so he decided to try something new. Clipp wiped the cobwebs off the station's library of old "Snaders" —snoozy musical film clips featuring Peggy Lee, George Shearing, and the like—and had Horn and Stewart perform "wraparounds" (TV parlance for intros and outros) in between segments.

The resulting show fared about as well as the old films. So Clipp scotched the Snaders and took up Horn's suggestion that the station produce a teen dance show similar to his old *Bandstand* radio show. Clipp quickly assented, and even nicked the *Bandstand* name.

*Bandstand* made its TV debut on October 6, 1952. The shoestring set resembled a record store festooned with various regional high

school banners, with Horn and his nerdy comic sidekick Lee Stewart holding court behind a wooden counter, the front of which listed the top ten tunes of the week. The audience, culled from the three high schools closest to WFIL's studios, danced, rated records, and "listened" to various artists lip-synch their newest records.

Horn was no hipster, just a very good DJ. Rotund, and with a receding hairline, he looked like an undertaker, or Alfred Hitchcock's younger brother. Yet he clicked with Philly kids, who cottoned to his easygoing demeanor. Horn never patronized his audience; he would rather be thought of as an accommodating square than a cynical opportunist. "Bob Horn was like a father figure to the kids," says DJ Jerry "the Geater with the Heater" Blavat, who as a teenager was one of *Bandstand's* most popular dancers and the head of the show's "Committee of Twelve." "But he was very hip to the music. Dick Clark was more like your older brother."

The TV version of *Bandstand* was an instant hit. Less than a year after its premiere, membership in the Bandstand Club, which allowed kids to be admitted to two appointed shows a week, had soared past 10,000.<sup>4</sup> The show's time slot was even moved up forty-five minutes to 2:45 from 3:30 in order to coincide with the dismissal of the area's nearby schools.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, the music presented on the show was still mired in mawkish, Velveeta-pop sentiment; early frequent guests included Frankie Laine, Georgia Gibbs, and Helen O'Connell.<sup>6</sup> Not that it mattered—*Bandstand* had tapped into a rich, and heretofore untapped, vein of teen solipsism. Horn was a master at gauging what songs would connect with *Bandstand's* viewers. When old-school trumpeter and bandleader Ray Anthony's clunky novelty song "Bunny Hop" turned out to be a hit with *Bandstand's* dancers, Horn staged a "Bunny Hop" dance contest on the air. The record wound up selling huge numbers in Philadelphia, and soon became a massive national hit.

By 1955 *Bandstand* had become an unprecedented regional phenomenon. Horn's Committee of Twelve—twelve handpicked dancers, led by Jerry Blavat, whose job duties included choosing records, picking participants for the "Rate-a-Record" segment, and enforcing the show's casual yet buttoned-down dress code—had become celebrities

in their own right. Thousands of hopeful studio participants were turned away on a daily basis. Horn, meanwhile, had become Philadelphia's resident pop music potentate. The city's polyglot teen demographic made it a key market for breaking records in the 1950s, and if you could somehow convince Horn to spin your record on *Bandstand*, chances are the local radio DJs would pick up on it, and subsequently get the ball rolling for widespread national exposure.

Since the *Bandstand* host had the final say on every aspect of the show's production, from the dancers to the records chosen for airplay, he had been vaulted to VIP status by local record promoters, who began to slide gifts his way in exchange for airplay. But Bob Horn's on-air persona was a carefully plotted construct; the reality was that Horn drank too much and had a taste for young girls. When a sixteen-year-old former *TV-Teen Club* dancer named Dolores Farmer came forward with allegations that she and Horn had engaged in "sexual relations" three years earlier, WFIL's top brass panicked. Horn certainly didn't help his cause when, a month later, he ran a red light while driving under the influence of alcohol and the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (a paper owned by WFIL owner Walter Annenberg's competitor, WCAU-TV) splashed the story across its front page the next day.

Horn's timing couldn't have been worse. Annenberg himself was a vocal crusader against drunk driving, and the fact that one of his most public employees had been slapped with a DWI didn't sit well with him. Add to that the DA's undercover investigation of a teenage prostitution ring that allegedly used Farmer as a ringer, and Horn's fate was sealed. He was summarily fired from *Bandstand* and temporarily replaced by WFIL producer Tony Marmarella.

Horn's dismissal from *Bandstand* was a knockout blow for the amiable host. "When Bob lost *Bandstand*, that was the end of Bob," says Jerry Blavat. "He was disgraced in Philadelphia. I went to Houston with him, when he tried to jump-start his career as a radio DJ and changed his name to Bob Adams, but nothing came of it." (Horn was eventually acquitted of the statutory rape charges in a 1957 trial.) The upheaval also left WFIL reeling. *Bandstand* had now been tarred by the brush of scandal, and Roger Clipp would have to

exercise some damage control in a hurry, lest WFIL lose their lucrative afternoon franchise. Clipp had been impressed by Dick Clark's brief on-air stint as a pitchman for Paul Whiteman's *TV-Teen Club*, and decided to give his buddy Richard Clark's son a shot.

Blavat and the other members of the Committee were furious—who was this slicked-back comer horning in on their show? “My loyalties were with Bob Horn, so I led the protest,” says Blavat. “It could have been anyone, and I would have still protested. I felt very close to Bob. He was like a father to me.” For Clipp and WFIL, however, Clark was exactly the right guy at the right time—an unimpeachably polite charmer with no skeletons in his closet.

From the moment Clark took over the reins as *Bandstand's* host, he made sure the balance of power swung his way. He diluted the Committee's centralized power by increasing its membership from twelve to thirty, placated the show's dancing dissidents by engaging in some toothsome glad-handing, buddied up to producer Tony Marmarella, and tried his best not to ruffle anyone's feathers.

Clark had quelled the counterrevolution from within; now he had to deal with the larger cultural convolutions going on outside WFIL's studios, namely the supplanting of Velveeta pop by rock 'n' roll. Clark's *Bandstand* tenure had begun at roughly the same time that Elvis Presley was undertaking his scorched-earth campaign on the music charts, and R&B artists were beginning to elbow their way onto Top 40 radio playlists, as well. Clark, for his part, was virtually clueless about all of it. “The music I listened to was the last vestige of the big-band era,” he noted in 1990.<sup>7</sup>

Clark may have been a bit in the dark about youth culture, but he was savvy enough to know that the key to his success lay in effectively selling it to *Bandstand's* viewers. He hedged his bets by following the lead of influential local DJs like Georgie “the Guy with the Goods” Woods and Douglas “Jocko” Henderson, picking up the hottest records from their playlists for *Bandstand* rotation. He retained Horn's “singing, dancing, and record rating” format, but airbrushed out any remaining rough edges by imposing a strict dress code: suits and ties for guys, long skirts for girls. Clark himself hosted the show with the bland benevolence of a TV weatherman and a knowing twin-

kle in his eye. The message was clear: this was a guy parents could trust with their thirteen-year-old daughters.

A year after its debut, Clark's *Bandstand* had surpassed Horn's *Bandstand* in the ratings and had turned Clark into Philadelphia's most influential pop music *macher*. The show dominated WFIL's afternoon programming, airing five days a week from two-thirty to five and attracting increasing numbers of viewers with each passing week. *Bandstand* clones began sprouting up all over the country, among them Ted Steele's *Teen Bandstand* in New York, Don McCleod's *Detroit Bandstand*, and Jim Gallant's *Connecticut Bandstand*.<sup>8</sup>

Other DJs followed Clark's lead. Albert Rucker, aka Clay Cole, was an Ohio native who relocated to New York with dreams of radio glory when he was twenty and was quickly hired as an apprentice for radio legend Alan Freed. Soon Cole was hosting his own TV rock shows, like *Rate the Records* and *The Record Wagon*, on local station WPIX-TV. *The Clay Cole Show*, which debuted in September 1959, was the hottest regional dance show in the tristate area for nearly a decade. With his pencil-thin mustache and spindly physique, Cole, the hipster's hipster, danced with the kids to the latest hits and promoted interracial kicks by having black dancers appear on the show, despite the station's protests. "A few years later, the station got a citation for its progressive civil-rights attitude," recalled Cole, "and they took full credit, even though they'd resisted it all the way."<sup>9</sup>



**Say Cheese! Dick Clark in 1959.**  
(Courtesy of Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa.)

In Baltimore, Buddy Deane, a hugely popular radio personality on WITH-FM who was the first local DJ to play rock 'n' roll, made the jump to television in 1957 with *The Buddy Deane Show* on Westinghouse-owned station WJZ-TV. Deane's show quickly became a local phenomenon much like Clark's *Bandstand*, a dance-crazed celebration of pheromones and testosterone hosted by the amiable, smooth-talking DJ. Deane's popularity with Baltimore kids meant that his show easily withstood *Bandstand's* eventual incursion into the Baltimore market. But Deane's show was even more of a whitewash than *American Bandstand*. In fact, no black dancers were ever seen on the show. In a city where racial divisiveness was threatening to tear its social fabric apart, *The Buddy Deane Show* became ground zero for local protest. Civil rights activists began picketing the show, but management refused to back down, offering instead to provide black dancers their own designated days on the show. The show withstood charges of racism until 1964, when management opted to cancel the show rather than integrate it.\* Clark would skillfully skirt any questions about racial segregation by using just enough black dancers and performers to keep things running smoothly.

With so many imitators, it was clear *Bandstand's* formula transcended regionalism, and the possibility of taking the show national became very real. "By then there were two or three copies of it and they were all successful," recalled Clark. "I firmly believed it would be a national phenomenon."<sup>10</sup> Clark figured that *Bandstand* would be an easy sell to ABC. After all, it was perennially ranked third among the three networks, and still had not yet solved the vexing problem of how to fill up its afternoon programming. For a network willing to try almost anything to attract an audience, *Bandstand* seemed like a safe bet. "We only had a 35 percent coverage of the country. CBS and NBC each had an 85 percent coverage of the country," recalls former ABC chairman Leonard Goldenson. "The only way we could possibly win was to come up with the ideas that were completely different from CBS and NBC."<sup>11</sup>

But ABC had already run into problems with another teen dance

\* Film director and Baltimore native John Waters based his 1988 film *Hairspray* on the Deane imbroglio, with a fictional program called *The Corny Collins Show* filling in for Deane's show.

show. In July 1957 the network signed Alan Freed, the immensely popular New York-based DJ who had supposedly coined the term *rock 'n' roll* while spinning records on his *Moondog's Rock 'n' Roll Party* show for Cleveland's WJW-AM, and who had mounted huge, integrated dance reviews at the Brooklyn Paramount Theater featuring the biggest pop and R&B acts of the era. The WINS disc jockey's TV show *Alan Freed's Big Beat* was a somewhat tame knockoff of the live revues, in which black and white artists would lip-synch their hits for a clutch of enthusiastic dancers.

Near the end of the show's third broadcast, guest star Frankie Lymon, who had scored numerous hits like "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" and "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent" with his group the Teenagers, was seen dancing with a white girl—*verboten* behavior for a medium still skittish about race-mixing on the air. ABC's southern affiliates balked, and the show's national sponsors threatened to pull their advertising. ABC capitulated to the pressure and canceled *Alan Freed's Big Beat* less than halfway into its scheduled thirteen-week run.

Thus Dick Clark was faced with a dilemma: he would have to pitch a national *Bandstand* to ABC as a show that would appeal to a large teenage viewership without alienating race-sensitive affiliates and advertisers. Unlike Freed, however, Clark always placed diplomacy before the pleasure principle. If Freed was a jive-talking wildman bent on stirring up a tempest using a loosely structured show format and an integrated audience, Clark was a control freak who was careful to maintain order, even if it meant diluting the inherent power of the music he was promoting. *Bandstand's* dancers may have been prisoners of rock 'n' roll, but they were also models of comportment so well behaved they might as well have been attending a Rotary Club mixer. Besides, the two neighborhood schools from which *Bandstand* drew most of its dancers were largely Catholic—that is, white. *Big Beat* captured the tumult and bluster of the big city; *Bandstand* looked more like the suburbs. "Alan [Freed] was the man who made it happen—we owe a great deal to him," recalled Clark in 1990. "I wore a coat and tie. Everybody in that *Bandstand* studio who was a male wore a coat and a tie. The thinking behind that



**American Bandstand** dancers shake their groove things, 1956. (Courtesy of Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa.)

was if we looked presentable, *normal*, the way *they* think we oughta look, *they'll* leave us alone.”<sup>12</sup>

Viewers who tuned into *American Bandstand's* national debut on August 5, 1957, witnessed a scenario similar to the numerous other musical variety shows that had clogged the TV airwaves over the past fifteen years—clean-scrubbed white people having good, clean fun. As author John Jackson notes in his superb book *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock and Roll Empire*, “the show’s studio audience remained segregated to the extent that viewers around the country did not have an inkling that Philadelphia contained one of the largest black populations in America.”<sup>13</sup> Telegrams of congratulations were read from Pat Boone and Frank Sinatra—two non-rock singing stars with shows slotted for ABC’s fall schedule. The set was pretty much unchanged from the local show:



ABC only requested that Horn's canvas backdrop be replaced by a wall of gold records.

*American Bandstand's* timing was spot-on. Sales of pop records were booming, teenagers were virtually rolling in disposable income, and TV had become America's dominant entertainment medium. *American Bandstand* was a major participant in this seismic cultural shift, and was gladly received by both young viewers who had waited too long for television to embrace them and bored housewives eager for a vicarious pop thrill. The critics hated it. "*American Bandstand* assaults the ear with rock 'n' roll interrupted only by mournful ballads," wrote *Time*. "The show is even more dismaying to the eye: furrow-browed teenagers jolting to the jangling beat of lyrics like 'Skinny Minnie, she ain't skinny, she's tall, that's all'"<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately for Clark, kids didn't read *Time* magazine. Over 20 million viewers tuned into *American Bandstand* during its first week, affiliates were signing on at a rapid clip,<sup>15</sup> and corporate powerhouses like General Mills, 7-Up, and Clearasil were eager to buy lots of ad time.<sup>16</sup> Its daytime slot circumvented the need to appeal to an older audience; both parents, after all, weren't watching TV after school.

Now that it had gone national, the show's regionalism turned into an asset. Viewers around the coun-



**Alan Freed on his short-lived TV show, *Alan Freed's Big Beat*. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

try recognized *Bandstand's* regulars as contemporaries, but they were also venerated as ultra-cool role models. Suddenly millions of viewers looked to Philadelphia kids as arbiters of fashion cool and dance-floor moves. Such *Bandstand* regulars as Bob Clayton, Justine Carelli, and Kenny Rossi received thousands of letters from admirers who wanted to know *everything* about their personal lives. Fashion trends were born out of necessity. When girls from Philadelphia's West Catholic Parochial School wanted to conceal their starchy uniforms for the television audience, they wore sweaters from which their stiff shirt collars peeked through. That sparked the "Philadelphia collar" craze, which swept Teenage Nation. Dick Clark recalled, "People would look in and fantasize about what was happening. Just the images and you'd say, 'Oooh, look at the look she gave him. They're not holding hands today,' or whatever, and they'd do this whole mind trip. It became a . . . national phenomenon."<sup>17</sup>

*American Bandstand* was now one of the key vehicles for record labels eager to break their potential hits, making Clark a fat target for local record label and distribution reps. He had already seen what a little promo push on *Bandstand* could do for his bottom line in the fall of '57 when Bernie Lowe, who owned Philadelphia-based Cameo Records, offered him 25 percent of the publishing rights to a banal trifle called "Butterfly." Clark began playing "Butterfly" (which was recorded by *TV-Teen Club* alum Charlie Gracie) regularly on *American Bandstand*. That no doubt helped the song become number one in the winter of 1957. Cognizant of his emerging power as a rock 'n' roll kingmaker, Clark began vertically integrating his business interests, which were expanding rapidly. He invested \$125 in a failing record company called Jaime and co-produced a rock 'n' roll exploitation movie called *Jamboree*, which wound up losing money. By 1959 Clark would own a piece of thirty-three businesses—record-pressing plants, distribution companies, labels, and numerous other music-related companies.

Dick Clark may have taken great pains to be the anti-Freed, but that doesn't mean he shied away from African-American artists. They just had to be the right kind of African-American artists, and there were a handful of black performers in the mid-1950s who



**American Bandstand hopefuls line up outside WFIL-TV's studios in Philadelphia, 1959.**  
(Courtesy of Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa.)

followed *Bandstand's* aggressively inoffensive game plan to a T. Frequent guest Jackie Wilson possessed one of the greatest voices in R&B—a throaty wail that could swoop into an impossibly high register at a moment's notice—but his hits “Lonely Teardrops,” “Baby Workout,” and “Reet Petite,” with their bossa-nova shuffle beats and cheery call-and-response backing vocals, were not dissimilar from those produced by the old-school crooners of the prerock era. Clark loved him.

Chuck Berry also circumvented the race issue with songs like “School Days” and “Sweet Little Sixteen” that brilliantly exploited the same teenage tropes—car culture, school drudgery, high school sweethearts—found in countless other records made by white artists, and drenched it all in a guitar-driven sound that was unmistakably rock. Of course, it didn't hurt that the chorus of “Sweet Little Sixteen” began with the immortal line “ 'Cause they'll be dancin' on Bandstand/Philadelphia, PA.” Both Wilson and Berry made their

national TV debuts on *Bandstand* in 1957, as did Buddy Holly and Gene Vincent, the latter an artist whose roughneck persona and grungy rockabilly sound hardly qualified him as an appeaser.

By 1958, *American Bandstand's* power to break artists and records topped that of the nation's hundreds of radio stations combined—and it could break them in a hurry, which made the show a magnet for virtually every record distributor and promoter in the country. “Every kid in the country was watching the show, and as a result, program directors had their secretaries watching the show to copy down the records we played,” observed Dick Clark. “In other words, whatever we played, everybody else had to play because a kid, say, in Keokuk, would call a station and say, ‘I heard it yesterday on *Bandstand*. How come you’re not playing it?’”<sup>18</sup>

Songwriter Artie Singer certainly wasn't adverse to giving Clark a piece of his action—that is, if he could find some action. An old friend of Clark's and Bernie Lowe's, Singer smelled a potential hit when he heard “Let's All Do the Bop” performed at an audition by a West Philly vocal group called the Juvenairs in 1960. When Singer approached Clark with the song, however, the *Bandstand* host gave it a mixed review. He liked the hyped-up energy of the song, but the lyrics were lacking a certain zing. According to Singer, when Clark suggested the song's lyrics center around record hops (Clark was supplementing his *Bandstand* income at the time by hosting countless record hops in Philadelphia), Singer went back and reworked the song.

The song was renamed “At the Hop,” the Juvenairs were rechristened Danny and the Juniors, and an approving Clark began road-testing it at local record hops. The response was overwhelming. “At the Hop” became a local smash, but Singer still lacked a large distributor, and Clark wouldn't embrace any record until it had national distribution.

Conveniently enough, ABC's record label division, Am-Par Records, expressed an interest in the song. Singer signed with the label, with Clark's publishing company Sea-Lark receiving half of the publishing royalties. Clark then booked Danny and the Juniors on *American Bandstand*, and began playing the record relentlessly. In a

few short weeks, it became the number-one record in the country, and one of the biggest hits of the sixties.

The Am-Par-American Bandstand connection also helped break one of the 1950s' biggest teen idols. Canadian Paul Anka was only fifteen when his ABC-Paramount record "Diana" began to slowly move up the national charts. Anka lip-synched the song on the third broadcast of *American Bandstand*, and three weeks later Am-Par signed over the copyright of the record's flip side to Sea-Lark, thereby ensuring that Clark would ring up a profit for every single that was sold.<sup>19</sup> "Diana" was enormously successful. By 1961, it was said to have sold over 9 million copies worldwide.<sup>20</sup> A star was born, and Dick Clark was quickly becoming a wealthy man. "Dick Clark was the most important DJ of any kind in the country at that time," says guitarist Duane Eddy. "A lot of artists would have fallen by the way-side had Dick not played their records."

Emboldened by the monetary motherlode Sea-Lark had struck, Clark decided to expand his reach even further into the record business. He cofounded the Swan record label and a record distribution company called Chips Distributing Corp. with Cameo Records owner Bernie Lowe and businessman Harry Chipetz. Soon, other records in which Clark had a stake began to break nationally, thanks to blanket exposure on *American Bandstand*.

Such was the power of *American Bandstand* to create hits and manufacture stars virtually overnight that it forever changed the way the music business promoted and marketed records<sup>21</sup>. No longer would artists have to rely solely on canvassing the nation's radio stations and record hops in order to generate buzz. One strong appearance on *American Bandstand* could start a feeding frenzy among thousands of kids all over the country. "*American Bandstand* provided such major exposure for artists. You didn't have to tour, you didn't have to do anything else," says Lou Adler, who managed James Darren, Shelly Fabares, and Johnny Rivers and would eventually make millions as a record label owner and producer for Carole King and others. "I remember when I had Jan and Dean, we would go to Philadelphia knowing that if we got on *Bandstand*, we'd have a hit."

No one was more pleased with Clark's success than the top brass

at ABC, and they were eager to test Clark in a prime-time slot. After a nighttime version of *Bandstand* failed to attract much of an audience on Monday nights, ABC moved Clark to Saturdays, where he might have a decent shot at attracting young viewers who certainly would not be watching Perry Como's venerable variety snooze. *The Dick Clark Show*, broadcast from ABC's Little Theater in New York, was an even more genteel version of *American Bandstand*. There were no dancers—the audience sat in their seats during performances—but it caught on, and *The Dick Clark Show* began to siphon viewers away from Perry Como.

For Clark, the addition of the Saturday-night show gave him a shot at a double promo dip on those records in which he had a vested interest. And no artist produced more ancillary income for Clark than guitarist Duane Eddy. The lanky Arizona native was signed to Jaime Records, the Philadelphia label in which Clark had invested a nominal amount of money in 1956. At the time, Eddy knew nothing about Clark's financial interest in the label. "One of my producers, Lester Sill, knew Harold Lipsius, who owned Jaime, and sent him an acetate of 'Movin' and Groovin'," says Eddy. "But it was a funny thing about that. I had heard that six people owned 25 percent of Jaime, and even this country boy knew that couldn't be the case."

"Movin' and Groovin'" was a negligible seller, but when Eddy's second record, "Rebel-'Rouser," began to move up *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart in June of '58, Clark greased the star-making gears by having Eddy and his band perform the song on *American Bandstand*. Clark wound up playing the record forty-two times on *American Bandstand*, and "Rebel-'Rouser" subsequently rose to number six. Eddy quickly became a favorite of Clark's; he asked the guitarist to perform no less than three songs for his inaugural appearance on *The Dick Clark Show*, including a number to replace the show's opening theme song. That song, "Ramrod," had been recorded as a rough demo in 1956, but Eddy was short of material, and Clark seemed to like it. "He owned a part of me, but I didn't know that at the time," says Eddy. "I had no idea what that meant. It never would have occurred to me he'd play something on the show to make money. He asked me if I had a closer for the show, and I told

him I could do 'Ramrod.' They had 150,000 orders for the record that Monday."

Eager to fill all those orders, Eddy's producer Lee Hazelwood grabbed the original '56 master, overdubbed a saxophone, hand claps, and some ambient shrieking, and had "Ramrod" shipped to stores less than a week after Eddy had performed the song on the show. It became yet another Clark-driven smash.

Clark continued to jump all over Duane Eddy's records as soon as they were released, and the guitarist kept on notching hits. All told, Duane Eddy logged fifteen Top 40 hits on *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart, making him the most successful rock instrumentalist of all time.

One of the vexing paradoxes of Clark's thirty-three-year tenure as *Bandstand* host was his tendency to highlight white performers even as he fostered the careers of some of rock's most important black artists. In the past, African-American artists with the right kind of indeterminate ethnic sound could "pass" if they were played on the radio, but television offered no such camouflage. Clark was savvy enough to know that if he wanted to increase the show's popularity, he had to play to the widest constituency possible—which meant whitewashing *American Bandstand* and *The Dick Clark Show* just enough to prevent the kind of backlash that had taken down Alan Freed. Talent manager and Chancellor Records owner Bob Marcucci was more than willing to help him out.

The brash Marcucci was a Philadelphia native with a hustler's instinct for the big score who saw in *American Bandstand* an opportunity to supply Clark with homegrown, unthreatening pretty boys. Marcucci had seen how Ricky Nelson had parlayed his role on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* into a phenomenally successful recording career, thereby becoming the first TV-generated teen idol, and he figured *American Bandstand* could do the same for his stable of would-be teen dreams. His first big discovery was local trumpeter Frankie Avallone, aka Frankie Avalon. Marcucci plucked him from his band Rocco and The Saints, wrote a silly piffle for him called "DeDe Dinah," and watched the song become a top-ten hit in January '58.

Marcucci had first done business with Clark in 1957 when he was

approached by Bernie Binnick to invest in the unsuccessful teen exploitation flick *Jamboree*, but more important, the two also had Am-Par in common—the ABC-affiliated company distributed both Avalon's label Chancellor and Clark's label Swan. Surely, the two must have guessed at the potential synergy to be had from joining forces, particularly considering the meteoric success of Frankie Avalon, a synthetic pop star whose record sales were helped in no small part by his frequent *Bandstand* appearances.

Marcucci's second discovery was another Italian-American teen from South Philly named Fabiano Forte, the next-door-neighbor of Marcucci's best friend, John Palmieri. So desperate was Marcucci's search for new teen idols that he approached Fabiano about making a record on the day the teen's father suffered a heart attack. Forte initially declined Marcucci's offer, but faced with mounting family medical bills, he decided to throw his lot in with the smooth-talking manager. It didn't much matter to Marcucci that Fabiano couldn't sing or dance and had no stage experience. He was terribly cute, and that's all Marcucci needed to make a star. That, and a few key *Bandstand* appearances.

At first, Marcucci and his business partner Peter DeAngelis tried writing potential hits for Forte, who they had renamed Fabian, just as they had done with Avalon. But when "Shivers" and "Lilly Lou" failed to generate any interest from either radio or Clark, they hired the brilliant songwriting team of Mort Shuman and Doc Pomus ("Youngblood," "Save the Last Dance for Me," "This Magic Moment"), who wrote a paean to testosterone called "I'm a Man." Fabian debuted the song on *American Bandstand* in December 1958, and a week later it entered *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart, climbing to thirty-one.

The emerging teen idol's next record, another Shuman-Pomus composition called "Turn Me Loose," was introduced on *American Bandstand* in March 1959, and this time the record shot into *Billboard's* top ten. The Marcucci-Clark connection was beginning to bear fruit. All told, Fabian wound up with three top-ten singles in 1959.

Philadelphia became a breeding ground for teen idols. While Marcucci continued to book Avalon and Fabian on *American*



*Bandstand* and log chart hits, Bernie Lowe was busy cultivating a prospective heartthrob of his own. Bobby Rydell, a *TV-Teen Club* veteran and former member of Avalon's band Rocco and the Saints, was desperate to follow the path blazed by his old bandmate, but every label in town had passed on him. Rydell's zeal, however, was matched by Bernie Lowe's, who was eager to take advantage of Clark's promo muscle. Lowe signed Rydell, who was already regarded as damaged goods, in the winter of '58.

After two singles failed to generate any radio buzz, Lowe commissioned songwriters Karl Mann and Dave Appell to write "Kissin' Time," a ludicrous song that made Fabian's previous hits look like Cole Porter gems. But Clark liked it, and when he began playing "Kissin' Time" on *American Bandstand* in June of '59, it began to catch fire. Rydell was then booked onto *The Dick Clark Show* to lip-synch the song, and "Kissin' Time" launched into the stratosphere, becoming one of that summer's biggest hits.

**The Duane Eddy brain trust: (l to r) Lester Sill, Dick Clark, Eddy, and Lee Hazelwood at the Hollywood Bowl, 1960. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**



Like a Brylcreem *jefe*, Dick Clark was tapping nominally talented young Philly kids and anointing them teen knights by virtue of his unchallenged power as rock's premier TV idolmaker. Time and again, Clark's uncanny instinct for TV-friendly personalities produced hits for the artists and their Svengalis: former Mouseketeer Annette Funicello, Freddy Cannon, Bobby Vee, Connie Francis, and Ray Peterson were some of Clark's other hand-picked idols made good.

Paradoxically, for a personality who staked his career on the premise that white artists had a greater chance of being embraced by TV viewers than black artists, Clark's biggest cross-promotional bonanza came thanks to a black performer. That was in large part because it was centered around a dance trend, always a curiously race-neutral fad—the messenger isn't nearly as important as the inherent novelty of the dance itself.

Bob Horn had proven with the Bunny Hop phenomenon that TV could instantly spark a dance craze, and Clark became pop culture's foremost disseminator of dance trends by virtue of *American Bandstand's* enormous reach and influence. The irony was that the most popular dances among teenagers were merely socially acceptable sublimations of foreplay, hormone-fueled transmitters of desire that, if pulled off with the proper decorum, could escape the censure of the era's moral watchdogs.

Hence, the appeal of dance fads as they played out on *American Bandstand* was twofold—kids tuned in to learn the steps but also to watch the show's lithe young regulars expertly execute suggestive moves. "I remember I once suggested to Dick that we bring on more performers and put less emphasis on dancing," says Barry Glazer, who directed *American Bandstand* for nearly twenty years. "He just told me, 'Don't rock the boat, Barry.'" The *American Bandstand* host managed to de-fang sexually charged dance moves by alternating slow and fast records on the air. He also minimized the participation of black dancers, lest he be hit with a controversy similar to the Frankie Lymon hand-holding incident that led to the demise of Alan Freed's TV show.<sup>22</sup>

*American Bandstand's* regular stable of white—and by 1960, black—dancers learned their best moves growing up in Philadelphia's

ethnically diverse neighborhoods, where Italian and black kids exchanged ideas and devised countless new steps that eventually found their way onto the show. “When you were a kid growing up in South Philly, you had to be the sharpest dresser, and you had to be able to either dance or sing if you wanted to get girls,” recalls Jerry Blavat.

One *Bandstand* favorite was the Stroll, a sexy shuffle-step in which couples would take turns sashaying up an aisle created by two rows of dancers. The Stroll was inspired by Chuck Willis’s hit “C. C. Rider,” but Clark had a hunch that the dance’s popularity could outlast the song. When Clark dropped a hint to the Diamonds’ manager and longtime friend Walter Goodman that a song *about* the dance could potentially become a huge hit, Goodman sprang into action and came up with “The Stroll.” Clark immediately put the record into heavy rotation on the show and had the Diamonds lip-synch it on *American Bandstand*. The Stroll shot up to number four on *Billboard*’s Hot 100 singles chart in December 1957.

Perhaps as a measure of gratitude to Clark for helping break “The Stroll” nationally, Goodman gave Clark the copyright to the Diamond’s follow-up record, “The High Sign,” which also became a Top 40 hit.

The Twist, *American Bandstand*’s most famous dance fad and the most popular dance in the history of rock ‘n’ roll, had its initial TV exposure on *The Buddy Deane Show* in Baltimore. The song of the same name was written by R&B artist Hank Ballard, who according to *Bandstand* historian John Jackson, appropriated the melody from Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters’ “What’cha Gonna Do?” Deane got wind of “The Twist” when Ballard performed the song at Baltimore’s Royal Theater in 1959<sup>23</sup> and immediately put it into heavy rotation on his show.

When Swan Records co-owner Bernie Binnick accompanied his artist Freddie Cannon to *The Buddy Deane Show* shortly thereafter to promote Cannon’s latest single, he was struck by the enthusiasm with which Deane’s studio dancers responded to “The Twist.” Binnick then brought a copy of the record back to play for Clark, who resisted the urge to rerecord a cover version—a common practice among label owners at that time—but nonetheless added “The Twist”

to his playlist. The song's momentum continued to snowball, and by the winter of 1960 it had completely infiltrated white teenage dance culture. Clark could no longer ignore the potential financial rewards to be reaped from exploiting "The Twist" for his own ends.

Cameo's head songwriter, Karl Mann, intrigued by the popularity of "The Twist," was eager to give it a new, Clark-approved spin that would downplay Ballard's lubricious double-entendres (in Ballard's version, the Twist's sexual suggestiveness was too overt). After getting Lowe's approval, Mann wrote a G-rated version of "The Twist," which was given to black Cameo artist Ernest Evans to record. A resident of South Philadelphia, Evans—rechristened Chubby Checker after Clark's wife Barbara saw him perform his Fats Domino imitation one night—was able to strike just the right note of benign playfulness. Instead of a leering come-on, Checker transformed "The Twist" into an innocent entreaty to shake a tail feather.

More significant was Checker's variation on the Twist dance move originated by Ballard, who claimed to have come up with the pelvis-yrating dance after seeing his band the Midnighters improvise some steps onstage one night.<sup>24</sup> The problematic move was Ballard's hip thrust; as Clark had seen with Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, anything hips-related was too hot for TV to handle. Checker downplayed the hip movement and ramped up the lateral waist movement while gently rocking back and forth, using the balls of his feet as a fulcrum.

Checker's incarnation of "The Twist," cleaner and punchier than Ballard's lurid version, was for Clark the apotheosis of all of his populist impulses packed into a deceptively simple dance step. In August 1960, shortly after the single made its first appearance on the *Billboard* Hot 100 singles chart, Checker lip-synched his version of "The Twist" on *The Dick Clark Show*. Checker followed up that appearance with a September appearance on *American Bandstand*, and the song moved up to number one on the Hot 100 chart. America's thirst for "The Twist" was unslakable. A year after the dance's first wave of success, Lowe was now eager to record a sequel. Written by Mann, "Let's Twist Again (Like We Did Last Summer)" shot up to number eight on *Billboard's* singles chart in the spring of 1961.

"The Twist" had become not only a national craze but a global



**Chubby Checker in a scene from the 1961 film *Twist Around The Clock*, which also co-starred New York DJ turned VJ Clay Cole. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

phenomenon, so much so that when Lowe decided to reissue the original record again in November 1961, it became the first and only record since Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" to return to the chart and reach number one twice—a feat that's never been duplicated.<sup>25</sup>

Clark was at the height of his power in 1960, the nation's most influential disc jockey, his tight web of business interests netting him far more income than his TV earnings. Up until 1959, no one had bothered to question the ethical or legal ramifications of Clark's numerous business ventures, especially ABC. But that would all change in short order.

The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) had been established in 1914 to protect the copyrights of

songwriters through the regulation of performance rights<sup>26</sup>, but it was on a mission to protect itself in 1959. Ever since the dawn of the rock 'n' roll era, ASCAP, at the time the industry's leading music-licensing guild, had strenuously avoided getting into the business of licensing what it regarded as substandard music. ASCAP had thus provided a window of opportunity for Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), a licensing guild founded by the radio broadcasters themselves in 1941 as a countermeasure against what it regarded as ASCAP's exorbitant licensing fees. By the mid-1950s, a huge percentage of rock 'n' roll copyrights were being handled by BMI, so a defensive and desperate ASCAP decided to strike back.

ASCAP charged BMI with monopolizing the licensing business. After all, they reasoned, if the radio broadcasters had control over the song licenses, they stood to earn substantial royalties by pushing those songs with which they had a vested interest. ASCAP also contended that payola, in which record companies plied DJs with money and gifts in exchange for airplay, was determining what songs were being played on the nation's airwaves. So determined was ASCAP to break BMI's back that they brought their case to the same congressional body that had investigated the *Twenty-One* TV quiz show scandal two years earlier. Oren Harris's subcommittee was primed for a fresh cause *célèbre*; all nine members of the white, archconservative panel were up for reelection, and a good witch hunt could only help boost poll numbers.

The impending payola probe chilled ABC chairman Leonard Goldenson, whose network had just weathered the quiz show scandal without any damage to its reputation. Not only was Clark the most visible DJ in America, but if the *American Bandstand* host was found guilty of accepting payola, the Federal Communications Commission could potentially revoke ABC's broadcasting license. Goldenson ordered Clark to divest himself of his outside businesses—the record companies, the pressing plants, the publishing firms—everything. According to Goldenson's 1960 testimony before the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight, the ABC chief told Clark that “unless you are prepared to do that, we will have to give consideration to taking you off the air.”<sup>27</sup>

In a 1990 *Rolling Stone* interview, Clark claimed his numerous conflicting business interests were just his way of trying to earn a decent living wage. "I did have publishing interests, record interests, management interests, because in all honesty, I wasn't being paid to do television," Clark told writer Henry Schipper. "Our budget in those days was \$1,500 a week to do *Bandstand*. So I went into the music business to make a living."<sup>28</sup>

As for the 150 song copyrights bequeathed to him over the years, well, that was just all part of the game. "If you were a songwriter then and you had a song, you'd want me to own it because I could do the best by it," recalled Clark. "That's just good business."<sup>29</sup>

When the *Bandstand* host returned to Philadelphia after his meeting with Goldenson to tell producer Tony Marmarella about what had happened, Marmarella confessed that he had been accepting payments from seven different companies since 1956, and offered to quit. Thus, the *Bandstand* producer became the ideal scapegoat for Clark's attorneys, who could now use Marmarella's transgressions as a feint to divert any questions about Clark. Marmarella was now ABC's "designated culprit." It hardly mattered that Clark was as culpable as Marmarella; the *Bandstand* host was a cash cow for ABC, and the network would do all they could to protect him.

Clark signed an affidavit in which he denied any wrongdoing, and the network in turn issued a strong vote of confidence in a November 18 press release. That same day, Clark presented his case to *American Bandstand's* audience by reading ABC's statement on the air. "I want you to know as a friend that I appreciate, as I said before, your kind words and encouragement," Clark told *Bandstand's* viewers, "and the fact that the people I work for stand behind me."<sup>30</sup>

To many in the business, Clark's denials smacked of stonewalling. Never mind that Marmarella and Clark shared an office so small that "we could reach out and touch four walls."<sup>31</sup> How could Clark not have known about Marmarella's every move? But Clark's pass-the-buck strategy was essential in clearing his good name, lest he suffer Marmarella's fate and find himself out of a job.

Despite Clark's efforts at spin control, the press jumped on the scandal. *Variety* claimed the money involved in the TV payola

imbroglio “makes the money involved in the rigging of TV quiz show prizes seem like peanuts by comparison.”<sup>32</sup> The House subcommittee began targeting specific DJs for payola, and heads were starting to roll. Clark was doing his level best to maintain equanimity, but he rapidly found the controversy closing in on him.

A parade of witnesses provided potentially damaging testimony to the House subcommittee before Clark had the chance to testify. Alan Freed claimed that his employers at ABC had leaned on him to play Am-Par records. Record promoter Harry Finfer told the subcommittee that Jaime Records, Duane Eddy’s label, had paid Clark a “salary” of \$17,000—compensation, Finfer dubiously claimed, for his expertise in record sales.

George Goldner, a record label owner who had released Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers’ hits and had enjoyed a cozy business relationship with Clark, was grilled by the committee’s chief counsel, Robert Lishman:

*Mr. Lishman:* Have you ever made payments to Dick Clark directly or indirectly?

*Goldner:* If you are speaking of money, no, sir.

*Mr. Lishman:* Well, have you ever made any valuable considerations to him in the form of copyrights or material things?

*Mr. Goldner:* Yes, sir.

*Mr. Lishman:* Will you describe what they were?

*Mr. Goldner:* I think there is a total of four copyrights that were assigned for [Goldner labels] Real Gone Music and N Music.

Clark went on the offensive, hiring a firm called Computech to back up his assertion that he did not favor those records in which he had a financial stake. Computech divvied up all the songs that Clark had played on *American Bandstand* into two categories: records in which he owned the copyright, and those in which he didn’t. Using a “popularity score” that subtracted the song’s ranking on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 singles chart from the number 101, Computech determined that Clark had indeed not given preferential treatment to any songs.

Computech’s study looked impressive, but as writer John Jackson



has pointed out, its validity was flawed.<sup>33</sup> For one thing, its findings only obfuscated the real heart of the matter, which was that until the payola scandal broke, Clark had played a whopping 53 percent of the records released by the three record companies (Jaime, Swan, and Hunt) in which he had a financial interest, regardless of whether or not they made *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart.

Nevertheless, Clark, armed with his quasi-scientific Computech study, appeared before the House subcommittee on April 29, 1960. "I want to make it clear, immediately, that I have never taken payola," Clark told the subcommittee in the same measured, carefully modulated voice he used to shill records on *Bandstand*. He denied having prior knowledge of any questionable payments Tony Marnarella might have received and denied favoring any record in which he held the copyright, even after some members of the subcommittee ascertained that the Computech study did in fact show that Clark leaned hard on his own records. "The truth, gentlemen," Clark testified, "is that I did not consciously favor such records. Maybe I did so without realizing it."<sup>34</sup>

The subcommittee pressed harder. What about all those copyrights? Surely this was an insidious form of payola? Clark maintained that the doling out of copyrights was "an established practice" in the music business, which was true enough. Was it dishonest? Perhaps. But it wasn't illegal.

Flashing the cozy conviviality that had turned him into a media phenom, Clark effectively cowed the subcommittee. He was not found to have engaged in any illegal acts, and suffered only the indignity of losing a substantial part of his yearly income due to the divestiture of his business interests.

Clark may have come out of the payola scandal with less financial muscle, but his power to break records on *American Bandstand* remained undiminished—at least until 1964, when the Beatles, whose American media outlet of choice was *The Ed Sullivan Show*, effectively wiped out Philadelphia's Italian-American teen idol cabal and left Clark with a smaller power base. Clark relocated the show to Los Angeles, and ABC chopped the show down to once a week, on Saturday afternoons. Clark would eventually build an aboveboard

media empire centered primarily around his TV production interests, shows like *The \$20,000 Pyramid*, *The American Music Awards*, and *The Country Music Association Awards*, but *American Bandstand* would never again hold quite the same sway over American teenagers. By the late 1960s, it was just another quaint Eisenhower-era artifact cast adrift in the countercultural maelstrom.

## ***Nelson Family Values***

***I don't think I can function without total artistic control. Because I think it's devastating to try to do any sort of entertainment by committee.***

—OZZIE NELSON

Dick Clark booked 10,000 performers on *American Bandstand* over the show's thirty-one-year ABC run, but there were two artists he could never bag: Elvis Presley and Ricky Nelson. By 1957 they were both already bigger than *Bandstand*. But if anyone understood the synergy that Clark had created between TV and rock 'n' roll, it was these two 1950s teen idols, who also happened to be the most telegenic pop performers of the era. Elvis had used the era's most popular TV variety shows to pierce the mainstream membrane during his breakout year of 1956, while Nelson owed his phenomenally successful recording career entirely to television.

Whatever his merits as an actor and musician, Ricky Nelson was a true pioneer in one important respect: he was the first pop star to emerge fully formed from television—not a recording artist, like Elvis, who used television to get a leg up toward stardom, but an actor who *became* a recording artist, and then a huge pop star, by dint of his being on television. He was the only teen idol of the decade who managed to pull off this dual-track career trick with any degree of success, and how he did it says as much about the era as it does about Nelson himself.

The vehicle upon which Ricky Nelson built his pop career was



Young Ricky Nelson. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, the longest running family sitcom in TV history that starred a real family—Ricky, his parents Ozzie and Harriet, and his older brother David. Whenever pop-cultural historians want to call up the eerie, hyperreal plasticity and phony pieties that characterized the 1950s mindset, this is the show usually invoked as the decade's most emblematic pop-cultural artifact. It was the first TV show that attempted to replicate the quotidian lifestyle of a middle-class, postwar American family with some degree of verisimilitude; in that respect, it was dubiously revolutionary.

Dick Clark and Ricky Nelson (and by extension Ricky's overseer Ozzie Nelson) are perhaps the key conspirators that helped stifle

rock 'n' roll's rebel spirit in the years that spanned 1958 to 1964, when the Beatles began their assault on American culture, even though there was plenty of great music being produced during that interregnum, much of it by Ricky Nelson. But Nelson and Clark had the advantage of TV at a time when few media outlets other than radio were available for rock artists. By assiduously following the dictates of TV's mass-appeal mindset, they became arbiters of a particular brand of medium cool—easily digested, eminently disposable, and censure-proof.

*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet's* creator and driving force was Ozzie Nelson. The offspring of Swedish immigrants, Nelson dabbled in boxing, toured the minstrel show circuit in the 1920s, and eventually formed a big band in the hopes of replicating the success of such superstar bandleaders as Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman. Like Dick Clark, Nelson was driven not by artistic impulses but by the potential financial rewards to be gained from meretricious entertainment.

Although Nelson had conquered both jazz and radio before he was forty, television was where his populist instincts truly bloomed. He grasped early on that TV was most effective when it created a false intimacy between its viewers and its stars, and that its audience viewed the medium as a mirror in which they could see their ideal selves reflected back at them. Nelson stumbled upon this notion as far back as 1944 when, as a successful big-band leader, he and his wife Harriet, a chain-smoking former starlet who frequently went pantyless onstage during her tenure as Ozzie's girl singer, had the chance to star in their own radio show and played themselves, with two child actors playing their sons, Ricky and David.

While the urge to replicate a pitch-perfect simulacrum of domestic life had more to do with the fact that Ozzie couldn't really act and had little comic flair—it's always easier, after all, for an actor to play himself—it was a radical notion at a time when the big radio stars like Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Red Skelton built audience loyalty through the cultivation of outsize personas.

*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* radio show was a huge hit, and when Ozzie brought on his real sons to play themselves in 1949, the program experienced another ratings spike. In 1950, the ambi-

tious former bandleader wanted to branch out into other media, and was approached by producer Aaron Rosenberg to make a feature film starring the family called *Here Come the Nelsons* for Universal Pictures. The film earned enough back at the box office for ABC to commit to a TV series, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* premiered in October, 1952.

From the start, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* strived to present a storybook version of suburban Americana. There was no racial strife in the all-white neighborhood, no unwanted pregnancies or teenage delinquency. Everything in the Nelson household ran smoothly and efficiently, a no-muss, no-fuss product of postwar prosperity. It was everything Ozzie wanted for his fictional family, but could never have in his real clan.

A notoriously tough negotiator, Ozzie demanded total control of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and he got it. From the start, Ozzie, who functioned as the show's producer, director, and head writer, ensured that the TV show strictly adhered to a loose template of the Nelson's real lives. The floor plan of the colonial house set was modeled after the family's real Hollywood home, and every time the show flashed an establishing shot of the house, audiences were actually looking at the Nelson's real residence on Camino Palmero Road.

But if the physical details approximated reality, the show's tidy story lines hardly captured the Nelson's domestic tableau with any degree of authenticity. Harriet, the show's happy homemaker, didn't know how to cook, for one thing, and domestics served dinner after tapings at the Nelson house.<sup>1</sup> Ozzie was hardly a snugly paterfamilias, but such messy contradictions would only confuse things. The show's plots were either twenty-two-minute morality plays designed to serve as primers for solving typical family conflicts, or lighthearted scenarios about the boys' girl troubles, or the search for that elusive tutti-frutti ice cream, or the problems associated with new living room furniture, served up with a healthy dollop of homespun wisdom from Ozzie and reassuring homilies from Harriet.

Each Nelson family member was a facile 1950s archetype: Ozzie, the perpetually befuddled patriarch; Harriet, the nurturing enabler; David, the awkward teen; and Ricky, the freckled, wisecracking imp

with the trademark catchphrase, “I don’t mess around, boy.” There was also the requisite next-door neighbor Thorny, played by Don DeFore, and the Nelsons’ friends the Randolphins (Lyle Talbot and Mary Jane Croft). As Gerald Nachman has observed, “The Nelsons bore no resemblance to any family, yet captured the essence of family-ness.”<sup>2</sup> Relentlessly optimistic, the Nelsons behaved exactly the way the show’s viewers wanted its own families to behave—without fear or favor, and always one step ahead of the Gloom Police.

From the outset, it was clear that Ricky (who began working on the show when he was eight) was the show’s star, a freckled, scenery-chewing natural who rattled off bemused rebukes and pithy one-liners in an adenoidal whine, usually at the expense of his long-suffering older brother. As the seasons progressed and Ricky evolved from gawky adolescent to pretty-boy teen, Ozzie began to write more story lines that centered around his youngest son, thus turning *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* into an advertiser’s dream: A show that appealed to parents *and* their kids.

Like all teenagers who came of age in the mid-1950s, Rick Nelson was besotted by rock, but it was more than merely diversionary for him. Ozzie, in marked contrast to his benign public persona, was in fact a moralizing bully who demanded that the Nelsons abide by his iron-clad code of ethics, and he didn’t brook any lapses lightly. There was even a morals clause in each family



Ozzie Nelson in his big-band days. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

member's contract that forbade them from smoking, drinking, or engaging in otherwise unsavory behavior while under contract to the show. "Ozzie played such a bumbler on the show," recalls Bruce Belland, a member of the singing group the Four Preps and a former cast member of *Ozzie and Harriet*, "but he was really like a shrewd, benevolent dictator."

Ozzie's sanctimoniousness didn't necessarily spring from any strongly held religious convictions; virtue was just good business for an impossibly perfect family that had become a lucrative commodity. "I felt the responsibility before we started on the show," David Nelson once observed, "for my behavior with sponsors coming over and conducting myself, making sure my hands were washed and my hair was combed for dinner. We started out fairly formal. We would come to dinner with coats and ties with nobody there."<sup>3</sup>

For Ricky and David, Ozzie was an overbearing oppressor, but there was no exit as long as their fortunes were tied to the show's. "Rick and Ozzie had a good relationship, but Ozzie had an iron hand," says songwriter Sharon Sheeley, a lifelong friend of Ricky's. "You didn't do anything that Ozzie didn't want you to do. Of course, we did a lot of those things, but the trick was not to get caught, or else there was hell to pay. Ozzie never screamed, but he would raise his voice and say Rick's name in a certain way that you knew he was gonna get it."

Like 70 million other Americans, Ricky caught Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the winter of '57, and it had a transformative effect. Seeking some respite from the rigors of Ozzie's strenuous work regimen, Ricky began to immerse himself in rock 'n' roll—particularly the raw rockabilly to be found on the early Sun recordings from Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash—wear leather jackets off the set, and hang out secretly with Sharon Sheeley and her Hollywood greaser buddies. For Ricky, rock 'n' roll was his only refuge, a chance to commune with an art form that was authentic and unkempt. Better yet, it was something his father could never understand or co-opt. Or could he?

"Like anybody that attains some degree of celebrity as part of a group, there's always that itch do something on your own apart from



it,” says Bruce Belland, who was a close friend of Ricky’s during the 1950s. “That’s very much where Rick was coming from. Being on *Ozzie and Harriet* wasn’t gonna impress anyone as much as being on the record charts. It was his primal drive, and it became much more pronounced later on in his life.”

Nelson and Belland would sneak in jam sessions on the *Ozzie and Harriet* set in Ricky’s trailer. “We’d have some milk and cookies, grab a couple of guitars, and listen to every Fats Domino and Elvis record,” says Belland. “He identified with Elvis to the point where he wanted the Four Preps to be sorta like his version of the Jordanaires. He would study those records to figure out all the vocal parts.”

Ozzie eventually got wind of Ricky’s rock obsession and, ever the opportunist, started to weave his son’s love of rock into the show’s story lines. He first wrote a show in which Ricky dressed up like Elvis for a costume party. Ricky’s curiously effeminate Presley, complete with mom’s fake eyelashes and wide-brimmed hat, was one of the strangest Elvis appropriations in TV history—the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll as kiddie drag queen.

“[Ricky] had been singing around home ever since he was a little boy, but we hadn’t paid much attention to it,” Harriet Nelson wrote in an article for *Look* magazine in 1958. “Ozzie decided Ricky was good enough to introduce as a singer in an episode.” Ozzie signed a recording contract on behalf of Ricky with Norman Grantz’s company Verve, a jazz label that was far from the cutting edge of contemporary rock ‘n’ roll but had recently hired session guitarist Barney Kessel to shore up its pop division.

A session was quickly booked on March 26 at Master Recorders, a studio that had made its reputation recording some of the seminal R&B records of the era. Nelson had L.A.’s finest in the studio with him that day, including country guitar legend Merle Travis and the great New Orleans drummer Earl Palmer, who had supplied the backbeat for Little Richard’s greatest records. “I remember all these people there, and I had gone straight from singing in the bathroom to the recording studio,” Ricky told writer Joel Selvin. “There was nothing in between.”<sup>4</sup> Under the watchful eye of Ozzie, Ricky laid down three tracks in four hours: A boilerplate ballad called “A Teenager’s

Romance,” a swoony Kessel composition called “You’re My One and Only Love,” and Fats Domino’s current hit, “I’m Walkin’.”

Now it was time to test the show’s cross-promotional muscle by having Ricky perform one of the songs on the air. Ozzie framed Ricky’s coming out as a singer on the show as a kind of public audition, hedging his bets in case the whole thing turned out to be a bust. “Ricky the Drummer,” which was broadcast on April 10, 1957, finds the Nelsons taking a European sea cruise, and climaxes with Ricky getting the nerve up to sing with the ocean liner’s orchestra before a crowd of fellow passengers.

During the last two minutes of the show, Ricky gets his shot:

“How about Ricky singing a rhythm and blues tune and the rest of us will give him a little moral support?” Ozzie asks the bandleader.

“Good deal,” he replies. “What do you want to sing, Rick?”

“How about ‘I’m Walkin’?”

The perennially dutiful son is clad in a black tux, but his carriage betrays just a hint of rebel self-consciousness: his bow tie is slightly askew, and he’s wearing a harmless, devil-may-care sneer. “Elvis was naturally a sexy boy, he let all his emotions flow,” says Sharon Sheeley. “Rick was a real sexy boy but he didn’t know it.”

With little fanfare, Ricky and the band launch into “I’m Walkin’.” The arrangement is pure schmaltz; Ricky effectively drains all of the sticky soul out of Domino’s version with his wispy voice and ham-fisted phrasing. And yet there’s something undeniably alluring about Nelson’s rock ’n’ roll swagger, as if he’s acting out the fantasy of every kid who ever had to repress his baser instincts for the sake of domestic propriety.

If Ricky had heretofore been the most popular cast member of the show, his performance of “I’m Walkin’” ratcheted up his cool quotient considerably, and seemed to hot-wire the show’s younger viewers into Ricky’s rock trip. The “Rick the Drummer” episode sparked a torrent of viewer feedback unprecedented for any TV show at the time. The show’s production office was overwhelmed with 10,000 pieces of fan mail, and a tall fence had to be constructed around the Camino Palmero house to prevent overzealous female fans from climbing through the windows.

Ozzie, blind-sided by the overwhelming success of “I’m Walkin’,” had Verve rush-release the record. The song, which hit stores three weeks after the broadcast, sold over 60,000 copies in its first week, and 700,000 copies total, making it one of the fastest-selling pop singles of the decade. Radio DJs, hungry to play more Ricky after “I’m Walkin’” petered out, flipped the record over and turned the B side, “A Teenager’s Romance,” into a top-five hit.

Ozzie, a workmanlike singer during his big-band days who had absolutely no feel for contemporary pop idioms, had transformed his son into something he would have found repellent in any other context. But it was undeniably lucrative. Ricky Nelson fan clubs sprung up all over the country: in southern California’s San Fernando Valley chapter alone, 2,000 new members had signed on by the end of May.<sup>5</sup>

As a platform for launching pop hits, Ricky Nelson now had a TV outlet that even Dick Clark might’ve envied. At the peak of its popularity, from 1954 to 1959, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* drew about 18 million viewers per week in its prime-time slot. Ozzie knew that there was a cross-promotional windfall to be had from milking Ricky’s teen appeal—by featuring performances of his son in the show, he could attract that newly prosperous younger demographic that advertisers hungered for and also sell some records in the process.

By the winter of 1957, musical numbers featuring Ricky and his band had become a regular feature on *Ozzie and Harriet*. In fact, for teens, the sitcom was strictly Square Biz, and it soon got to the point where Ozzie didn’t even need a story pretext to slip in a song: kids could tune in during the show’s final few minutes, when Ricky’s lip-synched performance would be aired after the show’s final scene and a commercial break. Invariably dressed in a white cardigan, sports jacket, or a crisply pressed Oxford shirt, Ricky would perch himself on the staircase, or in front of a malt-shop jukebox, and play his latest single while about a hundred extras bobbed their heads in unison, wearing pasted-on smiles. “We used to call the girls in those scenes the screamers,” says Bruce Belland. “Ricky and I would come on the set in the morning and see these girls with their eight-by-tens jumping up and down and applauding. Those were the screamer auditions.

Ozzie would just shoot these girls and stockpile the shots, so he could throw them in whenever he needed them.”

With Ricky’s popularity as a singing star on the ascendant in the summer of ’57, Ozzie signed a five-year contract with Imperial Records, an L.A.-based label that specialized in R&B and had a firmer grasp on how to promote and market pop records than Verve. Imperial was owned by Lew Chudd, an archetypal music-biz bean counter who had made a small fortune selling Fats Domino records; in fact, Domino’s original version of “I’m Walkin’” had been the label’s first big hit in 1957.

Just as he had done with *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, Nelson demanded total control over every aspect of Ricky’s Imperial recording career, from publicity and ad photos to song selection. Just when it seemed as if Ricky had finally found an autonomous creative outlet for himself, Ozzie took over, again. “Ozzie would be in the control booth with [producer] Jimmy Haskell, supervising everything,” says Bruce Belland. “Ricky didn’t necessarily know what he wanted, but he knew he didn’t want some corny, square thing.”

Ricky’s early records for Imperial were Ozzie-sanctioned, lightweight pap: “Be Bop Baby” was an unintentionally satiric send-up of rockabilly, and “Have I Told You Lately That I Loved You?” was an old Bing Crosby ballad from a few years prior. As it turned out, song quality was a moot point: after Ricky performed “Be Bop Baby” on the show in October 1957, the song shot up to number three on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 singles chart, and “Have I Told You . . .” the record’s flip side, made it into the top thirty.

Ricky was logging chart hits almost as fast as his role model Elvis, but the stigma of being a synthetic, ready-made construct still lingered. As much as Nelson hungered for respect, the fact remained that he was a top-down teen idol—someone who leveraged TV stardom to sell records, as opposed to stars like Presley, Buddy Holly, and Eddie Cochran, all of whom had up-from-the-bootstraps origins and learned their craft with real dirt under their fingernails.

“Ricky always felt a little insecure, but in all fairness, [other rock artists] didn’t treat him as an equal,” says Sharon Sheeley. “They all came from poor families, and clawed and scraped to get to the top,

but Rick was born on TV with a silver spoon in his mouth. No matter how good the records were, they never gave him the credit, so he had to try twice as hard to win their approval.”

Rick knew he needed a jolt of street credibility, so in late 1957 he hired two hotshot musicians, guitarist James Burton and bassist James Kirkland, from rockabilly artist Bob Luman’s band. A native of Shreveport, Louisiana, seventeen-year-old Burton was already a music-biz veteran by the time Ricky recruited him. At the age of fifteen, he was a regular guitarist for *Louisiana Hayride*, the popular radio show that featured Elvis as a regular in the winter of 1954-55. He also provided the stinging melody line for Louisiana native Dale Hawkins’s seminal rockabilly hit “Suzie Q” in June, 1957. A nimble practitioner of the staccato, “chicken-scratching” style of country guitar, Burton had his roadhouse bona fides securely in place.

“We were in the Imperial studios with Bob Luman, and Ricky came in on some business,” says Burton. “He heard us, and wanted to know who we were. Later that day, me and James Kirkland went back to our house in Canoga Park, and we see a telegram hanging from the door. It was from Ricky, asking us to come down to the TV studio to meet him and his parents. We came down, played a little for Ozzie, and he asked us to do the show.”

Burton and Kirkland, a journeyman bassist with an innate feel for both country and pop, sprang from the same southern musical wellspring that had spawned Nelson’s idols Carl



**“Hello, baaaybay!” Ricky strikes a pose. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Elvis. "I was sort of Ricky's guitar tutor," says Burton. "I taught him some chords, taught him how to use a capo, to the point where he was playing pretty good."

Ozzie approved of Ricky's new band, and Burton, Kirkland, and drummer Richie Frost soon became regulars on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*—yet one more instance of the Nelson's carefully orchestrated art imitating their carefully contoured life. Soon after, Burton moved into Camino Palmero, so he and Ricky could practice and write songs together. "I lived upstairs, and we would just play guitar all the time," says Burton. "He was getting very serious about his music at this point."

Perhaps because he was hanging out so much with Burton, Nelson's records also started to evince a more self-confident command of rock 'n' roll. There was less playacting, and more playfulness. On his next two Imperial singles "Waitin' in School/Stood Up" and "Believe What You Say," Nelson shed some of his pinched introversion in favor of a newly developed take-no-prisoners attitude. After all, he now had rebel rousers Johnny and Dorsey Burnette writing songs for him.

Songwriters and amateur boxing champs who liked to spend their spare time beating the crap out of each other, the Burnette brothers were roughnecks with absolutely no veneer of Hollywood slickness. Three-time winners on *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour*, the Burnettes, along with guitarist Paul Burlison, signed with Coral Records and made a seminal self-titled album of demented, gonzo rockabilly under the name the Rock and Roll Trio in 1957.

Ricky, eager to slum it with some good ole boys, was drawn to the Burnettes; naturally, Ozzie thought they were hoodlums, and wouldn't let his son socialize with them. But since Ozzie owned the publishing rights to every song the Burnettes wrote for Ricky—as with every other songwriter who toiled for the Nelson franchise—he certainly wasn't going to kick them off the payroll. Ozzie never let his own prejudices interfere with business.

Ricky's popularity was a ballast for *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, keeping its ratings high even as the sitcom's perky domesticity began to wear thin. But just as *Ozzie and Harriet* was starting to



Girls, girls, girls: Ricky and some potential conquests, (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

look like a 1950s fossil, Ricky's music started to take on emotional heft and moral complexity. "Lonesome Town," a despondent suicide note disguised as a lovelorn ballad written by a struggling actor and agoraphobic songwriter from Birmingham, Alabama, named Baker Knight, was not only the spookiest song Nelson ever recorded, it was one of the spookiest hits of the decade. Over a downcast acoustic guitar, Nelson spins a haunting tale of irredeemable heartache:

*There's a place where lovers go to cry their troubles away  
And they call it lonesome town, where the broken hearts stay  
You can buy a dream or two to last you all through the years  
And the only price you pay is a heart full of tears.*

More superb singles followed: the Burnette compositions "Just a Little Too Much," and "It's Late," and another Baker Knight song called "Never Be Anyone Else but You." It wasn't just about puppy love anymore; something real was at stake for the protagonist in these songs, a sense that the good times can come crashing down if true love doesn't find its way.

## Station to Station

Ricky became a multimedia star. In 1959 he was cast by director Howard Hawks to appear in the western *Rio Bravo* with Dean Martin and Walter Brennan, and the following year appeared in the comedy *The Wackiest Ship in the Army* with Jack Lemmon. In December 1958, Nelson, the best-selling pop star of the year, made the cover of *Life* magazine. Through it all, he kept on doing *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which continued to prosper as long as Ricky was lip-synching his hits on the air.

James Kirkland, Ricky, and James Burton. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)





Ozzie continued to meddle. In 1961 Ricky had handpicked a song by struggling writer Jerry Fuller called “Travelin’ Man,” a mid-tempo charmer whose lyrics mapped out a Baedeker of exotic locales in which to find pretty girls. Instead of having Ricky sing the song in a performance context on the show, however, Ozzie thought it would be cute if he juxtaposed all of the locales Ricky mentioned in the song over a close-up shot of Ricky’s face. The end result was a too-literal visual interpretation of “Travelin’ Man” that served as a prototype for bad MTV-era conceptual videos.

Ricky’s albums also suffered from Ozzie’s creative misjudgment. No matter how strenuously Ricky fought to keep sententious claptrap like “My Bucket’s Got a Hole in It” and “Fools Rush In” off his records, Ozzie insisted that they be included. Ricky knew that, in order for his rock ’n’ roll makeover to stick, he had to stay away from anything that smacked of family-hour pap. But Ozzie was an autocrat and hungry for control, even if it meant making heedless decisions. Ricky began lashing out.

“Ozzie wanted to control Rick’s career, and he did for a long time,” says Bruce Belland. “I remember one time on the show there was a scene where Rick and David come home from a frat party, and Ozzie pulls out a banjo and implores David and Rick to play guitar and sing some silly song with him. Well, Rick was so uninterested in the song he kept rolling his eyes on camera. They couldn’t even edit their way around it, it was so obvious. He didn’t even bother to memorize the song, and was checking the lyrics on a cue card. Meanwhile, David the dutiful son pretended to play the fake chords and sing the song.”

Ricky was trapped in an alternative reality of his dad’s devising, and like some Zenith-zapped Dorian Gray, he was growing out of his teen-idol image even as the show kept perpetuating it. There was never any question in Ozzie’s mind that Ricky’s success would continue well into the 1960s, and he secured an unprecedented twenty-year contract with the Decca label in 1963 to make sure of it. But by 1964 Ricky and his candy-cane pop were falling out of favor with teens, and the lucrative Decca contract had become a gilded cage. By that time, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* had slipped in the ratings, losing market share to NBC’s *The Virginian* and CBS Reports

in the 7:30–8:00 time slot on Wednesday nights. The show was finally cancelled in 1966 and replaced by *Batman*. Recalls Bruce Belland, “Rick was more pleased that the show got canceled than anyone else.”

Perhaps this was because he had finally found some measure of redemption. A few years after the show’s cancellation, he acquired a love of country music, dropped the “y” from his first name, and recorded two albums, 1966’s *Bright Lights and Country Music* and 1967’s *Country Fever*, that presaged the L.A. country-rock movement by a couple of years. 1970’s *Rick Nelson in Concert*, recorded live at the Troubadour in Hollywood, finally endeared him to the critics, and when his 1972 composition “Garden Party”—a kiss-off of sorts to his former self—became a top-ten hit, it seemed that Nelson had shed the last vestige of his teen idol persona. But it was Nelson’s fate to suffer the indignity of every child TV star who tries to recast himself in the world even as the ghosts of the past linger to remind everyone of what came before. When he died in a plane crash on New Year’s Eve, 1985, he was en route to perform in a 1950s revival show, with the *y* back in place at the end of his name.

## ***The Whole World Is Watching***

### **THE BEATLES ON *THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW***

Television has produced its share of unlikely rock 'n' roll proselytizers, but Ed Sullivan just might be the strangest. As the host of *Toast of the Town/The Ed Sullivan Show*, he presided over the most successful variety show in TV history at a time when the format was repeatedly trotted out by the three networks. Pop-cultural historians have often wondered how a man as hangdog-dull as Sullivan came to dominate Sunday-night TV across twenty-three years and countless cultural convulsions. Frequent guest Joe E. Lewis perhaps summed up Sullivan's lack of sparkle best: "He was a man who could brighten a room simply by leaving it."<sup>1</sup> Comedian Alan King, who appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* thirty-seven times, to this day cannot provide a rational explanation for Sullivan's success. "When I was rolling with Ed, everybody said, 'Can you explain Ed Sullivan?' I said, "I don't know *what* he does, but he seems to do it better than anybody else."<sup>2</sup>

Sullivan, with tea-stained bags under his eyes and a wide promontory of forehead, had the clenched bearing of a crooked congressman. His typical on-camera body language was a kind of regal slouch; arms crossed, shoulders hunched, his large head seemingly hovering over his shirt collar. He was gawky and ungainly, with a propensity to flub cue-card readings. Sullivan's malaprops became the stuff of show-biz



Ground zero for the revolution: The Beatles on the stage of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, February 9, 1964. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

legend. He once introduced opera singer Robert Merrill with the words, “I’d like to prevent Robert Merrill.” He capped an evening devoted to the fight against tuberculosis with, “Good night and help stamp out TV.” Sullivan, in short, was a model of unpolished affability.

But the crabby variety-show host was a hit precisely because he *wasn’t* a conventional star. During the 1950s, when families tended to own just one TV and gravitated toward shows that demanded little more than a healthy respect for light entertainment, Sullivan was

America's carnival barker, introducing a steady procession of plate spinners, opera divas, borscht-belt *tumblers*, acrobats, and one-legged tap dancers and then quickly getting out of the way. He built an empire on that hoary show-biz battle cry, "Give the people what they want."

From 1948 until 1955, that meant plucking guests from Broadway's diverse talent pool, recruiting members of the Metropolitan Opera, which was only fifteen blocks or so away from CBS's Studio 50, and booking the Jewish comics that slayed 'em on the resort circuit upstate in the Catskills. When rock 'n' roll grew to the point where the notoriously churlish Sullivan could no longer ignore it, he acceded some of his coveted airtime to pop stars, but with great reluctance.

That all changed in 1956, when Elvis's three appearances turned *The Ed Sullivan Show* into compulsory viewing for millions of teenagers. Now Sullivan happily booked, say, Rodney Dangerfield with Bobby Darin, or Alec Guinness with Bill Haley and the Comets. "Ed was a master showman," says John Moffatt, who worked in various production capacities on *The Ed Sullivan Show* from 1960 to 1971. "In those days, the secret to success was to have everyone in the family sit through all the acts. That's why he would frequently have rock acts on first and last, so kids would tune in for the whole show. He was very smart that way."

As a newspaper columnist covering the Broadway beat of the 1930s and 1940s, Sullivan was exposed to the best of Tin Pan Alley and heavily favored the music of its greatest performers. *The Ed Sullivan Show* was top-heavy with show tunes and Velveeta pop long after rock's revolution had rendered most of it irrelevant. Some of Sullivan's most frequent guests included Teresa Brewer, Connie Francis, Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, and Rosemary Clooney.<sup>3</sup>

But Sullivan wasn't just another small-screen whitewasher. He embraced black artists at a time when television kept an arm's length from anything that might offend southern affiliates and race-sensitive sponsors. Sullivan frequently stared down corporate patrons like Lincoln-Mercury, who feared reprisals from the owners of its numerous southern car dealerships if too many black artists received prime airtime. "When Ed was a Broadway columnist, his beat included Harlem, and that meant the Cotton Club, Duke Ellington, Count

Basie, and other black acts,” says *Ed Sullivan Show* producer (and Sullivan’s son-in-law) Bob Precht. “He acknowledged those artists and that continued into the TV show.”

As early as 1942, Sullivan hosted a radio show called *Harlem Cavalcade*, which showcased such veteran black vaudeville performers as Noble Sissle and Flournoy Miller.<sup>4</sup> In November 1955 Sullivan devoted an entire broadcast of *Toast of the Town* to black performers. The show, which was hosted by gonzo New York DJ Tommy Smalls, aka Dr. Jive, was a joyous, blithely untethered celebration of R&B that featured future legends Bo Diddley, LaVern Baker, and the Five Keys. It was a groundbreaking event, the first time a popular mainstream variety show had devoted an entire broadcast to race music.

Sullivan may have not been a fan of rock ’n’ roll, but he was shrewd enough to know that co-optation was the most economically prudent option. It was less a question of pretending to care in order to connect with youth culture—a strategy that had worked well with Dick Clark—than of simply appropriating the music’s heat to boost his own buzz. Besides, Sullivan’s bolder experiments with high art hadn’t exactly fared well.

In 1956 Sullivan made a deal with the Metropolitan Opera for five scenes to be performed on five different Sundays for the unheard-of sum of \$100,000. For the first broadcast, on November 25, Sullivan had nabbed the great opera star Maria Callas to make her TV debut with an eighteen-minute segment from *Tosca*. The performance was sublime, but the show’s ratings dropped more than six points during the segment. Although Sullivan would maintain an open-door policy toward classical music, he would never again devote as much airtime to it.

Rock ’n’ roll, on the other hand, was a sure bet. Elvis Presley’s three appearances had been a ratings bonanza, beating by 5 percent the previous record held by a 1954 broadcast that featured Elizabeth Taylor, singer Julius LaRosa, and the Harlem Globetrotters.<sup>5</sup>

Post-Presley, Sullivan booked performers like Jerry Lee Lewis and Gene Vincent—artists who lacked Elvis’s spit-shine polish and willingness to tailor their stage act to suit Sullivan’s puritanical side, yet whose popularity invariably provided a Trendex ratings boost.

By 1963, rock was an integral, and entirely acceptable, part of *The Ed Sullivan Show's* entertainment mix. In fact, Sullivan's tacit approval of rock 'n' roll played a large part in the mainstreaming of the music itself, bringing youth culture into the purview of older viewers and slowly inculcating them to the music's virtues. "Ed had faith in his ability to predict and present what audiences would like," says John Moffatt. "That was his newsman's sense coming into play, and it's what made him effective in keeping up with new things. He never showed any signs that he detested rock, and was always open to new things . . . and taking credit for them."

Sullivan placed a high premium on new talent, and he wasn't afraid to take a chance with an unknown act if he sensed something special. So when Sullivan traveled to London on a talent-scouting trip and was delayed at London's Heathrow Airport by a throng of fans awaiting the arrival of the country's most popular British band, the Beatles, who were coming home after a triumphant European tour, he immediately "made up [his] mind that this was the same sort of mass hit hysteria that had characterized the Elvis Presley days."<sup>6</sup>

In 1963 the Beatles—John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—had already conquered England and much of Europe with two number-one albums, *Please Please Me* and *With the Beatles*, and millions of copies sold of its two biggest hits, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "She Loves You." The band's success had single-handedly galvanized the British music business, transforming it from a sleepy and pallid facsimile of the American pop industry, with its own Elvis soundalikes and quaint skiffle acts, into a business with international reach. Stoked by Fleet Street's spin factory of gossip-hungry reporters, a huge cult of personality had grown around the band.

In America, however, the Beatles were marginalized by a music industry that was culturally protectionist and skeptical of importing something they not only invented, but dominated globally. In late 1963 the band's producer, George Martin, tried to persuade Capitol Records, the American distribution arm of the Beatles' British music company, EMI, to release the band's first three singles, "Please

Please Me,” “She Loves You,” and “From Me to You.” He was turned down. “We don’t think the Beatles will do anything in this market,” wrote Capitol senior executive Jay Livingstone in a rejection letter to Martin.<sup>7</sup> The singles were subsequently released on small independent labels Vee Jay and Swan (the label that Dick Clark co-owned) and barely scraped the lower reaches of *Billboard’s* Hot 100 singles chart.

Still, Brian Epstein, the Beatles’ manager, was determined to break the U.S. market, the biggest record-buying market in the world. It was what he had been grooming the band for since 1962, when he rescued Paul, John, George, and Ringo from the dingy club gigs they were playing, scrubbed them clean, and burnished their appearance until they sparkled. Epstein, whose genteel urbanity masked a brash, bullying perfectionism not unlike Ozzie Nelson’s, had proven with the Beatles that he was as canny a packager of youth culture as Dick Clark. By replacing the band’s leather jackets—that charged symbol of teenage ruffianism—with fitted suits and ties, he had turned the Beatles into an even more user-friendly pop product than Elvis.

For Epstein, an incursion into the U.S. market would mean circumventing the usual outlets and bringing the Beatles straight into American’s living rooms via television. For maximum impact, that only left one option: *The Ed Sullivan Show*. As it turned out, Sullivan had been sufficiently impressed by the Beatles’ reception at Heathrow to arrange a meeting with Epstein in New York in November ’63 to discuss a booking on the show. The Beatles’ appeal to Sullivan was twofold: they were clean-cut pop singers and foreigners to boot, thereby satisfying Sullivan’s jones for international acts.

Despite Sullivan’s reputation as an uncanny diviner of star quality, and his publicly stated belief that the Beatles would top Elvis, he never regarded the band as anything more than another ephemeral pop thrill, and he wanted to book them as a second-billed novelty act. Epstein held firm, however, and insisted they appear as headliners.<sup>8</sup> Surely, Epstein argued, Sullivan had seen the band’s sales figures in the U.K.?<sup>9</sup> Sullivan and producer Bob Precht eventually caved in, with the proviso that the band perform not one but three



times on three different shows. "I figured if we paid the airfare for the band to come over here, we might as well take advantage of it," says Precht.

The final deal called for the band to appear in 1964 on the February 9 and 16 broadcasts, and tape material to be used in a future show. The fee would be \$3,500 per show, with \$3,000 more for the taping—a far cry from Elvis's \$50,000 fee, and, as it turned out, the bargain of the century for Sullivan.<sup>9</sup>

The Sullivan deal was consummated in November 1963. By January '64, the Beatles were no longer unknowns in the States. A local DJ in Washington, D.C., named Carroll James had obtained an import copy of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" in late January and played it. Calls rolled in. So he played it again. And again. "I Want to Hold Your Hand" quickly became the station's most-requested single, and soon other stations in the Northeast and elsewhere added the single to their playlists. Two weeks later the record had vaulted to the number-one spot on *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart. TV personality Jack Paar even got into the act and aired a few performance clips of the band on the January 3 broadcast of his short-lived NBC variety show—thereby scooping the *Sullivan Show* "debut" by a month.

What had at first seemed like a smart, ahead-of-the-curve booking for *The Ed Sullivan Show* had turned into a major coup in a few short months. Sullivan was delighted, but Precht remained cautiously optimistic. "From the outset, we all knew that the Beatles were it, but we didn't know how big they would be," he recalls. "I had a rather jaundiced view of the whole thing, because I felt they were just another act. But we did have a tiger by the tail."

Despite Precht's reservations, the steamrolling hype that accompanied the success of the single and the band's debut album *Meet the Beatles* ensured that the February 9 show would be a newsworthy event akin to the first Elvis appearance. Nicky Byrne, Brian Epstein's merchandising whiz, decamped to New York a few weeks prior to the *Sullivan Show* to whip up a feeding frenzy among licensing companies for the right to manufacture all manner of Beatle ephemera. At Capitol Records, \$50,000 dollars was allocated for a

“crash publicity program.” Five million posters and stickers were printed up with the messianic message “The Beatles Are Coming.” “Be a Beatles Booster” buttons, promo records, and canned interview tapes with blank spaces reserved for DJs’ queries were mass-mailed to radio stations nationwide.<sup>10</sup>

At the *Sullivan Show*, the demand for tickets to the February 9 broadcast was overwhelming—over 50,000 requests for 728 seats. Byrne, however, was hedging his bets. He enlisted the services of local stations WMCA and WINS to announce that every kid who showed up to greet the band at Kennedy Airport would receive a free T-shirt.<sup>11</sup>

As the Beatles embarked for New York on Pan Am Flight 101 on February 7, the hype was ramped up to an absurd degree. “It is now 6:30 A.M., Beatle time,” announced WMCA’s disc jockey. “They left London thirty minutes ago. They’re out over the Atlantic Ocean, headed for New York. The temperature is thirty-two Beatle degrees.” Murray “the K” Kaufman, WINS’ popular DJ, declared himself the Fifth Beatle and spun nothing but Beatles records for hours. Walter Cronkite declared February 7 “B-Day.” Inside the airplane’s main cabin, the band’s enthusiasm was tempered by dark notions of abject failure. “We all did feel a bit sick that first time,” observed Ringo Starr. “We always did, though we never showed it, before anything big. Going to the States was a big step. People said just because we were popular in Britain, why should we be there?”<sup>12</sup>

The shrieking herd that greeted the band at Kennedy Airport laid those fears to rest. Thousands of kids screamed, waved hand-painted signs, offered themselves as supplicants. It became the signal moment in the band’s career—the day they arrived, both literally and figuratively, and crossed the Rubicon into legend. The Beatles’ Kennedy Airport press conference, not the Sullivan debut, was the band’s first important TV photo op in the sense that it established the band members as a sort of tag-team comedy troupe-cum-pop band. Tossing off terse punch lines in response to reporters’ (and a few well-placed Capitol reps’) questions, the Beatles were clearly show-biz naturals who could flash raffish wit, and spoke in the clipped, call-and-response cadence of sitcom characters:

Q: How do you account for your success?

Ringo: We have a press agent.

Q: What is your ambition?

John: To come to America.

Q: Do you hope to get haircuts?

George: I had one yesterday.

Q: Why does your music excite the kids so much?

Paul: We don't know, really.

John: If we did, we'd form another group and be managers.

To a nation still reeling from the Kennedy assassination, the Beatles' avuncular, spoon-fed bonhomie was a salve. They may have been British imports, but they seemed ready-made for American consumption.

The Beatles' Kennedy coronation led all of the evening news broadcasts, except for one. On NBC, veteran anchorman Chet Huntley announced that his station would not be joining the Beatles brigade. "Like a good little news organization, we sent three cameramen out to Kennedy this afternoon to cover the arrival of a group from England, known as the Beatles," he informed his viewers. "However, after surveying the film our men returned with, and the subject of that film, I feel there is absolutely no need to show any of that film."

For the band's appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a striking, modernist set had been constructed inside the studio on Fifty-second Street and Broadway, with six white arrows pointing toward the band's stage platform. The show's set designer, Bill Bohnert, had told a clutch of journalists, who were eager for sound bites from just about anybody associated with the impending broadcast, that he had wanted "to symbolize the fact that the Beatles are *here*."<sup>13</sup>

Fortunately, Brian Epstein approved. More than anyone else in the Beatles camp, Epstein felt the pressure of having to pull off a flawless performance on Sullivan, and he wasn't about to let the smallest production detail slip from his view. What he failed to realize was that Sullivan was the *capo di tutti capi* on his own stage. "I would like to know the exact wording of your introduction," Epstein asked

Sullivan during rehearsals, to which the great man replied, "I would like you to get lost."<sup>14</sup>

So unassailable was Sullivan's power that everyone who performed on the show did things either his way or not at all. At a time when lip-synching on TV was not only acceptable but practically a prerequisite for performers, *The Ed Sullivan Show* insisted that all of its guests perform live. It was one of the show's iron-clad rules, and not even the biggest stars dared breach it. (In 1963 Mary Tyler Moore tried to circumvent the rule by not informing Sullivan of her intention to lip-synch a song-and-dance routine until dress rehearsal. When Sullivan got wind of it, he yanked Moore from the show's lineup just before airtime. Moore took the show to court, and was rewarded with her \$7,500 fee.) "Mostly we were live, and occasionally live to [backing] track, but it wasn't an issue, because we prided ourselves on being live," says Precht. "If someone wanted to come in and lip-synch, it was trouble."

Epstein and the Beatles didn't want to lip-synch, but they demanded final say over the sound mix. TV sound technology still couldn't sufficiently accommodate the high-decibel wattage of an amplified rock band, and the Beatles wanted to ensure that their songs wouldn't turn into mud when heard through the nation's six-inch TV monitors. "Rock was always a mess," says Precht. "It was a very difficult thing to do, and the acoustics in the theater were not the greatest in the world."

Even ten years after Elvis, audio technology was not prepared to handle rock 'n' roll on television. "We used to use a boom mike a lot with singers," says Bob Arthur, the *Ed Sullivan Show's* music coordinator. "It never occurred to anyone to put a mike in front of a performer, or in a performer's hand. And as rock progressed, it got louder and louder. We struggled with ambient noise for years."

Fortunately, the Beatles would be using stand-up mikes, as opposed to a single boom. Epstein also demanded that the band's dress rehearsal be taped (albeit with road manager Neil Aspinall standing in for George Harrison, who was trying to stave off a cold back at the Plaza Hotel) and then evaluated by the band afterward. "No artist had ever been allowed inside the control room before. It

was unprecedented,” says Precht. “They wanted to duplicate the sound of the records, but they mixed their instruments very high and their vocals were buried, and we weren’t accustomed to that.” After a few adjustments, a satisfactory sound mix was achieved during dress rehearsal.

Director Tim Kiley, meanwhile, wanted to ensure that the Beatles’ five segments matched the visceral impact of the music, and utilized every visual trick at the show’s disposal. The usual static, four-camera setup used for the *Sullivan Show*’s other musical acts wouldn’t cut it for the Beatles. Not only did they look great on-camera, but the songs, with their melodic twists and swooping vocal harmonies, demanded something novel. Kiley opted for a five-camera package, with one camera trained on the screaming girls in the balcony, and used lyric sheets as blueprints for camera blocking.

“Tim meticulously laid out a shot list for every segment,” says associate director John Moffatt. “He knew the bar count of each song, so that we would know when an instrumental break happened, when there was a bridge and a chorus, and so on. It gave us a lot of freedom to try different approaches.”

Broadway was teeming with anxious fans on the night of February 9, as a phalanx of New York’s finest tried to look tough and law-abiding in front of kids too young to drink or drive. “It was extraordinary,” Bob Precht recalls. “We expected crowds, but nothing to the level that we

**“I’m ready for my close-up, Mr Kiley”: *The Ed Sullivan Show*.**  
(Michael Ohs Archives.com)



experienced.” Wooden barricades erected in front of Studio 50 looked like they would cave in to a sudden forward thrust of fans at a moment’s notice. “Because of the lunacy of the crowds, someone picked me up bodily and carried me over the police barricades,” recalled Cynthia Lennon. “It was getting quite dangerous.”<sup>15</sup> Somehow order was maintained as the audience filed into Studio 50. As was standard practice when rock acts appeared on the show, Sullivan segregated the crowd to preserve some semblance of family-hour decorum—kids in the balcony, older people down in front.

Backstage, the band mingled with the evening’s other performers. “We were sitting in our dressing room where the Coke machine was, and this cute little English gentleman says ‘buy us a Coke, luv,’” recalls Mitzi McCall, who, as one half of the husband-and-wife comedy team McCall and Brill, was scheduled to perform after the Beatles’ second segment. “It turned out to be John Lennon, and he was so darling and sweet. We looked out the window, and I asked him, ‘Can you believe this is all for you?’ and he says, ‘It’s not for me, it’s for Ringo.’”

Shortly after the crowd was corralled into the theater, the lights dimmed and MC George Fenniman introduced Sullivan, who emerged from the parted curtains to a more raucous reception than usual. After running down the list of the evening’s performers, which included impressionist Frank Gorshin, British music-hall chanteuse Tessie O’Shea, and actress Georgia Brown and the cast of *Oliver!*, America’s host mentioned that Elvis and Colonel Tom Parker had sent a telegram wishing the Beatles “tremendous success in our country,” then launched into his canned spiel: “Yesterday and today our theater’s been jammed with newspaper people and hundreds of photographers from all over the nation, and those veterans agree with me that the city has never witnessed the excitement stirred by these youngsters from Liverpool who call themselves the Beatles. Now tonight you’re gonna twice be entertained by them, now and again in the second half of our show. Ladies and gentleman, the Beatles, let’s bring ‘em on!”

The inevitable shrieks swelled into a cacophony. The first camera shot of the band is vertiginously high, then slowly cranes down

toward the band, who are clad in matching dark suits, thin ties, and Italian leather boots. Paul McCartney provides a quick four-count, and the Beatles swing into “All My Loving.” And just like that, the production crew’s best-laid plans collapsed under the weight of the crowd’s deafening screams. “The crowd is screeching, just screaming at the top of their lungs,” recalls Bob Arthur. “They were beside themselves. I remember Ed trying to hush the crowd before the Beatles came on, but it was just no use.”

“In those days, we all used these little Mickey Mouse radio headsets with no padding, not like the thick headsets they have now,” says Moffatt. “The screams were so high, none of the cameramen could hear Tim’s direction.”

So meticulous was Kiley’s shot list, however, that all five cameramen hit their marks despite not being able to hear Kiley (for future rock guests, the crew would borrow headphones from the network’s sports department). The segment is visually sharp, the camera edits keenly in synch with each chord change and lyric. Curiously, despite Precht’s fears about the instruments overwhelming the vocals, it appears to be the other way around.

The song ends, there’s a quick bow, then another song, “Til There Was You,” a ballad from the Meredith Wilson Broadway show *The Music Man*—and a perfect concession to Sullivan’s conservative older viewers. During this segment, Kiley subtitles each band member’s first name under his respective close-up, with John getting the requisite fan-mag disclaimer: “Sorry Girls, He’s Married.” There’s also an unintentionally lascivious cutaway to two screaming girls in the audience lolling their tongues in a manner that surely confirmed the worst fears of every disapproving parent who tuned in that night.

After the band’s third number, “She Loves You,” Sullivan tries to calm the crowd. “Now, you promised,” he pleads, like a grandfather who’s been left to baby-sit his unruly nieces. Then, in a bit of typically cryptic Sullivan-speak, the host informs his audience that “those first three songs were dedicated to Johnny Carson, [Jack Paar’s daughter] Randy Paar, and Earl Wilson.” Despite Sullivan’s game attempt at crowd control, they’re still audibly buzzing as he goes to commercial.

In booking the Beatles, Sullivan and Precht had made one crucial

miscalculation: instead of blending into the performance mix, as even the most buzz-worthy Sullivan guests (Elvis included) always did, they set the tone for the entire show. Which meant that the evening's other acts, who initially might have surmised that the show-biz gods had smiled upon them, wound up being upstaged. Instead of gaining crucial exposure, their big Sullivan moments backfired. It was one of the 1960s' first televised instances of the generation gap at work: conventional show-biz performers plying their trade to a younger audience that couldn't have cared less.

"If the audience came to see a rock 'n' roll act, all the comics had problems with the crowd, especially the old-time comics," says Bob Arthur. "Borscht-belt material just didn't go over well with young kids. It could be pretty rough on a stand-up act. Teenagers were tough audiences. They came to see one thing, and everyone else was out in the cold."

None of the evening's acts felt the sting of the crowd's contempt the night the Beatles performed more than McCall and Brill. A twenty-something married comedy team who had killed on the nightclub circuit, Mitzi McCall and Charlie Brill specialized in tragicomic

set pieces that combined shtick with a verbal sophistication reminiscent of the era's most popular male-female comedy act, Mike Nichols and Elaine May. For Sullivan, however, their act was just a little too sophisticated for his viewers. An hour prior to air-time, he made them scrap their intended sketch, a poignant skit about growing old, in favor of something a bit more accessible. "In retrospect, we should have said, 'Thank you, Mr. Sullivan,

**"It was the worst disaster of our lives": Charlie Brill and Mitzi McCall.**  
(Courtesy Charlie Brill)





and we hope we can do your show again some other time,” says Mitzi McCall. “But this was our big break.” The new sketch, which resorted to that old comedic standby, the producer’s audition, barely registered a guffaw with the Beatle-mad crowd. “We just did it by rote,” says McCall. “I was terrified.” McCall and Brill had committed the unthinkable: they had bombed on *Sullivan*. Suddenly, their club bookings started dwindling, and a once-promising career came to a standstill. Says McCall, “It was the biggest disaster of our lives.”

A week later, still reeling from the Sullivan debacle and trying to unwind in Miami Beach with Frank Gorshin, McCall and Brill were accosted on the street by four men in a stretch limousine. “The window comes down like a stealth bomber, and it was the Beatles,” says McCall. “We told them, ‘Get the fuck out of here, leave us alone, we hate you!’”

The show, which also featured the band singing “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “I Saw Her Standing There,” was greeted with the inevitable quasi-sociological hand-wringing and stodgy paternalism by critics. The *New York Times* TV critic Jack Gould wrote that the band “hardly did for daughter what Elvis Presley did for her older sister or Frank Sinatra for mother.” Branding them “conservative conformists” with haircuts similar to Captain Kangaroo’s, Gould wrote off their performance as little more than a “fine mass placebo.”<sup>16</sup>

It was a sentiment not shared by many kids in America. The February 9 show was, in Sullivan’s words, a “record-buster”: over 70 million viewers tuned in, making it the highest-rated TV show ever at that time. Paul McCartney remembers hearing someone mention the potentially huge tuned-in audience backstage before their second set, to which he replied, “‘No, shhh, tell us afterwards.’ It was a bit scary.”<sup>17</sup>

The next week, the Beatles were in Miami—“limp from adulation,” according to the *New York Times*<sup>18</sup>—to tape their second appearance on the *Sullivan Show* (actually, their third: the band had taped an appearance in New York for the February 23 broadcast). The show, which was to be broadcast from the tony Deauville Hotel—a gaudy resort that favored lots of gilding and powder-blue decor—attracted a fresh southeastern horde of underage lunatics,

who clogged the corridors and gave headaches to the blue-rinse retirees and vacationing families more typical of the hotel's clientele.

"I went down with associate producer Jack McGeehan a week before to try and convey to [the city] the gravity of the situation," says John Moffatt. "They had this big southern police chief who told us he had everything under control, and don't you worry about a thing. Well, they had hundreds of girls ringing every hotel room in the place, trying to find the Beatles."

Just prior to show time, the Beatles found themselves unable to get across the lobby to the hotel's Mau Mau Room, where the show was being broadcast. "Ed introduced them once, and they weren't there, so we had to go to commercial," says Moffatt. "Eventually, the cops made a flying wedge, which enabled the band to run up onstage just before the end of the break."

The Deauville stage was smaller than Studio 50's, which made Kiley's *mise-en-scène* more cramped than the previous week's. The Beatles, wearing gray suits with black lapels and black ties, started off their first segment with a spirited "She Loves You," but this time the squeal factor was practically negligible. All the kids that blocked the Beatles' entry remained outside; this Sullivan crowd was strictly Miami, with lots of gray-hairs and families responding to all of the evening's acts in a kind of post-sunbathing torpor. When Kiley cuts to his first audience reaction shot, he doesn't get tongue-flicking teens but a lone little girl, politely watching the Beatles as if attending an elementary-school assembly.

Whereas the Beatles were flawlessly decorous on the first broadcast, this time a sly self-consciousness is apparent. The band occasionally exchanges knowing, furtive glances during songs; Lennon yelps without provocation during McCartney's between-song patter, and even appears to flip a furtive bird before the final chorus of "All My Loving." This was hardly a perfectly orchestrated photo op—the room's stifling humidity lacquered a thin veneer of perspiration on the band's faces before the first segment was complete.

There were technical flaws, as well: the harsh lights constantly bled into Kiley's low camera angles, and the mike stands were chest-high when the Beatles came out for their second set. No matter—the



Rehearsing in Miami for *The Ed Sullivan Show*. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

show, which also featured actress Mitzi Gaynor, borscht-belt comic Myron Cohen, and the comedy duo Allen and Rossi, scored an even higher Trendex rating than the first broadcast, with 75 million viewers tuning in.<sup>19</sup> “Of course, Ed was thrilled,” says John Moffatt. “There was nothing hostile or frightening about them. He loved them.” So much so that he was willing to pay them \$75,000 for a one-off performance a year later, on September 12, 1965—the last *Ed Sullivan Show* to be broadcast in black and white.

This was a far more ambitious undertaking than the '64 broadcasts. Bill Bohnert had designed two different sets for the band's two segments: a strikingly modernist tableau reminiscent of a Louise Nevelson sculpture, with three cubist panels framing the proscenium, and a quasi-crash pad set, with giant cutouts of the band's disembodied heads suspended from the ceiling. For a whimsical touch, Kiley also shot the four band members' grinning profiles during dress rehearsal, then superimposed them over the band during the intro to “Ticket to Ride.”

The foursome, who had by this time achieved global megastar status, sported shaggier haircuts and a looser attitude than the year before. It was their prerogative, after all: they were bigger stars than



*The Ed Sullivan Show, 1965. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)*

Sullivan now. The great man himself had even referred to the broadcast as “tonight’s Beatles show.” There were numerous gaffes, the worst being Lennon’s mangling of the second verse of “I Help” and Ringo’s horrid vocal take on “Act Naturally.” Allen and Rossi shared the bill again, but this time their routine was laced with Beatles references; the duo climaxed their routine with Marty Allen donning a Beatles wig and frugging to something that went “We Love You and We Wanna Hold Your Hand.” Sullivan, for his part, made no bones about his claim to the Fifth Beatle title, and appeared in a Beatle wig on the June 1965 cover of *Esquire* magazine.

When the Beatles retired from live performance with a final show at San Francisco’s Candlestick Park on August 29, 1966, it also signaled a retrenchment from the media saturation campaign that had stoked their fame until then. They didn’t need to do much of anything at this point, really; their records invariably went to number one without any press. Instead, they picked their spots, and reserved

TV appearances for those occasions they determined were worthy of something special. That usually meant making a short film to accompany a single that wasn't initially supported by a formal album, such as the film for the 1967 double-sided single "Strawberry Fields Forever/Penny Lane," and their performance of "Hey Jude" on *The David Frost Show* in August 1968, a clip that was shown in America on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*.\*

On June 25, 1967, the Beatles, flush from the triumph of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, participated in a global telecast that provided the ultimate promo plug for their latest single. When the Beatles agreed to appear on a special called *Our World*, a show that was designed to spread love vibes throughout the globe, they decided to write an original composition for the occasion. Thus, John came up with "All You Need Is Love" days before the scheduled broadcast. After running through 57 takes in the studio to lay down a basic rhythm track, the Beatles arrived at the BBC studios on June 25 with a clutch of acolytes, among them Eric Clapton, Keith Moon, Graham Nash, and The Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Surrounded by balloons and placards that spelled out "Love Is All You Need" in English, French, German, and Spanish, the Beatles introduced "All You Need Is Love" to 350 million viewers and watched the single jump to number one on *Billboard's* singles chart.

There was also *Magical Mystery Tour*, a made-for-TV film that Paul McCartney had conceived as a kind of psychedelic road trip, whereby the four Beatles would embark on a totally unscripted jaunt through the British countryside in a chartered bus full of midgets, fat ladies, hired actors, and whoever else the band might want to tag along. The shooting of *Magical Mystery Tour* was a comedy of errors; despite strenuous attempts at anonymity, sightseers stalked them wherever they journeyed, and none of the spontaneous scenarios quite panned out the way McCartney had originally envisioned. The film was sold to BBC-1, and shown on December 26, 1967, the

\* "Strawberry Fields Forever/Penny Lane" was released on February 17, 1967, and was featured on the *Magical Mystery Tour* album, which was released in December 1967. "Hey Jude" was released August 30, 1968, and appeared on the album *Hey Jude/The Beatles Again*, released in August 1970.

British holiday Boxing Day. What 15 million Britons witnessed that night was an incoherent cinematic bus wreck—part sub-Godard polemic, part acid-addled nature film, part Busby Berkeley musical. *Time* magazine summed it up: “Paul directed, Ringo mugged, John did imitations, George danced a bit, and, when the show hit the BBC last week, the audience gagged.”<sup>20</sup>

*Magical Mystery Tour* left a sour taste in the mouths of even the most ardent Beatles fans. American television didn't even bother to air it. It was the first time the Beatles had fallen from grace; the film, according to their biographer Phillip Norman, signified “the loss of their divinity.”<sup>21</sup> There would be no more television experiments forthcoming from any Beatle until 1973, three years after the band's breakup, when Paul McCartney produced a TV special, *James Paul McCartney*, to promote his album with Wings, *Red Rose Speedway*. Four years later, Ringo produced a self-titled special, *Ringo*. Both shows were Hollywood hack jobs—self-indulgent ego-strokes replete with bad production numbers, canned performances, and gratuitous celebrity cameos.

Aside from a few well-publicized talk-show appearances, such as John Lennon and Yoko Ono's co-hosting gig on *The Mike Douglas Show* in 1972, no TV work was forthcoming from any Beatle until 1995, when the three surviving members of the band came together again to produce the mother of all rockumentaries. For years, Apple Corp. President and ex-road manager Neil Aspinall had wanted to produce a documentary about the Beatles using the mounds of archival footage that he had been compiling since 1969. “In '69, in all the chaos, the traumas—things were falling apart but they were still making *Abbey Road*—Paul called me saying, ‘you should collect as much of the material that's out there, get it together before it disappears,’ recalled Aspinall.<sup>22</sup> The fledgling filmmaker started to compile a film called *The Long and Winding Road* in 1970, but then the Beatles broke up, and the film languished.

It took the Beatles nearly twenty years to work through all the legal entanglements and logistical loopholes, but in 1989 Aspinall finally went to work again on the documentary, which was now called *The Beatles Anthology*. The project took close to six years to

produce; Aspinall and writer-director Bob Smeaton interviewed surviving Beatles Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and a reluctant George Harrison (“George wasn’t really into it,” remembers Smeaton. “He was sick of the Beatles anyway”<sup>23</sup>), while Apple Corp. archivist Nell Burley pored through thousands of photographs and thousands of feet of newsreel and home movie footage. Three two-volume CDs of outtakes were compiled by Beatles producer George Martin, to be released after the *Anthology* was broadcast. The final documentary had a running time of ten hours. Aspinall shopped it to all three U.S. networks, with ABC president and Beatles fanatic Bob Iger snapping up the rights for \$20 million—a huge investment for a documentary series, even if it did feature the most famous musicians on the planet.

ABC positioned *The Beatles Anthology* smack in the heart of their big November ratings sweeps period in 1995, with three two-hour segments over three nights—November 19, 22, and 23 (ABC cut four hours for broadcast, although the home video version contains all ten hours). Whatever doubts that ABC might have had about attracting the eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-old demographic (ABC Entertainment president Ted Harbert conceded that it would be a “challenge” to get younger viewers to “realize why this is a big important event”<sup>24</sup>) were more than offset by the \$30 million that advertisers shelled out to appear on the program.

ABC hyped *The Beatles Anthology* to within an inch of its life. In New York’s Times Square, Sony’s giant “Jumbotron” billboard blared out snippets of Beatles tunes and a steady stream of ads for the show. The press slathered Beatle gush all over magazines, newspapers, and television. A big deal was made about the two “new” Beatles songs recorded expressly for the *Anthology*, in which the late John Lennon’s vocal tracks were lifted from old demos for two songs called “Free as a Bird” and “Real Love” and then overlaid with vocals and musical accompaniment from the “Threetles,” as *Life* magazine dubbed them. The two songs were then used as “teasers” to be premiered at the end of the first two episodes.

It was all a bit too much. A backlash set in even before the first part of the *Anthology* was aired. “What are the expectations on the

part of the audience?” Bob Iger mused, “*Gone With the Wind* meets *A Hard Day’s Night*?”<sup>25</sup> Weren’t, some wags proclaimed, the Beatles just cashing in on their fans’ cherished memories in order to swell their already fat bank accounts? “There’s two ways of looking at it,” observed Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards at the time. “One is: How sick, making money off John. The other is: It’s the Beatles. If they feel happy doing it, why shouldn’t they do it?”<sup>26</sup>

Why not, indeed? *The Beatles Anthology*, despite its epic length, was nothing if not compelling—alternatively self-aggrandizing, heart-string tweaking, and mind-numbingly boring. Bob Smeaton gave the *Anthology* the full Ken Burns treatment—lots of long, languid pans across countless archival photos and somber, reflective interviews with the three surviving members. The interviews provided little that was illuminating or revelatory (McCartney on the Beatles’ trip to Miami to tape *The Ed Sullivan Show*: “We had never been to anywhere where there was palm trees”), and much of it was insultingly portentous, as when McCartney seems to equate the Beatles’ first *Sullivan Show* appearance as a great historical moment right up there with the Kennedy assassination. Despite its air of mirthlessness and puffed-up import, *The Beatles Anthology* was a ratings hit. Over 50 million viewers tuned in on average, giving ABC a much-needed sweeps victory and providing millions of fans with the Beatles reunion they had longed for but assumed would never come.

*The Beatles Anthology* does a good job of reinforcing the band’s mythology; *All You Need Is Cash* does the best job of debunking it. The show, which aired on NBC in 1978, had its origins in a British satire program called *Rutland Weekly TV*. One of the show’s writers and producers was Eric Idle, a founding member of British comedy troupe Monty Python’s Flying Circus. Idle wanted to create a parody of *A Hard Day’s Night* for the show and contacted his friend Neil Innes, a humorist and musician who had been one of the founding members of British comedy-music group the Bonzo Dog Band (whose song “I’m the Urban Spaceman” was produced by Paul McCartney). Together they conceived of a Beatles facsimile called the Rutles—Ron Nasty, Dirk McQuickly, Stig O’Hara, and Barry Wom—cast studio musician Ricky Fataar and actor John Halsey to



join Innes and Idle in the “prefab four” and produced a short film for *Rutland Weekly TV*.

A few weeks later, in the winter of 1976, Idle was asked to host NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*—a nice bit of timing for the Rutles, considering that a handful of concert promoters at the time were offering huge sums to have the real Beatles reunite for a one-shot concert. SNL had even joined the fray when the show’s producer Lorne Michaels offered to give the Fab Four \$3,000 to appear on the show. Idle trumped Michael’s lowball bid by offering to get the Beatles on the show for a gaudy \$300. “And so in fact he couldn’t,” recalls Innes, “but in fact what he got was the Rutles, and so they showed the Rutles instead on *Saturday Night Live*.”<sup>27</sup>

Viewer response to the Rutles was so overwhelming that NBC agreed to finance a two-hour special based on the faux band. Written by Idle and produced by Lorne Michaels, with music by Innes, *The Rutles in All You Need Is Cash* is a gleeful flogging of the Beatles legend. It is, quite simply, the *Citizen Kane* of mock rockumentaries. Idle and Innes subvert this most familiar of rock ‘n’ roll narratives with uncanny song parodies like “Hold My Hand” and “Cheese and Onions,” movie clips from “A Hard Day’s Rut” and “Ouch!” that brilliantly replicate the self-consciously madcap style of the two live-action Beatle films, and a fake Pathé newsreel clip that packs all of the sill madness of “Rutlemania.” With cameo appearances by George Harrison and SNL members Bill Murray (as Bill Murray the K), John Belushi, and Gilda Radner, and eyewitness accounts from Mick Jagger and Paul Simon, *All You Need Is Cash* remains a high-water mark for TV satire. Would that the Beatles had as much irreverent fun recounting their own history in the *Anthology*.

## Do the Demographic Rock

### THE MONKEES

*I don't see much of a future for the Monkees. I can't see a synthetic talent lasting.*

—BEATLES MANAGER BRIAN EPSTEIN, 1966

The Beatles' American TV blitz took pop music to charm school. Eight years after Elvis had made rock safe for TV, the Fab Four had suddenly reclaimed old-school show-biz shtick for pop performers; their sharp-witted sparring and droll japes were a far cry from Presley's raw, inarticulate bumpkin appeal. It was no longer good enough to hold oneself at a cool remove from the typical mainstream viewer that tuned in to *The Ed Sullivan Show* and "white-shoe" variety shows like *Hollywood Palace*; artists now had to hitch themselves to a pleasing personality hook, something as instantly recognizable as a great guitar riff.

No one understood this better than Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson. In 1969 the pair would revolutionize the movie industry by producing *Easy Rider*, but in 1965 they were just bored, restless, and armed with the financial resources to do something about it. Schneider, the son of Columbia Pictures president Abe Schneider, had worked his way through the ranks of Columbia's TV arm Screen Gems with a healthy nepotism headwind at his back, until he was running Screen Gems by himself. But he was hardly another compliant company man. Obsessed with the counterculture that was begin-



**Don Kirshner (r) presents a gold record to the Monkees. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

ning to seep slowly into Hollywood entertainment. Schneider was looking to make TV shows that reflected the era's anarchic, free-wheeling zeitgeist. "Bert was very radical," recalls ex-Monkee Micky Dolenz. "He was very anti-Vietnam, and engaged in protests, that type of thing."

An aspiring director, Bob Rafelson came from a wealthy New York family and carried himself with an arrogant sense of entitlement. A cousin of screenwriter Samson Rafelson, Bob Rafelson was raised on Manhattan's Riverside Drive, an upper-middle-class enclave generally populated by bookish Jewish intellectuals. After graduating from Dartmouth, Rafelson got a job writing dialogue for

teleplays at Channel 13 in New York. He then moved to Hollywood in 1964 to pursue a career in the movie business, winding up with a job as a producer on the ABC college drama *Channing*.

Rafelson and Schneider were bonded by a mutual desire to shake up the existing Hollywood power structure, or at least make the old guard take notice. The ultimate goal was innovative movies, but for now, with Schneider's connections at Columbia, the duo would settle for the chance to give TV Nation a healthy jolt. In 1965 Schneider quit Screen Gems to form a production company with Rafelson, Raybert. "Bob and Bert were very young to be producers," says Micky Dolenz. "They wore jeans and T-shirts, not like your usual producers at that time. Clearly, they were part of the scene, and not looking at it from the outside. They were huge Beatles fans."

They also admired the way the Beatles had arrived at a powerful synergy by marketing music via their own cult of personality. Rafelson had a notion: What if he and Schneider created an American facsimile of the Beatles from whole cloth, and packaged it as a TV show? With nothing but that idea to work with, Rafelson and Schneider hired comedy writers Paul Mazursky and Larry Tucker to help them flesh it out. The young writing team were already TV veterans, having shilled for CBS's *The Danny Kaye Show*, but this was something else altogether; a sitcom that would appeal to mainstream audiences while at the same time jarring the expectations of those very same viewers.

For Rafelson and Schneider, the objective was simple: create a made-for-TV Beatles, four disparate yet cuddly characters that combined whipsaw wit, pinup appeal, and, if all went according to plan, vigorous record sales. At first the team tossed around the idea of using an existing band like British quintet Herman's Hermits, but Rafelson and Schneider insisted on total financial and creative control, and they could only get that by building their own band from the ground up. The partners may have fashioned themselves as Hollywood radicals, but their faux-pop group concept was born of the same cynical mindset that spawned such self-consciously "wacky" high-concept sitcoms of the era as *The Flying Nun*, *Green Acres*, and *Gilligan's Island*. Rafelson and Schneider had no interest in replicat-

ing TV's stodgy sitcom formula, however, in which the yucks were ladled out evenly and the direction adhered to the standard close-up/medium shot template. Raybert would get into the TV business on its own terms, or not at all.

Mazursky and Tucker eventually came up with a concept for a show called *The Turtles*, but aside from the obvious problem—there was already a real band with that name—the slothful imagery conjured up by the name wasn't exactly what Raybert had in mind. The writing team eventually came up with *The Monkees*—a goofy homage to the Beatles' animal-derived moniker. Now all they needed was a band. (After the show became a hit and merchandising profits started rolling in, Rafelson and Schneider claimed to be the sole owners of the Monkees trademark; Mazursky and Tucker took their case to Writers' Guild arbitration and won).

The casting objective was as time-tested as any in television: hire actors that could appeal to the widest possible demographic swath of viewers. "To succeed on network television, you had to attract at least thirty percent of the audience," recalled *Monkees* associate producer Ward Sylvester. "The thought was that our group had to be demographically diverse. You can't have four guys who are all the same."<sup>1</sup>

Mazursky, Tucker, Schneider, and Rafelson eventually came up with four prototypes: a country-western singer with a homespun demeanor; an English lad to make the Beatles connection explicit; a prankster; and a reserved yet irrepressible introvert. Observed Sylvester, "You hope 25 percent of the audience would choose each of the guys."<sup>2</sup>

Rafelson and Schneider took out a casting-call ad in *Daily Variety*: "Folk and Rock Musicians-Singers for Acting roles in a New TV Series. Running parts for four insane boys, age 17-21." Over four hundred hopefuls, many of them struggling musicians with guitars slung over their shoulders, showed up. Almost 80 percent of the prospects were either considered "too old" or a bad fit for the show. Among the rejects: guitarist Bryan MacLean from the L.A. psych-pop band Love, eventual Three Dog Night member Danny Hutton, and a future godfather of L.A.'s folk-rock scene, Stephen Stills.

"I sang and hung out for a while," Stills recalled years later. "I said

‘basically, I’m not that interested in the show, but mainly I want to write the songs because that’s where the moola is.’ And then I said, ‘listen, I know another guy that’s a lot like me and he’s probably a little brighter and quicker and funnier.’ That’s when I suggested Peter Tork.”<sup>3</sup>

The Raybert team eventually hired Tork (aka Peter Thorkleson), a singer-songwriter who had been toiling around the Greenwich folk scene in New York; Briton Davy Jones, a former jockey and child actor who, in a nice bit of harmonic convergence, had appeared with the cast of *Oliver!* as the Artful Dodger on the night the Beatles performed for the first time on *The Ed Sullivan Show*; Micky Dolenz, another child actor who had starred in the short-lived NBC kiddie western *Circus Boy* in the late 1950s under the pseudonym Mickey Braddock; and singer-songwriter Michael Nesmith, whose mother had invented the correcting fluid Liquid Paper.

Schneider and Rafelson had cobbled together their band; now they had to program them to behave like the loony, devil-may-care miscreants they had originally envisioned. To that end, they hired director James Frawley, an alumnus of the Premise comedy troupe (which also included Buck Henry and George Segal), to be their drama coach.

“I had studied with Stanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, and I had also been an avant-garde filmmaker, so Bob and Bert thought it would be a good idea for me to work with the boys,” says Frawley. “Basically, I came up with some theater games to discover who the characters were. I was very improv with my approach. We sort of made



**Davy Jones, Mike Nesmith, and Micky Dolenz recording in the studio. (Photo: Henry Diltz)**

it up as we went along.” Frawley led the Monkees through a six-week, preproduction improv intensive, where the foursome learned how to ad-lib and riff extemporaneously like seasoned Vegas stand-ups. By the time shooting began on Columbia’s Burbank lot, the four actors were ready for just about anything. “Bert and Bob wanted to get that sense of anarchy into the show, and James brought us all up to speed on the improv end,” says Micky Dolenz. “It very quickly became apparent that the show wasn’t gonna be produced and directed like a conservative sitcom.”

For the visual template of the show, Rafelson and Schneider looked to British commercials, with their rapid-fire pacing and arch visual allusions, for inspiration. It wasn’t lost on the producers that Richard Lester, who had been hired by the Beatles to direct *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!* and gave those films their distinctive screwball flavor, had been one of England’s top commercial directors. “Rafelson and Schneider didn’t want to use regular TV directors for the show,” says Bruce Kessler, who was hired to direct on the basis of a low-budget underground film he had made called *The Sound of Speed*. “They wanted different looks, stuff that no one had ever seen on television before.”

Given Schneider and Rafelson’s bold plan, it’s a wonder NBC ever consented to give them the green light. Columbia, too, at the time one of Hollywood’s most hidebound studios, had doubts. Columbia’s top brass had begun to have second thoughts about airing the show, particularly after Raybert cast four seriously scraggly actors for the leads. “In those days, having long hair was still considered a crime against nature,” says Dolenz. “It was synonymous with a commie-pinko-fag kinda thing, and NBC was like, ‘Holy shit, we don’t know about this.’ I guess it would be like the equivalent of having Tupac Shakur on a sitcom today. Standards and Practices were scared to death of it.”

Hard to believe, considering how innocuous and social-agenda-free the scripts turned out to be. “The material was not that complicated,” says Frawley. “I mean, we’re not talking about deeply complex psychological motivation here. We just tried to keep a Marx Brothers kind of pace going. I was a big fan of Preston Sturges and

Frank Capra films, and I tried to put some of that into the show.” Certainly Kellogg’s, one of the Monkees’ two primary sponsors, had no problem with it, and hired the band to shill Rice Krispies in commercials that replicated the irreverent tone of the show.

If anything, NBC should have been more concerned about the show’s disjunctive narrative technique, which *was* radical for network television at that time. While American film was about to be upended by a new generation of mavericks intent on rewriting the rules of cinema’s narrative and visual vocabulary, television was still stuck in a rut of bad cop shows, tepid variety fare, and banal family sitcoms. It was Schneider and Rafelson’s intention to infuse American network television with a jolt of the formal experimentation that could be found in films like Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blowup* and John Schlesinger’s *Darling*.

The pilot, which was shot by commercial director Mike Elliot, is a visual bricolage of styles, as if the producers were dead set on using every available technique not being used elsewhere. Spoken dialogue is interspersed with silent film placards; action sequences are shot in fast motion; scenes leapfrog over one another in a seemingly arbitrary pattern. The Monkees are constantly breaking through the “fourth wall”—addressing the audience directly—an old Marx Brothers trick. There are snap set changes, as when a corporate boardroom turns into an Old West saloon at a moment’s notice. Mazursky and Tucker also wrote stand-alone blackout sketches, squeezed in between some scenes, that did nothing to move the plot forward—it was just vaudeville hokum for kids weaned on *The Flintstones* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*.

“We were so undisciplined compared to the way TV shows were normally shot,” says Bruce Kessler. “Anything that looked good to us, we did. We stole a shot from the *Ironhorse* set one time, we would shoot stuff on the streets without the proper permits. We would just make it up as we went along.” Adds James Frawley, who became the show’s primary director, “We had to shoot forty to fifty setups a day, so we worked very quickly. It was more important to get a lot of different angles, so we had editorial options.”

Although the scripts employed many of the same shopworn story



lines that had been recycled countless times by other shows (Monkees have to stay in a haunted house overnight, Monkees have to save a cute girl from a villain's evil clutches, and so on), much of what made the final cut of each episode was strictly impromptu. James Frawley encouraged ad-libs, and frequently cobbled together sequences from outtakes.

"I know more often than not they used the outtakes, then the editor, Jerry Shepard, would do a marvelous job of putting it all together with little links," says Dolenz. "They would shoot everything, even us coming onto the set, just to make sure they didn't miss anything. They would keep us off the set, then bring us on at the last minute and kind of hold their ears, ya know? 'Cause it got very combustible pretty quickly."

A lot of the show's manic capriciousness was fueled by Raybert-sanctioned drug consumption. The producers built a windowless rumpus room for the Monkees on the lot that Dolenz dubbed the "Frodis Room," a place where the band could get high and court lovely extras. "They smoked a lot and were not discouraged from doing so, 'cause the producers wanted them to ad-lib and be zany," says photographer Henry Diltz. "First thing in the morning, Micky and I would go up to the catwalk and smoke a joint. Then, Mike would say, 'Hey, you wanna get high?' Then I'd run into Peter, and he'd be like, 'I've got a good chunk of hash, we could get a safety pin from wardrobe and smoke it.'"

"There was a lot of pot smoking, a lot of girls around," recalls songwriter Bobby Hart, who, along with his partner Tommy Boyce, wrote numerous songs for the Monkees. "It was really party time. They were kind of rebels on the lot."

The happy accident of *The Monkees* was that Dolenz, Jones, Tork, and Nesmith wound up having genuine chemistry on-screen. The made-for-TV conceit that Schneider and Rafelson had contrived worked better than even they could have imagined. Critics loved it. The *New York Times*' Jack Gould, no fan of rock 'n' roll, wrote that the "Monkees are to be welcomed for joining the pursuit of chuckles rather than orgiastic studio squeals," and praised Frawley (who won an Emmy Award for his direction) for his "often quite funny" directo-

rial touch.<sup>4</sup> “Bright, unaffected, and zany,” wrote *Time* magazine. “It romps around haunted houses and toy factories with no intention of making things all add up.”<sup>5</sup> The avant-pop aesthetic that the *Monkees*’ brain trust had cooked up was resonating with even the most staid guardians of mainstream culture.

For all of its formalist razzle-dazzle, *The Monkees*’ first season in 1966 didn’t exactly shake up TV’s old guard. Slotted opposite ABC’s *Ironhorse* and CBS’s *Gilligan’s Island* on Monday nights at 7:30, *The Monkees* frequently wound up in the middle of the Nielsen weekly ratings, and finished the season with a solid 31.4 share. But it didn’t have to attract a huge portion of the TV viewing audience to be a financial success. If enough kids tuned in, Schneider and Rafelson could cash in. And what better way to cash in than with *Monkees* records?

All of the band’s recordings were distributed through Screen Gems’ in-house label Colgems, an imprint that had been spun off of Nevins-Kirshner Music, an enormously successful publishing and recording company that Schneider had purchased for Screen Gems in 1965. It turned out to be a crucial acquisition: Don Kirshner, the company’s co-owner, had already built a reputation as one of the record industry’s top music publishers and talent spotters.

A native of Washington Heights, New York, Kirshner and his partner Al Nevins, a former guitarist for 1950s singing group the Three Suns, had amassed a fortune by representing a stable of songwriters who, while toiling away in New York’s pop music citadel the Brill Building, had produced some of the most sophisticated and enduring pop of the decade. Kirshner and Nevins named their company Aldon, and among their clients were the songwriting teams Carole King and Gerry Goffin (“Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?” “Take Good Care of My Baby,” “The Loco-Motion”), Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil (“On Broadway,” “Kicks,” “We Gotta Get Out of This Place”), and Howie Greenfield and Neil Sedaka (“Stupid Cupid,” “Frankie”), as well as Neil Diamond and Bobby Darin, whom Kirshner had discovered when Darin, whose real name was Walden Robert Cassotto, was cleaning latrines in New York.

A canny spotter of hit-worthy material with a stunning stable of



What, me worry? Davy Jones greets his loyal subjects, 1967. (Photo: Henry Diltz)

talent at his disposal, Kirshner was the logical choice to supply *The Monkees* with the top-shelf material it needed to go over the top commercially.<sup>6</sup> But Kirshner was based in New York and was afraid of flying, which meant that his role as music supervisor on *The Monkees* had to be carried out by proxy through Lester Sill, Kirshner's point man in Los Angeles. Assigned to scout young (and exploitable) songwriting talent for the Monkees, Sill hired the songwriting team of Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart. The duo had already scored a few top-ten hits, such as Little Anthony and the Imperials' "Hurt So Bad" and Jay and the Americans' "Come a Little Bit Closer," and Boyce had a little TV experience with the theme song for Dick Clark's show *Where the Action Is*.

Boyce and Hart's mission was simple: "American Beatles," says Bobby Hart. "We put just enough that was familiar, and a little English, in the songs." Case in point: The bands first number-one Boyce-Hart hit, "Last Train to Clarksville," which was inspired from the fade-out from the Beatles' "Paperback Writer." Hart remembers the Monkees' first recording sessions as futile, time-chewing affairs. "We talked with them for a while to break the ice, then set them up

in front of a mike,” says Hart. “We look out from the control booth, and there’s no one singing. Everybody was on the floor in a dog pile. We tried that three times before we got anything. The boys were a little rowdy in the beginning.”

“Last Train to Clarksville” and “(Theme from) The Monkees,” as well as material from Aldon clients Goffin & King, David Gates, and Jack Keller, were featured on the band’s debut *The Monkees*, an album that wound up spending thirteen weeks in the number-one position on *Billboard’s* Top 200 album chart. The band’s second album, *More of the Monkees*, spent eighteen weeks at number one. It was an unprecedented achievement for a rock band that really didn’t exist, but there was no denying the polished songcraft to be found on the two albums, which were recorded by a passel of L.A.’s best session musicians, including Glen Campbell, Phil Spector veterans Larry Knechtel and Hal Blaine, and bassist Joe Osborne. “I always felt that the songs were the key, like a book in a Broadway musical,” says Don Kirshner. “Of course, you have to execute, but without the songs it was nothing.”

Schneider and Rafelson moved Monkees albums the same way Ozzie had sold Ricky Nelson records—by cross-promoting them on the show. In the Monkees case, absurdist vignettes, or “romps,” as the production team called them, were written into each episode, as a pretext to spin the band’s latest record. Similar in tone to the studiously madcap musical numbers in *A Hard Day’s Night*, the pop-surrealist romps were precursors to contemporary rock videos, using snap juxtapositions and a juiced-up directorial style to approximate the sugar-powered energy of the Monkees’ jingle-jangle pop. It was the first time TV didn’t resort to creating literal visual interpretations of pop songs. Attitude and style now took precedence over context. “The romps had no rhyme or reason,” says Bruce Kessler. “But any song that played during a romp would go right up the charts the next week. We saw that happening immediately.”

The show’s success was a windfall for Schneider and Rafelson, but it was starting to become an albatross for the actors by the start of the second season. For one thing, they weren’t getting a share of the profits from the shows, the records, or the live dates they were

squeezing in during the weekends and hiatus periods. “We had the same record deal as everyone else in those days,” says Dolenz. “It was an absolutely unconscionable bargain [for the producers], but nothing was done deceptively, we all signed the contracts. It wasn’t fraud, but it was certainly unfair. When we went on the road they made us partners and we ended up not making anything ’cause they wrote off all the costs of the production company against the tour. They made sure we didn’t have representation. Bob and Bert were our managers and agents and owned the show and owned us.”

The Monkees also had to grapple with the fact that they were not the vanguard of rock’s new wave but rather the last gasp of the Brill Building era, figureheads hired to supply an image for songwriters and producers lurking in the wings. At a time when rock musicians were becoming increasingly self-sufficient and garnering respect from high-cult snobs, the Monkees were rock’s straw dogs. “The Monkees were never a band,” says Dolenz. “They were more like a comedy troupe.”

But they wanted very much to be a band, or at least act like one. Ironically, Nesmith and Tork, the two real musicians hired for the show, had minimal participation in the recording of the albums, while the actors Dolenz and Jones wound up singing virtually everything. Meanwhile, Kirshner was releasing the Monkees’ records without consulting the band about album design or song selection. “The second record was so angering, because Donnie almost militantly cut us out of the process,” recalled Peter Tork.<sup>7</sup> Nesmith, for his part, was dead set on having his own compositions recorded, and managed to get two of his songs on the band’s first album. Now they *all* wanted more.

“I had helped them put out two number-one albums and three number-one singles, but when I approached them with a fourth song, Mike Nesmith proceeded to punch a hole in the wall of the Beverly Hills Hotel,” recalls Don Kirshner. “He wanted to do his own songs, and I had total creative approval. He really hated that. The song was ‘Sugar, Sugar,’ by the way, which became a hit for the Archies.”

Colgems was earning more money than the entire Screen Gems TV division, and Kirshner was personally reaping 30 percent of the division’s profits. Nesmith was resentful of Kirshner’s stranglehold on

the music, and Schneider, according to Kirshner, was jealous of both the money Kirshner was making and the press he was receiving. In January 1967 Schneider fired Kirshner from the Monkees. “[Kirshner] wanted the credit for the Monkees,” recalls co-producer Ward Sylvester, “[but] he wanted the world to know it was him, and it came out as if, ‘those four kids on the screen really don’t have anything to do with it,’ which was really hard on us.”

“They fired me ‘cause I was earning two million a year as a co-employee, and they didn’t want to pay me my money,” says Kirshner. “But I had the goods. I was controlling the music of a group that was outselling the Beatles. It wasn’t a question of looking for press. How can you not write about that accomplishment?”

With Kirshner out of the picture, Nesmith and the other Monkees were free to try their hand at being a self-contained band. “When we went on the road, there was no way we could fake playing our instruments,” says Dolenz. “I became the drummer by default, really, ‘cause Peter and Mike played guitar already. The fact that we did it gave a show that might have been a flash-in-the-pan some longevity.” The Monkees’ third album, *Headquarters*, was recorded by the four cast members, with very little participation from session musicians. It was also surprisingly good, and became the band’s third number-one album. Says Dolenz today, “I’m really proud of *Headquarters*.”

But just when it looked as if the band was achieving artistic vindication, the show was slowly sinking in the ratings. Slated opposite CBS’s powerhouse *Gunsmoke* during its second season, *The Monkees* slipped precipitously in the Nielsen ratings, finishing seventieth for the year. By early 1968, with the Vietnam War raging in America’s living rooms and artists like Jimi Hendrix (who had opened for the Monkees during their 1967 summer tour) providing the new sound track for youth culture, the band’s wide-eyed friskiness and Day-Glo humor started to seem fusty and contrived. Rafelson and Schneider were getting bored with the show, but were also deathly afraid of losing their hip quotient among the Hollywood *hipoisie*. “We were all burning out,” says Frawley. “It became a drag for all of us.” Then, in 1968, Rafelson decided that the only way to eradicate the synthetic taint of *The Monkees* would be to use the band to debunk the myth definitively.

As film historian Peter Biskind notes in his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Rafelson was determined to prove that he was cooler than his own creation: “Why not turn [the Monkees] inside out, show the world that they, and more important he, was in on the joke, nay, had authored the joke.”<sup>9</sup> So Rafelson and Schneider hired struggling B-movie actor Jack Nicholson to write a loosely structured scenario for the Monkees involving Vietnam imagery, druggy humor, and bizarre hallucinatory montages.

Rafelson’s film *Head* effectively deconstructed and demolished the idea of the Monkees. “Hey, hey, we’re the Monkees, you know we love to please/A manufactured image with no philosophies,” the boys sang, in a revised version of their familiar battle cry. *Head* was self-consciously unconventional, but it was also an incoherent mess—loopy self-indulgence passing for social commentary—and instead of scoring street cred, Rafelson and the “band” just endured bad reviews and total neglect from the moviegoing public. The dream was over, indeed.

The Monkees final act of contrition for their crimes against TV was *33½ Revolutions per Monkee*, an hour-long NBC special produced five months after *The Monkees* had been canceled. Produced and cowritten by *Shindig* creator Jack Good, *33½ Revolutions* was an even bigger disaster (if that’s possible) than *Head*. The band continued to gleefully skewer its plastic persona in annoyingly obvious fashion. The plot, such as it is, revolves around an evil scientist (played by British jazz-rocker Brian Auger) whose métier is rock-star mind control. Among the set pieces to be found in this twisted psychedelic fantasia are “Wind-up Man,” in which the band members stumble around like wind-up dolls and sing lines like “I’m a wind-up man/programmed to entertain/turn the key/I’m fully automatic/wind-up man/invented by the teeny bopper/turn me on and I will sing a song.” There’s even a scene where the band members dress up in Monkee suits and grunt.

*33½ Revolutions per Monkee* was the band’s way of getting their anti-Monkee message across to all those kids who were too young to buy a ticket to *Head*, but the special boomeranged on them: instead of redefining them as artists, it just laid bare their limitations as song-

writers and musicians, and definitively slammed the door on any aspirations the band might have had as legitimate rock contenders. “When the Monkees sang an atonal version of their chart hit ‘I’m a Believer,’ they succeeded remarkably in destroying the song’s beauty,” wrote *Variety*’s TV critic.

The Monkees had finally gotten their wish—everyone finally knew they weren’t puppets anymore—but to what end? At least the Monkees had found something they could do as well as the Beatles: make a really terrible TV special.

The Monkees split up shortly after *33 $\frac{1}{3}$  Revolutions per Monkee* aired, in the winter of 1969. Members of the band continued to cobble together records, such as Micky Dolenz and Davy Jones’s 1970 album *Changes*, but Nesmith, as it turned out, was the only member that parlayed his Monkees tenure into a springboard for his own recording career. In the early 1970s the guitarist made a series of charmingly eccentric country-rock albums—1970’s *Magnetic South* and *Loose Salute*, 1971’s *Nevada Fighter*—that received critical hosannas and reserved a place for him on the front lines of the L.A. singer-songwriter movement. Micky Dolenz and Davy Jones teamed

**Backstage with (l) Bob Rafelson and (c) Bert Schneider, 1986. (Photo: Henry Diltz)**





up with songwriters Bobby Hart and Tommy Boyce for an album in 1975, and toured the United States trying to elicit fuzzy nostalgic feelings for the very thing they had rejected six years earlier. In 1986, sixteen years after renouncing their Monkee-ness, Tork, Jones, and Dolenz reunited for a tour. When MTV reran the original series in the spring of 1986, the Monkees sans Nesmith recorded a new record, *Pool It!* and saw its back catalog embraced by Gen X'ers who looked upon the band as icons of 1960s trash culture. Nowadays you might catch the Monkees, who were made whole again when Nesmith rejoined in 1996, playing the occasional state fair gig or network morning show. If you do catch them, look very closely. They will be playing their own instruments.



## ***Bump City***

### **1960S TV ROCK SHOWS**

By the mid-1960s, rock 'n' roll on TV had achieved something close to critical mass. *American Bandstand* had been an afternoon fixture for almost a decade, the Monkees were a hit, Ed Sullivan was regularly featuring pop artists on his show, and even stodgy sitcoms like *Gilligan's Island*, *The Munsters*, and *F Troop* satirized post-Beatles pop from time to time with faux-pop bands. So culture-altering was the Beatles' success that it removed any last vestige of danger from rock 'n' roll. The band's music had pan-demographic appeal; it was something parents could embrace, and many of them did, so the climate seemed right for the networks to float some prime-time music shows into their programming schedules.

But old network habits die hard, and the Big Three were still committed to the stodgy variety-show format, which placed a high premium on creative inertia. That conflicted corporate mindset—nab the kids but appease the elders—led to the short-lived era of the 1960s rock 'n' roll variety show, which flourished from about 1964 to 1969, with varying degrees of success, before burning itself out by the end of the decade.

The architect of this anomalous surge in rock 'n' roll programming was a British producer named Jack Good. An Oxford-educated

fop with an abiding love of Shakespeare and medieval literature, Good had begun his career producing highly stylized TV music shows in England that used moving cameras and smash-cut editing techniques to create a pulse-quickening jolt even when the music failed to do so.

Good was a TV rock pioneer in England; as early as 1956, he was producing *6.5 Special* for BBC-1, a showcase for homegrown stars like skiffle performer Lonnie Donegan and the U.K.'s most popular faux Elvis, Cliff Richard. *6.5 Special*—co-hosted, incongruously enough, by British boxer Freddie Mills—was a beat ahead of its time in that it pulled away from the static staging of staid British variety shows. For Good, rock symbolized freedom from boundaries, and TV rock had an obligation to get that feeling across to its viewers.

In 1958 Good was hired by England's commercial TV network ITV to produce *Oh, Boy!*, a show that gave him the opportunity to break the rules of TV etiquette less decorously than he had on *6.5 Special*. The camera moves were a little bolder, the lights a little brighter, and everything was performed live. For Good, technical proficiency was anathema; slickness created a comfort zone that prevented viewers from seeing and hearing rock in its most authentic, unmediated state. When asked once about his freewheeling aesthetic, Good offered this terse response: "Who gives a damn if a camera comes into a shot?"<sup>1</sup>

"*Oh, Boy!* was known as the fastest show on television," says Ian Whitcomb, who, during his brief career as a British teen idol, performed numerous times on programs produced by Good. "The cameras would whip about. He would have the artists do medleys of songs, so he could quickly segue from one act to the other, which is something he would do on *Shindig*." "We were excited about what we were doing because everybody working on it was excited, and it excited the people who came to look and listen," Good recalled, "It's as simple as that."<sup>2</sup>

Good was the closest thing to an auteur that TV rock has ever produced. No aspect of *Oh Boy!* production escaped his purview, including the look of the performers themselves. Good picked out their wardrobes and choreographed their every hip-swivel. According to

Whitcomb, it was Good who shaped both Cliff Richard's Elvis-manqué persona, as well as Eddie Cochran's street-tough rockabilly image when the artist came to England to appear on *Oh, Boy!* in 1958. Good's show was the theater, he was the director, and the artists were his repertory company. "He would show the artists what to do, and how to move," says Whitcomb. "For Cliff Richard, he studied Elvis films to, as he said, 'distill the essence of Elvis into Cliff.'"

Good's success with *Oh, Boy!* in England attracted the attention of ABC, who figured Good would be their man to create a British version of *American Bandstand* for the United States. Hosted by the unctuous and clueless Tony Hall, *Oh Boy!* ran during the summer of 1959 and featured British artists like Cliff Richard and Marty Wilde as regulars. But *Oh Boy!*'s Anglocentric booking policy was too arcane for American viewers, and it was yanked after only two months.

Nonetheless, it gave Good a small taste of American TV, and he wanted more. This time, he knew he would need an insider's knowledge of the American music scene. Having developed a close relationship with Eddie Cochran's former girlfriend, songwriter Sharon Sheeley, the producer contacted her again in the spring of 1963. "I had always encouraged him to try and do something in the States," says Sheeley. "So he called me saying, 'I hope you know what you're talking about, 'cause I've sold everything I have and I'm bringing the wife and kids to America.'"

Working with nothing but Good's life savings, Sheeley and Good cobbled together a pilot using Sheeley's singer-songwriter friends Jackie DeShannon and P. J. Proby and Sheeley's new husband, hugely popular KFVB disc jockey Jimmy O'Neill, as the host. Good slapped the title *Young America Swings the World* on the show, and proceeded to pitch it all over Los Angeles. Nobody bit. "He screened it to some agents at William Morris, and they told him, 'It's the fastest thirty minutes we've seen, but it might be too much for the Midwest,'" says Jimmy O'Neill. "He even tried to get the government to subsidize it. He wrote a letter to Bobby Kennedy trying to convince him that the show was a goodwill gesture for the youth of the world."

The pilot eventually made its way to ABC when O'Neill slipped a copy of the tape to TV producer Chuck Barris during an audition for a

game show. “The ABC execs said, ‘Why don’t we turn it into a country show and call it *Shindig?*’” recalls O’Neill. After shooting a snoozy pilot with guitarist Roy Clark as the host, ABC decided to do it Good’s way. Recalls O’Neill, “That format didn’t stick, but the title did.”

Good wanted to use *Oh Boy!*’s kinetic visual vocabulary for *Shindig*—it certainly couldn’t mimic the by-now-moldy dance show format of something like *American Bandstand*. Rock was sexier now than it had been in 1957, more fashion conscious and racially integrated. On the radio, Motown stars like the Temptations and Marvin Gaye were played alongside the Byrds and Donovan. *Shindig*’s visual style had to match the verve and visceral thrust of rock—it had to provide, in essence, the look of the sound.

*Shindig*, which premiered on September 16, 1964, at 8:30 opposite CBS’s hit *The Beverly Hillbillies* and NBC’s durable western *The Virginian*, was, like *The Monkees*, a headlong rush of music and skewed visuals designed to lure jaded teen viewers up and out of their couches. Watching *Shindig* was like flipping the radio dial in a great music city—R&B greats and soul divas shared the stage with pop poseurs and earnest folkies. Regular performers during the show’s first season included blue-eyed soulmen the Righteous Brothers, Phil Spector’s favorite backup vocal group the Blossoms (featuring singer Darlene Love), and Glen Campbell.

*Shindig*’s visual style was head-spinningly manic. Trigger-happy director Rita Gillespie constantly cut away from one camera angle to the next—on chord changes, on lyrics, sometimes for no logical reason. “I remember the boom guys colliding into each other, trying to keep up with the cameras,” says Sharon Sheeley. The show’s pace was breakneck; acts would follow each other without any introductions or preamble from O’Neill, just a discreet subtitle identifying each performer. The lighting schemes would frequently change in mid-song, and Good always had a surprise or two in store, like a pair of catwalks that rolled out like two suspension bridges, giving the hot Shindigger dancers more square footage to shake their groove things. O’Neill presided over it all with casual aplomb, his smooth DJ’s delivery providing the right note of hopped-up cool: “Howdy-hi, Shindiggers . . . we’ve got a Shindig for you that’s so far in it’s out of sight.”<sup>3</sup>



"Howdi-hi, Shindiggers!" *Shindig* host Jimmy O'Neill.  
(Michael Ochs Archives.com)

Gillespie, who had also worked on *Oh Boy!* blocked the performers in frequently radical ways within striking, modernist sets. It wasn't unusual for Gillespie to frame backup singers in the foreground and have the putative star appear as a blip in the background. This was Good's vision of rock as theater, its *mise-en-scène* created with the intent of providing a visual analogue to the era's innovative pop music. In his autobiography *Rock Odyssey*, Whitcomb described Good's micro-managed approach:

One of the joys of *Shindig* was that it was like being in a school play. We are all amateurs as far as acting and dancing are concerned, but Jack made us dramatize our routines and linked up each song in a theatrical manner. The ghost of Shakespeare hung in the air and Jack was everywhere bellowing instructions. For instance, I had been quietly going through my routine in front of the cameras when an Oxonian bellow came through the hanging studio speakers: 'No, no, no, dear boy! Put some more oomph into it. Make believe you are a real dangerous bike boy with a dagger—like Gene Vincent after I got hold of him!' . . . He proceeded to rehearse me in every movement, down to the flicker of an eyelid. We might have been doing Richard III.<sup>4</sup>

Good insisted that his artists sing live to a prerecorded track, usually recorded two days prior to the taping and then played back on the air. The show's house band the Shindogs, who laid down all of the prerecorded tracks, featured the cream of L.A.'s session players, many

of them veterans of legendary producer Phil Spector's "Wrecking Crew"—sax player Jim Horn, keyboardists Larry Knechtel and Leon Russell, singer Delaney Bramlett and Ricky Nelson's guitarist James Burton, among others. "I remember when Jack hired me, he said, 'This group's gonna be bigger than the Beatles,'" says Burton. "He was very funny that way, but his enthusiasm is what made that show so exciting."

Good had superb taste—Tina Turner made her American TV debut on the show, as did Donovan—and he wasn't shy about going after rock's biggest icons. The Beatles gave Good a TV exclusive with performances of "I'm a Loser" and "Kansas City" in late 1964, the Who made their American TV debut on the show in October 1965, and the Rolling Stones appeared numerous times. The Stones even coaxed Good to book Chicago blues great Howlin' Wolf on the show in 1965; their joint appearance is one of *Shindig's* timeless highlights, and is seen in countless blues documentaries. Good even tried to book Elvis Presley—who was deep into his shlocky movie career—and had Sharon Sheeley arrange a meeting with Colonel Tom Parker.

"Jack went into his spiel and told Parker, 'I'll make Elvis look better than he's ever looked in his career,'" says Sheeley. "When he was done, Parker told him, 'I don't care if you put him on his knees and make him sing 'Mammy,' I want a million dollars.' So Jack didn't get Elvis. It was Elvis's favorite show, though—we used to go to his house and watch it with him."

*Shindig* was an immediate hit. In its first four months on the air, it was averaging a 19.2 Nielsen rating, enough to give *The Beverly Hillbillies* a healthy scare.<sup>5</sup> "*Shindig* is the only show I've ever been connected with where the audience applauds the commercials," Good told *Newsweek* with typically hyperbolic overkill at the height of the show's popularity.<sup>6</sup> The show was so successful, in fact, that ABC expanded it to an hour in January 1965.

Good wasn't sheepish about race-mixing on the air, and booked numerous black performers, who frequently appeared on stage with white artists. Two of the show's performing regulars, in fact, were white pop singer Bobby Sherman, a psychology student at L.A.'s Pierce College whom Good gave his first professional gig, and a then-

unknown black soul singer named Billy Preston (and what no one at the network knew was that show regulars Darlene Love and the Righteous Brothers' Bill Medley were having an interracial affair at the time). Good's one-world policy eventually led to a confrontation in the fall of 1965 with ABC, which was starting to get the inevitable flack from southern affiliates. "Jack got a call from network brass, who told him the show was too black," says Jimmy O'Neill. "So Jack said, 'Put it in a memo,' knowing full well they would never do such a thing."

Good's frustration with ABC led to his walking off the show in late 1965—the network, which had initially bought *Shindig* as a summer replacement, was losing money on the show. "They had no intention of the show being a hit, and they sold it for nothing to Stridex," says Sharon Sheeley. Locked into a three-year commitment with the zit-pad manufacturer, ABC split the show in two half-hour programs and ran it on Thursday and Saturday nights with the intention of overexposing it to death. Without Good's guiding hand, the show devolved into a showcase for Hollywood hackdom. Icons of old-school showbiz culture like Zsa Zsa Gabor and Hedy Lamarr were tapped to cohost with O'Neill, while artists like Sammy Davis Jr. and Paul Anka tried to get down and funky with *Shindig*'s increasingly estranged viewers. It was a masterful display of sabotage, and eventually led to *Shindig*'s cancellation in January 1966.

*Shindig* may have died prematurely, but that didn't stop the other networks from trying to replicate its manic house-party milieu. NBC's *Hullabaloo*, which debuted four months after *Shindig* in January 1965, was shot in color, but everything else about the show was strictly monochromatic. Its demographic skewed slightly older than *Shindig*, so the go-go dancers were a bit more polite than the Shindiggers, the theme song sounded like a commercial jingle for aftershave lotion, and its revolving door of hosts dispatched stiffs like Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello. "The idea was to bring some production values to rock 'n' roll," says *Hullabaloo* set designer Gene McEvoy. "The show really was sold on the idea of bringing a different look to rock 'n' roll. With *Shindig*, it was artists being shoved out on platforms. The whole point of *Hullabaloo* was to legitimize rock, make it appeal to parents as well as kids."





Hubba-hubba: *Hullabaloo* dancers. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

But rock didn't need legitimizing; NBC just needed a white-bread show to sell to its sponsors. And yet, despite *Hullabaloo's* strenuous attempts to put a temperate face on rock 'n' roll, the atmosphere inside Studio 8H in New York's Rockefeller Plaza, where the show was taped, was always thick with sexual tension. Apparently, many of the show's participating rock stars just couldn't keep their paws off *Hullabaloo's* go-go dancers. "The NBC executives used to send memos down to the set about how they would find prophylactics in

the bleachers,” says McEvoy. “The show was taped in a Brooklyn studio during the last season, I think, because NBC just wanted to get rid of us.” *Hullabaloo* lasted about as long as *Shindig*, but its eventual cancellation in August 1966 was more like a mercy killing.

All of this prime-time TV rock activity was not lost on Dick Clark. Although Clark was still hosting *American Bandstand*, that show was no longer the music industry behemoth it had once been, and Clark was looking for ways to expand his influence with teen consumers. With Ed Sullivan booking the British acts, *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* providing family-hour exposure for charting stars, and numerous regional shows breaking local performers, *American Bandstand*'s power had been diluted. Still, Clark was not about to let Good and his imitators usurp his territory without a fight.

Clark's answer to the *Shindig-Hullabaloo* onslaught was *Where the Action Is*, which debuted in June 1965 and was broadcast weekdays at 3:30 on ABC. Like *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo*, *Where the Action Is* was a performer's showcase—no dancers allowed. In fact, *Where the Action Is* didn't look anything like *American Bandstand*. Clark was not an on-screen presence but rather a disembodied voice providing introductions. Instead of taping everything in a studio, Clark chose various picturesque exteriors around the country to shoot the musical segments, which gave the show an odd whiff of neo-realism, particularly during bad lip-synch performances.

*Where the Action Is* was curiously retrograde, even for this pre-hippie era. Artists who lip-synched ballads were more often than not required to hold the hand of some attractive, blank-faced extra, and up-tempo numbers were accompanied by a crowd of fresh-faced, cardigan-clad sorority types clapping in unison. If *Shindig* was rock 'n' roll as sex, this was rock 'n' roll as frat house root-beer social, with the show's house band Paul Revere and the Raiders flashing brief, erotically charged adrenaline jolts in between stage-managed drivel.

Natives of Portland, Oregon, Paul Revere and the Raiders had already established a reputation on the northwestern club circuit (a scene that included other great proto-punk bands like the Sonics, the Wailers, and the Kingsmen) by dressing up as colonial soldiers

and bashing out tuneful garage pop. The Raiders' Mod Minutemen shtick caught the attention of Clark, who hired them to be the *Where the Action Is* house band in the summer of 1965. "He initially signed us because we were in the right place at the right time," Raiders lead singer Mark Lindsay recalled. "Dick's thought, I think, was that, 'If this show takes off, I'll be able to hire a known band.' And what happened was that we helped the show take off, and we became a known band."<sup>7</sup>

The Raiders had to tone down their frequently ribald stage act for *Where the Action Is*. "When we got on TV, suddenly we had to make sure that our zippers were up and that we didn't make obscene gestures," observes Lindsay. "Once the ABC Standards and Practices official came running out: 'You'll have to shoot that over,' she said. I asked why. 'Because your . . . your . . . your belt is dangling down . . . It looks too phallic . . .'"<sup>8</sup>

With the darkly handsome Lindsay, *Where the Action Is* had something that *Shindig* or *Hullabaloo* didn't have—a legitimate in-house teen idol. The singer's ponytail became an object of desire for the show's female viewers, so much so that Clark decided to hold a "win Mark Lindsay's ponytail" contest on the air as a ratings booster.

The Raiders appeared on *Where the Action Is* over 500 times, giving them the ideal platform from which to promote their own records. They eventually wound up with a string of top-ten hits, a few of which were gloriously randy Britpop knockoffs. Suitably swarthy, striated with twelve-string guitar jangle and Revere's pounding Farfisa organ block chords, hits like "Kicks," "Hungry," and "Just Like Me" made Paul Revere and the Raiders one of the few mid-1960s American pop bands that stared down the British Invasion without flinching. Nor was the band solely dependent on its TV exposure to secure hits—its only number-one single, "Indian Reservation (the Lament of a Cherokee Reservation Indian)," was released in 1971, four years after *Where the Action Is* was canceled.

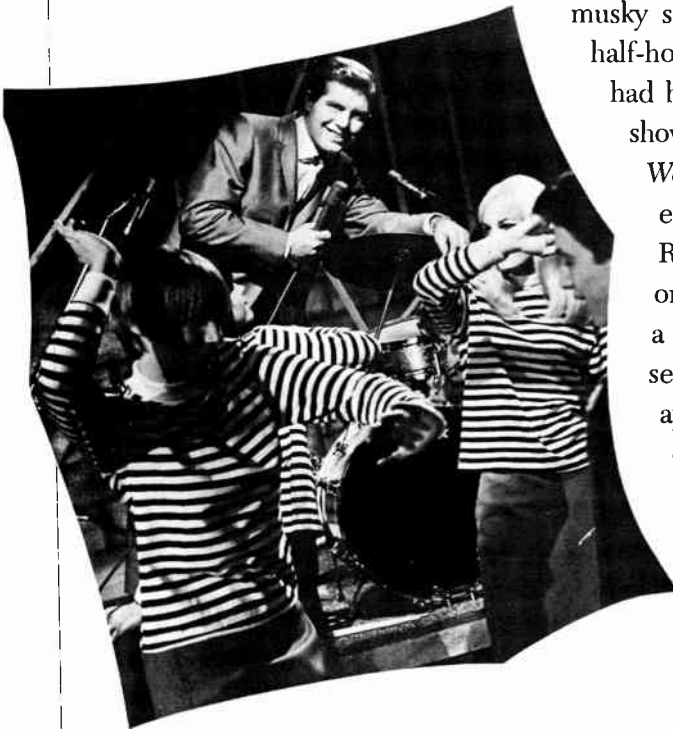
*Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* were calculated risks that hadn't quite worked out, and *Where the Action Is* lasted only two years. But that didn't stop local stations with lower overheads and less at stake to try their hand at knockoffs. Los Angeles, with its bottomless supply of

musical talent, high-profile DJs, and buzzing nightclubs, was the nexus of American pop culture in the mid-1960s, and countless TV shows emerged from its fertile talent pool—a few of them bankrolled by *American Bandstand's* network ABC, who were trying to catch lightning in a bottle a second time.

Al Burton was already a veteran of music television shows by 1964, having coproduced pianist/raconteur Oscar Levant's KCOP-TV show in the late 1950s and a popular local dance show called *Wink Martindale's Dance Party* with Los Angeles DJ Wink Martindale in the early 1960s. As the creator and producer, from 1962 to 1973, of *Teenage Fair*, a kind of beach party-cum-World's Fair summer blowout that featured an annual Battle of the Bands competition, Burton was also attuned to L.A. youth culture.

When L.A. station KHJ-TV went looking for a cheaply produced dance show in 1965, Burton came up with *Hollywood A Go Go*. A nationally syndicated program that featured dancers from the famous Hollywood nightclub Gazzari's (Toni Basil and Teri Garr among them), *Hollywood A Go Go* even managed to outcool *Shindig* by

sheer virtue of its street grit and musky sensuality. The nightly half-hour program, which had begun as an afternoon show called *Ninth Street West*, was hosted by the eminently affable Sam Riddle and was taped on a set that resembled a dank basement turned seedy speakeasy. An appealing undercurrent of demimonde sleaze lent *Hollywood A Go Go* a kind of hipster



***Hollywood A Go Go***  
host Sam Riddle.

(Courtesy Al Burton)

cachet among visiting artists. “I used to say *Hullabaloo* was like a Warner Brothers movie from 1937,” says Burton. “The dancing girls wore heels, for God’s sake.” Burton wanted to avoid *Hullabaloo*’s slick pretense: “We shot into the lights in the ceiling, we had tracked lighting that we aimed straight into the lens. *Hollywood A Go Go* was the loudest, nastiest, and funkiest show, but it was primitive on purpose.”

Ian Whitcomb has another theory as to why *Hollywood A Go Go* was a hit: “The girls were much sluttier than on *Shindig*. You could go to bed with the girls on *Hollywood A Go Go*, but you had to be a Beach Boy to sleep with the *Shindig* girls. The director loved girls’ tits. He would do these crane shots where he would swoop down . . . he would be yelling, ‘More boob shots, come on!’”

Other shows, like Casey Kasem’s *Shebang*, which was produced by Dick Clark and broadcast from L.A.’s KTLA-TV, played down the pulchritude in favor of a more chaste high-school-assembly vibe. Kasem, who had hosted *Cleveland Bandstand* for WJW-TV in 1959, was at the time one of L.A.’s most listened-to DJs on KRLA. *Shebang* tried to replicate the warm communal feel of *American Bandstand*—Kasem frequently held dance contests, highlighted various local high schools, read love letters and dedications on the air, and counted down the top records of the week. But without the *oomph* appeal of *Shindig* or *Hollywood A Go Go*, *Shebang* couldn’t sustain itself for long, and was canceled after three seasons. Kasem would have better luck later in his career with *America’s Top Ten*, the nationally syndicated TV spinoff of his wildly popular *America’s Top 40* radio show, which ran from 1980 to 1992.

*Playboy After Dark* tried to conjure the after-hours vibe of a swinging bachelor pad teeming with full-bodied babes. And who else to provide the right note of verisimilitude for such a fantasy setting than *Playboy* magazine publisher Hugh Hefner? Hefner had tried his hand at a variety show in 1959 with a show called *Playboy’s Penthouse*, but that was well before the full flowering of the sexual revolution, and the newly promiscuous cultural climate of the late 1960s made for a far sexier show. Co-hosted by a pajama-clad, pipe-smoking Hef and Bunny hostess Barbi Benton, *Playboy After Dark* strained for a spontaneous, anything-goes approach, where show-biz

giants could rub shoulders with rock stars while a clutch of bombshells stood dutifully on the sidelines, strategically positioning their ample cleavage within camera range.

Hefner kept things unstructured and unhurried, which was sometimes to the show's detriment. When James Brown appeared on the show and was presented with Hef's usual silver cart of food, the Godfather of Soul became so preoccupied with eating ("I'm hungry, man!") that the interview went south. Like the magazine from which it was spun off, *Playboy After Dark's* not-so-covert subtext was debauched male excess, and more than a few rock stars managed to spirit away a Playmate or two after tapings.

A former commercial pitchman for Oscar Levant, Lloyd Thaxton had no use for cleavage or civic boosterism. The amiable Thaxton had natural comic flair and a penchant for toying with the formal elements of television that made him TV rock's answer to Ernie Kovacs. *The Lloyd Thaxton Show*, which was seen weekdays in L.A. on KCOP-TV, had none of the financial resources of, say, *American Bandstand*, and it couldn't possibly compete with *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* for artists or production value. Its main asset was the inventive Thaxton. "I was a commercials announcer at KCOP-TV in L.A., and they had to have a show where they needed to go to commercial every three minutes, so they said, 'Let's have Lloyd do it,'" says Thaxton. "Since pop records were only three minutes long, it made sense to play them on the air. But then the situation became, 'What do I do while the records are playing?' They could've cared less, 'cause no one was watching the show, anyway. So I came up with gimmicks, like the lip-synching."

Thaxton seized what was usually the most dreaded aspect of music shows—the dreaded lip-synch performance—and turned it into an asset. *The Lloyd Thaxton Show* had dancing, sure, and a nice-looking soda shop set and musical guests like James Brown, but it was mostly a celebration of mimicry, which made Thaxton the first real postmodern TV rock show host—he reveled in the artifice of showbiz fakery. Thaxton lip-synched masterfully, featured members of the audience lip-synching, and naturally had his guests lip-synch. The end result was a gleefully goofy, endearing lark of a show that briefly

turned Thaxton into a major local teen celebrity. “It was the thing that distinguished me from Dick Clark,” says Thaxton. “Dancing made up only about ten percent of the show.”

*The Lloyd Thaxton Show* went into national syndication in 1963, where it held its own for five years until Thaxton himself pulled the plug in 1968: “The music was changing. Schools weren’t having sock hops anymore. I could’ve hung in, but I quit while I was ahead.”

*Groovy*, which was broadcast weekly on KHJ-TV in L.A., was the first TV rock show to turn its gaze toward the teenage beach culture that had transformed southern California into a surfer’s mecca. *Groovy*’s host, Michael Blodgett, was a sun-kissed, wave-riding beachcomber archetype straight out of central casting, a blond, blue-eyed Adonis with bleach-white teeth who presided over the show like an affable party-crasher. Shot entirely on location in Santa Monica, *Groovy* tried to appear modishly antiestablishment, with Blodgett assuming the role of a young American Everykid trying to serve the greater good by raising awareness about divisive issues, spinning Top 40 records, and showcasing ample amounts of exposed female flesh. “We’re burying prejudice today,” announced Blodgett in one episode while standing in front of a makeshift graveyard whose tombstones announced the demise of various social ills.

*Shivaree* was yet another L.A.-based music show produced by ABC that managed to find its



**Lloyd Thaxton with James Brown.** (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

niche in prime-time syndication in 1965. In the L.A. area, *Shivaree* had the advantage of being hosted by the number-one-rated L.A. disc jockey at the time, KFVB's Gene Weed, and frequently bested *Shindig* in the local Nielsen ratings. At a time when the subtlest variation could provide a marketable hook, *Shivaree* opted for the populist approach, encouraging the audience to crowd around performers during musical segments. "The audience was a part of the set on *Shivaree*," recalls Weed, who went on to produce TV shows for Dick Clark. "We had kids everywhere."

L.A. may have been the locus of TV rock from 1964 to 1966, but there was no shortage of shows catering to strong music markets in other parts of the country. *The !!!! Beat*, which was nationally syndicated from Dallas, Texas, station WFAA and hosted by legendary radio DJ Bill "Hoss" Allen, was far and away the quirkiest and coolest R&B-driven television show of the decade. As a DJ for Nashville station WLAC, the "Hossman" and his fellow on-air personalities Gene Nobles and John R. Richbourg were among the first southern radio personalities to champion black music for a large white audience, and *The !!!! Beat* was an outgrowth of the trail-blazing programming that had turned Allen into a radio pioneer.

*The !!!! Beat*, which debuted on thirteen affiliates scattered across the country on May 7, 1966, was the only nationally televised music show devoted exclusively to R&B at the time. Advertising agency Noble-Dury, which had bankrolled successful country music shows for Porter Wagoner and Ernest Tubb, had already underwritten an R&B television show on WLAC-TV called *Night Train*. But that program was shot in black and white, and if *The !!!! Beat* was to go national, it needed to be shot in color so it could seamlessly blend into the national TV landscape. Hence WFAA—the nearest TV studio with color facilities that Noble-Dury president Bill Graham could find.

*The !!!! Beat*, which featured regional and national acts, made up in grit what it lacked in polish. Allen was a barrel-chested, marble-mouthed white hipster who liked to pepper his sentences with phrases like "bless your swinging heart" and "we're gonna crack the whip and make the trip," but more important, he was able to book



the artists on the show for free. “I brought all the damned talent in,” recalled Allen, who died in 1997. “I’d been a jock for so long, I knew all the record companies. They all owed me favors from way back.”

How hip was *The !!!! Beat*? For starters, the show’s house band, the Beat Boys (which featured future Jimi Hendrix bassist Billy Cox), was led by blues great Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, who always provided innovative, tricked-out arrangements for the show’s guests, a roll call of R&B legends that included Little Milton, Carla Thomas, Freddy King, Louis Jordan, and Otis Redding, who appeared on the show’s final program in October 1996. *The !!!! Beat* was shoestring cool, but only lasted twenty-six programs—it was just a little too grimy for affiliates who had grown comfortable with well-mannered *American Bandstand* knockoffs.

Philadelphia’s *Discophonic Scene* was hosted by former *Bandstand* dancer Jerry “the Geater with the Heater” Blavat, who was now a local DJ. Blavat’s hook was simple yet effective: instead of introducing records and deferring to his dancers, he would mix it up with the performers themselves. “Most dance shows at the time were dull,” says Blavat. “They all had guys with suits and ties standing in front of a podium. But I danced with the acts. When we had Little Richard on the show, I jumped up on his piano and did the Slop!”

In New York, TV rock found an unlikely collaborator—the federal government, which decided to take advantage of rock ’n’ roll’s popularity with teens to alert them to the existence of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity. The OEO, which was established by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and presided over by Sargent Shriver, was instrumental in doling out educational subsidies for inner-city children and providing guidance for high school dropouts during the height of Johnson’s War on Poverty. In 1965 the agency was determined to get the word out via television, and so landed upon the idea of sponsoring a TV rock show hosted by “America’s swingiest DJ,” Murray the K.

*It’s What’s Happening, Baby* (the title was a riff on one of Murray the K’s pet phrases) was broadcast on CBS in the summer of 1965, and featured a wide cross-section of pop and R&B artists: Herman’s Hermits, Martha and the Vandellas, the Dave Clark Five,

Dionne Warwick, Tom Jones, the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, and so on. For a show that was supposed to raise the public's awareness of OEO, it mentioned the agency itself only cursorily, in a few odd segments between performances. Herman Munster, aka Fred Gwynne, crashes a beach party featuring the *Shindig* Dancers, then asks Murray the K if he could "talk to someone about the President's Opportunities Office." The performances themselves are mostly location shoots in the style of *Where the Action Is*—Martha Reeves and the Vandellas singing "Nowhere to Run" in a Detroit auto factory, Marvin Gaye lip-synching "Pride and Joy" on a riverboat, and so forth.

*It's What's Happening, Baby* was benignly goofy, yet it managed to trigger a firestorm in Washington, as a vocal cabal of Republicans questioned the efficacy of the government sanctioning what they deemed meretricious trash. It also gave the G.O.P. a great opening to launch a frontal assault on President Johnson's poverty programs.

"Last night, I saw one of the most shameful and disgraceful exhibitions I have ever witnessed in the United States," declared Republican senator Gordon Allott in a typically overheated Senate floor speech. "Every American who saw the telecast must be sick. It was decadent in the extreme. I would say the program was even debauched."<sup>10</sup> "Lousy, double lousy, degrading, immoral," grouched Senate minority leader and perennial Johnson nemesis Everett Dirksen. Murray the K, for his part, had no problem with raising teen awareness via a televised rock 'n' roll show. "What should we have given [the kids], a sonata?" he asked *Newsweek*. "Some of them can hardly read. Rock 'n' roll moves them."

*It's What's Happening, Baby* beat its competition by nearly 10 million homes, and inspired a fusillade of socially conscious fan mail urging CBS to continue fighting the good fight with pop. "People say, 'How could you use The Supremes to reach kids?'" CBS-TV president John A. Schneider told *Newsweek*. "Well, all I know is that somebody out there was listening."

A few pop musicians found a safe harbor in prime time with their own shows, but they were mostly appeasers—artists so controversy-proof that offensiveness would have been hard work. The big three



**Your mother's sex symbol: Tom Jones on his TV show. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

pop variety shows of the era were hosted by Glen Campbell, Tom Jones, and Johnny Cash.

In 1969 singer Tom Jones was every mother's secret sex fantasy, a darkly handsome Welsh testosterone bomb who had a knack for squeezing every last ounce of raw emotion from a lyric until it grew knuckle hair. Jones had notched a handful of hits in the United States, among them his signature song, "It's Not Unusual," which was a top-ten hit in the spring of 1965, and "What's New Pussycat?," the title song from the Peter Sellers sex comedy of the same name.

Jones was a hugely popular Vegas entertainer, an untamed Lothario for the 4-H Club set, which made him a prime candidate to host his own variety show. *This Is Tom Jones*, which debuted in June 1969 on ABC in the Thursday-night lineup at 9:00 P.M., alternated between supper-club class and belt-loosening sass. Among the show's regulars were the Ace Trucking Company comedy troupe, who could also be found on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and other shows of that ilk; the Norman Maen Dancers (essentially Shindiggers in long pants); and a weekly clutch of musical guest stars that ran the

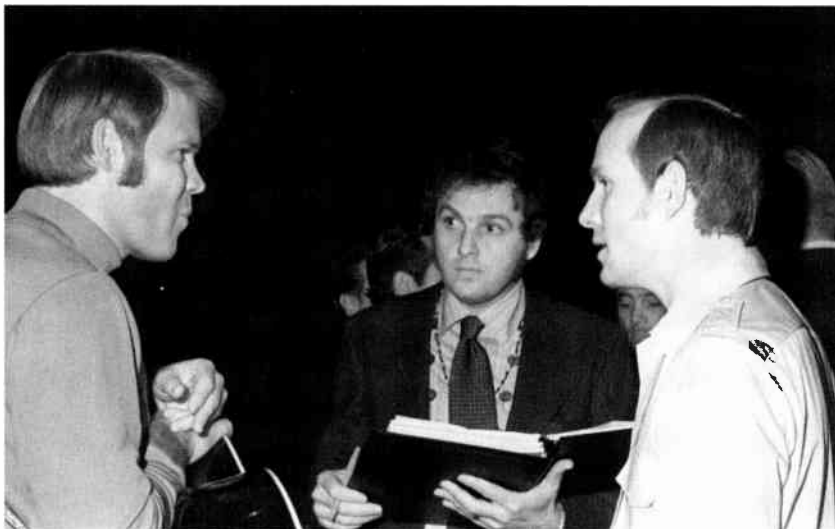
gamut from Ella Fitzgerald to Joni Mitchell, the Moody Blues to Janis Joplin.

“Janis was a ballsy chick!” recalls Jones. “She didn’t try to pick me up—I don’t think she was all that impressed with me until we started to sing. We did a duet, a scream-up rock ’n’ roll tune, and after rehearsals she looked me up and down and said, ‘You can really sing.’ To her it was the real deal if you could dig in like that and scream like her.”<sup>11</sup>

Glen Campbell was another pop star that seemed destined to become a *TV Guide* cover boy. The Billstown, Arkansas, native had begun his career in the mid-fifties, playing guitar in his uncle Dick Bill’s Western Swing band, then moved to L.A. when it became apparent that his prodigious skills as a guitarist could land him some recording session work. Campbell quickly became one of L.A.’s in-demand studio heavies. During his stint as a studio guitarist, he played on hundreds of sessions for acts as diverse as The Monkees, Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, The Beach Boys, psych-pop group Sagittarius, Merle Haggard, and The Champs, as well as numerous sessions for uber-producer Phil Spector’s roster of singing groups.

But Campbell was more than just a fleet-fingered crackerjack. He

**Glen Campbell and Tom Smothers backstage. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**



also possessed virile, varsity-athlete good looks and a seductively smooth alto voice. Signed to Capitol Records in 1962, Campbell recorded a string of lushly produced country smashes from '62 to '67—"Gentle On My Mind," "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," "The Universal Soldier"—that turned him into country music's biggest crossover star of the era.

Tommy Smothers, who had seen Campbell perform live and was struck by his casual charisma, invited the guitarist to appear on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in the spring of 1967. Campbell quickly became a regular on the show, sometimes as a comic straight man, but usually as a musical guest, and was hired to host the Smothers Brothers' summer replacement show, *The Smothers Brothers Show*, in June 1968. The gig lasted only four months, but it turned Campbell into a major star. In November 1968, two months after the show's run, Campbell scored a major hit with Jimmy Webb's sublime "Wichita Lineman," which soared to number three on *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart.

The success of "Wichita Lineman" was incentive enough for CBS to give Campbell his own show, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, in the winter of 1969. An odd mixture of flaccid, quaint sketches (cast members included Smothers Brothers regulars Pat Paulsen and Jack Burns, and Steve Martin was on the writing staff), edgy, politically charged satire, and musical performances by Campbell and other guests, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour* was a moderate hit for three seasons, but it turned Campbell into one of the more user-friendly pop stars of the era. "Glen was a great, pliable performer," says Bob Einstein, who worked on *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour's* writing staff. "Of course, we were doing political shit on his show. We got a letter from the CBS execs after our first show that just tore Tommy [Smothers] a new you-know-what, calling us hippie punks with love beads. But we got good ratings and rave reviews, so it didn't matter."

Like Campbell, Johnny Cash had begun his career as a hillbilly cat, singing no-frills honky-tonk on a series of classic singles for Sam Phillips's Sun Records in the mid-1950s. Cash spent a good part of the 1960s, however, in an amphetamine fog. He was busted for trying

to smuggle drugs into Mexico, got into a car wreck that nearly killed him, and divorced his first wife. Not until 1967 did Cash get his act together again. He married June Carter, a member of the legendary country music clan the Carter Family, who got him straight and converted him to fundamentalist Christianity. A clean and sober Cash began racking up hits on a regular basis again, with “Jackson,” “A Boy Named Sue,” a remake of his old song “Folsom Prison Blues,” and an album, *At Folsom Prison*, that became his first million-seller.

In less than a decade, Johnny Cash had made the transformation from hayseed reprobate to America’s gutter-poet laureate, the “Man in Black” who was the most recognizable country star on the planet. It made good business sense for ABC to give him his own variety series in the summer of 1969. (The show’s opening, in which Cash appears out of the shadows with his guitar slung over his shoulder and announces, “Hello, I’m Johnny Cash,” became an enduring trademark.)

*The Johnny Cash Show*’s schlock-to-sparkle ratio favored sparkle, if only because Cash was too guileless to play the accommodationist. Right off the bat, Cash sent a message to his viewers that he wasn’t going to abide by the usual network policy of booking well-known nightclub hacks when he hired his old Sun labelmate Carl Perkins to be a regular on the show and recruited Joni Mitchell (who performed Cash’s “I Still Miss Someone” with the country legend) and Bob Dylan to sing some duets with him for the very first broadcast.

Dylan was deep into his country-rock phase at this time, having recorded an album, *Nashville Skyline*, that included liner notes from Cash and a duet featuring the two legends on Dylan’s “Girl from the North Country.” Cash had heard a Dylan album for the first time backstage during a Vegas show, and declared him “one of the best country singers I ever heard.”<sup>12</sup> Dylan was experiencing one of his many popularity spikes at the time, having scored a top-ten single with “Lay Lady Lay” that summer, so the prospect of booking him on the show wasn’t exactly a radical notion. Still, booking Dylan, an artist that shied away from TV, was a coup for Cash. When he was asked why he agreed to perform on the show, Dylan responded, “Because it is a good show. There are so few good TV shows around these days.”<sup>13</sup>

Dylan, his dark suit and scraggly beard giving him the courtly mien of a country squire, was incommunicado with *The Johnny Cash Show*'s production staff on the day of the taping. Ridiculous security measures were taken to ensure that no one from the press weaseled their way onto the set. A team from *Look* magazine was thrown out. Dylan performed two numbers by himself, accompanied by backing tapes—"Living the Blues" and "I Threw It All Away"—and when it came time for Cash and Dylan to perform "Girl from the North Country," nary a word was spoken between the two legends. The resulting duet was riveting, however—a stirringly rough-hewn summit between two icons. "We've done it dozens of times, just fooling around," Cash recalled after the taping. "But everybody here said 'North Country' was the most magnetic, powerful thing they ever heard. Just raving about electricity, magnetism. And all I did was sit there and hit G chords."<sup>14</sup>

## ***Tougher than Leather***

### **ELVIS'S '68 COMEBACK SPECIAL**

1968 was the year American culture imploded. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated, the Tet Offensive stoked the passions of the growing anti-Vietnam War movement, and the Democratic Convention in Chicago turned into a violent street riot that led to the infamous trial of the “Chicago Seven,” a band of insurrectionaries that included Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. It was the year that lit a match to the decade’s flashpoints, creating an epic social conflagration.

So where did that leave Elvis Presley? Twelve years after he galvanized youth culture, the lapsed icon was lost in the Hollywood wilderness, a spent creative force churning out puerile star vehicles like *A Change of Habit*, *Clambake*, and *Easy Come, Easy Go*, and he hadn’t had a top-ten hit in three years. Although Colonel Tom Parker had no intention of steering his protégé’s career back toward full-time recording, the films and soundtrack albums weren’t reaping as much revenue as they once did, and while Elvis longed to try his hand at serious acting, Parker wouldn’t have it. Songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who had written “Loving You,” “Jailhouse Rock,” and “Treat Me Nice,” among others, had pitched a film project to Parker in the mid-1960s. “We cooked up this idea for *A Walk*





**"If you're looking for trouble, you've come to the right place": Elvis on the comeback special. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

*on the Wild Side*; it would be an incredible property for Elia Kazan to direct and for Presley to play the lead as Dove," Mike Leiber told *Rolling Stone* in 1990. "We got this notion to Parker, and the word we got back was, 'If you two jerks don't mind your own business and stay away from the business of Elvis Presley, I'm going to put you both out of business.'"<sup>1</sup>

But there was always television, the great show-biz redeemer, where everyone from Hollywood character actors Agnes Moorhead and William Demarest to big-band singers Merv Griffin and Mike Douglas had found their second winds. Like so many show-biz artifacts whose careers had been rejuvenated by television, Elvis was ready for his cathode-ray close-up.

In October 1967 Colonel Parker met with NBC vice president Tom Sarnoff to propose a deal: Elvis would star in his own Christmas special in exchange for a commitment from the network to finance an

Elvis film, all for \$1,250,000. Sarnoff signed off on Parker's proposal. Elvis, he reasoned, was still Elvis, and even if people weren't going to see his awful films anymore, those who had grown up listening to his music would certainly tune in to watch him sing Christmas songs on television. Besides, Elvis hadn't appeared on television in eight years, which would give the special a big event buzz.

The next spring, Elvis and Parker met with NBC executive producer Bob Finkel, who expressed reservations about Elvis doing a show exclusively devoted to Christmas songs. Parker was adamant; Christmas with Elvis was ideal, all-American holiday TV fare. Finkel wanted something more ambitious in scope, a special that would appeal to a broader spectrum of viewers. NBC may have been interested in Elvis, but a special that abided by Parker's lowest-common-denominator dictates wasn't going to do anyone any good. After much pleading and cajoling, Parker backed off, but only when Finkel assured Elvis's manager that he would be able to squeeze both a sound track album and a Christmas single from the show.

If Parker was playing it close to the vest, Finkel had no doubt that Elvis was game for something new when the singer told him during one of their preliminary meetings that he wanted this special to be a wake-up call to the world that would transform him into something more than just a blip on the pop-cultural radar. With that objective in mind, Finkel knew exactly who to hire as the show's ringleader. Steve Binder was a twenty-four-year-old whiz kid who had already racked up an impressive list of credits: *The Steve Allen Show*, *Hullabaloo*, *Jazz Scene* with Oscar Brown Jr., and Al Jarvis's *Let's Dance*, as well as a series of innovative TV specials starring singers Petula Clark and Leslie Uggams. Binder was that rarity, a director who evinced a keen empathy for pop music and the ways in which formal experiments could spike the music's excitement. Binder's 1965 theatrical feature, *The T.A.M.I. Show*, a pulse-racing concert film showcasing a rainbow coalition of stars (the Supremes, the Rolling Stones, James Brown), effectively used a kind of anti-aesthetic—handheld camera work, juiced-up audio, garish close-ups. It remains the greatest rock concert film ever made.

“When I first started, I was learning as I went along,” says Binder.

“On *Jazz Scene*, I would put Vaseline on the lens for ballads, or go into extreme close-ups all the way through a performance. A lot of executives gasped when I had these long, extreme close-up shots of James Brown and Mick Jagger in the *T.A.M.I.* movie. They would say, ‘Nobody in the theater is going to like it because the shots are way too big for the screen.’”

For Binder, the song was the thing, and technical considerations were of secondary importance. On the Leslie Uggams special, Binder gave the singer free rein to move around the stage as she saw fit, as opposed to hitting specific marks for camera blocking, and wound up getting an unusually spontaneous performance from the veteran nightclub singer. Binder had the kind of creative edge Finkel was looking for, but the director, for his part, wasn’t particularly interested. “I was not an Elvis fan,” says Binder. “I was certainly intrigued by him, but I wasn’t going out and buying his records.” Binder’s business partner Bones Howe, who had worked as an engineer on some Elvis sides in the early 1960s, convinced Binder at least to meet Presley.

“We met in our office at 8833 Sunset Blvd, and immediately, it was ‘Hi, Steve,’ ‘Hi, Bones,’” Binder recalls. “We didn’t talk much about the special, just small talk. We told Elvis about how we were working with Jimmy Webb at the time, and how we had heard Webb play ‘MacArthur Park’ for the first time before he offered it to the Association, who turned it down ’cause they couldn’t get the publishing. We asked Elvis if we would have taken ‘MacArthur Park,’ and he said, ‘Absolutely!’ So I knew he wasn’t just some guy who was living in the past.” Binder got down to business: “I told Elvis exactly where I felt he was at. I said, ‘Look, you haven’t seen a hit record on the charts in four or five years, and your movies have obviously dwindled down to zero.’ We talked about a lot of things like that, and I think he really liked my bluntness.”

Despite Elvis’s eagerness to try something innovative, he still had some misgivings about appearing on TV after such a long layoff. What if he couldn’t hit his marks, or looked ridiculous? “I find with all performers who are not basically concert performers, TV is just not their turf,” says Binder. “They can’t feel it, you know? It’s strange,

and cameras are photographing them, and so forth. So I said to Elvis, 'why don't you make an album and I'll put pictures to it?' That clicked with him."

What Binder had in mind was a special whose story line would be drawn from old Elvis songs and new material written exclusively for the show. "I told Elvis, 'This is going to be you and your music, it will all come from you, and that will be our script,'" he remembers. Convinced that Binder was his man, Elvis decamped to Hawaii for a short vacation on May 18 while Binder, Howe, and hot TV writers Allan Blye and Chris Bearde, who were working on the groundbreaking variety show *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, fashioned a working script. "Elvis was almost convinced, I'm sure, that all of this success he had he didn't deserve, it was all because the Colonel had this great PR machine that was grinding away and made him this unbelievable superstar and he hadn't done anything," says Binder. "I was there to convince him that he really was who he was, you know?"

Binder's brain trust came up with a loosely structured narrative based on Maurice Maeterlinck's 1909 play *The Blue Bird*. Using Jerry Reed's song "Guitar Man" as the special's leitmotif, the story line would follow Elvis all over the globe in pursuit of fame and fortune, until he finally discovers the "bluebird of happiness" at home. It was a shopworn conceit fit for a movie of the week, and Elvis loved it.

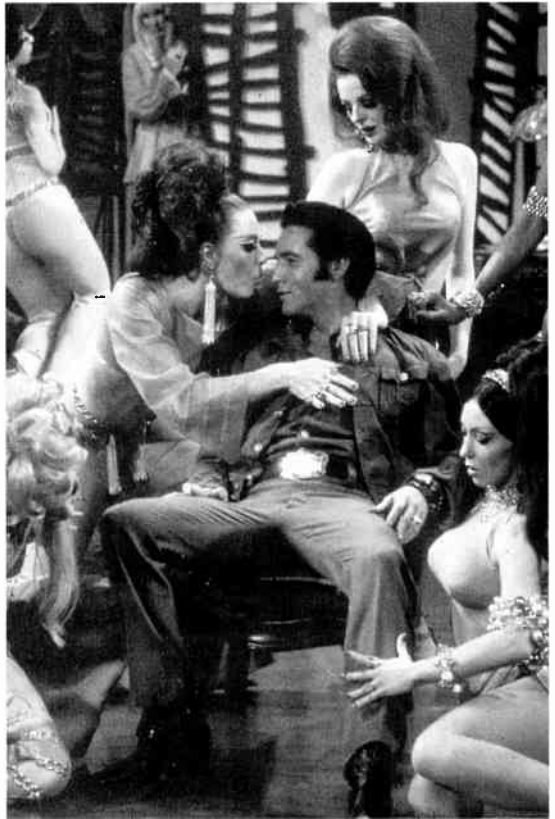
Elvis returned from his vacation on June 2nd, and Binder showed him around NBC's Stage 4, where the special was to be taped: "Elvis said, 'I'd like to live here,' and I said, 'OK, we'll change the dressing room into your living quarters, and when you do the show, you can live in it.'" That turned out to be the easiest task Binder would encounter during preproduction. For one thing, Elvis's personal music arranger, Billy Strange, had thus far been a no-show—he chafed at sharing the job with Howe and orchestrator Billy Goldenberg—and with the taping only six weeks away, Binder feared the production could shut down. That, compounded by Parker's dismissal of Bones Howe over a dispute regarding sound track residuals, left the special in state of limbo.

After consulting with Goldenberg, Binder defied Parker, fired Strange, and rehired Howe to be the show's musical producer. After

all, Goldenberg's background was Broadway, not rock 'n' roll, and Howe's producing credits with the Association, Laura Nyro, and Jimmy Webb made him the right man for the job.

Binder's production crew—set designer Gene McEvoy, choreographers Claude Thompson and Jaime Rogers, and costume designer Bill Belew—had all racked up extensive credits on music-driven shows; most of them, in fact, had worked on both the Petula Clark special and *Hullabaloo*. From the start, Binder laid down the gauntlet for his production team. That meant building sets that matched the eye-popping, color-drenched tableaux of the classic MGM musicals of the 1950s, choreographing intricate dance steps that showcased Elvis's skills as a hooper, and clothing the rock icon in garb that was on the cutting edge of contemporary fashion. "The mandate was to take Elvis a step further than the movies he had been doing," says Gene McEvoy. "He was obviously very unhappy with the movies because Hollywood just treated him like a freak, for the most part."

It was Belew who came up with the black leather suit that transformed Elvis into a born-again sex bomb. "Bill and I had found a photograph of Marlon Brando sitting on that motorcycle in *The Wild One*, and we decided that was a really hot look," says Binder. "So Bill based the suit on that photo." For all of its visual appeal, the suit presented technical problems once taping got underway. "The lights in those days



**A shot from the deleted bordello scene. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

were really hot, and we had to use the suit twice for two tapings,” says Binder. “We had to blow-dry the sweat out of the suit to make it workable the second time.”

Rehearsals for the show proceeded smoothly, with Parker mercifully staying out of everyone’s hair and Elvis frequently putting in sixteen-hour days with Binder and the crew. “During the wind-down sessions after rehearsals, Elvis and some of his buddies would sit around their dressing room playing guitars,” recalls Binder. “It was amazing.” Binder immediately knew he wanted to work these informal jam sessions into the show somehow, and asked Parker if he could bring the cameras into Elvis’s dressing room, but, predictably enough, “He absolutely forbade it.”

Instead, Binder worked out a compromise whereby NBC would fly in Elvis’s original guitarist Scotty Moore and drummer D. J. Fontana so Binder could set up a staged “impromptu” jam in an intimate setting. Moore and Fontana were not only old friends, but crucial players from Elvis’s halcyon past—a living link to his great musical legacy. One night after a post-rehearsal dinner, Elvis talked to Scotty Moore about his need to break free of Parker’s schlocky endeavors. “He asked me what would be the chances of us going into the studio and just locking the doors for a couple of weeks to see what we could come up with,” wrote Moore in his memoir, *That’s Alright, Elvis*. “I told him sure, to just let me know when. He didn’t say what was on his mind. I know he was tired of the movie songs. He might have wanted to go back to where we were in the early years.”<sup>2</sup>

The special renewed Elvis’s faith in his own craft—his ability to create something worthwhile without sacrificing his integrity on the altar of commerce. Orchestrator Billy Goldenberg remembers Presley being so jazzed by the recording sessions for the special that took place at Western Recorders Studio in Hollywood that “it was like he just fornicated. I mean, he was on such a high, he was so involved and excited and emotionally charged—I don’t remember anything in my life like that, frankly.”<sup>3</sup>

As the June 27 taping day approached, everything was running about as smoothly as Binder could have hoped. Yet one vexing matter had yet to be resolved with Parker. Elvis’s manager still insisted on

closing out the show with "I'll Be Home for Christmas" in the hope that he could turn it into a hit holiday single, but Binder dissented: a Christmas song would add a cloyingly dissonant note into the director's spirited, secular song-and-dance fantasia.

"So I told Billy Goldenberg and [songwriter and arranger] Earl Brown, you know, you've lived with Elvis for six weeks now, you know him as a man that nobody knows, so let's write a song that reflects that," says Binder. "Earl went home and called me the next morning." The song, "If I Can Dream," was no less mawkish than "I'll Be Home for Christmas," but at least it could be passed off as Elvis's personal mission statement, a from-the-heart paean to global harmony that would humanize Elvis and cast him as a goodwill ambassador.

Parker hated it. When Binder pitched it to him, he responded with an unambiguous "Over my dead body." Undeterred, Binder did an end run around Parker and played the song for Elvis with Howe, Goldenberg, and Earl Brown present and the omnipresent Parker cooling his heels in the hallway. "It was very exciting," recalls Earl Brown. "I remember when we played the song for Elvis, he didn't say anything at first, just, 'Play it again.' So we did. And then he wanted to hear it a third time. So we did, and after that, he just said, 'I'll do it.'" A cowed Parker demanded 100 percent of the publishing. "Billy said, 'Earl wrote the song,' and erased his name from the lead sheet," says Binder. "That erasure probably cost Billy about a quarter of a million dollars."

On June 26, the day before the informal jam session with Moore and Fontana was to be taped, Parker requested that Binder hand over all of the studio tickets so he could corral an audience for the show:

He said give me all the tickets, and I mean all the tickets, none for you, none for the sponsors, none for the network, I will bring you plane-loads of Elvis fanatics. So I went to Finkel and we agreed to give the Colonel all the tickets. The day before the improv session, I'm driving through the gate at NBC and the guard calls me over and says, "Hey, Steve, do you need any tickets for the improv shoot tomorrow?" and I say, "What are you talking about?" I look over and he's got a stack of the tickets sitting there. I said, "Who

gave you these?" And he says, "Oh, some little bald-headed guy came over and handed them to me and told me to give them out." So, the night that we were going to tape the improvs, we had no audience. I arrived the next morning to the studio, and there wasn't anybody standing outside like, you know, they do at Burbank for *The Tonight Show*. So we called some local disc jockeys and asked them to announce the taping. We went to Bob's Big Boy in the Valley and we asked people who were eating lunch, "Do you want to come see Elvis?" And I realized to the Colonel it was all a game, it was all just that kind of magician, sleight-of-hand kind of thing.

Were it not for Binder's last-minute support, the tickets might have been worthless. Elvis, finally succumbing to the pressure of the moment, informed Binder at the last minute that he wouldn't be participating in the special: "When we went out to do the improv part, I went into the makeup room, and he told me, 'Steve, I don't think I can go through with this.' I told him, now isn't the time to back out, and that he had to go out there. Elvis said, 'What if I can't think of anything to say?' and I told him, if you can't think of anything, walk out, say goodnight, and leave, but you've got to go out there."

*Singer Presents Elvis's* opening segment is a tour de force. It begins with a tight close-up on Elvis's face—leering, heavy-lidded, and ready to rumble. He sings the opening line of the Leiber-Stoller song "Trouble"—"If you're looking for trouble/You've come to the right place/If you're looking for trouble/Just look right in my face." Binder then cuts to a medium shot of Elvis, his taut frame clad in an all-black ensemble, with a fire-red Gibson guitar slung over his shoulder. "I'm Evil, my middle name is misery," Elvis sings, and the stark blackness behind him is lit to reveal a multi-tiered scaffold similar to the one found in Elvis's 1957 film *Jailhouse Rock*, with numerous "Elvis" dancers bumping and grinding to Bones Howe's blowsy arrangement.

Billy Goldenberg's orchestra then quickly switches gears into "Guitar Man," and Binder cuts to Elvis, once again framed against a black void. The director then slowly pulls back to reveal Elvis positioned between the *L* and the *V* of a huge, red neon Elvis sign. The song fades out, and the screen goes to black with no opening credits



or voice-over announcements—just that Elvis sign. It's a visually audacious opener, just the thing Elvis needed to get his message of renewed purpose across to the viewers.

Binder follows that meticulously choreographed segment with a large chunk of the informal jam. Elvis, clad in his form-fitting black leather outfit, is positioned at the fulcrum of a semicircle that includes Scotty Moore, D. J. Fontana, guitarist Charlie Hodge, and crony Alan Fortas, whom Binder decided to add to the mix as a kind of security blanket for the visibly skittish Elvis. Binder's *mise-en-scène* is cramped and casual—he wanted to replicate the unstructured, hothouse atmosphere of those dressing-room jams. “I saw a scared guy during that jam session,” says Gene McEvoy. “The Beatles were out and he had a lot of competition. He doesn't know whether he's coming back or going away.”

Elvis initially seems ill at ease, unsure of his role; it had been a long time since a director had told him not to follow a shooting script. With a thin veneer of sweat covering his face, he runs through the old Lloyd Price tune “Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” his voice breaking into a sandpapery growl, as Fontana keeps time on a guitar case and the two guitarists settle into a back-porch groove. From the outset, Elvis works to distinguish this unpolished version of himself with the Hollywood construct. At one point, Elvis tries to suppress a lip-curl, then tosses out a scripted line about how “I did twenty-nine pictures like that.” In other words, that was then, and this is now, and if you think you've got a bead on Elvis, well, you've got another think coming, baby. “It took all of about fifteen minutes for Elvis to have everyone under his control,” says McEvoy. “You can see the change in the man. He just opened up and became the guy he really was.”

Binder follows the impromptu jam with a stand-up solo performance, whereby Elvis, with Goldenberg's orchestra accompanying him, would get to flash his charisma and work the kinks out of his creaky dance moves. With the bused-in audience crowding the stage like spectators at a cockfight, Elvis runs through a medley of some of his most familiar hits—“Heartbreak Hotel,” “Hound Dog,” and “All Shook Up.” He looks great, but his movements are hamstrung by the tight leather outfit—the most he can muster are a few halfhearted

jackknife moves. Not that it matters—Elvis is loose and relaxed, emitting a pronounced sexual charge as he dabs off sweat with handkerchiefs borrowed from female audience members. He isn't quite the Elvis of old, and Goldenberg's overblown arrangements don't help, but for the first time in years he's undeniably *relevant*.

That's made even more apparent when Binder cuts back to the improv jam session, unquestionably the show's highlight. Prodded by his own desire to prove his mettle as a legitimate artist, Elvis betrays a renewed commitment to old favorites, drawing from a wellspring of gospel, country, and R&B influences to achieve a charged musical frisson not heard since his glory days at Sun. As Peter Guralnick writes in the second volume of his definitive Presley biography, *Endless Love*, "It is 1955 and 1956 all over again, as, without rules, outside of all the normal guidelines of show business, of polite professional and social intercourse, with nothing in fact but a bemused instinct for his own charm, an innate belief in his ability to locate just what his audience is looking for, and a belief in that audience itself, Elvis explores uncharted territory, creates himself as he would like to be."<sup>4</sup>

After introducing Moore and Fontana, Elvis charges into "That's All Right," "the very first record we ever made," his legs doing scissor kicks while the band members cheer him on with rebel yells. There's a version of former Sun Records labelmate Joe Hill Louis's "Tiger Man" that feels endearingly tossed-off even if it isn't, and a smoldering take on "Trying to Get to You" that finds Elvis effortlessly in command of his high register during the song's tricky bridge.

The music seems to send an electric current through him. He's now playing Scotty Moore's trusty Gibson 400 Starburst electric guitar, and tossing off nimble blues licks during Jerry Reed's "Baby, What Do You Want Me to Do." It doesn't take long for Elvis to start chafing at the staged formality of Binder's informal setting, and he requests a strap for the guitar so he can stand up. When no strap materializes, Charlie Hodge suggests he just wing it. Smiley Lewis's "One Night" is performed upright, with Hodge propping up the mike stand for Elvis. It's one of the highlights of Elvis's thirty-five-year-career.

The barn-burner atmosphere is prematurely squelched at the segment's conclusion, when Elvis leaves the band behind on the stage,

walks over to the stairs, and sings the saccharine Billy Strange–Mac Davis ballad “Memories” to the camera in his best quavering croon. It was precisely the kind of momentum-killer that Binder had battled with Parker to leave out of the show, but even Elvis was a sucker for Hallmark card sentiment.

The second half of the special is devoted to the “Guitar Man” set piece that Binder, Bearde, and Blye had written. Although it packed all of the choreographed flash, saturated color schemes, and high production value that Binder insisted was essential for the show’s success, it nonetheless came off as standard-issue 1960s variety-show material, albeit with a burnished visual patina.

The set piece begins with Elvis as a lonely innocent in the big city, lost in a gritty urban demimonde of loose women and shifty con men. Using Reed’s “Guitar Man” as a thru-line, the segment takes Elvis on a journey of self-discovery, where he stares down a Big Boss Man, fights off some thugs with a few well-placed karate kicks, and finally winds up singing the Coasters’ “Little Egypt” in Big Jack’s nightclub wearing a gold lamé suit.

Binder shot another sequence for this portion of the show set in a bordello, in which Elvis falls for a young prostitute who has not yet sold herself, but was forced to cut it when NBC’s sister company General Electric took issue with its mild sexual content. “The representatives from [the show’s main sponsor] Singer and their ad agency were on the set on the day I was gonna shoot the sequence,” recalls Binder. “The first thing they took issue with was the girls’ cleavage in their bodices. I appeased them by covering it up with netting. Then the guy from the ad agency starts making a big deal out of the scene, telling us it’s too risqué for television. I just told them, ‘Look, I’m gonna shoot this thing. You gotta tell me now if you don’t want it.’ They were afraid I was gonna walk off the project, so they let me shoot it.”

Nothing more came of it until Binder was editing the special and received word from NBC president Herb Schlosser that the sequence would have to be excised from the final cut: “The sponsors had turned on me after giving me their word.” In a classic example of corporate buck-passing, Schlosser, who had vowed to fight for Binder, deferred to General Electric to make the final decision.



**The jam session: (l to r) Elvis, Scotty Moore, D. J. Fontana, Abe Fortas, and Charlie Hodge. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**

“Some guy in a brown suit and brown shoes who knew nothing about television came down to the basement at NBC where I was editing,” says Binder. “There was a Dean Martin special being cut on another machine and there was a scene with Martin, Phil Harris, and this enormous, huge-chested blonde with lots of cleavage, and I remember this guy just laughing his head off. I thought to myself, ‘I’m in.’” Then it was time for the GE suit to view the Elvis sequence: “He looks at it stone-faced, then turns to me and says, ‘You can’t use it,’ and I said, ‘But this Dean Martin thing is 100 times worse.’ He just turned his back on me and walked out.” (The sequence was not seen on television until after Elvis’s death in 1977.)

The “Guitar Man” segment, with or without the bordello sequence, never quite resolves itself satisfactorily; Binder arbitrarily cuts to Elvis singing a reprise of “Trouble” and “Guitar Man” during his stand-up performance to close it out. The show ends with Elvis, now clad in an angelic white suit, singing Earl Brown’s “If I Can Dream,” its hopeful message of “a better land where all my brothers can walk hand-in-

hand” providing the life-affirming denouement that Binder felt the show needed.

*Singer Presents Elvis* was an unqualified smash. Despite the mixed critical reception—“I don’t think many viewers care to see singers sweat on TV,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times* critic,<sup>5</sup> while *Variety* felt the special “didn’t have the zing of the old hip gambit”<sup>6</sup>—the special was the most-watched show of the season, with a 32.0 Nielsen rating and a 42 percent share of the viewing audience. The sound track album culled from the special went to number one, and the single “If I Can Dream” became Elvis’s first real hit in four years.

*Singer Presents Elvis* brought about a creative and commercial rebirth for Elvis. Eager to recapture the gutbucket vibe he had conjured up with his old sidemen on the TV show, Elvis returned to Memphis in January 1969 to make the first studio recordings in his hometown since the Sun Records sessions. *From Elvis in Memphis* was recorded at American Recording Studios with its owner, producer Chips Moman. Moman, a Georgia native, had already achieved near-legendary status for his work with the stunning roster of R&B artists on the Stax label, and supplied the immediate, rawboned sound that Elvis’s records had lacked since the mid-1950s. *From Elvis in Memphis* spun off a series of superb hits—“Kentucky Rain,” “Suspicious Minds,” “Don’t Cry Daddy,” “In the Ghetto”—that turned Elvis into a consistent hit maker again.

But warring impulses were at work within the Presley camp. Colonel Parker cared little about the creative renaissance that *Singer Presents Elvis* had sparked. More important, Elvis was a hot commodity again, and Parker, eager to cash in on his newly bankable client, arranged a series of concert dates. In the summer of 1969 Elvis made a return to live performance with an engagement at Kirk Kirkorian’s International Hotel in Las Vegas. Less than a year after the 1968 comeback special, Elvis had morphed into a jumpsuited Vegas headliner, and it didn’t take too long for him to settle comfortably into a benumbed state of creative torpor and rote crowd-pleasing.

It was this new lounge-lizard incarnation of Elvis that Parker arranged to beam into the living rooms of viewers around the world in January 1973. The previous summer, Parker had conceived of a

concert that would top anything ever attempted on TV—a global broadcast beamed from Hawaii (the American state with the earliest time zone) via satellite to almost 1.5 billion people. He promptly sold NBC on the idea, but only if the network could hire someone with the experience and expertise to pull it off. Marty Pasetta, a forty-one-year-old veteran director, was eminently qualified to mount a big production in Hawaii, having had directed five variety specials with Hawaiian singer Don Ho.

Pasetta, like Steve Binder, was not a huge fan of Elvis, and he was unimpressed by Presley's live show. "I went to see him in Long Beach, California, and he just stood there like a fat lump," says Pasetta. "He didn't do squat, and he had a bunch of dirty drapes around him, but the audience loved him, anyway." Pasetta knew that it would take something more than the lumpy Presley's star power to win over a massive television audience this time around. Working closely with art director Ray Clauson, Pasetta came up with the idea of using thousands of lightbulbs, which would sell the glitz of Elvis's newly Vegas-ized image ("What's Vegas if not lots of lightbulbs?") and create an interesting visual palette for the cameras to focus on. Elvis's name spelled out in different languages would be in lights thirty feet high over the proscenium, and a runway would extend out into the crowd to create an illusion of intimacy between Elvis and the audience.

NBC signed off on the concept, but it was left to Pasetta to get Parker's approval. "I went to the Vegas Hilton to meet the Colonel in the gambling area there, which is where he conducted a lot of his business," says Pasetta. "I told him how I thought Elvis wasn't very exciting as a performer, and we immediately had an argument about that. Then I laid out the concept for the special, and he knocked everything down—'It's just gonna be Elvis up there singing, nothing else.' I mentioned the runway, and he says, 'The stage is ten feet high, and we're gonna have guards. No runway.' So I asked him if I could at least meet Elvis, and tell him my ideas."

Parker made a phone call and escorted Pasetta to the elevators. Once the doors parted, Pasetta was greeted by two burly bodyguards, who escorted him to Elvis's suite. "It was cavernous, like a ballroom,"

recalls Pasetta. "The room was empty, except for four chairs around a small coffee table. No Elvis." After what seemed like an eternity, Elvis finally emerged from his bedroom, wearing oversize sunglasses so impenetrable Pasetta couldn't see his eyes. "Elvis sits down, and doesn't say a word," says Pasetta. "Then the two bodyguards took out their silver-plated guns and placed them on the table in front of me. Don't think that didn't send a shiver through me."

Pasetta was desperate to get his pitch across to Elvis quickly, so he went for broke. After providing the singer with a curt review of the Long Beach performance he attended ("I told him he was fat, boring and awful, yet exciting"), Pasetta quickly ran through his Hawaii show ideas, while Elvis sat there, stoic as a statue. "I told him about how the runway would bring him close to the girls, and if he didn't want to use it, he could just move away," says Pasetta. "Then I told him he had to lose weight. Elvis just laughed, jumped out of his chair, threw off his glasses, picked me up and hugged me. He said, 'You're the first producer that's ever told me the truth.'" Pasetta was relieved, but the question remained: What about the Colonel? "Elvis said, 'He takes care of the bookings, I handle the creative part. I'll talk to the Colonel.'"

Elvis convinced Parker to give Pasetta free rein; now came the hard part. Hawaii would provide pretty pictures, but it lacked the production resources of the mainland. Clauson had to have the elaborate stage set constructed in Los Angeles and shipped by freighter across the Pacific to the Honolulu International Center Arena. Pasetta's six TV cameras also had to be transported by ship, which took weeks. Once everything arrived, there was little preproduction time—a few dry runs with the band at the Hilton, one camera rehearsal in the arena, and then the broadcast.

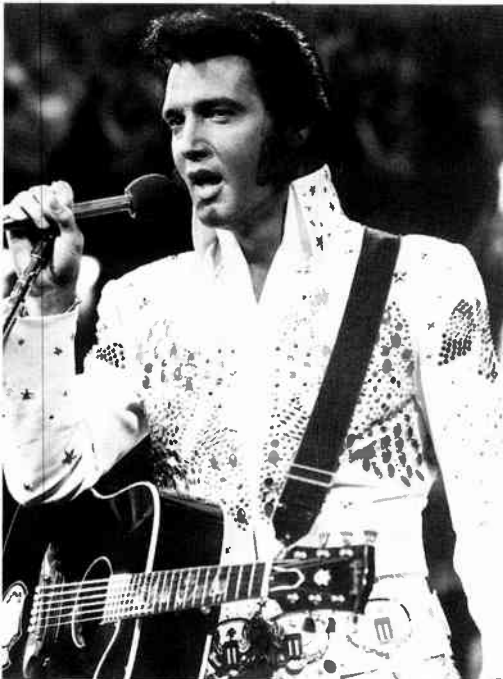
Elvis, for his part, was thoroughly in the mix, selecting material for the show and collaborating with costume designer Bill Belew on a gaudy jumpsuit emblazoned with red, white, and blue American eagles, an eagle belt, and a jewel-encrusted cape. Parker suggested a show opening: how about having Elvis arrive by helicopter to a gaggle of well-wishers outside the arena? "In addition to all the people, Colonel had these crazy robots outside the area, and one of them had

a sign that said, ‘Produced by Pasetta Productions,’” says Pasetta. “I guess that was his way of making amends with me.”

Given the high expectations and media hype, *Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite* was an oddly subdued affair that definitively codified the singer’s slick Vegas persona—this was the benchmark performance that would be used as fodder for countless satirists and Elvis imitators in the ensuing years. Elvis was certainly in fighting trim, having lost twenty-five pounds on a crash diet. Snugly cinched into his white suit, his hair coiffed into a modish brush cut with mutton-chop sideburns, Elvis kicks off the broadcast with the song that had become his standard Vegas show opener, the Chuck Willis classic “C. C. Rider.” A thirty-foot-tall neon likeness of Elvis pulses above the band, and the Elvis signs flash like broken traffic lights. “Thank you, you’re beautiful,” Elvis tells the crowd at one point, sounding for all the world like a bad Wayne Newton imitator. Five years after successfully rehabilitating his image on the comeback special, Elvis was now doing his unwitting best to tear it down again with an over-the-top exercise in unctuous insincerity.

Most striking about the special for those viewers who had never

seen the Vegas act was how disengaged Elvis appeared to be. He was content to tick off the performance “beats” by rote, as if it were just another gig. The material is top-heavy with sentimental schmaltz like “You Gave Me a Mountain,” “An American Trilogy,” and “My Way,” while his own hits are treated like tossed-off novelties. For much of the performance, he stands riveted to one spot, his bejeweled hand gripping the mike as if it were a



**Elvis on *Aloha from Hawaii*.** (Michael Ochs Archives.com)



life buoy, his legs managing an occasional halfhearted heel swivel. Periodically, he walks over to designated scarf supplier Charlie Hodge, who drapes him with a souvenir to hand to the ladies.

Despite *Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii's* hollow fakery, its big-event aura was potent enough to make the show one of the most-watched specials of the 1970s. In places like Japan, a highly competitive television market with six different networks, the show gained an astounding 95 percent share of the audience. The U.S. broadcast, which aired three months after the original satellite transmission, garnered a 33.8 rating and a 57 share, temporarily knocking *All in the Family* off its top perch, while the album culled from the concert went to number one on *Billboard's* Top 200 album chart—the first number-one album for Elvis since the sound track for the 1964 film *Roustabout*.

Perhaps the special's positive reinforcement did Elvis more harm than good. Even as he spiraled into a cloistered, forlorn lifestyle stoked by prescription drugs, junk food, and paranoia, the Vegas act continued unabated. By 1977 Elvis resembled a garish doppelganger of his younger self. Grossly overweight and increasingly morose, his too-tight jumpsuits now a poignant symbol of his own spiritual and physical dissipation, Elvis trudged through performances so desultory they hardly seemed worth the effort. Yet Colonel Parker, still looking for ways to profit from the Elvis brand name, managed to cut a deal with CBS in the summer of 1977 for a televised concert special that would pay out \$750,000.

Why Elvis would consent to such a public display of his own Fellini-esque grotesquerie remains a mystery; Parker claimed at the time that CBS made an offer they simply couldn't refuse, but the colonel's huge gambling debts probably had more to do with it. Whatever the reason, it was an ill-considered move. Given the fact that the two shows taped for the special took place two months before Elvis's death, it's hard to summon anything but a mixture of repulsion and pity upon watching *Elvis in Concert*. Bloated, ashen, and sweating uncontrollably, Elvis looks utterly and irrevocably lost, as if he knows he has nothing left to give. "It was almost like he was saying, 'Okay, here I am, I'm dying, fuck it,'" concert promoter Tom Hulett recalled. "I've never seen a backstage area so sad."

## ***Couch Time with the Counterculture***

In the mid-1960s, rock and television had arrived at an uneasy yet mutually beneficial *détente*. As long as the British Invasion kept spitting out fine young lads like the Dave Clark Five and Herman's Hermits, and fresh-scrubbed American pop and soul stars like the Rascals and the Supremes kept things on the innocent tip, TV welcomed rock as a lure for the eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic. In 1967, however, that common ground fissured and cracked when the Beatles shed their boy-next-door pose, grew facial hair, dropped acid, and released their self-serious, acid-stoked *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

That album left a permanent schism between pop and rock and fomented the countercultural revolution. To the music's new guard—Hendrix, Joplin, the bands of the Haight-Ashbury cabal—pop was fatuous kid's stuff, while rock was battling it out on the front lines, addressing divisive social issues and testing the limits of mainstream propriety. Thus, television yet again found itself treading a fine line, satisfying younger viewers' appetite for confrontational artists while trying to keep things kosher. No one found this a tougher pill to swallow than TV personality Steve Allen.

A native of Phoenix, Arizona, Steve Allen, like virtually every other television pioneer, began his career in radio. He eventually

landed his own half-hour variety show on KNX-TV in Los Angeles in 1948, and its success eventually led to his first national TV job, as the host of *The Steve Allen Show* on CBS in 1950, and then as the first host of *The Tonight Show* in 1953. A self-described “phenomenon,” Allen’s undeniably a cross-disciplinary polymath. An accomplished jazz pianist, he’s composed hundreds of songs, authored over fifty books on everything from comedy to China and Jesus cults, and logged thousands of hours on TV. Though Allen comes off as a stodgy reactionary today, in the 1950s he was a stodgy, reactionary hipster who hung out with Jack Kerouac and recorded albums with cool jazz cats like Milt Hinton and Urbie Green.

At his peak, Steve Allen was one of TV’s most innovative funnymen; his knowing irreverence and formal experimentation laid the groundwork for future late-night smirk-meisters like Jay Leno and David Letterman. Allen was also an ardent champion of jazz, and was the first TV personality to devote an entire show exclusively to the genre in 1957. But Allen was, and remains, a middle-brow snob, and to this day he regards pop music with unshakable contempt. “Steve came from the big-band world,” says former *Steve Allen Show* associate producer Daryl Duke. “His life was composing songs at the piano. In the beginning, he was very dismissive of anybody who held a guitar.”

Ask Allen today about his attitude toward rock, and you’re regaled with the same spiel he’s lobbed at interviewers for decades. “I have recorded rock music, I occasionally write rock music, and I have respect for some rock performers,” says Allen. “And I wouldn’t say my opinion is contempt, although for some specific rock songs it is. They are *that* dumb. Someone asked me about this at one of my concerts recently, and I said, let me put it this way: ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ is better than ‘Switchblade Me Baby, I’m Gonna Stab You Tonight.’”

While it’s true that Allen booked Elvis prior to Ed Sullivan, it was strictly business—he wanted to scoop a hot artist from his time-slot competitor at a time when Allen was desperately trying to keep pace with Sullivan in the ratings. For Allen, the success of Elvis’s music was merely an ancillary by-product of his extraordinary charisma. “I was impressed with him, quite apart from what he sang or recorded,” says Allen.

And there were other rock performers on *The Steve Allen Show*. In 1958 Allen booked Jerry Lee Lewis in what is perhaps the Killer's most unstrung TV performance—a chair-slinging, hell-raising rave-up that sent a chill through the network's Standards and Practices department. But Presley, Lewis, and countless other rock greats of the late 1950s, no matter how wild their stage act or unkempt their hairstyles, still resided within a musical frame of reference with which a jazz lover and antirockist like Allen could feel somewhat comfortable. What was Jerry Lee Lewis, after all, if not a somewhat undisciplined country singer? Not Allen's cup of tea, perhaps, but not quite the Antichrist, either.

Allen's nominal tolerance for rock waned in the 1960s. From a formal standpoint, the British Invasion was simply louder than what had preceded it, and Allen couldn't abide what he regarded as its rude aural assault on American values. Never mind that rock had supplanted jazz and Velveeta pop as America's Music; now it wasn't even being polite about it.

The folk movement, with its pious liberal agenda and do-gooder ethos, was more in line with Allen's way of thinking. He booked Bob Dylan on his syndicated talk show in early 1964, but only because he could pass him off as a kind of fresh-faced boy genius, as opposed to the cantankerous lefty polemicist that more closely resembled the real Dylan. During his long-winded introduction, Allen refers to Dylan as having "the mind of a poet" while cocktail jazz piano music tinkles in the background. Allen then reads the liner notes from Dylan's album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* with hushed, humble solemnity. "He never really sang, he just sort of chanted," says Allen. "His lyrics were interesting. I don't think anyone ever walked down the street whistling a Bob Dylan melody."

Then out comes Dylan, in his typical sharecropper's garb of the period—rumpled Oxford shirt, army jacket, baggy blue jeans, hurricane hair. Allen tries to get Dylan to talk about his songwriting, but Dylan just gives him *The Treatment*—terse, unenlightening responses, a bemused shrug here and there, a tug at his shaggy mane. Watching the always unflappable Allen trying to wrest something out of Dylan is like watching a headmaster trying to elicit the right answer from a reticent yet brilliant student. "I don't think that was the greatest experi-

ence,” says Daryl Duke. “The studio audience was a blue-rinse crowd, and they definitely weren’t there to hear a Dylan song.”

Ironically, Allen had better luck when a twenty-year-old Frank Zappa appeared on his syndicated talk show in 1960 to wrest musical sounds out of a bicycle. At least Allen could mine Zappa’s “bicycle concerto” bit for laughs—it was kind of like a precursor to David Letterman’s Stupid Human Tricks. Allen thrived on the immediacy and serendipity of segments like Zappa’s; it wasn’t lost on him that *The Tonight Show*’s unscripted routines elicited the biggest laughs from the studio audience.

Zappa, appropriately primed in a black suit, thin tie, and neatly slicked-back hair, provides a little biographical background, telling Allen that he’s a composer who just scored “the world’s worst movie,” something called *The World’s Greatest Sinner*. Armed with a pair of “Louis Bellson-style” drumsticks (“Does Louis Bellson know what you’re doing with them?” asks Allen) and a double-bass bow, Zappa directs Allen to a pair of bicycles, one of which is overturned. He then demonstrates for Allen’s audience the various musical sounds that one can elicit from a bike by stroking the spokes with the bow, blowing through the handlebars, running the drumsticks across the wheel. Allen’s bemused but rolling with it—at least the audience is laughing. Zappa, Allen, and the orchestra then proceed to play Zappa’s “Concerto for Two Bicycles,” a wailing cacophony of noise that is surely the most avant-garde moment in the short history of Allen’s syndicated talk show. When it’s all over, Allen snipes, “That’s thirty-two bars”—a beat—“We’re playing like we went to thirty-two bars tonight.”

Steve Allen approved of rock artists inasmuch as they could be used as shills for comedy routines, i.e., Tumbleweed Presley. Ed Sullivan wasn’t a comic—far from it—and his puritanical streak ran even deeper than Allen’s. “Ed was a straitlaced guy,” says *Ed Sullivan Show* producer Bob Precht. “He was his own best censor. An inch of cleavage was a big deal to him. If a deodorant commercial flashed a bare body part that he felt was inappropriate for his audience, Ed would let the network know about it. It’s hard today to even conceive of that kind of prudishness, but nevertheless it was very much there.”

But Sullivan was a slave to ratings, and the Beatles' appearances had hauled in a windfall of ad revenue for the network and a huge teenage audience for the show. When his two-year exclusive contract with the Beatles expired, Sullivan turned to the slew of British bands that rode the band's coattails into America. "In England, you weren't considered a really big hit until you were on the *Sullivan Show*," says *Ed Sullivan Show* director Tim Kiley. "It would make headlines in the British show-biz trades, so all the acts wanted to be on." The Dave Clark Five, an amiable pop band with a jangly, harmony-heavy sound much like that of the Beatles, were booked on the *Sullivan Show* twelve times, a record for a rock act. "I don't think it was a matter of personal taste one way or the other," says Precht. "He saw this phenomenon occurring, and he got feedback from the audiences in the theater and in the ratings, and realized we had to be a part of it."

From 1964 to 1971, when the show finally went off the air after twenty-three years, *The Ed Sullivan Show* was the most important American TV vehicle for rock bands, and virtually every important artist of the era performed on the show. Sullivan trotted out a steady stream of pop, rock, and R&B artists—the Mamas and the Papas, James Brown, Jefferson Airplane, the Beach Boys, Bobby Darin, The Animals, Aretha Franklin, Herman's Hermits, the Byrds, Johnny Cash, Fats Domino, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, and Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps among them.

A few months prior to his appearance on Steve Allen's show, Bob Dylan was scheduled to perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But instead of choosing a politically correct protest song about racial injustice like "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," he chose "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues," a song that had touched off a firestorm at Dylan's record label, Columbia, after it was discovered that Dylan's song equated Birch, at the time a popular far-right extremist, with Adolf Hitler. Fearful of a libel lawsuit, Columbia refused to include "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues" on Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Sullivan and Precht were fine with it, however, and approved the song after hearing Dylan perform it a week prior to the program.

CBS wasn't so charitable. During the May 12 dress rehearsal, the

network's in-house censor, Stowe Phelps, heard the song and, fearing a lawsuit, insisted Dylan sing something else. Sullivan and Precht stood firm, but Phelps would not back down. When Precht requested that Dylan choose another song, he refused, telling the Sullivan show producer, "If I can't sing that song, I won't sing *any* song."<sup>1</sup> Dylan then stormed off the stage with publicist Billy James and manager Albert Grossman in tow and, legend has it, threw a tantrum that night, muttering obscenities about "those bastards" at the network.

The press rallied to Dylan's defense. Nationally syndicated columnist Harriet Van Horne decried CBS's "rigid, narrow" mindset and called "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues" "neither salacious nor libelous. It simply poked fun at a society of political know-nothings whose malicious mischief has already menaced the spirit of free inquiry in our schools, slandered our clergymen, and subverted—in the most evil fashion—the minds of many youngsters."<sup>2</sup> Dylan wrote a letter to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requesting a public investigation, but the story eventually faded away.

"I was Dylan's champion, and so was Ed," says producer Bob Precht. "I really wanted him on the show, 'cause I had seen him early on in the Village. We supported him, but the network overruled us, one of the few times that ever happened." Dylan never did appear on *Sullivan*.

Precht and Sullivan could stand by Dylan in 1963, but as the decade wore on and rock's subject matter became politically confrontational, sexually frank, and drug-friendly, *The Ed Sullivan Show*'s brain trust blanched at the tiniest transgression. Some artists willingly complied with Sullivan's rigid code of ethics for the chance to be on the show. The Rolling Stones had no problem with changing "Let's spend the night together" to "Let's spend some time together" for their January 1967 appearance, even if Mick Jagger did roll his eyes mockingly during the delivery of the line. "I changed the lyric," says the show's music coordinator Bob Arthur. "At that time, the worst you could do was hint that someone was having sex." In a 1968 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Jagger denied ever singing the air-brushed line on the air: "I never said 'time.' I really didn't. I said, mumbled, 'Let's spend some mmmmm together.'"<sup>3</sup>

Sullivan figured the Doors would cave just as readily as the Stones. In the summer of 1967, the L.A. quartet had scored a number-one hit with "Light My Fire," a hypnotic come-on with a darkly menacing undertow that had somehow already become a staple for Vegas lounge lizards and wedding bands, and thus acceptable for the Sullivan show. The song, when performed by Doors singer Jim Morrison, was clearly an invitation to sex, but it was the drug reference in the line, "Girl we couldn't get much higher," that Sullivan didn't approve of, and he insisted that the band alter the lyric.

"I was in the back of a limo with the Doors, and I told them about how the show wanted them to change the 'get much higher' line," says Steve Harris, a former executive at the Doors' label Elektra who chaperoned the band to *The Ed Sullivan Show*. "They seemed fine with it. Three hours later, I get a phone call from Jim Morrison asking me how many millions of people watched *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He seemed nervous, 'cause he realized a great performance on the show could captivate a lot of people. But he was also up to something."

The Doors toed the line during dress rehearsal, trying on different clean variations on the lyric. Then showtime arrived. "I was in the control booth, and the band gets to the line, but Morrison doesn't change it," says Harris. "The next thing I know, Bob Precht gets up and starts screaming, 'They promised me, they promised me!'" When Precht approached the band about it afterward and told them they would never do the show again, "They were cool about it," recalls Harris. "We all went down to Max's Kansas City afterward to celebrate." Adds director Tim Kiley, "The Doors realized this was a live show and that they would probably never be back, nor would they ever want to be. It would have made more of a mess if Ed tried to stop it."

The Doors, for their part, couldn't figure out what the hubbub was all about. "That night, [Doors guitarist] Robbie Krieger, who wrote 'Light My Fire,' told me, 'You know, Steve, the song's not about drugs, it's about love,'" says Steve Harris. "It was much ado about nothing, really, like if people thought Irving Berlin was on acid when he wrote 'Blue Skies Smiling at Me.'"

• • •



As one-half of the musical comedy team the Smothers Brothers, Tommy Smothers's public persona was that of a lovable naïf, a clueless innocent whose tenuous grip on reality always got big laughs and incredulous stares from his long-suffering brother and straight man sibling Dick. Yet during the duo's stormy run on CBS in the late 1960s, Tommy Smothers was television's most dangerous subversive, an antiwar activist who fearlessly used his show as a bully pulpit against injustice and social hypocrisy. He was television's worst nightmare—a successful TV star with a conscience.

Natives of Redondo Beach, California, Tommy and Dick Smothers had immersed themselves in San Francisco's vibrant folk music culture as early as 1959 by performing at local coffeehouses while attending college at San Jose State. The brothers absorbed the musical lessons to be learned from listening to old Josh White and Pete Seeger records, and palled around with their friends Dave Guard and Nick Reynolds, who had recently formed a folk group called the Kingston Trio.<sup>4</sup>

The Smothers Brothers began their show business career as folk-music parodists, performing cheeky interpretations of coffeehouse warhorses like "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" and "I Will Never Marry." By the early 1960s, the duo were swept up in the folk music renaissance sparked by the massive success of the Kingston Trio's 1960 remake of the Frank Proffitt mountain ballad "Tom Dooley." They sold out nightclubs across the country, recorded successful albums, and made numerous TV appearances, most notably on *The Tonight Show* during Jack Paar's tenure. In September 1965 the duo starred in their first TV show, a forgettable sitcom about an ad executive and his brother-ghost called *The Smothers Brothers Show* that lasted a full season before being canceled.

When CBS offered the Smothers Brothers their own variety show in the winter of 1967, their personas were already well known to millions of Americans—Tommy, the daft, perpetually bemused man-child and Dick the levelheaded pragmatist. Their routines were finely calibrated *pas de deux* in which Dick played George Burns to Tommy's Gracie Allen, but, as CBS would soon discover, the brothers Smothers were hardly supper-club quaint.

*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* debuted on February 5, 1967. The Summer of Love was only four months away, but TV comedy was still mired in laugh-track hokum; the most popular sitcoms in 1967 were *Gilligan's Island*, *My Three Sons*, and *McHale's Navy*.<sup>5</sup> CBS wanted *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to be an innocuous comedy-and-music showcase for the same younger viewers who tuned into *The Monkees*. "We want you to be controversial, but at the same time we want everyone to agree with you," Tom Smothers remembers an executive telling him at the time.<sup>6</sup> The network's research department had determined that a variety show that appealed to fifteen-to-thirty-year-olds might have a chance at siphoning some viewers away from NBC's Sunday-night juggernaut *Bonanza*, which had been fending off its time-slot competition with ease since its 1959 debut. Perry Mason couldn't conquer the Ponderosa; nor could Joey Bishop, Judy Garland, or Garry Moore. Now it was the Smothers Brothers' turn. After failing to beat *Bonanza* for years, CBS was ready to take a flyer on two kids in red blazers doing comedy and singing folk songs—what, after all, could be more harmless than that?

"It was the lowest-rated time slot on CBS," says Tom Smothers. "CBS just wanted to put something in there, and as long as the ratings were good, they weren't going to bother us." But Smothers, who had been burned once before with his short-lived sitcom, wasn't about to cede control of the show's content this time around: "We had no control over our prior show, which was a sitcom, so I knew I had to have total creative control over the new show."

Tommy Smothers had no interest in creating just another culturally myopic TV show, conveniently estranged from the real world. Why, he reasoned, couldn't a TV show shed light on important issues at the same time that it entertained? From the start, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (whose writing staff included Steve Martin, Rob Reiner, and David Steinberg) worked against the grain of traditional TV comedy shows, featuring sketches about sex, interracial marriage, even censorship—three of Cathode Nation's most verboten hot-button topics.

Here's a typical exchange from a Smothers Brothers sketch:

*Dick*: We've come a long way since that first Thanksgiving dinner in Plymouth, when the Pilgrims sat down at the table with the Indians to eat turkey.

*Tom*: Boy, I'll say we've come a long way. Now we're in Paris, sitting down at a table with the Viet Cong, eating crow.<sup>7</sup>

After several weeks, the show leapfrogged past *Bonanza* and landed in the number-one spot. But that didn't stop the network's Standards and Practices department from slicing and dicing the shows.

"I performed a sketch with Elaine May about two movie censors," recalls Smothers, "and we had the word *breast* in there, so CBS cut it out of the show. I went to the press, and the *New York Times* printed the entire sketch. That's when we started becoming a cause célèbre against the giant. That's also when Vietnam War consciousness began creeping in." References to pregnancy and words like *conception* were cut out of early sketches. A seven-minute segment featuring Harry Belafonte singing "Lord Lord, Don't Stop the Carnival" against a backdrop of clips from the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention never aired. Neither did an interview with baby doctor and noted antiwar activist Benjamin Spock.<sup>8</sup>

*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, like every variety show of the era, booked the same clutch of rock artists promoting their latest records. But unlike other variety shows, which practiced a decidedly hands-off approach with their rock guests, the Smothers Brothers weren't timid about incorporating little bits of comic business into musical segments. For the most part, the sight gags came off as standard-issue TV corn, as when the Smothers Brothers held up placards bearing slogans like "Hooray for Our Side" during Buffalo Springfield's lip-synch of "For What It's Worth" in 1967. For a show with a social conscience, the duo's yuck-fests staged during somber protest songs provided a dose of irreverence.

"Buffalo Springfield loved it," says Smothers. "These people were all so cool, but they knew that the show made a big difference as far as record sales were concerned. Some other bands weren't so cooperative—the Mamas and the Papas went on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and

pretended not to lip-synch, 'cause it was a signal that they were cooler than TV.”

Other times, it was the bands themselves who supplied the laughs.

The Who were booked on the show on September 16, 1967—the band’s first American TV appearance since the quartet’s triumph at the Monterey Pop Festival—and drummer Keith Moon was going to make sure the band made a big impact on the show’s viewers. It was usually Moon’s practice during the Who’s live shows to “blow up” his bass drum with a well-timed detonation of flash powder at the climax of the band’s feedback-drenched battle cry “My Generation.” During rehearsals for the band’s segment, Moon convinced a few starstruck stagehands to supply him with some extra flash powder.

When it came time for Tommy Smothers to introduce the band during the show taping, Moon was ready for him. After gently ribbing guitarist Pete Townshend, bassist John Entwistle, and vocalist Roger Daltrey, Smothers turns to Moon:

*Tommy:* And over here, the guy who plays the sloppy drums.

What’s your name?

*Keith:* Keith. My friends call me Keith, but you can call me John.

*Tommy:* What’s your next song gonna be?

*Roger:* “My Generation.”

*Tommy:* Well, I can really identify with that, because I really identify with these guys, I dig ’em.

To which Moon spontaneously blows a loud raspberry. Smothers shoots a look at Moon, who’s apparently still bristling from the “sloppy drums” remark. “You’ve got sloppy stagehands around here,” Moon remarks, to big laughs. Townshend, Entwistle, and Daltrey then pantomime their patented stage moves to a prerecorded track of “My Generation,” while Moon makes a mockery of the mimicry. (“I hate it,” he once told an interviewer about lip-synching, “so I go my own way.”<sup>9</sup>)

At the song’s conclusion, Moon ignites the flash powder from his left bass drum, setting off an explosion too intense for the TV cam-

eras to capture. When the smoke clears, Moon, who was thrown back from the explosion, is sprawled over his drums and clutching his left arm, which has been sliced by a cymbal. “I thought [the explosion] had destroyed all the speakers,” says Smothers. “Townshend got up off the ground with his head ringing. That explosion is partially responsible for his hearing problem.”

Smothers then walks back onstage with an acoustic guitar, and Townshend, dutifully following the well-rehearsed script, smashes it to bits. “I didn’t expect Townshend to continue to sketch as we had planned,” says Smothers. “The explosion had disrupted the flow of everything, but he didn’t miss a beat.”

Acts like the Who may have displayed a momentary flash of recklessness, but it was still show business as usual. Everything changed during the show’s second season, when the Smothers Brothers began booking musical guests on the far-left fringe of the counterculture. In less than a year, Tommy Smothers had been radicalized—less by the antiwar movement than by TV itself. “We’d watch TV and be appalled,” said show writer Mason Williams, who lived with Tommy Smothers at the time. “There was nothing for him, or me, or anybody we knew to watch.”<sup>10</sup> How could Smothers abide by network television’s closed-door policy when the Vietnam War was raging and the seeds of counterrevolution were being sowed among his contemporaries? And who better to articulate that discontent than the musical artists leading the charge?

Folk singer Joan Baez, who had become one of the antiwar movement’s most prominent and vociferous voices, appeared on the show in 1969 and was given airtime to dedicate a song to her husband, David Harris, who was serving a jail sentence for draft evasion. CBS director of programming Michael Dann promptly excised the statement and aired a bewilderingly truncated version instead. “I want to dedicate this song to my husband,” Baez was heard to say, “who is in jail.” The story behind that dedication was left unspoken.<sup>11</sup>

“That offended the hell out of me,” says Smothers, “’cause it wasn’t subversive or anything. She was one of the great women of music at that time, and I was embarrassed for her. That was one of the huge anger fits that I fell into. I went to press about that one, and then it

encouraged me to do more.” During the show’s final season, seventeen of the twenty shows were edited. “It’s been a fight all the way,” Smothers said at the time. “From the fourth or fifth show, I would say that in the three years, 75 percent of the material was edited in one way or another.”<sup>12</sup>

The most controversial musical guest during *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*’s brief run was not a bedraggled rock star but a genteel, middle-aged folk singer. Pete Seeger—former card-carrying member of the Communist party and victim of the Hollywood blacklist for well over a decade—was anathema to CBS. A former cohort of Woody Guthrie and an impassioned antiwar activist, Seeger had first gained notoriety as a member of the folk quartet the Weavers, who recorded a huge-selling number-one record with a remake of Leadbelly’s “Goodnight Irene” in 1950. The Weavers were a hugely popular nightclub act during the early 1950s, and recorded a string of innocuously jaunty folk hits, including that old Smothers Brothers live staple, “Tzena, Tzena, Tzena.” They were also blacklisted at the time.

Seeger had been involved with left-wing political groups ever since his days as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he was a member of the Young Communist League. He eventually joined the American Communist party, and offered his talents as a singer-songwriter to various left-wing causes. When the editors of the far-right newsletter *Counterattack* published *Red Channels*, its special report on communism in the entertainment industry, Seeger was singled out for his subversive activities in the service of the Red Menace.

At a time when the Communist scare was reaching fever pitch, and Cold War alarmists were warning of the insidious threat that American pinkos presented to the commonweal, *Red Channels* became a tip sheet for paranoid studio and network executives, who feared reprisals, and more important, revenue loss, if they hired well-known Communists. Given the climate of fear and caution induced by the blacklist, Seeger was doomed to become an invisible man. He didn’t appear on national television for close to seventeen years.

“An old friend of mine had a job in the CBS casting department, and I had asked him if a real blacklist existed, ’cause I didn’t believe it at first,” says Seeger. “He told me, ‘Oh, there’s a blacklist alright.

Every time I cast a show, I have to call an extension number and give the names of the actors. A few hours later they call me back to let me know if someone isn't 'available.'”

The Communist freeze-out didn't begin to thaw until 1960, when director Otto Preminger hired writer Dalton Trumbo to write the screenplay for his film *Exodus*. Trumbo was a Communist and member of the “Hollywood Ten,” a clutch of vehement Hollywood filmmakers who had been jailed for refusing to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947. Soon other former victims of the blacklist were being added to studio payrolls, and banned performers began making the rounds of the TV variety shows. Not Seeger, though, who continued to lend his voice to a number of controversial far-left causes. He had refused to testify before HUAC in 1955, and participated in anti-Vietnam War protests all through the 1960s.

Seeger was so defiantly radical that even *Hootenanny*, the only network show at the time exclusively devoted to folk music, wouldn't book him—which was ironic, considering the show's name was coined by Seeger and Guthrie in the 1940s, a “Hootenanny” signifying an informal gathering of folkies. Only after other folk stars like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez refused to appear on the show did the producers of *Hootenanny* agree to consider booking Seeger and the Weavers, but not until they consented to sign a loyalty oath. They refused, and never appeared on the show.<sup>13</sup>

Seeger may have been absent from television, but he was hard to ignore. Not only had his music become a rallying point for antiwar protestors, but he had also become a hero of the counterculture. Tommy Smothers was among those who looked upon Seeger as a beacon of truth and righteousness, and in 1967 he decided to break the TV ban by extending an invitation for Seeger to appear on the show. “Our roots were in folk music, and I knew that Seeger was being blackballed for some reason,” says Smothers. “I didn't know that he was a Communist, I just thought it was irrational and immoral, denying a person a career like that.”

“We want America to sit back and think while they're watching our show,” said the show's coproducer Saul Ilson at the time. “Not



**The Smothers Brothers with Pete Seeger. (Compliments of Knave Productions Inc.)**

that we're doing these things to be controversial, but to let our audience know that we know what's going on."<sup>14</sup> And there was little CBS could do about it; Smothers had iron-clad control over the show, which meant he could book anyone he wanted to without network interference. "We put him on the booking slip, and CBS was fine with it," says Smothers. "The show was a little off-kilter, anyway."

For his appearance, Seeger had chosen to sing "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," the title track from his most recent album—which, in an odd twist, had been released by CBS's sister company, Columbia Records. The song tells of an incident during World War II in which a platoon is nearly drowned when its commanding captain orders it to forge the Big Muddy River. Unaware of the water's depth and danger, the officer himself is swept away by its currents and drowns. The song was approved by Standards and Practices, with the exception of the final verse:



*Well, I'm not going to point anymore, I'll leave that for yourself.  
Maybe you're still walkin', you're still talkin', you'd like to keep  
your health.  
But every time I read the paper them old feelings come on.  
We're waist deep in the Big Muddy, the big fool says to push on.*<sup>15</sup>

Seeger was using the song's tale of misguided hubris as a metaphor for the Vietnam War, the "big fool" being President Johnson. CBS was predictably outraged, and would only permit Seeger to perform the song if he omitted the last verse. But Seeger wouldn't back down, and neither would Smothers, who convinced the network to let Seeger perform the song in its entirety.

Michael Dann consented to Smothers's request, but when it came time for the show to air, he cut the segment out of the show. The folk legend was incensed, and made sure the press knew about it. "It's important for the people to realize that what they see on television is screened," Seeger told the *New York Times*, "not just for good taste, but for ideas."<sup>16</sup> Tommy Smothers turned the Seeger snub into a personal crusade, and invited the folk singer back on the show in February 1968. CBS was up against the wall. Now that Seeger had publicly aired his grievances against CBS, the network was forced to backpedal, and allowed Seeger to perform "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" in its entirety. "The public opinion was very strong to have him on," says Smothers. "They had gotten such negative press, and people who were watching weren't even aware of what Pete Seeger was all about, anyway."

Smothers had scored a rare triumph over the network, but the Seeger imbroglio had only hardened CBS's position against the show. In April 1969, CBS "fired" the Smothers Brothers on the spurious grounds that Tom had broken the terms of his contract, which stipulated that CBS prescreen all edited program tapes prior to airtime. "Tommy was so confident, and so sure of what he was doing on the show," says staff writer Bob Einstein. "It never occurred to him that it might be canceled." Smothers proceeded to engage in a verbal scorched-earth campaign against the network, insinuating that its CEO, William Paley, may have wanted to cancel the show on the

grounds that it frequently criticized his friend President Nixon, and that Paley was gunning for an ambassadorship to the Court of Saint James. The Smothers Brothers eventually sued CBS for breach of contract and, after years of legal wrangling, were awarded nearly \$800,000 in damages. Smothers and Seeger had scored a small yet significant moral victory against the network, who replaced the show with *Hee-Haw*. "It made me feel hopeful for my country," says Seeger of his appearance on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. "It made me very proud and very optimistic. The Smothers Brothers were basically patriotic. They were just saying, very frankly, 'We want to make the system work.'"

Dick Cavett was the first TV talk-show host to give rock artists quality interview "couch time." A product of Nebraska and Yale, the genteel, well-spoken comic turned talk-show host got his big break writing jokes for Jack Paar on *The Tonight Show* in the late 1950s. He then parlayed that experience into a career as a stand-up comic and occasional game-show contestant, where his wry witticisms got him noticed. ABC signed Cavett to host a daytime talk show in 1968, then hired him to take over their late-night talk show from Joey Bishop in 1969 when the former Rat Packer's ratings began sliding. For ABC, it was a curious move, considering Cavett was hardly the animal-acts-and-Gabor-sisters type.

With his blond hair combed in a neat part, his Brooks Brothers suits, and his patrician locution, Cavett was like an Ivy League debate club president turned TV star. Cavett's talk show was the first to feature middlebrow entertainment without the whiff of snooty paternalism; he was the antithesis of Steve Allen. An astute interviewer with a slyly sardonic streak, Cavett, more than any other media figure of the late 1960s and early 1970s, turned authors into brand-name celebrities, making late-night fixtures out of Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Germaine Greer, and Truman Capote. Cavett's 1971 show featuring Vidal and Mailer, surely one of the most bizarre and compelling talk show programs in television history, turned the two writers' long-simmering feud into the stuff of office water-cooler gossip.

Cavett may have been a contemporary of the rock 'n' roll artists

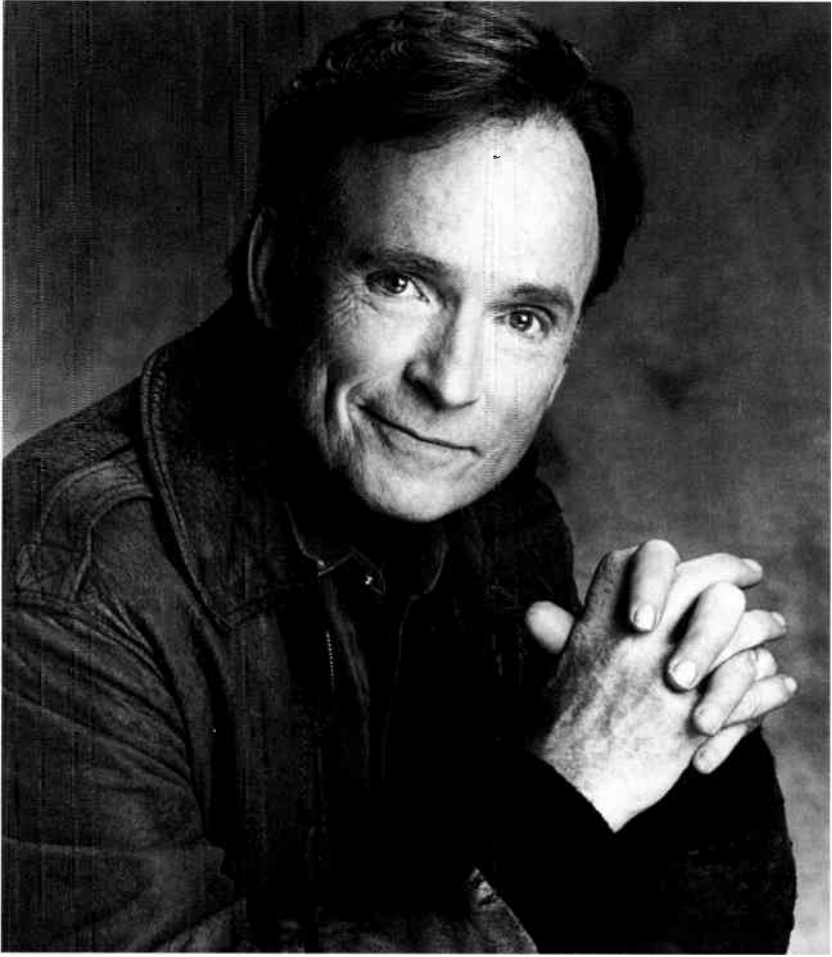
he booked on the show, but he never strained to “relate” to quasi hippie-speak, nor did he flash his limited knowledge of the counter-culture to curry favor. As a result, artists felt more at ease with him than they did with other talk-show hosts; even when he was discomfited by uber-freaks like Joplin and Hendrix, he earned their respect by refusing to pander.

What intrigued Cavett more than the music was the nature of rock 'n' roll celebrity itself; he peeled back the artists' personas to locate the genuine core underneath. “I don't know why, but it just seemed like a good idea at the time,” recalls Cavett. “If you see a brilliant character, you think to yourself, how close is that person to what he's really like? It was fun to see if there was a real personality there.”

There was plenty, as it turned out. Talk shows in the 1960s were not the micromanaged promotional vehicles they are today, and guests were given a wide berth to discuss anything, regardless of whether they sparkled. Because there was no formal code of comportment, rock stars presented a unique challenge, even to an unflappable pro like Cavett. Most of them had little TV experience, didn't benefit from media coaching as they do now, couldn't abide by the normal rules of engagement with their hosts, and were frequently stoned.

Cavett's only show devoted exclusively to rock—an anomaly at the time—occurred on August 19, 1969, just a day after Woodstock, when festival participants Joni Mitchell, Steven Stills, David Crosby, and members of Jefferson Airplane tried their best to conjure a love-in for Cathode Nation. The artists were arranged in a circle, the better to create a crash-pad vibe, and there was music, antiwar sloganeering, and grooviosity in abundance. Cavett hosted the show like a benevolent school rector, eliciting the artists' impressions of Woodstock, the “kids,” and the Vietnam War, and providing a forum for a gentle discourse among his guests—a proto-Bill Maher hosting what might have been called *Politically Correct*. Mitchell, Stills, and Jefferson Airplane all performed; the Airplane's version of “Somebody to Love,” with David Crosby on tambourine and backing vocals, is one for the ages.

“I liked the audience so much on the Woodstock show,” recalls Cavett. “There were all these articles written at the time about the evils of this music, and how there were not gonna be any people with



Dick Cavett. (Photo by Charles Betz)

their brains intact, and there was something so cheerful and innocent, almost a 4-H quality, about that show. One guy said to me, 'I can't believe I'm within the same four walls as Joni Mitchell,' and I thought, should I have known who she was?"

At the height of the hippie movement, Cavett was proud to be square. During his July 16 interview with Janis Joplin, he admits to a love of snorkeling and betrays his Truman-era pop frame of reference by name-checking 1940s singing stars Kate Smith and Jo Stafford. When Joplin mentions that Tina Turner is her favorite singer, Cavett pleads ignorance. "I knew very little about the scene back then," he says. Joplin, clad in a gold macramé vest, red blouse, and purple pants

and smoking a cigarette (a *de rigueur* prop for rock stars on talk shows at the time), seems visibly uncomfortable with having to articulate why she had become, in Cavett's words, America's first "superstar rock lady." She's sweet but unrevealing as she discusses her need to get on "the bottomside of the music instead of floating on top of the melody" and the subdued audiences she performed for on her recent European tour ("They're very cerebral. They don't get down").

Joplin wasn't a Gore Vidal-esque raconteur, but it didn't matter—she delivered incendiary performances of the Bee Gees' "To Love Somebody" and Jerry Ragavoy's "Try (Just a Little Harder)" with the Full Tilt Boogie Band. "Janis was feeling more at home the second time she was on," says Cavett. "She was really enjoying it, but ultimately, there's a reduction of someone like Joplin when you put her in two dimensions."

Jimi Hendrix's September 9, 1969, appearance had the opposite effect—it humanized him, despite the loopy, metaphysical patois he laid on Cavett during his couch time. After performing a medley of his antiwar anthems "Izabella" and "Machine Gun" with drummer Mitch Mitchell, bassist Bobby Cox, and percussionist Juma Sultan, Hendrix, looking Far East chic in a wraparound blue kimono, sits between Cavett and guest Robert Young, but the persistent feedback from his amplifier is distracting Cavett:

*Cavett:* What is that sound that we hear irritating us so dreadfully?

*Hendrix:* It sounds something like the New York streets, I don't know. Like today, the air's all static, so the amplifiers are static, the music is loud so the air is loud. We're trying to settle things down a little bit, but it's gonna take like a rest.

*Cavett:* I ask a practical question, I get a philosophical answer.

*Hendrix:* Is that philosophical?

*Cavett:* I thought it was. There's static in the air today, and all.

*Hendrix:* We're just trying to get a point across before we take our rest (pantomimes sleep).

*Cavett:* We're both gonna sack out. (To Robert Young): Mr. Young, can you entertain the audience for us?

“Well, I was surprised he could talk,” says Cavett. “I had no idea what he was talking about, and neither did he. One can only speculate on what substance might have been causing this phenomenon. But I remember thinking he was quite friendly in a non-crazy way—in the sense that some people would have liked to have thought of him.”

Mike Douglas was the indisputable heavyweight champion of daytime talk in the 1970s. Douglas, whose real name was Michael Dowd, was a native of Chicago and a former naval officer who started his show-business career as a singer for popular bandleader Kay Kyser in the 1940s. As the frontman for Kyser’s spinoff group Michael Douglas and the Campus Kids, the singer was a regular on the radio and TV versions of Kyser’s show *Kollege of Musical Knowledge*, and scored two top-five hits during his tenure with the band—“Ole Buttermilk Sky” in 1946 and “The Old Lamplighter” in 1947.

When Kyser quit show business in 1950, Douglas embarked on a solo career, providing the voice of Prince Charming in Disney’s *Cinderella* and hosting a daytime variety show in Chicago called *Hi Ladies*. In 1961 Douglas moved to Cleveland to try his hand at producing his own talk show. It was an instant hit, and led to a national syndication deal with Group W/Westinghouse in 1963. In 1965 Douglas moved his show to Philadelphia, where it remained for thirteen years.<sup>17</sup>

*The Mike Douglas Show* occupies a unique position in the pantheon of successful talk shows. Because it was usually broadcast in the late afternoon in most parts of the country, its viewership constituency was a patchwork of bored housewives, unemployed loafers, domestic help, and latchkey kids, who flipped on the show when they should have been doing their homework. Douglas was savvy enough to know he had to satisfy the needs of all of those camps if he wanted to thrive in the afternoon, so he booked rock stars along with the usual mix of show-biz hacks. Ted Nugent, Blondie, Peter Frampton, the Rolling Stones, Vanilla Fudge, Chuck Berry—all of them made Mike Douglas’s Philadelphia scene, which was only a two-hour limousine commute from New York.

So did John Lennon. In 1972 the ex-Beatle was hitting the American talk-show circuit with Yoko Ono as a celebrity emissary for

world peace, even while the U.S. government was trying to deport him on the basis of a 1968 drug conviction. Lennon and Ono had moved from London to New York in September 1971 on a waiver granting temporary admission into the United States. During this time, they had become celebrity culture's most outspoken social activists. They participated in a benefit for MC5 manager and White Panther leader John Sinclair, who had been sentenced to a ten-year prison term on a minor marijuana charge, in December 1971; they wrote politically charged songs like "Gimme Some Truth" and "I Don't Want to Be a Soldier Mama I Don't Want to Die;" and they befriended Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the coleaders of the Yippies, whose infamous "Chicago Seven" trial for insubordination in 1968 had turned them into America's radical media darlings.

Lennon's highly visible commitment to leftist causes made him a fat target for the Nixon administration, and when rumors began circulating that Lennon was to perform for an antiwar rally at the Republican National Convention in November 1972, the INS began to clamp down hard, claiming that Lennon's 1968 bust made him an undesirable alien.<sup>18</sup> It was in this heated atmosphere that Lennon and Ono hit the talk-show circuit in the winter of 1971-72, making appearances on *The David Frost Show* and *The Dick Cavett Show*.

*The Mike Douglas Show's* format required that a different celebrity "cohost" the show with Mike each day, and when the show's talent bookers learned of Lennon and Ono's availability, they floated the notion of having the couple co-host an entire week's worth of shows. "John and Yoko at that time in their lives were using the media as yet another communications vehicle," says longtime friend Elliot Mintz. "Virtually anybody who called and provided them with a forum had a chance to get them. Douglas allowed them to bring on their own guests, and that was really appealing to them."

Lennon and Ono taped five shows over a five-week period in January and February 1972, driving into Philadelphia via limo from New York. Douglas usually taped seven shows in five days, which meant that two shows had to be "double-taped" in one day. Douglas thus had to seamlessly segue from the likes of Eva Gabor and Charles Nelson Reilly to John and Yoko's handpicked radical rogue's gallery,

which included Jerry Rubin, Black Panther leader Bobby Seale, and macrobiotic cook Hillary Redleaf. Booking fringe counterculture figures and political extremists on late-night talk shows was in itself a rarity, but to have a steady procession of them in daytime was practically insurrectionary. "I think people were kind of shocked by [the Lencons]," Mike Douglas recalled. "I'm sure we got some pretty interesting mail from our regular fans, 'cause not everyone's thinking was in that direction at the time."<sup>19</sup>

Like Merv Griffin, Douglas was a minor singer who parlayed a benign, pleasant personality into a long and lucrative career as a talk-show host. He didn't possess the cheeky wit of Carson or the quicksilver intelligence of Cavett, but celebrities opened up to him because he was non-threatening—charming, but a touch daft. Case in point: his opening number on the first John and Yoko show, in which he flubbed the French lyrics to "Michelle"—a song originally sung by Paul McCartney—then credited the song to John, who, he tells Douglas later on in the show, only wrote the middle eight section.

Douglas knew next to nothing about rock or the counterculture, but he had respect for Lennon's fame and talent, and the potentially huge viewing audience he could attract. Each program began with a lengthy John and Yoko interview, where the couple touched on a number of different topics: their respective backgrounds, the Beatles, fame, politics, women's lib, marriage, and so on. Yoko would then trot out a conceptual art project. On Monday, it was something called "Unfinished Painting," a blank canvas that the show's guests and audience members could fill in with whatever their hearts desired as the week progressed. On Tuesday, it was "Mend Piece"—a broken teacup that John and Yoko would slowly piece back together until it was whole again by Friday. Douglas handled it all sportingly, like an out-of-touch dad trying to connect with his art-school kids.

Backstage, it was a different story. Douglas had constructed a special dressing room for the couple, complete with new furniture, carpet, and decorations, which John and Yoko proceeded to trash as the week progressed. Yoko, for her part, made impossible demands on the crew, to the point where she alienated nearly everyone associated with the show. Bandleader Joe Harnell, who seemed to bear the





John Lennon and Yoko Ono with Mike Douglas, 1972. (© Michael Leshnov/Lost Archives)

brunt of John and Yoko's mind games, found himself chasing a stoned monkey, who had been plied with pot smoke by Lennon.<sup>20</sup>

The guests that Lennon and Ono handpicked to appear on the show were a roll call of radical chic's most telegenic personalities. Ralph Nader appeared on Monday's show and discussed his new program to mobilize schoolkids into starting their own activist organizations. On Tuesday, Jerry Rubin, after giving Lennon and Ono a big bear hug, tore into a prolonged rant about Nixon ("He's created a situation where forty-three people can be murdered in Attica . . . The atmosphere in this country is just death"); the Vietnam War ("They've automated the war so it's machines now that are killing people"), and the system that "killed my parents."

Douglas barely conceals his contempt for Rubin after this verbal fusillade, and tries to steer him away from all the heated rhetoric with a little up-with-America attitude, but it backfires on him:

*Douglas:* This is the only place in the world, if I may say so, where a man can say something like this on national television.

*Rubin:* No, wait a minute. I've got five years in jail facing me for saying things like this, so it's not so true.

Rubin's antiestablishment jeremiad eventually gets the better of guest Dr. Eugene Steinfeld, the U.S. surgeon general at the time, who berates Rubin for putting down a country that enabled his immigrant parents to find good work and send their kid to medical school. Even Lennon and Ono seem a bit uneasy about Rubin's diatribe after a while. "I wondered if [Dr. Steinfeld] was gonna make it through all this, or would *he* need medical attention," said Douglas. "And I'm a compassionate soul—I'd try to be the mediator and try to keep things on course, but that was tough sledding right then, . . . But there wasn't much I could do—Jerry would say these things."<sup>21</sup>

Six years after CBS banned Pete Seeger for making a veiled reference to the Vietnam War in a folk song, wannabe revolutionaries like Jerry Rubin and Bobby Seale were browbeating America's housewives on *The Mike Douglas Show* with their far-left manifestos, and no one—not Westinghouse, nor the local affiliates who carried the show—was stopping them. In the more culturally permissive TV climate of the early 1970s—an era that witnessed the success of socially conscious shows like *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *M\*A\*S\*H*—high ratings were all that mattered, even if it meant ditching middle-class propriety for radical politics.

The week had its fair share of surreal theater. On Monday's show, Yoko thought it would be a great idea to call up people randomly selected from the nation's phone books and tell them how much she and everyone else on the show loved them. It was a long, arduous segment with the kind of leaden pacing that gives network execs fits. Too many disbelieving callers simply hung up or didn't care, and the segment required a considerable nip-and-tuck edit to make it work for broadcast. "If you had an IQ of 78, you probably ate it up," says *Mike Douglas Show* director Don Waunbaugh. "Otherwise, it was going down the toilet fast."

Comedian Louis Nye, a former regular on *The Steve Allen Show* and one of the few "straight" guests booked that week, saved the day when he called Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo's office and hooked in his secretary. "Could you leave a message for Mayor Rizzo?" Nye told the secretary. "Could you tell him that we love him?"

Lennon and Ono performed a musical number every day of the

week, mostly from Lennon's 1971 album *Imagine* and Yoko's 1970 release *Fly*. Starkly ruminative meditations on love and war, Lennon's selections—"Oh My Love," "Midsummer New York," "It's So Hard," "The Luck of the Irish"—were performed with Elephant's Memory, a shabby New York bar band that Jerry Rubin had recommended to the couple. Rubin also accompanied the band on hand drum—the revolutionary as slumming groupie. Douglas and his brain trust might have preferred Beatles tunes, or that Yoko didn't sing at all, but they took what they could get. "It was almost as if Lennon was promoting Yoko as opposed to himself," says Waumbaugh. "I think it's quite obvious that she had little if any talent, and Elephant's Memory were just awful."

Only one musical event during the week managed to effectively bridge the chasm between square culture and counterculture. Chuck Berry, a frequent guest on *The Mike Douglas Show*, was also Lennon's musical hero, and his appearance on Wednesday marked the first musical meeting between the two icons. "John was just in seventh heaven when Chuck was there," said Douglas. "John treated him the way people would expect us to treat John Lennon."<sup>22</sup>

"Memphis" and "Johnny B. Goode," the two Berry standards that Lennon and Berry performed with Elephant's Memory, sounded horrid from a technical standpoint. But their ragged righteousness was part of their charm. To see an unself-conscious Lennon clearly enjoying himself in the presence of his idol is one for the TV rock highlight reel. "The Berry and Lennon segment sounded bad 'cause there were too many mikes open, and the ceilings in the studio were fifteen feet tall, which meant the sound was bouncing all over the place," says Waumbaugh. "But that segment was genuine, and that's why it worked so well. Lennon was such a big fan, and it was inspiring to see him perform with Berry."

Despite the numerous headaches, Douglas had hit it off with John and Yoko, and eight years later he extended an invitation for the couple to make a return appearance on the show. Lennon agreed; he just needed to put the finishing touches on his latest album. The segment, which was scheduled for December 1980, never happened.

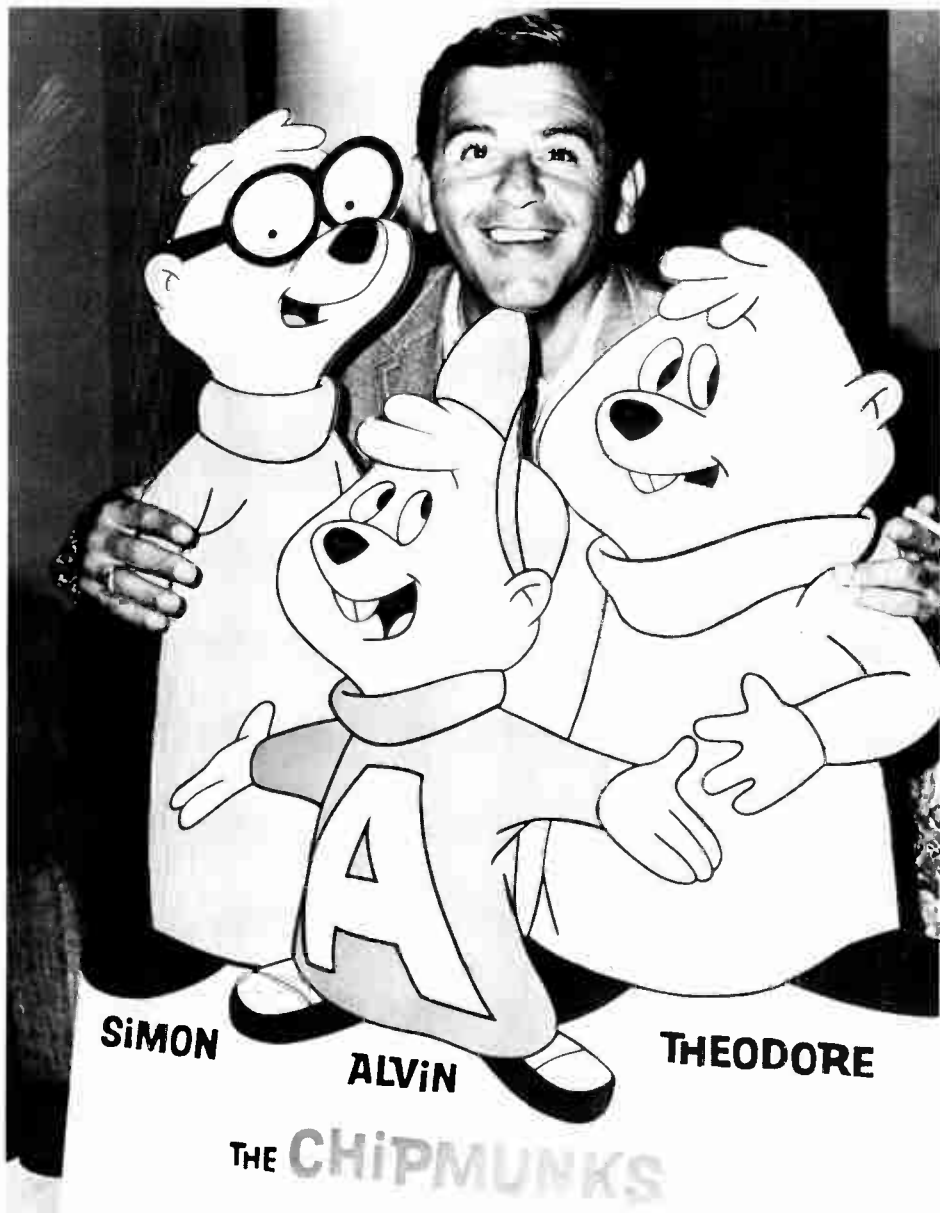
## ***After the Sugar Rush***

### **CARTOON ROCK**

The year: 1971. The time: Saturday morning. The place: AnyKitchen, USA. The protagonist: a nine-year-old kid, munching on his favorite sugar-intensive cereal while keeping his eyeballs affixed to the tube, where a procession of cartoons are teaching him valuable lessons about interplanetary space travel, Mormon pop stars, and clumsy yet lovable simians who wear bowler hats and bow ties. He hears a song, perhaps the Archies' "Sugar, Sugar" or the Osmond's "One Bad Apple," makes a mental note about how groovy it is, then flips his cereal box to read the back cover (a curious yet familiar ritual for 1970s kids) only to discover that the record in question is right there on the box. Suitably thrilled, he carefully cuts along the dotted line, plops the record onto his Close and Play record player, and hums along contentedly.

Scenes like this played themselves out in households all over America from the mid-1960s onward, when rock music became a staple of Saturday-morning cartoon programming for all three networks. The harmonic convergence between pop music and animation lasted until the mid-1970s, when bubblegum pop fizzled out and kids turned their attention to Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and Asteroids.

Cartoons had been running on television since its inception, but



Ross Bagdasarian with the Chipmunks. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

aside from a few original productions, such as Jay Ward's *Crusader Rabbit*, which debuted on local NBC stations in 1949, and CBS's interactive cartoon *Winky Dink and You*, the three networks mostly recycled old theatrical cartoons that had been rendered obsolete, such as the Warner Brothers cache of Looney Tunes shorts and the

Terrytoons library (which included the Mighty Mouse cartoons), which CBS acquired in 1955. But as the movie studios gradually downsized and then eliminated their animation departments, television ramped up its production of original animation programming. By 1966, all three networks featured a full slate of original animated programming on Saturday mornings.<sup>1</sup>

As shows like *The Adventures of Johnny Quest* and *The Jetsons* found huge underage audiences, giant corporate sponsors, especially toy companies and cereal manufacturers like General Mills and Kellogg's, discovered they could move millions of Tonka Trucks and tons of Corn Flakes by advertising on Saturday mornings. This in turn led to the nurturing and cultivation of the tot consumer market, which exploded in the mid-1960s and continued to grow unabated until well into the 1970s.

Just as Madison Avenue was discovering that it could make cereal-munching, toy-lusting consumers out of pre-adolescents, the music business tapped into the knee-high market with the novelty songs of bubblegum pop, a subgenre that relied on cloyingly simple musical hooks and lyrical nonsense, usually set to a nursery-rhyme meter. In many respects, Saturday-morning cartoons and novelty pop were made for each other; both art-pop forms were usually created swiftly, with little money or artistic consideration, and kids, the least discriminating consumers of pop culture, were easy targets for both.

One of pop music's novelty-song pioneers was a first-generation Armenian named Ross Bagdasarian. The child of a Fresno, California, grape farmer, Bagdasarian was a classic dabbler. He wrote songs, he was an actor, he sang—whatever it took to establish a foothold in the entertainment business. “My dad was like an Armenian version of Zorba the Greek,” says Ross Bagdasarian Jr. “He was bigger than life, just an amazingly vibrant person. His motto was always Go Big Or Go Home. He wasn't afraid to fail. He just figured, what's the worst that can happen?”

Bagdasarian spent his twenties peddling his songs to no avail, and when marriage and two kids forced him to become a provider, he decided to tank his show-business aspirations, move back to Fresno, and follow his dad into the grape-growing business. But if there's one

vocation that's more volatile and unpredictable than show business, it's agro-business, and when the bottom fell out of the grape market, Bagdasarian decided to give songwriting one more try. Armed with a clutch of new material, he moved his family to Los Angeles and started song-pitching again. He finally sold a silly piffle called "Come on-a My House" to Mitch Miller in 1953; Miller's recording of the song featuring vocalist Rosemary Clooney became a giant smash.

More songs followed: "Hey Brother, Pour the Wine" was a hit for Dean Martin in 1953, and "Armen's Theme," which Bagdasarian recorded for Liberty Records under the pseudonym David Seville in 1956, also sold well. "He started thinking, 'Gosh, this music business thing is easier than I thought,'" says Bagdasarian Jr. But his few hits couldn't compensate for the countless misses, and despite small acting roles in films like *Stalag 17* and *Rear Window*, Bagdasarian was down to his last \$200 by 1957.

Bloodied but not unbowed, Bagdasarian sank \$190 of his life savings into a state-of-the-art tape recorder, complete with a nifty "vari-speed" feature that allowed him to alter the pitch of his voice. Using his new gear, Bagdasarian stumbled upon an idea that would make him a millionaire many times over in less than two years.

He had written a novelty song called "Witch Doctor," and was looking for a way to alter his voice to create the hoodoo-jive-talking character of the title. Using the vari-speed control, he raised the pitch of his voice until it sounded like he had overdosed on helium. "Witch Doctor"—with its immortal "Ooh, eeh, ooh ahh alh, ting, tang, walla walla bing bang" chorus—became a number-one hit, and convinced Bagdasarian that listeners were just suckers for goofy voices.

Bagdasarian had a surefire gimmick—now he needed some new characters to record. He tried a bird, but Bagdasarian's "The Bird on My Head" laid an egg on the charts. Driving around Yosemite National Park one day in search of inspiration, he nearly ran over a chipmunk, who refused to give way to Bagdasarian's car. Such are the happy accidents upon which multimedia empires are born.

Bagdasarian came up with three Chipmunk characters, named them after Liberty record executives Simon Waronker and Alvin Bennett and engineer Theodore Keep, and recorded "The Chipmunk

Song,” a cheery if somewhat bizarre-sounding remake of “The Christmas Song.” It quickly became a monster hit, then a cultural phenomenon, in the winter of 1958. “They couldn’t get it to the stores fast enough,” says Bagdasarian Jr. “Some days they were selling over 550,000 copies. Can you imagine?” The song set a new precedent for pop music—it was the first time a fictional band had scored a top-ten hit.

“The Chipmunk Song” eventually sold over 4 million copies, making it one of the biggest hits of the decade. Other hits followed in quick succession—“Alvin’s Harmonica,” “Ragtime Cowboy Joe,” “Alvin’s Orchestra.” By 1961 Bagdasarian had sold, astonishingly enough, 16 million Chipmunk records. “The Chipmunk Song” alone charted an astonishing five times in five years. Now, it was time to give TV a shot. After passing on various attempts by different animation artists to create live-action versions of the Chipmunks, Bagdasarian finally settled on mid-size Format Films, a production house formed in 1959 by Herb Klynn and Jules Engel, both veterans of UPA Studios, the company that had created the animated versions of Dick Tracy and Mr. Magoo. “He wanted a company that would be small enough to give him a lot of control,” says Bagdasarian Jr.

*The Alvin Show* premiered on CBS in October 1961 in the 7:30 slot opposite NBC’s popular western *Wagon Train* and ABC’s *Steve Allen Show*. Cartoon shows in evening time slots were not unusual during this era; both *The Flintstones* and *Bugs Bunny* had proven successful for ABC upon their prime-time premieres in 1960. But *The Alvin Show* was not, like *The Flintstones*’ refashioning of Jackie Gleason’s 1950s sitcom *The Honeymooners*, an animated facsimile of a popular sitcom, and the Chipmunks were certainly not as brilliantly caustic as Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tunes cabal. With its broad, slapstick sight gags and musical segments featuring anesthetized remakes of public-domain songs like “Buffalo Gals” and “Polly Wolly Doodle,” *The Alvin Show* was doomed to fail.

In June 1962 CBS moved *The Alvin Show* to Saturday mornings, and straight into the crosshairs of millions of underage viewers. Although no new episodes were produced for the morning time slot, the show found its niche with the three-to-twelve demographic,



while Bagdasarian released a steady stream of albums featuring original material and remakes of popular songs: *Let's All Sing with the Chipmunks*, *The Chipmunks Sing the Beatles Hits*, *The Chipmunks a Go Go*, and so on.

The show ended its run in 1965, and Bagdasarian retired in 1967. He died of a heart attack five years later. Fast-forward to 1980, when a bored Philadelphia radio DJ working the graveyard shift decides to play Blondie's "Call Me" at 78 rpm, and then identifies the record as the "latest song from the Chipmunks." The station's phone lines light up with listeners asking where they could buy that new Chipmunks record. Ross Bagdasarian Jr. is heartened by this. For years he had been trying to bring his father's Chipmunks back to life on TV, only to be told that the concept was tired, the characters a silly anachronism. Now, a single spin of someone else's record at 78 rpm landed the Chipmunks a new record deal for the first time in nearly twenty years.

The album cover for *Chipmunk Punk* featured Alvin, Simon, and Theodore as spiked-hair-and-safety-pin ruffians, but the song selection was more adult contemporary than punk. Nevertheless, *Chipmunk Punk*, which was released by tiny Pickwick Records, sold over a million copies, and its country music follow-up *Urban Chipmunk* equaled that sales figure. The kids weaned on Bagdasarian's furry imps in the 1960s now embraced them as kitsch icons in the 1980s.

Bagdasarian Jr. took advantage of his new window of opportunity and sold a TV special called *A Chipmunk Christmas* to NBC in 1981. The special was the fifth-most-watched show of that week, and led to a new Saturday-morning series, *Alvin and the Chipmunks*, in 1983, with Bagdasarian Jr. now supplying the voices of David Seville and his overbite trio. Music played a large role in the new show, but this time it was more self-consciously rock-driven. The Chipmunks had their own band, and played spiffy guitar rock that sounded like Loverboy after an appendectomy. The 1980s version of the Chipmunks were also joined by the Chipettes, an Australian chipmunk group whose voices were supplied by Bagdasarian Jr.'s wife Janice Karman. There was even a "rockumentary" episode, loosely based on *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Producer Al Brodax was impressed with the way Bagdasarian Sr. had parlayed a hit single into a television cartoon juggernaut. As the director of King Features Syndicates' television division, which had already made hits out of comic strips like *Popeye* and *Beetle Bailey*, Brodax was a savvy executive with a keen eye for adapting existing properties into animated series. So when he, like virtually everyone else in America, was blown away by the Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the winter of 1964, he immediately sprang into action and made a "terrible deal" to obtain the rights for a cartoon series from Beatles manager Brian Epstein.

"I met with Epstein's assistant Wendy Hanson in the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel while the Beatles were still in New York for *Sullivan*," says Brodax. "I told her I wanted the rights to use the Beatles' likenesses for a cartoon, and she tells me, 'You've got brass balls, Brodax.'" After considerable prodding from Brodax, Epstein agreed to a deal, but only if the Beatles received 50 percent of the profits. "It was a shitty deal," says Brodax. "I had to work with \$32,000 for each episode, when the average cost at that time was around \$150,000."

Brodax only had a one-month option on the rights, which meant he had to round up sponsors in a hurry. He convinced Anson Issacson, the president of Chicago-based Ideal Toy Company, to sponsor the show on the basis of a few rough sketches. Issacson, in turn, called his friend Tom Duffy, ABC's head of daytime programming, and secured a network deal for the show.

For the animation, Brodax enlisted the illustrators from Britain's TVC Studios, a small cartoon studio located in the Soho district of London, thereby eliminating the need for high-priced, unionized animators in the States. The characters designed by TVC animators Jack Stokes and Peter Sander were appealingly exaggerated caricatures, but the small budget necessitated that the show use "limited animation"—8 frames per second as opposed to 32, which created choppy, truncated movement.

If there was an upside to Brodax's deal with Epstein, it was that the Beatles songs could be used free of charge, and Brodax made sure the segments sold the music, and not the other way around.

Each episode contained two fifteen-minute vignettes, the story lines of which revolved around Beatles songs that were presented in their entirety during the interregnum between segments. This presented a challenge to Brodax's writing staff, who had to fashion plots out of songs they weren't familiar with and didn't necessarily like. "All we had was the music to work with," says show writer Jack Mendelson, "but not everything lent itself to stories. You hoped you would get an up-tempo song, because then you could come up with sight gags and slapstick stuff to use. If you got a slow song like 'Michelle,' it was really hard to think of funny stuff."

But *The Beatles*, which was heavily dependent on slapstick shtick and visual puns, didn't deviate too radically from every other Saturday morning cartoon comedy of the time. The voices, supplied by Paul Frees and Lance Percival, were wildly inaccurate. Frees, who had worked extensively with Jay Ward (he was Rocky and Bullwinkle's arch-nemesis Boris Badenov) and Hanna-Barbera, supplied the voices for both John Lennon and George Harrison; Percival handled Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr. "Frees was a very successful voice-over artist, and Brodax flew him into London at tremendous expense to do the voices, which I thought was a huge waste of money," says Mendelson. "He was terrible. We used to call him 'The Man of a Thousand Voice.'"

The four Beatles, for their part, looked upon the show as little more than another low-rent revenue stream. "We all thought the cartoon series was a joke and refused to do the voices for it," recalled Paul McCartney. "But financially it was a good deal, and the kids seemed to like it. We weren't really keen on the people from King. They were nice enough but artistically we weren't that impressed."<sup>2</sup>

None of it mattered, of course, to an audience of grade-schoolers. If there was one truism that all cartoon producers at the time could take to heart, it was that kids can't tell the difference between artful animation and hack work—or flesh and ink, for that matter. So what if Frees and Percival didn't nail the voices, and the story lines reduced the Beatles to limey Marx Brothers? The mass appeal of the Beatles practically guaranteed huge ratings for the show during its first season, drawing nearly 50 percent of the Saturday-morning audience.

*The Beatles* was a mammoth hit for nearly three years. Even after the real band had morphed into psychedelic troubadours in late 1966, its cartoon equivalent remained frozen in a mop-top time warp. The show ceased production of original episodes in 1967 (ABC aired repeats until 1969), but Brodax wasn't finished with the Beatles just yet. In 1968 he convinced them to lend their names to an animated feature film that would allow them to fulfill the terms of their three-movie contract with United Artists (the first two films being *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*) without having to do any acting themselves. The film was *Yellow Submarine*, which was created by many of the production staff members that had worked on the *Beatles* cartoon series.

*The Beatles'* success prompted other rock artists to try and grab a piece of the kiddie cartoon market. Canadian animation studio Rankin-Bass was responsible for bringing both the Jackson Five and their Caucasian counterparts the Osmonds to Saturday-morning TV in 1971 and 1972, respectively. Aside from the fact that *The Jackson Five* featured superior music, little distinguished these two shows from each other. Both boy bands came on like everyday heroes in their cartoons, spreading goodwill and good vibes across the globe, with an occasional musical number thrown in for good measure. Perhaps not as concerned with maintaining their credibility as the Beatles, both the Osmonds and the Jacksons supplied their own voices to their respective series, although Paul "Man of a Thousand Voice" Frees did provide voices for supporting characters on both shows.

Brodax and Rankin-Bass notwithstanding, TV animation in the 1960s and '70s was dominated by one company: Hanna-Barbera. Founded in 1957 by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, two veteran animators who had been victims of a massive downsizing in MGM's film animation department, Hanna-Barbera was by far the most prolific producer of cartoons for TV. During its peak years in the late 1960s, the company had as many as fourteen shows running concurrently, including such evergreens as *The Jetsons*, *Scooby Doo*, *Huckleberry Hound*, *Yogi Bear*, and its most popular show, *The Flintstones*.

*The Flintstones*, a show that frequently parodied the pop-cultural trends of the 1960s, devoted a number of programs to rock 'n' roll. In "The Girls Night Out," Fred records a knockoff version of "Listen to the Mockingbird" called "Rockin' Bird," and is discovered by a Colonel Tom Parker-like manager, who books him at the Rockadero and transforms him into rock deity Hi-Fye. In "The Twitch," pop idol Rock Roll sings the immortal "Bedrock Twitch," a song composed by Bill Hanna and Joseph Barbera:

*There's a town I know where the Hipsters go called Bedrock,  
Twitch, Twitch  
When you get an itch, then you do the twitch in Bedrock, Twitch,  
Twitch  
'Cause the Twitch is fine have yourself a time in Bedrock, Twitch,  
Twitch.*

There were also some fine guest performances. James Darren, aka Jimmy Darrock, sang a Beach Boys parody called "Surfin' Craze." *Shindig's* Jimmy O'Neill, aka Jimmy O'Neillstone, also made an appearance as the MC of a show called *Shinrock*, which presented the Beau Brummels, aka the Beau Brummlestones, who performed their real 1965 hit "Laugh, Laugh." There was even a faux-English group called the Way-Outs, whom Hanna and Barbera supplied with a revved-up anthem called "Way Outs."

Hanna-Barbera's TV cartoon hegemony was challenged by many production houses, but only one company posed a real threat. Filmation, which was co-owned by former radio announcer Norm Prescott and animators Hal Sutherland and Lou Sheimer, gained market share by exploiting resources Hanna-Barbera had no interest in utilizing. "When we started the business, we figured that if we were going to go into competition with Hanna-Barbera, the best we could hope for would be an Avis-Hertz situation," says Norm Prescott. "So we examined their weaknesses and tried to capitalize on them." Notoriously protectionist about its properties, Hanna-Barbera never worked with business partners, preferring to either buy a concept outright or, in Prescott's words, "legally steal" it—*The Honeymooners* into

*The Flintstones*. “We knew there were a lot of good properties out there that could be converted into shows,” says Prescott.

One such property was *Superman*, which Filiation acquired from National Periodicals in 1965 and sold to CBS’s Fred Silverman as an animated series. *The New Adventures of Superman* became the highest-rated show in the history of Saturday-morning cartoons, and encouraged Filiation to try its hand at adapting other print comics for TV.

Filiation would have to tread lightly, however, because TV animation was under siege. In 1968 a number of moral watchdog organizations, among them the National Association for Better Radio and Television and Action for Children’s Television, mounted a crusade against what they perceived as the excessive violence on display in the raft of superhero cartoons that aired on weekend mornings. Whatever the merits of the criticism (were Superman and Wile E. Coyote really pernicious threats to America’s youth?), the media attention generated by the backlash was enough for the networks to retrench for a while, and provide some family-friendly counterprogramming to silence their critics.

For Filiation, the backlash provided an opening. They had just acquired the rights to *The Archies*, the venerable comic-book series that, upon its inception in 1941, was marketed as an alternative to such garishly graphic comics as *Batman* and *Superman*. *The Archies* had been created by its original creator Bob Montana to provide a white-bread template upon which the comic book’s young readers could model their own behavior. The comic’s seventeen-year-old red-headed protagonist Archie Andrews was every mother’s dream, a happy-go-lucky charmer with an unflappably cheery disposition and an unwavering moral compass. Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge were chaste gal pals who nonetheless fueled more than a few naughty fantasies for male readers. Reggie Mantle was a smirky wisecracker; Mr. Weatherbee, the principal of Archie’s Riverdale High, the archetypal faculty hard-ass; and Jughead Jones, the burger-munching existentialist with a perpetually world-weary disposition.

*The Archies* was already an entrenched pop-cultural phenomenon by the time Filiation acquired the rights in 1968. The newspaper

strip had been running since 1947, and a successful radio adaptation of the comic ran on NBC from 1943 to '53. There had been a few attempts to turn *The Archies* into a television show, but none had ever proceeded beyond the pilot stage. Given the anti-violence tempest swirling around beleaguered studios like CBS, a property like *The Archies* was a no-brainer, and Silverman wasted little time in green-lighting the show.

*The Archies* premiered on September 14, 1968, and immediately began siphoning away little viewers, many of whom were already familiar with the comic book, from the other two networks. The show drew almost 75 percent of the audience—an astonishingly high number. Still, Prescott and the Filmation brain trust weren't satisfied. Their main objective was to make *The Archies* a true crossover show, one that appealed to teenagers as well as the three-to-twelve-year-old demographic. And the only way to do that was to make the Archies pop singers.

Never mind that the voice of Archie was a sixty-two-year-old actor named Dallas McKennon. Filmation would hire a fresh set of singing voices to make the Archies go pop. "Being a former DJ, my attitude was that if there are any kids in the family who are under the age of seven, they're probably not listening to the radio, but rock music is permeating through the house," says Prescott. "I proposed that we try to do authentic rock. Whatever music used in our shows would be the same kind of thing that could be recorded by any major record company at that moment in time."

True enough. Bubblegum pop was at its zenith in 1969, and more young listeners were buying more records than ever before. 1910 Fruitgum Co. and Ohio Express, two faux-bands that were really just fronts for songwriting whiz kids Jerry Kasenetz and Jeff Katz, were scoring top-five hits with dunderheaded effluvia like "Yummy, Yummy, Yummy," "1, 2, 3, Red Light," and "Indian Giver." So if Prescott had the chutzpah to think he could score chart hits with a cartoon band, now was the time to do so.

To that end, Prescott hired music publisher Don Kirshner, the man who had supplied the Monkees with a steady stream of hits from his stable of Brill Building songwriters. Kirshner in turn called on the ser-

vices of Jeff Barry, who with his partner Ellie Greenwich had penned sublime pop melodrama like the Shangri-Las' "Leader of the Pack," but had also written a few proto-bubblegum hits, such as Manfred Mann's "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" in 1964 and Tommy James and the Shondells' 1966 hit "Hanky Panky," both number-one singles. "It was not only an opportunity for Jeff, but let's face it, when a network bought an animated show in those days you were guaranteed to be on the air for two years," says Prescott. "You were guaranteed a royalty every time a song was played, and that could be hundreds of times."

Barry, as evidenced by "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" and the Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron," was a master of the verbal non sequitur as primal rock riff, which made him the perfect candidate to write songs that appealed to both preteens and high-schoolers. "Bang Shang-a-Lang," the Archies' first single, was a pure sugar rush powered by starburst harmonies and a chugging guitar riff, and crept its way up to number twenty-two on *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart in September 1968.

In 1969 Kirshner peddled another Barry composition, cowritten with occasional writing partner Andy Kim, called "Sugar, Sugar" to the Monkees, but that other rock 'n' roll construct was trying to reinvent itself as a legitimately self-contained band at the time, and passed. So Kirshner tried his luck with Filmation, who pounced on it. "The Monkees laughed at me when I brought them 'Sugar, Sugar,'" says Kirshner. "But it wound up making millions for Filmation."

The Archies' "performance" of "Sugar, Sugar," as recorded by session vocalists Ron Dante and Toni Wine and a clutch of studio-slick musicians, is Bubblegum pop's sweetest confection. Over an easy-rolling, two-chord melody, Dante justifies his love—"Sugar, ah honey, honey / You are my candy girl / And you've got me wanting you"—like a heartsick man-child. There's something for everybody in "Sugar, Sugar": lubricious lyrics ("pour your sweetness over me"), vocal harmonies worthy of Brian Wilson, and an arrangement sophisticated enough (dig that crazy vibraphone) to please mature ears.

"I went to [L.A. radio station] KHJ, sat down with them and tried to get them to play 'Sugar, Sugar,'" says Prescott. "Luckily, they did, and we knew within forty-eight hours that we had a hit song." "Sugar, Sugar" was the pan-demographic hit Filmation was looking for,



bypassing the Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman" and soaring straight to number one the week of July 26, 1969, where it stayed for a month.

The success of "Sugar, Sugar" was not lost on Archies Publications heads John and Richard Goldwater, the men who had sold Filmation the rights to the Archies. They had another character in their comic manifest that was ready-made for multimedia exploitation. Josie began life as a comic book in 1963 in an attempt to capture the mostly untapped female teenage market. As created by artist Dick DeCarlo, Josie was the feminine equivalent of Archie Andrews, a spunky teenager with an arsenal of one-liners and a knack for accessorizing. Shortly after the breakout success of "Sugar, Sugar," the Goldwaters and CBS's Fred Silverman came up with the notion of turning Josie into a TV series in which she would become the leader of an all-female rock band called the Pussycats.

Ironically, Filmation, due to an overloaded production docket, was not given the contract to turn *Josie and the Pussycats* into a series. Which meant Hanna-Barbera would now have a shot at knocking *The Archies* off its ratings perch with its own rock cartoon. Hanna-Barbera, after all, had been the first animation house to create recurring cartoon rockers with the superpowered trio the Impossibles, stars of the 1966 series *Frankenstein Jr. and the Impossibles*.

The production of *Josie and the Pussycats*—which, like most Hanna-Barbera projects, used the low-budget "limited animation" technique—was handed to three veteran members of the company's crackerjack team: animation director Charles Nichols, creative director Iwao Takamoto, and songwriter Hoyt Curtin, who cowrote the trippy, quasi-soul main title ("Josie and the Pussycats / Long tails and ears for hats"). The Pussycats also occasionally sang a tune composed by for-hire writers Danny Janssen, Bob Ingerman, and Art Hogell. "The music was more of a tool than anything else," says Takamoto. "Limited animation really limited your expression, because you were using less animation cells to create movement. That's how the music helped a lot—it gave the show a feeling of energy and drive it might not otherwise have."

*Josie's* rock 'n' roll emphasis was more pronounced than that of

*The Archies*, featuring as it did three singers—redheaded Josie, blond Melody, and Valerie, the first recurring African-American cartoon character—on a never-ending world tour orchestrated by its meek manager Alexander Cabot III (one of the Pussycat voice-over singers was an aspiring actress named Cheryl Jean Stopelmoor, who six years later would become a sex bomb icon under her married name, Cheryl Ladd).

Despite the blatant musical hook and a full-length album, *Josie and the Pussycats* never gained the ratings momentum it needed to score a hit single. There was even an attempt to revamp the flagging show after two seasons with something called *Josie and the Pussycats in Outer Space*, but it fell to earth after only sixteen episodes. Still, one can't overlook Josie and Co.'s influence on contemporary teen idols the Spice Girls, whose Sunshine Superhero image is surely a derivation of the trio's teasingly coy feline look.

Filmation and Hanna-Barbera continued to try their luck with rock-striated cartoons well into the 1970s. *The Groovie Goulies*, which began as a spinoff of another Filmation show called *Sabrina*

**The "real" Archies, a faux group used for promotional appearances. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)**



and the *Groovie Goolies*, subscribed to the theory first posited by live-action shows like *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*—namely, that monsters could be a goofy kick. The Groovie Goolies scored a top-ten hit in March 1971 with “Chick-a-Boom (Don’t Ya Jes’ Love It),” a song written by cartoon songwriter Richard Monda, who released the single under the *nom de toon* Daddy Dewdrop.

*The Banana Splits Adventure Hour* was Hanna-Barbera’s first attempt to mix live action with animation, or at least alternate costumed actors with cartoons. Like so many children’s shows of the era, *The Banana Splits Adventure Hour* was created to provide an advertiser with a showcase that could heavily promote its products. Lee Rich, an ad executive for the Chicago-based Leo Burnett Agency, initially approached Joseph Barbera about creating a show that could shill Kellogg’s line of cereals. Barbera consulted his production team, then came back to Chicago to pitch a show to Rich and NBC executive Grant Tinker. “Joe wanted to sell the idea of how funny a group of costumed characters that played rock music could be,” says Iwao Takamoto, “so he brought along animator Jerry Eisenberg, who’s this kind of funny, heavy guy, and put him in a Yogi Bear suit. So Joe makes his pitch to the Kellogg’s people, then cues Jerry, who throws open the door and starts doing his shtick—sitting on executives’ laps, crazy stuff. It just cracked everyone up, and practically ensured that [the show] would be sold.”

The intent was to create an animal band—Drooper the lion, Bingo the gorilla, Fleegle the beagle, and Snorky the elephant—that could provide *Laugh-In*-esque comic relief in between lots of cereal commercials. The show also featured three cartoons and one other live-action segment—*The Three Musketeers*, *Arabian Knights*, *The Micro Venture*, and *Danger Island*. The advertising hard sell was in full effect, as well—if kids didn’t know about Kellogg’s cereal before viewing the show, an above-the-title “Kellogg’s Presents” logo would change all that. Kellogg’s also orchestrated a give-away premium—send in two cereal box tops and 50 cents, and an eight-song Banana Splits EP would be yours.

Essentially, *The Banana Splits Adventure Hour* was psychedelia lite for tots hopped up on refined sugar. The show’s direction was



The voices behind *Josie and the Pussycats*: (l to r) Catherine "Josie" Dougher, Cherie "Melody" Moor, and Patrice "Valerie" Holloway. (Michael Ochs Archives.com)

dizzily hallucinatory—all zippy zoom shots, fast motion, and odd angles—and the song segments employed more smash-cuts per second than any Monkees episode. Humor-wise, it was strictly clunky slapstick, obvious sight gags, and jokes fit for a Bazooka gum wrapper:

Q: What is yellow, delicious, and manages a baseball team?

A: Yogi Banana.<sup>3</sup>

For the Splits' musical segments, Hanna-Barbera commissioned journeymen songwriters like Mark Barkan, who had previously written for *The Archies* and scored a top ten hit in 1966 for British band Manfred Mann with "Pretty Flamingo." It was Barkan and his partner Richie Adams who wrote and performed the main title, "The Tra La La Song (One Banana, Two Banana)". Bubblegum pop demi-legend Joey Levine, who provided the lead vocals for the Ohio Express and 1910 Fruitgum Co.'s biggest hits, also contributed material, as did former Bob Dylan sideman Al Kooper ("You're the Lovin' End") and future R&B loverman Barry White ("Doin' the Banana Split").

The show's first season was a rousing success, capturing nearly 65 percent of the Saturday-morning kiddie audience, but Hanna-Barbera's dreams of bubblegum glory never quite panned out. The Banana Splits' sole album, *We're the Banana Splits*, a curious hodge-

podge of pop juvenilia and adult contemporary balladry, sounds as if Hanna-Barbera actually had the intention of pawning off a kiddie band to James Taylor fans.

*We're the Banana Splits* stiffed, although the endearingly cheery pop trifle "Tra La La Song" has had a suprisingly long shelf life: pop-core pranksters the Dickies recorded the song in 1990, and Liz Phair covered it in 1995 as part of a tribute album to Saturday-morning theme songs, *Saturday Morning: Cartoon's Greatest Hits*.

The Banana Splits inspired other animal pop acts. *The Chattanooga Cats*, which featured actors in cat costumes who introduced animated segments and sang pallid bubblegum pabulum, lasted only seventeen episodes. Then there was 1976's *Jabberjaw*, a show that featured a shark who *nyuk-nyuk*-ed like Curly Howard and played drums for the Neptunes. Perhaps influenced by all of this pop besituality, Lancelot Link—secret agent and star of his own ABC series *Lancelot Link, Secret Chimp*—formed his own simian band called the Evolution Revolution in 1970 with costars Mata Hairi, Creto, Wang Fu, and Dr. Strangemind.

Until 1973, rock 'n' roll was used in cartoons as a tool to get kids to turn on, tune in, and buy stuff. No one had actually entertained the notion of using rock as—God forbid—an educational tool. But that's what David McCall had in mind when, as a partner in the McCaffrey and McCall advertising agency, he proposed that ABC broadcast musical math lessons as animated segments to be aired in between its usual programming.

The notion had first come to McCall while on vacation at a dude ranch in Wyoming, when he noticed that his ten-year-old son Davey had no trouble memorizing the words to, say, "Sugar, Sugar," but had difficulty learning his multiplication tables. McCall commissioned one of his in-house jingle writers to come up with something rock-derived that might work for an educational record, but when that failed to pan out the way he envisioned—the resulting song wound up sounding like a shaving cream ad—he turned to fellow ad exec George Newall for advice on songwriters.

Newall, who moonlighted as a jazz pianist, suggest McCall hire Bob Dorough, a sharp-witted hipster with a coolly sardonic style

reminiscent of Mose Allison. “I was thrilled, because I saw it as a chance to communicate with young people,” says Dorough. “And when Dave told me, ‘Don’t write down to your audience,’ well, that really piqued my interest.”

Commissioned to write one song, Dorough dug into his daughter’s math textbooks and came up with “Three Is a Magic Number,” which so impressed McCall that he then tried to sell the idea of an animated series to McCaffrey and McCall’s biggest corporate clients, ABC. Using some characters and a storyboard created by McCaffrey and McCall art director Tom Yohe, McCall pitched the idea to ABC’s vice president of children’s programming, Michael Eisner, and Eisner’s animation adviser, Bugs Bunny creator Chuck Jones.

McCall had two cultural trends working in his favor. One was that PBS’s *Sesame Street* had already proven how compatible vernacular music and education could be. The other was that the Federal Communications Commission had ramped up its continuing crusade to clean up children’s TV with some civic-minded programming, and Eisner was eager to assuage the FCC with something that was not only good, but good for you.

“Michael knew immediately what to do,” remembered McCall. “He said, ‘We’ll cut all our Saturday- and Sunday-morning animated series three minutes short next year, we’ll put *Multiplication Rock* in, and we’ll get a sponsor.’”<sup>4</sup> Three sponsors, actually—General Foods, Kenner Toys, and Nabisco—who bookended their ads around the thirteen *Multiplication Rock* episodes that ran six times each Saturday morning during the 1972-73 season.

*Multiplication Rock* had a very tenuous relation to rock. Dorough, who had recorded a number of criti-



**Schoolhouse Rock** songwriter **Bob Dorough**. (Photo courtesy of Rhino Records)

cally acclaimed albums for jazz labels Evidence and Bethlehem in the late 1950s and early '60s, understood early on that the inherent repetition of most rock melodies would begin to sound redundant when set to monotonous multiplication tables. Instead, Dorough borrowed elements of cabaret jazz, folk, R&B, and the singsong cadence of children's music to create an idiom entirely his own. "I approached each song in a different style and viewpoint," recalls Dorough. "It wasn't too jazzy, but it wasn't head-on rock, either. It was kind of in the middle, with some country music and other things thrown in."

Dorough's genius lay in his ability to create easily comprehensible story lines that illuminated abstract mathematical concepts, and the whimsical yet simply drawn characters created by Yohe and a staff of designers were as cuddly and charming as Dorough's compositions.

In "My Hero, Zero," Dorough explained the concept of nothingness:

*That's why with only 10 digits including zero,  
You can count as high as you could ever go . . .  
Forever, towards infinity,  
No one ever gets there, but you could try.<sup>5</sup>*

"Elementary, My Dear" explained the two-times multiplication table through the story of Noah's Ark, an idea that Dorough picked up from Yohe. "I had written it as a straight multiplication, but when it came time to do the animation, Yohe needed a story, so he suggested Noah's Ark," says Dorough. "I went home and wrote that lyric, 'Forty days and forty nights, didn't it rain children?'"

An album of Dorough's *Multiplication Rock* songs was released by Capitol Records in 1973 and garnered the songwriter a Grammy nomination. In 1974 ABC signed the *Multiplication Rock* crew to create a clutch of new segments. *Grammar Rock*, which featured songs by Dorough and McCaffrey and McCall secretary turned songwriter Lynn Ahrens, was every bit as exuberant as, and a touch hipper than, *Multiplication Rock*. "Verb: That's What's Happening" featured the world's first animated blaxploitation superhero; "Conjunction Junction" was pure, uncut Cool, with jazz trumpeter Jack Sheldon's

swaggering, lounge lizard vocal “hooking up words and making them function.”

More *Schoolhouse Rock* series followed: 1974's *America Rock* anticipated the 1976 Bicentennial and featured the beloved congressional civics lesson “I’m Just a Bill”; *Science Rock* debuted in 1978 and explained things like the “Telegraph Line” and “The Body Machine.” By 1983's *Scooter Computer and Mr. Chips*, a show commissioned by ABC to make computers user-friendly for kids, the format started to show signs of middle age; songs like Dave Frishberg's “Hardware,” which tried to teach kids the inner workings of computer language, were too obtruse to resonate as effectively as the earlier segments.

Still, *Schoolhouse Rock* represents a high-water mark for cartoon rock, the only network animation series that effectively utilized jazzed-up pop music to teach kids writing and math skills without pandering or oversimplifying. The show has been a formidable influence on the generation of rock artists who came of age in front of the tube in the 1970s. Rap trio De La Soul reworked “Three Is a Magic Number” on its seminal 1986 debut album *Three Feet High and Rising*, and a 1996 tribute album called *Schoolhouse Rock! Rocks* featured a number of rock's most respected artists (Pavement, Moby, the Lemonheads, Ween) affectionately covering Dorrough and Co's songs with nary a trace of postmodernist irony.



## ***Naked Lunch Box***

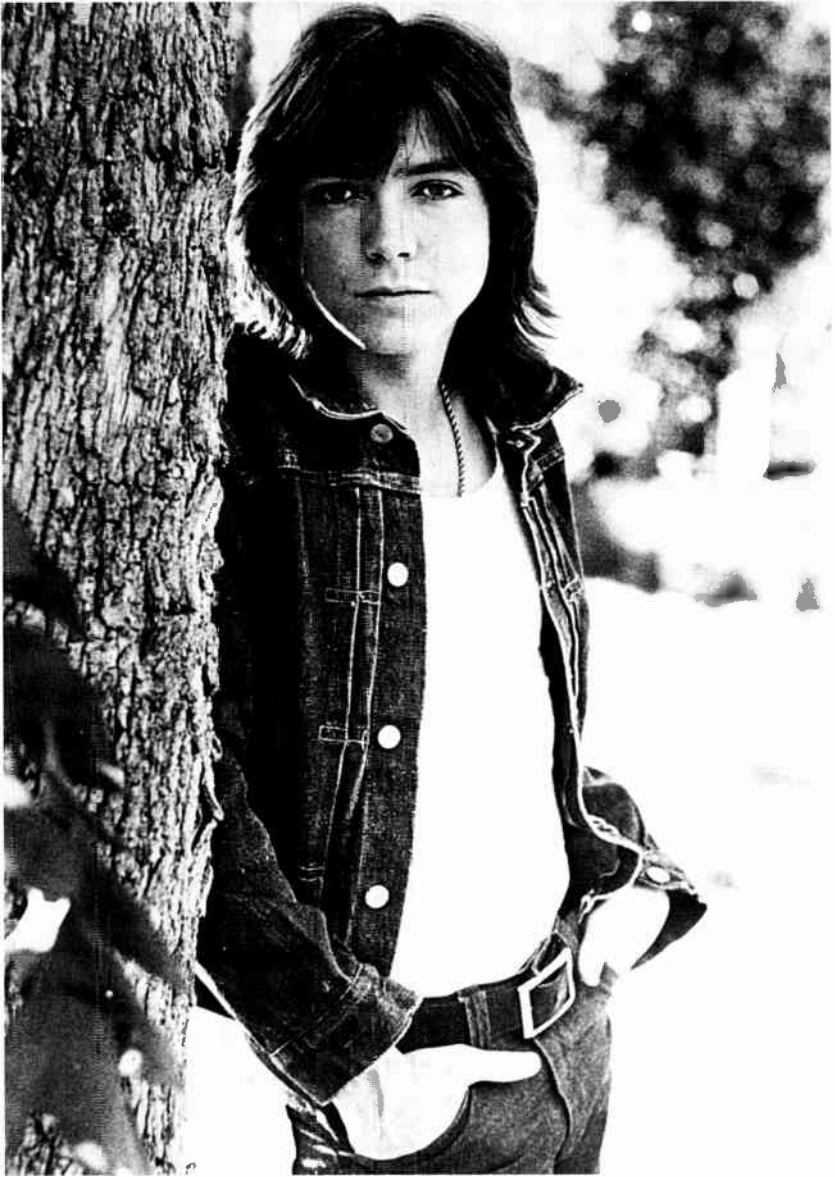
### **DAVID CASSIDY AND THE CULT OF THE TEEN IDOL**

*A fake will always be a fake. Anything prefabricated or just an accident will turn out to be just that.*

—PARTRIDGE FAMILY SONGWRITER WES FARRELL, 1976

The picture-perfect nuclear family is one of television's most powerful and enduring myths. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a time of unprecedented social upheaval in America, viewers clung to the well-ordered domestic rituals of idealized TV families like lifelines to a rapidly vanishing idyll—namely, the well-ordered domestic tableau of 1950s America. Über-clans as seen on shows like *The Flintstones*, *Family Affair*, *My Three Sons*, and *The Brady Bunch* thrived in prime time.

The music business, too, had its own subset of family bands that catered to pop fans who felt themselves estranged by psychedelic rock and emerging heavy metal behemoths like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. Sibling singing groups like the Osmonds, the Jackson Five, and the Cowsills sold millions of records by catering to an audience that found some measure of comfort in bands whose family ethic stressed working together for the greater good. Never mind that these groups were, in reality, hatched in dysfunctional domestic environments that placed an unhealthy emphasis on show-biz success over family values. In the early 1970s, nobody knew or cared about such things.



"Do I make you horny, baby?" David Cassidy. (Photo: Henry Diltz)

Few TV producers reaped more success from unsullied domestic virtue than Bernard Slade. As a writer and producer on such shows as *Bewitched* and *The Flying Nun*, Slade was already an old hand at wresting mild laughs out of quaintly prosaic familial situations when he had the notion to create a TV show about a family that kept it together by playing pop music. Inspired by the Cowsills and *The*

*Sound of Music*, Slade in 1969 sold the idea of a singing family to Columbia's TV division Screen Gems, the same company that had produced *The Monkees*.

Slade and co-executive producer Bob Claver, who had produced the Bobby Sherman vehicle *Here Come the Brides* in the late 1960s, originally thought of casting the Cowsills, who had scored two top-ten hits with 1967's "Rain, the Park, and Other Things" and a cover of the theme from "Hair" in 1969. But the band couldn't act, and were perhaps a touch too physically homogeneous to cast a wide enough demographic net. "I think it would have made us crazy," observes Susan Cowsill, "and we're not actors, as [the producers] found out pretty quickly upon their visit to our house." Instead, the producers decided to cast actors in the roles, and then lip-synch studio singers for the musical segments. That way, Screen Gems could avoid the kind of cast mutiny that nearly sabotaged *The Monkees*.

The show would be called *The Partridge Family* (working title: *Family Business*), and would center around the travails of a traveling rock band that shared adventures and a surname taken from an old British school chum of Slade's. Slade quickly wrote a pilot script and sent the first copy to Shirley Jones, an Academy Award-winning film actress (1960's *Elmer Gantry*) with no background in pop music or episodic television, but whose chaste sensuality and matronly demeanor made her ideal ballast for the show. For Bob Claver, Shirley Jones was the perfect TV mom: "She was a clean-cut, nice-looking, pretty woman, and her movie career wasn't exactly booming at that point."

Just as Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson had conducted a cattle call to cast *The Monkees*, Slade and Claver looked at over 800 child actors to play the Partridges, eventually settling on five: two inexperienced adolescents named Jeremy Gelbwaks and Suzanne Crough, commercials actor Danny Bonaduce, teen model Susan Dey, and Jones's stepson David Cassidy, who had already racked up an impressive list of credits on various TV shows.

The casting of Cassidy, of course, would turn out to be Slade and Claver's masterstroke, but the actor was hardly an overnight sensation, having been weaned on show business at an early age. The son

of Broadway actors Jack Cassidy and Evelyn Ward, Cassidy was raised by his mother from the age of five after his parents divorced (Jack Cassidy married Shirley Jones in 1956). "I had a lot of rejection from my father when I was young," Cassidy told *Rolling Stone* in 1972. "I never saw him after he divorced me and my mother."<sup>2</sup> This '70s poster boy for family values was in fact the product of a broken home, and would tell all about his troubled relationship with his father ad nauseam during his post-Partridge years.

Cassidy skated through high school, dabbled in drugs ("I did a lot of fucking around . . . not smack, but grass and speed and psychedelics")<sup>3</sup> and petty theft, dropped out of Los Angeles City College, then went the route of so many show-biz kids: he tried acting. After appearing in a small role on Broadway in Allan Sherman's play *Fig Leaves Are Falling*, Cassidy began landing small parts in episodic TV shows like *Medical Center*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, and *Ironside*. "I was out to earn the bucks," Cassidy confessed to *Rolling Stone* in 1972.

As an actor, Cassidy was solidly competent, not unlike many bit players for hire who did guest shots on TV in the 1970s. But he was uncommonly good-looking—small-boned and effete, with a white-pearled smile and an au courant shag 'do—and that started to get him noticed. The teen magazine culture that centered around such magazines as *16* and *Tiger Beat*, in their never-ending search to feed the pop idol maw, anointed Cassidy the bell-bottomed demigod of the moment in mid-1970. And he hadn't even made a record or landed a recurring TV role yet.

"David had been in an episode of *Bonanza*," says Randi Reisfeld, a former editor at *16* magazine, "and what happened was readers wrote to *16* requesting more information on this really cute guy they had seen on TV. That alerted our editor in chief Gloria Stavers that David was something to start looking at."

Adds Cassidy, "The business of creating teen idols was in the hands of merchandisers and teen magazines. Before *The Partridge Family* ever aired I was on the cover of teen magazines from doing guest TV appearances. I started getting fan letters a good nine months before *The Partridge Family*."

The most successful TV teen idols tend to emerge from family

shows that aren't star vehicles; girls like to feel as if they've singled out their heartthrobs from the brood to embrace them as treasured objects of desire. That stratagem worked well for Ricky Nelson, and David Cassidy also benefited from it. Like Nelson, Keith Partridge's sex appeal was neutralized by a strong sense of civic-minded dogoodism and an awkward, ditzzy disposition. Producer Bob Claver correctly surmised that safe sex always plays more smoothly in prime time. "David was handsome bordering on pretty, and we made him a loser," says Claver. "He didn't get the girl, he didn't win the school election. That vulnerability made him more appealing to the audience."

*The Partridge Family*, which premiered on September 25, 1970, and followed *Nanny and the Professor* at eight-thirty on Friday nights, was pure sitcom Similac, featuring the usual procession of lovably eccentric guest stars, family crises, feel-good moralizing, romantic subplots, and the requisite pop piffle or two in the second act. But it represented TV's ultimate triumph over rock's rebel spirit. With *The Partridge Family*, youth culture had at last been tamed within the tender bosom of the family hearth. For younger viewers, *The Partridge Family* was the perfect conflation of family values and rock 'n' roll careerism. The Partridges were pop stars and pillars of the community, cashing in but also giving something back. They were living the dream of every school kid who ever sang into a hair-brush in front of a mirror.

The show's music was an afterthought for Claver, who gained control of the show when Bernard Slade left shortly after the pilot was shot, but the show's main songwriter, Wes Farrell—hitmaker, producer, and rakishly elegant rogue—proved to be a crucial catalyst in catapulting Cassidy to superstardom. A native of Brooklyn, Farrell was a street-smart hustler with an unerring capacity to gauge pop market trends and capitalize on them. "Wes was a high school dropout, but he dressed like a million bucks," recalls Cassidy. "He was super-slick. He produced Paul Anka, married Tina Sinatra, bought a house in Beverly Hills. He was the personification of poor boy makes good."

After dropping out of college in 1960, Farrell rented an office on Broadway for fifty dollars a month and set his sights on writing hits.

None came, so Farrell took a job as a manager for publishing company Roosevelt Music, where he was hired to find potential hit songs for the company's roster of artists—a list that included Chubby Checker, Dionne Warwick, and Bobby Vee. “The writers for Roosevelt just weren't coming through with songs, so I started signing young writers that I was associated with when I was walking the streets,” Farrell told the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* in 1976. “I got [Neil Diamond] for \$35 a week, and when he asked for a \$15 a week raise, my boss said no and Diamond split.”<sup>4</sup>

Farrell's Midas touch made him a music business legend in short order. He landed twenty-six Top 40 hits for Roosevelt artists during his three-year tenure, and left the company in 1963 to start Picturetone Music. Three years later, the songwriter started the Wes Farrell Corporation, which he subsequently turned into a music industry giant. As a publisher, Farrell cashed in on hits by the Rascals, Tony Orlando and Dawn, and Wayne Newton. As a songwriter, Farrell co-authored hits like the McCoys' “Hang On Sloopy,” Jay and the Americans' “Come a Little Bit Closer,” and “Boys,” the B side of the Shirelles' “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow,” which was recorded by The Beatles in 1963.

Given the fact that one of Farrell's specialties was bubblegum pop (as music publisher, he also represented the writers of Paper Lace's “The Night Chicago Died” and the Cowsills' “Indian Lake”), it only followed that Columbia's label subsidiary Bell Records would hire Farrell to be musical producer of *The Partridge Family*. Claver would have been content to lip-synch everything and use studio singers like Jackie Ward and John and Tom Bahler, who had shored up the vocals for the Brady Bunch and other singing TV stars in the 1960s and 1970s. But Cassidy, an amateur musician who also fancied himself a songwriter, wanted to try his hand at vocals, and auditioned for Farrell by singing along to a Crosby, Stills, and Nash record.

Farrell was drawn to Cassidy's tremulous, feline croon, and agreed that he should sing lead on all of the tracks. Shirley Jones, for her part, had it written into her contract that she contribute background vocals on all the Partridge Family material. “Shirley did those *oop-oops* so she could get some extra money for those records,” says Claver.

For the Partridge Family's "records," Farrell hired the cream of L.A.'s session heavies, many of them veterans of producer Phil Spector's legendary Wrecking Crew—drummer Hal Blaine, keyboardist Larry Knechtel, guitarists Tommy Tedesco and Louie Shelton, and bassist Joe Osborn. Farrell contributed songs, as did Brill Building legends Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, Paul Anka, Bobby Hart, and Mike Appel, future manager of Bruce Springsteen. "I worked on the show all day, then went to the studio at night," says Cassidy. "We had five hours to record three tracks, and there was no time to redo anything. Fortunately, the musicians were so good, they could read charts quickly, and there was never a problem." There were, however, many studio laughs at the material's expense; Larry Knechtel's chuckles during the harpsichord solo on "I Think I Love You" had to be wiped out of the final mix.

"I Think I Love You" was a shimmering declaration of puppy love that rose to number one on *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart in November 1970 and sold over 4 million copies. Other hits followed—"Doesn't Somebody Want to Be Wanted," "I'll Meet You Halfway," "I Woke Up in Love This Morning"—all of them characterized by Farrell's wide-screen arrangements and Cassidy's pleadingly pretty vocals. "Wes really taught me the economical approach to songwriting," says Cassidy. "His only downfall was that he wasn't willing to go further with the songs. He wouldn't develop a lyric enough, or the track. He would say, 'OK, that's good enough,' when sometimes it wasn't."

Not that it mattered: As *The Partridge Family* crept into the Nielsen top ten and the records sold in the millions, Cassidy became a massive star, aided and abetted in no small part by the teen mags. Now Cassidy was a ubiquitous presence in *16* (he appeared on twenty-four consecutive covers), *Tiger Beat*, *Fave*, and *Spec*, with headlines promising "David's After-Dark Confessions" and articles that taught young girls how to be "David's Summer Love." "Teen idols like David Cassidy are a very safe fantasy for girls," says Randi Reisfeld. "He was just so pretty. Very few are that pretty." Fan clubs sprouted up all over the country; the official fan club had 100,000 card-carrying members by 1971.<sup>5</sup> "I lost my identity, because of those magazines," says Cassidy. "They made an

image to prey upon the innocence and naiveté of young kids, and I resented it.”

“The magazines would just make up stories,” says Henry Diltz, a friend of Cassidy’s who frequently photographed the teen idol for *Tiger Beat*, *Star*, and other magazines. “Once, David and I spent a week in Hawaii, and this little puppy wandered into our yard, so I took a picture of David with the dog for *16*. When we got back, this writer Don Berrigan wrote this story about how there was this little Hawaiian girl next door whose dog had wandered over to David, and how this girl gave David the dog with tears in her eyes. It was pure fiction.”

On the *Partridge Family* set, which was located at Columbia’s Burbank Ranch, swarms of underage girls would wait patiently outside the studio gates until shooting ended, hoping to graduate to groupie status with a tryst in Cassidy’s house trailer. Extras had easier access and consequently were a bit luckier. “If they were doing a classroom scene, there would be, like, fifteen boys and girls hanging around,” says Henry Diltz, who spent a lot of time on the *Partridge Family* set. “It would be like going to a party. You’d pick out who you wanted to talk to, and in between shots make conversation. David would sometimes invite a couple into his trailer. There was a lot of down time on the set.”

Cassidy’s face was plastered on everything Screen Gems merchandising guru Ed Justin could think of—lunch boxes, toys, paper dolls, beach towels, and so on. Cassidy’s live shows sold out within minutes; in the spring of 1972, he sold 113,446 tickets to two matinee shows at the Houston Astrodome. That same year, twenty-four zealous fans fainted during a performance in Detroit.<sup>6</sup> “It was hysteria, and my life was turned upside down,” says Cassidy. “I was a twenty-four-year-old guy living the life of a twenty-four-year-old guy. There was no such thing as AIDS or being PC then. I also wasn’t with sixteen-year-old girls, but with consenting adults—sometimes two, three, or four.”

Cassidy was reveling in the perks of his newfound fame: “I would leave my hotel room, and there would be, like, seven girls over the age of eighteen, bra-less and ready to rock.” But he wanted to have it



both ways: to luxuriate in his success, but lose the teen idol image that had turned him into a locker door pin-up. “Perpetuating this white knight thing, and being robbed of your own identity is wrong,” he says. “It was untruthful.”

Eager to distance himself from his media-made love-child alter ego, Cassidy agreed to be interviewed by *Rolling Stone* magazine, the early 1970s ultimate arbiter of cultural cool, in the spring of 1972. The resulting article, cheekily titled “Naked Lunch Box,” ripped the lid off of the Cassidy construct, portraying the TV star as a jaded, overworked marketing tool beholden to his handlers and various hangers-on. But it was Annie Leibowitz’s photos that attracted the most attention. In the cover shot, Cassidy lies nude on a field of grass, a beatific smile on his face. The inside gatefold was even more revealing, with a hint of pubic hair teasingly peeking out from the bottom of the page.

“It was an anti-establishment magazine, and that was cool to me,” says Cassidy. “The photo shoot was awkward, though. Annie was unmarried, and I was unmarried, she’s taking photos of my body. She

**Backstage at a London concert, 1974. (Photo: Henry Diltz)**



was really uncomfortable.” But the Cassidy marketing machine was too powerful to be derailed by a mere magazine article, and Cassidy’s young audience didn’t read *Rolling Stone*, anyway. There was some corporate fallout: Coca-Cola pulled out of sponsoring an hour-long David Cassidy special after the *Rolling Stone* piece was published. “That was OK with me,” says Cassidy. “I didn’t want to do the special, anyway.” Cassidy had tried to crack his persona wide open, but it remained too impermeable a myth to deconstruct.

The arena shows turned into stadium shows; in England, Cassidy became a huge star after *The Partridge Family* began airing there in March 1972. He scored two monster U.K. hits with the Rascals’ “How Can I Be Sure” and “Daydreamer,” which had eleven- and fifteen-week runs at number one, respectively. But the fanaticism was starting to curdle into something ugly and menacing. Henry Diltz, who frequently traveled on the road with Cassidy, would observe everything from the wings while snapping photos.

“It was like the Beatles, just screaming hysteria,” Diltz recalls. “In the big soccer stadiums in places like Australia and England, they would have festival seating, and the girls would shove forward to try to get a better look at David. Thousands of them would be jammed up against the railing, and it would knock the wind out of them. The security people would be pulling unconscious girls out of the crowd. They would have to stop the show to tell people to move back. Backstage, there would be cops with stretchers tending to semiconscious girls, or girls who were sobbing hysterically. I mean, it was like

Korea or Vietnam back there.”

Cassidy, meanwhile, was trying desperately to reinvent himself as an interpreter of legitimate rock. “He would be singing these Dylan



**Under siege, 1974.** (Photo: Henry Diltz)

songs and stuff during the shows, but it's not really satisfying for a performer when no one's listening," says Diltz. *The Partridge Family* continued to do well, so ABC moved the show to Saturday nights opposite CBS's powerhouse *All in the Family* at the start of 1974 season in an attempt to cut into that show's huge viewership. But it turned into a knockout blow; *The Partridge Family* slipped from the top twenty and became a Nielsen cellar dweller. "I imagine that some ABC vice president in charge of annoying me pulled the Friday-Saturday switch in the hopes that the teeny-bopper passion for David Cassidy . . . would gnaw away at Archie Bunker's popularity," wrote the *New York Times*' TV critic Cyclops. "As usual, this kind of creative programming has ended in disaster, and the culpable vice president should be sentenced to 40 years of Orange Bowl half-times."

Four months after the scheduling change, during a sold-out David Cassidy concert at London's White City athletic stadium, a fourteen-year-old fan named Bernadette Whelan suffered a fatal heart attack. "That really crushed David," says Diltz. "He quit touring after that." Cassidy, exhausted and disenchanted, quit *The Partridge Family* in May 1974, only to find himself lost in a show-biz Siberia of his own devising. The show was canceled, and the teen Icarus fell back to earth. "I didn't know what to do," says Cassidy. "I refer to those years as my dark years. I was pretty lost."

Intent on becoming a legitimate artist, Cassidy began hanging out with a few members of L.A.'s music mafia—the Beach Boys' Bruce Johnston and Carl Wilson, Flo and Eddie, and Gerry Beckley of pop-lite band America. He wrote songs for his solo albums with Richie Furay, Harry Nilsson and Brian Wilson, got shit-faced with John Lennon and jammed with the ex-Beatle in Cassidy's Encino home, and abused lots of substances. "I went crazy," says Cassidy.

Cassidy returned to acting in 1977, and earned an Emmy nomination for a guest role in an episode of the NBC anthology series *Police Story*. That led, in the fall of 1978, to a starring role in *David Cassidy: Man Undercover*, a standard-issue crime show starring Cassidy as an undercover L.A. cop. "The series was done in the middle of the year, when all the good writers and directors were booked," says Cassidy. "It was thrown together and put in a horrible time slot.

And the cherry on the cake was that they called it *David Cassidy: Man Undercover*. I just went ballistic when I heard that.” When the show was canceled after twelve episodes, Cassidy vowed to never act on television again. From that moment on, Cassidy, like Ricky Nelson, was destined to live in the shadow of his idealized former self.

Although he found some measure of success as a theater actor in the musicals *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Blood Brothers*, in which he co-starred with his half-brother Shaun, David Cassidy in 1999 found himself producing NBC’s biopic *The David Cassidy Story* and appearing in something called *David Cassidy at the Copa* in the main room at Las Vegas’s Rio Casino Resort. His name now a potent, nostalgically charged trademark, Cassidy continues to cash in on his former glory even as he struggles to be recognized as something more than Keith Partridge.

## ***Lucite and Soul***

### **1970S TV ROCK**

***I can't understand why the late-night talk shows don't pick up on Alice. I see they've got that female impersonator Jim Bailey on the Cavett show, why not Alice?***

—ALICE COOPER'S MOM, 1972

In the television landscape of the 1970s, rock performed by real rock musicians was no longer considered a viable prime-time proposition. Paradoxically, it was also a time when the audience for popular music was expanding exponentially—more than 25 percent each year during the first half of the decade<sup>1</sup>—but that audience's taste was balkanizing into countless different camps. One segment of the generation that had been weaned on the Beatles and the Stones in the 1960s had moved on to the singer-songwriter movement centered around artists like James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, while many of the kids that had copped a sugar rush from the Archies were embracing Deep Purple's medieval metal and P-Funk's comic strip R&B. The market for rock 'n' roll was subdividing, and the networks could no longer sell advertisers on the promise of snaring a mass audience with family-hour shows like *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo*. The only way for a pop act to thrive in prime time was to capitulate to television's rules of engagement (i.e., conform to the venerable variety-show format), and no one did that more successfully in the 1970s than Sonny Bono and Cher Sarkasian La Pier, whose *Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* turned them into living room icons.

The couple, who had scored a string of hit singles in the mid-1960s, were the beneficiaries of a burgeoning celebrity culture in the '70s which valued personality cults over artistic merit. It mattered little that Sonny and Cher were no longer consistent record sellers in the early '70s; what made them household names was the clash of their domestic archetypes as it played out on TV: Sonny, the perpetually trod-upon dunderhead, and Cher, the sexy shrew with a knack for the razor-edged zinger. Sonny and Cher were pure show-biz yet reassuringly homey, like the Honeymooners on a Vegas trip.

"The magic of the show was that they absolutely didn't look like they belonged together," says show writer Bob Einstein. "They would throw barbs back and forth at each other, and then go home together. Audiences loved to see that dynamic."

It was a put-on, to be sure, but Sonny and Cher had always been willing to strike a pose for a little slice of fame. In the 1960s, when the pair scored with top-ten hits like "I Got You Babe" and "The Beat Goes On," they affected a hippie shtick so over-the-top silly that it became strangely endearing. Bono, a show-biz scrapper from an early age who had co-written "Needles and Pins" for the Searchers and apprenticed under Phil Spector, was the duo's architect, writing most of their material, designing their look, calling all the shots. He was also smart enough to know that Cher would ultimately prove to be their meal ticket, and did everything he could to make her a star. Exhibit A: 1969's *Chastity*, a feature film Bono bankrolled as a star vehicle for his wife, which failed miserably.

Sonny and Cher were steamrolled by the counterculture in the late 1960s—synthetic freaks made irrelevant by the real thing—so they did what all self-respecting '60s pop stars did when the chips were down: play Vegas. Sonny worked up an act that packed all the flash and polish of a classic nightclub routine, with the couple sparring affectionately between songs. In 1969, saddled by a \$200,000 IRS tax bill, they made their Vegas debut as Pat Boone's opening act at the Flamingo. Soon, the couple were nightclub fixtures. Sonny was determined to make them stars again, writing in his diary in the fall of 1970, "I'm serious when I say there's only one place for me, and that's on top."<sup>2</sup>

CBS head of programming Fred Silverman caught their act and

signed them to their own series in the fall of 1971. *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* debuted in August 1971 as a summer replacement show, and proved so popular with viewers that it won a spot on the fall schedule. Programmed in the 8:00 time slot on Friday nights opposite ABC's *The Brady Bunch* and NBC's *Stanford and Son*, *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* was an instant hit, becoming the most-watched program in its time slot for three years running.

*The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* was standard-issue variety-show stuff, featuring as it did slapstick costume sketches, musical numbers in which Cher would sashay in the latest Bob Mackie gown, an ensemble of supporting players that included Teri Garr and Freeman King and guest stars from the usual TV talent pool. But that was all superfluous. The show's main attraction was the monologues that bookended each program, when the couple would toss benign verbal jabs at each other, then bring on their daughter Chastity and sing their theme song, "I Got You Babe," at the show's conclusion. It was irresistible TV—comedy as soap opera—and viewers ate it up, as long as the illusion of domestic bliss could be maintained.

What viewers didn't know was that the union had been crumbling almost from the show's inception. By 1972, their marriage was falling apart; Cher had fallen in love with their tour guitarist, Bill Hamm. Divorce proceedings were kept under wraps so as not to disrupt the illusion of familial tranquillity that sustained the show. Cher, in fact, was under contract to Sonny, but when the show made her a huge star, their business relationship became unbearable for her. "I don't think we knew just how volatile it had become," says Bob Einstein. "When you're insulting each other and you're not going home together, that's a whole different ball game." They were, in fact, going home together, just to different parts of the same home; Sonny and Cher had split their Beverly Hills residence down the middle, with Cher and Chastity living in one part, and Sonny and his inamorata Cheryl Freeman living in the other.

In 1974 Sonny and Cher canceled themselves, and were then given the opportunity to star in their own individual variety shows. *The Sonny Comedy Revue* and *Cher* were virtually identical, but at least Cher had her fabulousness to fall back on. Nonetheless, neither

show fared well; viewers wanted the whole package. So the duo reunited for *The Sonny and Cher Hour* in 1976—the first time a divorced couple had starred in a TV show together— but this time the rancor that had been simmering on the previous show rose to the surface. Now the insults packed real contempt, and the chill between them was uncomfortably palpable. “I didn’t realize it at first, ’cause I only saw what they did on camera,” says show writer Earl Brown. “But then, Cher would tell me, ‘That asshole is driving me crazy.’” *The Sonny and Cher Hour* lasted sixteen months.

*The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* spawned a host of imitators—*Donny and Marie*, *Tony Orlando and Dawn*, *Sha-Na-Na*, and *The Hudson Brothers Show*, which was a summer replacement for *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*—all of which required of its musical stars the ability to mug and riff humorously on cue. But there’s no TV opiate like sexual tension, and none of these performers could generate the same heat as Sonny and Cher.

In the 1970s the best music on television was found at the viewer-supported fringes of the broadcasting landscape, on regional public television stations. In Chicago, WTTW’s *Soundstage* provided a crucial forum for folk, country, pop, jazz, and fusion stars, while in Austin, Texas, KLRN’s *Austin City Limits* played a significant role in mainstreaming the rebel roots music that was incubating in that great music city. *Soundstage* lasted only six seasons, but *Austin City Limits* continues to provide a crucial forum for marginalized roots artists a quarter-century after its debut.

*Austin City Limits* was established in 1976 by producer Bill Arhos, an Austin resident and music fan who was eager to provide a national forum for the city’s thriving music scene. At the time, Austin was a proving ground for artists like Townes Van Zandt, Willie Nelson, and Guy Clark—brilliant mavericks who chafed at Nashville’s hit-making dictates and found a nurturing environment among Austin’s ramshackle network of clubs and bars. PBS, on the hunt for new programming, agreed to bankroll thirteen episodes on the basis of a pilot show that featured Nelson, who was on the verge of international fame.

“All Texas music tends to get funneled through Austin,” says the



show's current producer, Terry Lickona. "Austin and the show have fed off of one another through the years. That's what woke Nashville out of its torpor, and injected a new credibility in country music."

As a showcase for roots music, *Austin City Limits'* influence has been incalculable, introducing its viewers to then-marginal acts like Delbert McLinton, Rodney Crowell, and Joe Ely in the 1970s. When Leonard Cohen appeared on the show in 1989, it helped revive his career. "We got calls from hard-core country fans after that show," says Lickona. As the years progressed, *Austin City Limits* became an important TV showcase for various strains of vernacular music; Steve Earle, Alison Krauss, and Stevie Ray Vaughan are some of the acts that received crucial national exposure on the show early in their careers.

The key to *Austin City Limits'* success is its effective illusion of intimacy. Shot with a minimum of camera cuts on an unadorned stage with a photo of the Austin night skyline as its backdrop, most episodes of the show are devoted to two artists who get thirty minutes to perform. "What bugs the shit out of me when I watch a lot of music on TV is it's more for the director and the lighting people than the viewer," says Lickona. "If I'm watching an artist sing his heart out, I don't want to see the camera jumping around. We have a more loving approach; we draw you into the artist singing."

ABC's *Music Scene*, which ended its five-month run in January 1970, was the last gasp for prime-time network TV rock. The show's odd forty-five-minute running time was the result of a programming faux pas; ABC mistakenly assumed it had signed on to do a half-hour show, and then had to concede an extra fifteen minutes when executive producers Tommy Smothers, Ken Fritz, and Stan Harris balked. *The Music Scene* was a relatively stripped-down pop music showcase, with no lip-synched performances, lame comedy sketches, or scripted patter in between segments—just temperamental rock stars with attitude.

"When we booked Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, it was a real coup for us," recalls Stan Harris. "But we made the mistake of letting them have final approval over the segment. We spent five hours shooting and reshooting 'Down by the River.'" The final version of

“Down by the River” that made it to air was incendiary, the best televised performance by the foursome. “It was almost like they were channeling each other,” says Harris. “I never cut to their guitars, only close-ups of their faces.”

Janis Joplin also lit it up on *The Music Scene*, and nearly sabotaged the show in the process. “The fire marshall used to attend all the tapings to make sure no one was smoking dope in the audience,” says Harris. “When Joplin was on, she smoked cigarettes constantly. She was waiting to go on with a cigarette in her hand, and the fire marshall tells her to put it out. So she tells him, ‘Why don’t you fuck off,’ and he closes up the show. Everybody had to leave the studio, and only half the crowd was allowed back in.” After scoring respectable ratings during its first few weeks, *The Music Scene* petered out, and with it, the short-lived era of prime-time TV rock.

TV had pushed rock back to the margins, but instead of finding refuge in the afternoon, where *American Bandstand* had been a fixture for three decades, rock would carve out its own niche in the late-night weekend hours, when stoned kids coming home from a night of partying would be amenable to a pre-crash rock fix.

Originally conceived by ABC network executive Bob Shanks as part of the network’s Wide World of Entertainment package—which also included once-a-month airings of *The Dick Cavett Show* and *Jack Paar Tonight—In Concert*, which aired on ABC from 11:30 to 1:00 A.M. on Friday night, was the network’s attempt to replicate the spontaneity and adrenaline rush of an authentic rock show. In order to snag talent and facilitate a smoothly run production, Shanks hired Don Kirshner to function as *In Concert*’s creative consultant.

Given Kirshner’s complete lack of TV production experience, it was a curious choice. Kirshner’s strong point had always been packaging songwriters with singers, and the logistics of wrangling performers for a TV show didn’t come easy to him. But if there’s one thing Kirshner did better than any “suit,” it was generate headlines for himself. Kirshner was surely the most boastful music executive of his day; he frequently took full credit for creating *The Archies* and *The Monkees* when he had, in fact, merely coordinated the music for

those shows. That chest-thumping braggadocio would come in handy for ABC when it came time to promote *In Concert*.

That Kirshner had lots of “juice” was indisputable, and he managed to book an impressive lineup of artists for *In Concert*’s first program, including the TV debut of shock rocker Alice Cooper. That was no easy feat in the post-*Ed Sullivan Show* early 1970s, when many rock artists questioned the efficacy of a TV gig to boost their bottom line. The majority of them considered themselves either too cool for TV or too busy to bother.

In order to create what Kirshner described in interviews as a “Fillmore of the Air,” the music impresario hired Josh White, who had been responsible for mounting the groundbreaking psychedelic light shows for Bill Graham’s Fillmore East and West. Kirshner also created the first network TV “simulcast” by having ABC’s radio affiliates pick up *In Concert*’s audio feed, thereby allowing viewers to turn down their TV monitors and mix in hi-fi sound from their stereos.

But this wasn’t the freewheeling Fillmore, this was network TV, with its restrictive unions and tight budgetary constraints, and Kirshner ran into countless headaches during the first taping of *In Concert* at New York’s Hofstra University. Numerous logistical snags created massive time delays, which left irate bands like the Allman Brothers and Poco sucking on warm beer and threatening to abandon ship until the early morning hours.<sup>3</sup> “We had Chuck Berry on the first show,” says Kirshner, “and right before he was scheduled to go on, he comes up to me. ‘Donnie, grease my palm, man. Give me a thousand dollars or I’m leaving.’ I told him, ‘Chuck, I can’t do that, man.’ He eventually went on without the money.”

Alice Cooper didn’t need a kickback to ensure his participation. The Detroit native and his manager Shep Gordon were well aware of how effectively television could sell Cooper’s visually striking, Grand Guignol stage show to a captive audience of millions. Gordon spent countless hours in meetings with *In Concert*’s production crew working out every last detail, and even flew the crew at his own expense to see a Cooper show a few weeks prior to the taping so they could gain some working knowledge of how the rocker’s elaborate show played out onstage.

Cooper's resulting November 24, 1972 *In Concert* performance was a carefully choreographed exercise in benign ghoulishness. Clad in black leather pants, vest, and matching mascara, Cooper held forth over a *West Side Story*-like gang-banging scenario during his performance of "Gutter Cat vs. the Jets," and was then led to the gallows and "hanged." It was nothing if not attention-getting; amazingly, only one affiliate in Cincinnati flinched and pulled *In Concert* from their schedule, until a raft of protest letters forced them to reconsider.<sup>4</sup>

Cooper's theatrics helped *In Concert* deliver over 4 million viewers to ABC, almost twice the number that Cavett and Paar were drawing in the same time slot. But Cooper's show-stopping appearance on *In Concert* was an anomaly. For the most part, Kirshner didn't effectively utilize the medium to compensate for the downsizing effect that television has on rock performers; the show's static camera shots and metronomic edits tended to drain the life out of even the most dynamic acts.

Still, rock performers, eager to replicate the success that Cooper had on the show, flocked to *In Concert* for the next two years. By mid-1973, *In Concert* was giving Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* a run for its money. In the spring of 1974, ABC mounted the first of two "California Jams" at Ontario Motor Speedway in California, and broadcast the festival over four installments on *In Concert*—the first time a network had actually staged its own rock festival.

In August 1972, four months before *In Concert*'s debut, NBC had broadcast a pilot for a musical variety show called *The Midnight Special* at 1:00 A.M.—the first time any network had programmed at that time. "Networks used to stop at 1:00 A.M. They would just show a test pattern," says *Midnight Special* director Stan Harris. "They would give the time to local stations to play old movies. Putting in original programming in that slot was a very novel idea at the time. I used to say it was like putting out a magazine and leaving blank pages inside. If you could potentially sell advertising in that time slot, why not at least try it?"

The idea for *The Midnight Special* had come from Sydney Vinnedge, an executive at Grey Advertising, who was, according to the *New York Times*, looking for a way to "reach the teen-agers who can't

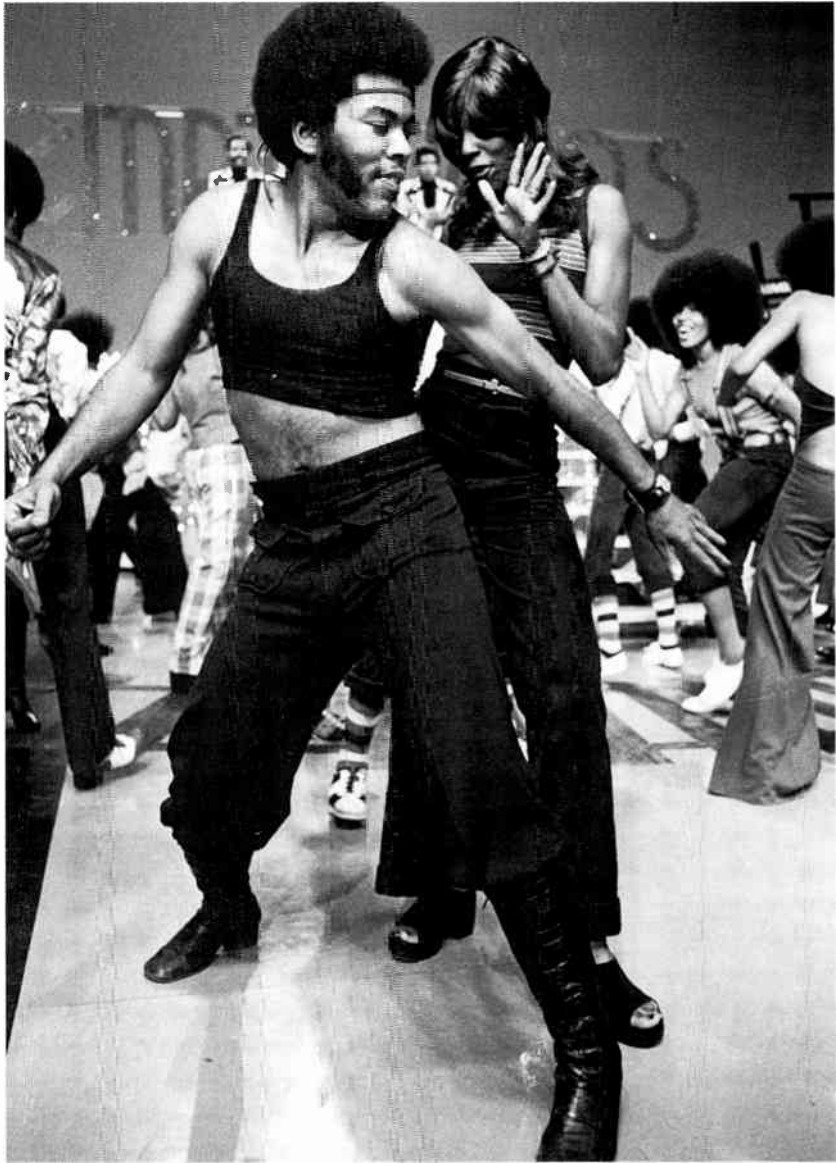
be . . . reached efficiently as far as cost is concerned through prime-time TV.”<sup>5</sup> Because eighteen-year-olds had just recently been given the legal right to vote, it was Vinnedge’s intention to snare younger viewers with a steady procession of pop stars, then wrap the whole package in the patriotic bunting of a get-out-the-vote public service announcement. Sold on the idea, NBC’s head of West Coast operations Herb Schlosser hired Burt Sugarman to produce the show.

A veteran of various network music specials and award shows, Sugarman had specific ideas as to how *The Midnight Special* should be positioned on NBC’s late-late-night grid. He surmised that *The Midnight Special* should follow *The Tonight Show* on Friday nights; Carson always netted a high rating on Fridays, and kids would be off from school and could stay up late without guilt or retribution. Schlosser and NBC were skittish about following Carson with rock, so Sugarman cut them a deal. He would put up the total cost of the show’s production, around \$180,000, in exchange for ownership of the show. NBC agreed, and with the help of Vinnedge, who sold out all of the advertising slots for the first show, Sugarman earned his money back.

The inaugural episode of *The Midnight Special* served up pure, middle-of-the-road piffle. Hosted by John Denver and featuring Linda Ronstadt, the Everly Brothers, Cass Elliot, and Helen Reddy, it could have been scheduled as an after-school special; Sugarman was careful not to alienate NBC or potential advertisers with anything much more controversial than Reddy’s feminist anthem “I Am Woman.” The strategy worked, ratings soared, and NBC programmed *The Midnight Special* as a weekly series.

Sugarman pretty much stuck to that middle-of-the-road formula throughout *The Midnight Special*’s eight-year run, providing a sop to the Carson loyalists by offering up mainstream acts during the first half of the ninety-minute show, then backloading heavier rock performers for the second half. In that sense, *The Midnight Special* was an accurate reflection of the decade’s zeitgeist. This was an era, after all, when rock glossed itself with the hard, slick veneer of mainstream show business, and authentic voices struggled to be heard on TV.

Booking rock acts on late-night television was a challenge in the early 1970s. Sugarman, like Kirshner, had little money to spend on



**Soul Train dancers, 1972. (Photo by Neal Preston)**

artists; union rules required everyone to be paid scale, or \$350. Bad audio continued to be a concern among performers, and there was also the fear that a single TV appearance could have a damaging effect on touring revenue. Sugarman was aware of the pitfalls, and by ensuring that *The Midnight Special* avoided the usual production hassles of music-driven shows, he was able to lure a steady stream of

big acts to the show. “We were the only music show at that time using four tracks of audio, and that was a big plus as far as artists were concerned,” says Stan Harris. “We also wouldn’t lip-synch. We thought that meant something at the time. Whenever an act came and said, ‘We’d like to lip-synch,’ we told them to go to *American Bandstand*.”

To minimize pre-production headaches, Sugarman set up six separate performance stages in NBC’s Studio 4, thereby ensuring a seamless flow of music without countless equipment changes. “We had the audience members sit on mats, so they could shift their attention from one act to another,” says associate producer Jacques Andre. “That created a lot of excitement in the studio. The crowds would go wild.”

Everything was taped live, with a minimum of retakes, and sound engineer Joe Ralston worked closely with all of the acts to make sure the final sound mix was acceptable. “Once the artists knew that we cared about their audio, and we weren’t screwing them around, we gained their trust,” says Andre.

But even as Sugarman strived to create an amenable, thoroughly professional atmosphere, the artists didn’t always comply. Cocaine had infiltrated the rock community to an unprecedented extent, and Sugarman and his production crew had to make contingency plans for erratic behavior. When Sly Stone appeared on the August 9, 1974, show, he holed himself up in his dressing room with his cronies, consumed untold quantities of drugs, and refused to come out. It took director Stan Harris eight hours to shoot two songs.

The following week, a segment with Aerosmith had to be halted in mid-song when an “8-Ball” vial of heroin slipped out from behind lead singer Steven Tyler’s ear.<sup>6</sup> Bob Smith, aka Wolfman Jack, the legendary Border Radio DJ whom Sugarman hired to be *The Midnight Special*’s announcer, recalled a familiar pre-show ritual in his autobiography, *Have Mercy!* “I would walk into the dressing rooms of some of these guys and they would have their coke stash laid on the table all lined out on mirrors, and their hundred-dollar bills rolled up into snorting tubes. Usually they’d offer me a line. Here’s where my over-size frame helped me out. If someone seemed too wasted to watch closely, I’d hunch over the mirror, block their view, and pretend to inhale a line.”<sup>7</sup>

Other times, ego took precedence over professionalism, as when Marvin Gaye gave Sugarman the big dis prior to a show taping. “Marvin didn’t always like to cooperate,” recalled Sugarman. “One time we were supposed to rehearse, and he was two hours late. So I went to his father’s house to get him, and he was sleeping. So I woke him up and said, ‘Marvin, you were supposed to rehearse two hours ago.’ He said, ‘Frank Sinatra does it his way, and so do I.’”<sup>8</sup>

Artists would bail out, as when Brian Wilson split without provocation in the middle of an interview with Wolfman Jack and never returned. Lou Reed engaged in a loopily discursive talk with Flo and Eddie in 1978 after NBC’s Standards and Practices objected to a reference to oral sex in Reed’s song “Walk on the Wild Side” and barred Reed from performing it on the air.

*The Midnight Special’s* mix of show-biz schmaltz and occasional flashes of legitimate rock worked well for the first few seasons, but by the fall of 1975 sagging ratings forced Sugarman to skew the format toward an even more traditional television audience. Aussie chanteuse Helen Reddy was installed as permanent host. Sugarman’s then-fiancée Carol Wayne, best known as the well-endowed ditzy blonde from Johnny Carson’s lubricious, sub-vaudeville sketches on *The Tonight Show*, had a short stint as the show’s gossip maven. Sugarman also enlisted cutting-edge rock visionaries like Carol Burnett and Bob Newhart to make appearances on the show. “There aren’t enough rock fans,” Sugarman told *Rolling Stone* when asked to explain the makeover. “The music’s changed. Now it’s discos and MOR. There’s maybe five big rock acts, that’s all.”<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, *The Midnight Special* scared away the biggest rock performers, who didn’t want anything to do with a show that had someone like Reddy as its standard-bearer. “A lot of the rock groups want a mystique,” talent booker Debi Genovese said, “or they’re on this kick of how it’ll hurt them.”

Unable to book A-list rock acts, *The Midnight Special* and *In Concert* had to resort to the B list, which is how middling acts like Black Oak Arkansas and Johnny Rivers became late-night TV fixtures in the early 1970s. *The Midnight Special’s* steady diet of MOR kept it on the air until just before the dawn of MTV in 1981, but even pinch-



hitting executive producer Dick Clark couldn't salvage *In Concert*, which was canceled in the spring of 1975.

Don Kirshner fared better with *Rock Concert*, a syndicated performance show financed by a relatively new company called Viacom. "They were doing Lucy reruns when I brought them the idea," recalls Kirshner. Kirshner launched *Rock Concert* with a bang by booking some of the era's most popular acts, including the Allman Brothers Band. "We flew down to Macon, Georgia, to tape the Allmans, Wet Willie, and the Marshall Tucker Band, all of whom were on Capricorn Records," says *Rock Concert* director Steve Binder. "[Capricorn owner] Phil Walden hated Don Kirshner with a passion, so Don was running around the whole time thinking Phil was gonna kill him. Anyway, right before we did the Allmans, the band dropped acid. We had to hold off the crowd for an hour while we got the guys together. Worked out alright, though. They put on a great show."

At its peak, *Rock Concert* was being aired by over 100 independent TV stations. Like *Midnight Special*, however, it eventually suffered from a paucity of big-name acts as the novelty of the show wore off for performers; a typical show from the 1975 season featured mid-level draws like Pure Prairie League, Chuck Berry, and Ruby Starr. One thing the pallid *Rock Concert* did have going for it was the deliciously awkward presence of Kirshner himself, who introduced all of the segments on-camera. With his powder-blue polyester suits, helmet hair, and adenoidal, New York accent, Kirshner was the archetypal A&R dude greasing the promo gears with his insincere rap. Paul Shaffer, a member of *Saturday Night Live*'s house band, had seen Kirshner do his thing during a live taping of a Jim Croce tribute show in 1972, and wound up satirizing Kirshner numerous times on *SNL*. Shaffer's Kirshner parody became one of *Saturday Night Live*'s most popular bits during the early years of the show. Here's a typical Shaffer-Kirshner intro for a 1977 skit featuring cast member Garrett Morris as Tina Turner: "Tonight we have a group that's been at the forefront of the R&B rhythm and blues scene for a long time. Today with the help of Dee Ostin, Moe Anthony, and the staff of Selectric Records, their manager Maury Daniels, and the whole rock division

of the promotional department of ICM, they continue to be as strong a creative force [long pause] as ever. So now, let's join Tina, Mr. Mike and The Mike-ettes—The Mr. Mike and Tina Turner Review.”

“I loved it,” says Kirshner. “Paul was a friend. Besides, it helped my show.” Director Steve Binder wasn't so amused by Kirshner's ego-strokes. “One night when I was editing, I got a called from Don at four in the morning,” says Binder. “He tells me that the show's sponsors are threatening to pull out 'cause his name isn't big enough on the opening credits. So I said, ‘Don, I have a great idea. Why don't you come over here and do it yourself?’ I can't remember if he fired me, or I quit, but that was it.”

The promise of late-night rock on TV was scuttled by the logistical and commercial challenges inherent in booking big acts for the small screen. Too many artists chafed at the technical restrictions and the potential overexposure. “There's a formula to these shows,” singer Johnny Nash told *Newsweek* in May 1973. “You mix hits with forthcoming releases and give 'em a change-of-pace tune. The TV guys don't tell you what to sing, but they, uh . . . let's say they make suggestions.”<sup>10</sup> After its initial flush of success, late-night TV rock succumbed to its self-made image as a reliable disseminator of harmless musical gruel.

Among late-night TV rock's many flaws was its lack of musical diversity. Sticking to a middle-of-the-road game plan in the 1970s also meant sticking with mostly white performers. But that was a counterintuitive strategy; more black people were watching television in the mid-1970s than whites. In 1974, TV ratings company A. C. Nielsen published a study that determined more black viewers viewed TV during off-peak hours, and that one of the highest-rated shows among blacks in major cities like Washington and Cleveland was *Soul Train*, the syndicated dance show that imported urban street style to suburban America.<sup>11</sup>

*Soul Train's* creator Don Cornelius has never made any bones about his show being a chocolate-flavored facsimile of *American Bandstand*. “We've always realized that we were doing *American Bandstand* or whoever did this thing before us,” Cornelius told the *New York Times* in 1995. “It was really the same show. A dance show

is a dance show is a dance show.”<sup>12</sup> *American Bandstand* director Barry Glazer concurs. “Soul Train would take everything from us,” he says. “Angles, shots, dancing—everything.” Yet at a time when black culture was making inroads into the mainstream like never before, *Soul Train* was a crucial beacon of funky chic for music fans eager to pick up new dance moves and fashion cues.

In the late 1960s, the architects of the civil rights movement, particularly black nationalist groups like the Black Panthers with their “Back to Africa” rhetoric, created new modes of acceptable behavior for African-Americans, as well as the recognition that ethnic self-awareness, not assimilation, was the key to empowerment. By the early 1970s the political thrust of the movement had all but dissipated, but the salient cultural symbols remained to fuel a black artistic renaissance.

New fashion trends were cross-bred from traditional African style and white hippie garb, as Afros, dashikis, bell-bottom jeans and platform shoes became de rigueur accessories. Black filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks launched the “blaxploitation” movement with such films as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* and *Shaft*, while musical artists like Curtis Mayfield, George Clinton, and Isaac Hayes embedded messages of racial unity and self-empowerment within deep-dish funk grooves that aimed to bring “One Nation Under A Groove.”

R&B was crossing over like never before, as white listeners purchased greater quantities of records made by black artists than at any time in pop music history. Consider that in May 1972, the top eight singles on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart were made by black artists, and that three out of every ten records played on Top 40 radio that year were R&B.<sup>13</sup> Roberta Flack, Al Green, the Jackson Five, the O’Jays, and Stevie Wonder became global superstars.

The unintended irony of this black cultural renaissance was that Madison Avenue almost immediately discovered the potential for coopting “black power” to sell products to white and black folk alike. Companies like Johnson Products sold huge quantities of its Ultra-Sheen and Afro-Sheen hair spray products on ethnocentric TV shows like *Sanford and Son*, itself an all-black sitcom created by white television producers.

As a part-time DJ for WVON in his native Chicago, Cornelius caught on to the ways in which black self-determination had created a new consumer class, and he longed to be a part of it. The former marine and insurance salesman came up with the notion of producing a TV dance show featuring black dancers and performers, and talked local UHF-TV station WCIU, where he was moonlighting as a newscaster, into producing it. Using \$400 of his own money, Cornelius mounted the first *Soul Train* in the summer of 1970 using Sears, Roebuck as his sole sponsor and crackerjack booty-thumpers recruited from local high schools as his dancers. The show caught on immediately with Chicago's black viewers, particularly those style-conscious dancers who gleaned new moves from the show's slick amateurs, and WCIU agreed to carry the one-hour program five afternoons a week on a trial basis.

*Soul Train* quickly turned into a regional phenomenon. Cornelius had closely followed Dick Clark's career with *American Bandstand*, and he wanted to emulate the trajectory of that show's success. In May 1972 he transplanted the show to Los Angeles, signed Johnson Products as a sponsor, and sold *Soul Train* to national television syndicator Metromedia. "When we decided to try for a national show we thought we needed other facilities and more highly skilled technical people, the kind that are only available in Los Angeles," Cornelius told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1973. "Also, we found that there are regional attitudes toward dancing. In Chicago, the criterion is how cool, how smooth you can be; in Los Angeles, it's all about how wild you can be and, of course, that's much more interesting to watch."<sup>14</sup>

As a national show, *Soul Train* served up urban cool with laid-back intensity. Like *Bandstand* and countless other dance shows, *Soul Train* had dancers gyrating to the latest hits (R&B and funk this time), dance contests, and two or three performers lip-synching every week. *Soul Train* MC Cornelius, however, was the anti-Clark—bad-ass, coolly self-possessed, and impeccably dressed, with an Afro that touched the clouds ("I'm . . . 6 feet 8 in my platform shoes and afro," Cornelius told *Newsweek*),<sup>15</sup> introducing records in a distinctively resonant bedroom baritone. In a 1973 *New York Times* article on the show, writer Clayton Riley described Cornelius's hipster patois

as a “crisp, fly sorta rap that plays its own verbal music, bouncing around phrases like a hip and gifted git-tar player easing his way through a well-known solo.”<sup>16</sup>

As a disseminator of dance trends, *Soul Train* was to the early 1970s what *American Bandstand* had been to the mid-1950s. African Americans had been the instigators of national dance crazes as far back as the early 1920s, but prior to *Soul Train*, white dancers were TV’s proselytizers by virtue of their exposure on *Bandstand* and other shows. *Soul Train* reversed that decades-old trend, beaming black dance moves by black dancers straight into the vanilla suburbs. Highly formalized steps like the Breakdown, the PA Slaughter, the Robot, and the Penguin became staples at school dances and house parties all over the country. Frequently, Cornelius would slap names on new moves his dancers created to provide that critical feeling of discovery for the show’s viewers.

Style was just as crucial to *Soul Train*’s ethos as dancing, as viewers learned fashion tips from Cornelius’s high school dancers, who always showed up “costumed, filigreed, marcelled, enameled, plaited, and decalced from coif to clog.”<sup>17</sup> By 1975 a few of *Soul Train*’s regulars, like Scooby Doo, Pat Davis, and Eddie Champion, started landing professional gigs with the likes of Tom Jones and the Spinners.<sup>18</sup> “A lot of professional dancers come to the studio and watch the show and often they ask the kids to demonstrate dances for them or to come to their studios to work out with them,” Cornelius said in 1973. Cornelius, for his part, became a teen celebrity, as kids took turns mimicking his Courvoisier-sweet voice in the schoolyard during recess— as well as the high-pitched “Sooooouuuulllll Train!” shout-out that was heard over the show’s opening theme song, “TSOP (the Sound of Philadelphia),” by MFSP.

*Soul Train* became one of the ten most-watched syndicated shows in the country, and Cornelius’s “black *Bandstand*” was starting to make Dick Clark nervous. A good number of ABC’s affiliate stations started carrying *Soul Train*, prompting Clark to strike back with something called *Soul Unlimited* in 1972. A virtual carbon copy of *Soul Train* hosted by an L.A. disc jockey named Buster Jones, *Soul Unlimited* had none of the casual cool or street cred of *Soul Train*,

but it did have Clark's muscle behind it, and it instantly became a credible competitor.

Clark's stealth counter-strike infuriated Cornelius and his supporters, most notably the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who fired off a protest letter to ABC vice president Martin Pompador. "*Soul Train's* success had partially been at the expense of Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*," Jackson wrote. "Many of the stations carrying *Soul Train* are ABC affiliated. *Soul Train* has consistently outrated and overshadowed *Bandstand*." Jackson also claimed that Clark "launched a campaign to recruit *Soul Train* dancers for *American Bandstand*, selling them on the fact that *Bandstand* was a network show," and how "in . . . markets where *Soul Train* airs on ABC, the show was preempted for *Soul Unlimited* due to the power and pressure of the network."<sup>19</sup>

Cornelius called Clark's move "an open and overt attempt to seize control of the black-oriented TV entertainment medium away from the blacks who first cultivated it and made it successful."<sup>20</sup> Clark took a coolly pragmatic approach with the press, telling *Rolling Stone* that *Soul Unlimited* was "strictly business." *Soul Unlimited* producer Judy Price tried to pull the reverse racism card. "Whether it's *American Bandstand* or *Soul Train*, it's entertainment," she told *Rolling Stone*. "But, you know, they're talking about an all-black show. That's segregation!"<sup>21</sup> Despite Clark's attempts to steal away *Soul Train's* viewers, the ersatz *Soul Unlimited* was summarily crushed under *Soul Train's* wheels, and didn't even last a full season. Cornelius's black *Bandstand*, meanwhile, continues to chug along; although Cornelius resigned as host of the show in 1993, two years later *Soul Train* became TV's longest-running show in first-run syndication.

Music award shows were relative latecomers to television. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) began handing out Grammy Awards in 1958, and the first televised Grammy show took place a year later, with a live after-show ceremony that featured performances from a handful of winners. The show garnered paltry ratings, and the ceremony was not seen again on TV until 1963, when something called *The Best on Record* was conceived as a way to showcase Grammy winners without actually

broadcasting the ceremonies in their entirety. That year, Tony Bennett won the Record of the Year award for "I Left My Heart in San Francisco"—this in the same year that witnessed the emergence of the Beach Boys and Stevie Wonder as superstar acts. Thus, 40 million viewers were privy to the utter cluelessness of the Grammy selection process, and many of them would continue to watch in utter disbelief as the Grammy Awards continued to recognize mediocrity at the expense of greatness. Consider that in 1976 the Rolling Stones, the Who, Eric Clapton, David Bowie, Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, and Van Morrison had not yet won Grammy Awards. Rock 'n' roll, in fact, didn't get its own exclusive categories until 1979.

From the start, it had been NARAS's intention to put the best possible face on the music industry's yearly showcase of its best and brightest. Still, there's always been something strangely out-of-synch about the televised Grammy ceremonies, as if the gods of good music were making the industry do penance for overlooking so many great records and promoting bland, middle-of-the-road acts. During the show's first live broadcast in 1971, a TV camera fell and set fire to the dress of a record executive's wife. In 1973 the show was moved to Nashville, but only eleven out of the thirty-six awards were handed out on the air due to time restrictions. Burt Sugarman, who coproduced some of the earliest Grammy ceremonies, left in frustration in 1972. "You've got some guy who stamps records in a plant, and he's trying to tell everybody how to do a TV show," Sugarman told *Rolling Stone* in 1973.<sup>22</sup>

Undeterred by his failure to successfully mimic *Soul Train*, Dick Clark set his sights upon producing an alternative to the Grammy Awards called the American Music Awards in 1974. Clark conceived of the AMAs as a populist alternative to the industry-sanctioned Grammys, and sent out 43,000 ballots to a cross-section of Americans, who would then vote in five categories (best male vocalist, best female vocalist, best group, best album, best single) for soul, country, and pop/rock nominees chosen on the basis of record sales. "I think the industry awards should be given," said Dick Clark in 1974, "but I kind of like the idea of asking the guy on the street who listens to radio and maybe buys an album."

The first American Music Awards show, which aired two weeks

before the Grammy Awards, on February 19, 1974, was hardly the grassroots alternative Clark had promised. If anything, it was nothing more than a reread of the same old Grammy formula: lots of Lucite stage sets and tuxedoed execs, and presenters who included Rodney Allen Rippy, Phyllis Diller, Vicki Carr, and Luci Arnaz.

Don Kirshner also tried his hand at an awards show. The Rock Music Awards, like the American Music Awards, was top-heavy with Hollywood glitz and thin on authentic rock 'n' roll moments. It was also rife with howlers. During the second broadcast in November 1976, Jefferson Starship, who were piped in from the jai alai arena in Miami, was notified that singer Grace Slick had won Best Female Vocalist. "After they hear me do 'Fast Buck Freddie,' they'll probably take it back," Starship's vocalist told the TV audience. After Slick and the Starship performed "Fast Buck Freddie," the show switched back to Hollywood, where Brian and Dennis Wilson announced the winner: Linda Ronstadt. During the same broadcast, Diana Ross called Natalie Cole "Natalie Wood," and visibly cringed when Peter Frampton won the Rock Personality of the year award. "Ay-yi-yi . . . is this the right thing?" she exclaimed after reading off the winner. "Peter Frampton!?" The Rock Music Awards, wrote *Rolling Stone* critic Ben Fong-Torres, "had as much to do with rock music as Jimmy Carter has to do with Bob Dylan."<sup>23</sup>

The Grammy Awards ceremonies have always kept a discreet distance from rock 'n' roll, preferring instead to trot out show-biz hacks as presenters and performers and then feeding them cornpone fit for a Dean Martin roast. This forced banter between Alice Cooper and Helen Reddy from the 1974 broadcast is fairly typical:

*Helen:* How's your snake, Alice?

*Alice:* It's fine.

*Helen:* Is it really as long as they say?

*Alice:* Length really isn't that important.<sup>24</sup>

There have been a fair share of gaffes. In 1977 Stevie Wonder, whose album *Songs in the Key of Life* won five awards that year, was presented with his first award via satellite from Lagos, Nigeria, where



the R&B legend was to perform that night. But there were technical complications, and as host Andy Williams tried desperately to establish contact with Wonder, he uttered, “If you can’t hear us, Stevie, can you see us?” There was an audible gasp and a few nervous titters from the audience, and Williams himself was abashed. But nothing much came of it; they finally established contact, and all was forgotten. Williams, however, was not invited back to host the awards again.

In 1978 the Eagles’ *Hotel California* won the Grammy for Record of the Year, but the band was a no-show. “There’s a credibility gap,” Eagles guitarist Glenn Frey told *Rolling Stone*. “Debbi Boone wins Best New Artist, and Warren Zevon and Karla Bonoff aren’t even nominated. I have reasonable doubt about how accurately any kind of contest or award show can portray the year in music.”<sup>25</sup>

Bob Dylan received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1991, and proceeded to make an incoherent mess out of what should have been his finest hour. Given Dylan’s propensity for creative sabo-

**Too many teeth: Helen Reddy and Roger Daltrey on *Midnight Special*, 1975.**

(Photo by Neal Preston)



tage at various times during his career, it wouldn't be a stretch to assume his behavior was a pointed mockery of the organization that was only now ratifying the greatness of an artist it virtually ignored during the past three decades. After a glowing introduction by long-time friend Jack Nicholson, Dylan, dressed in his finest Hobo Joe threads, mumbled through a disjunctive acceptance speech, then rambled through a version of his 1962 song "Masters of War" (a pointed reference to the Persian Gulf War raging at the time) that left viewers craving a printed lyric sheet.

Dylan got his comeuppance in 1998, when, during a performance of his song "Love Sick," a half-naked man with the words "Soy Bomb" scrawled across his chest bounded onto the stage and proceeded to dance like a deranged contortionist for thirty-five seconds while Dylan gamely trudged on. The dancer, who later revealed himself to be a twenty-six-year-old performance artist named Michael Portnoy, was forcibly removed from the stage after what seemed like an eternity. Portnoy, who had been hired to stand behind Dylan as an onlooker, later explained to *Entertainment Weekly* magazine that Soy Bomb was a "dense, nutritional, transformational life explosion. That's what I think music and art should be. The Grammys don't have anything to do with that." As for Dylan, he was "indifferent to him," and would have preferred to have crashed Celine Dion's performance.<sup>26</sup> As it turned out, Portnoy's protest dance was the highlight of the ceremonies.

## ***Saturday Night Live***

### **ROCK AS COMEDY, COMEDY AS ROCK**

During TV's infancy, comedy was the sole province of Square Culture, and the linchpin behind the Big Three networks' strategy to please their burgeoning middle-class audience by the crudest means possible. For millions of viewers, TV comedy in the 1950s was defined by Milton Berle in drag, the Jim Crow minstrelsy of *Amos and Andy*, and the shrill shenanigans of Lucille Ball. Remarkably resilient, this brand of seltzer-spritz hokum endured well into the late 1960s, long after youth culture had embraced rock 'n' roll as a viable alternative to a television culture that continued to ignore it.

It wasn't until a small group of performers began to emerge from the nascent comedy underground in the late 1960s that comedy came into its own as a powerful cultural counterforce. Firebrands like George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, and the Smothers Brothers—artists who had honed their material in clubs like New York's Bitter End and San Francisco's Cafe Wha?—began to slowly infiltrate TV's somnolent talk-show circuit, puncturing its slick facade with routines aimed straight at disenfranchised youth.

By pointing a cracked mirror back at TV viewers, the underground comics of the 1960s caught some of the insurrectionary spirit of rock. With *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, that spirit found its way

into a successful prime-time variety show, and not even that groundbreaking program's premature cancellation could quell the comedy revolution that would reach its efflorescence in the mid-1970s.

Soon comedians like George Carlin and Steve Martin and England's Monty Python's Flying Circus comedy troupe began to acquire the cultural cachet of rock stars. They released their own best-selling comedy albums, which were reviewed in music magazines like *Crawdaddy* and *Rolling Stone*; they sold out amphitheaters and attracted large, fervid fan bases. Carlin, who had started his career as a conventional Vegas stand-up, grew his hair long, sported a beard, and openly talked about his weed habit on TV.

Comedy had become an adjunct of rock culture by the early 1970s, as troupes like the Firesign Theatre and the Credibility Gap released groundbreaking albums that satirized youth culture even as they pandered to it. When Chicago's Second City troupe (which featured John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, and Richard Belzer) collaborated with *National Lampoon*, the signature comedy magazine of the decade, on a series of radio shows, it upped comedy's hip quotient. Cynically self-referential, *The National Lampoon Radio Hour* was syndicated to FM rock stations and specialized in musical parody. *Lemmings*, a take-off on 1969's Woodstock festival, was produced by the *Radio Hour* in 1972.

By 1975 a show like *Saturday Night Live* seemed inevitable, at least to its creator, Lorne Michaels. An obsessive fan of TV and the Beatles in that order, Michaels was a Canadian comedy writer (*Laugh-In*, *The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Hour*) and performer who in 1975 was handed a late-night time slot by NBC to create a variety show. Although the network had envisioned a sanitized showcase for middle-of-the-road talent, Michaels had other ideas in mind. He was aiming for a what he termed a "raw, disposable" aesthetic,<sup>1</sup> a show that would tweak the prejudices of Middle America at the same time that it tapped into youth culture with its pop-ironic sensibility. Amassing the cream of the comedy underground—among them *National Lampoon* alumnus Michael O'Donoghue and Second City members Chevy Chase, Gilda Radner, Belushi, and Aykroyd—Michaels set his sights upon reinventing TV comedy.

*Saturday Night Live* was the first TV comedy show to approximate the irreverence and freewheeling creativity of rock—the first comedy show created exclusively by twenty-something rock fans for a rock-obsessed audience. Michaels wanted *Saturday Night Live* to do nothing less than pick up rock 'n' roll's mantle as the definitive arbiter of cool, something he felt the music had squandered at the close of the 1960s.

Music was critical to *SNL*'s aesthetic, particularly during the crucial make-or-break first season. Gone was the staid pit orchestra piping in fake jazz, a longtime staple of past TV variety shows. Instead, *SNL* amassed a crack band of New York's finest session musicians, including Canadian pianist and future David Letterman sidekick Paul Shaffer, to play everything from roadhouse R&B to bebop and rock. "I put that band together by looking at my record collection and picking out the musicians on the back covers," says Howard Shore, *Saturday Night Live*'s musical director from 1975 to 1980. "Those guys were the best players in the city at that time."

Musical guests would also play a significant role in the show's first season. By booking multiple performers on a single show, Michaels could attract a larger audience, who could then be converted into *SNL* loyalists in short order. But popularity was hardly the criteria for musical bookings during *SNL*'s early years. The musical guests during the 1975-76 season were a hodgepodge of Top 40 stars of the moment, folkies, jazzbos, and a smattering of rock legends. The first four shows featured Janis Ian, Billy Preston, Phoebe Snow, Joe Cocker, Abba, and Loudon Wainwright III. *SNL*'s all-over-the-map musical programming resembled mid-1970s free-form radio more than traditional TV.

Howard Shore remembers the booking process as a group effort during *SNL*'s first few seasons; although future *SNL* executive producer Jean Doumanian was the official talent booker, every one involved with the show participated. "Everybody who worked on the show had their shot, and the show was a reflection of everyone's taste, which is why we had popular acts and marginal music as well, like Sun Ra and Keith Jarrett," says Shore. "Now the show's become a Top 40 station, but at the time, we didn't care about who was on the charts. We picked what we liked as fans."

SNLs 11:30 to 1:00 A.M. time slot afforded Michaels the opportunity to book whom he wanted, when he wanted; after all, very little was at stake, at least until the show became a hit. “The network left us alone as far as the music was concerned,” says Shore. “We were doing a cheap show, and it was on late at night. The show didn’t have a profile yet.”

A newsworthy musical event put *Saturday Night Live* on the pop-cultural map when Simon and Garfunkel reunited for SNL’s second show on October 18, 1975, the folk-rock duo’s first appearance together since 1969. A real coup for a green show, it was orchestrated entirely by Michaels. “Lorne and Paul Simon had met through mutual acquaintances and had become good friends,” says Anne Beatts, an SNL staff writer during the show’s first five seasons. “It was Lorne who had arranged everything.” It was a momentous booking for the show, to be sure, but Paul Simon had other pressing matters on his mind. Like his bald spot.

Simon was working double duty as the show’s host, and all during rehearsal week he was preoccupied with the fact that his bald spot might show up on camera during sketches. During rehearsals, he would frequently turn to the monitor to check his appearance, unwittingly revealing his scalp divot. After one botched take too many, director Dave Wilson began berating Simon, his voice resounding through the studio speakers.<sup>2</sup> After an offstage powwow with

Michaels, Simon eventually curtailed his vanity checks.

It’s doubtful anyone would have paid attention to Simon’s chrome dome if a battery of klieg lights had been trained on it. Everything on the show (which also featured singer-songwriters Randy Newman and Phoebe Snow and gospel



Paul Simon in a chicken suit, 1975.  
(© Edie Baskin/Corbis Outline)

group the Jessie Dixon Singers) was upstaged that night by Simon and Garfunkel, who performed two numbers, “The Boxer” and “Scarborough Fair.” Simon, at the top of the *Billboard* charts at the time with his album *Still Crazy after All These Years*, then proceeded to hog airtime with no less than three solo numbers and a duet with Snow, while Art Garfunkel was allotted only one song, a waltz cover of “I Only Have Eyes for You.” It wasn’t the last time that Michaels’s pal Simon would use his show as a promotional vehicle; he would host *SNL* four more times.



**“If you want to give Ringo less, it’s up to you:” Lorne Michaels making his pitch to the Beatles, 1976. (© Edie Baskin/ Corbis Outline)**

Although the Simon and Garfunkel show garnered impressive ratings, the staffers were unimpressed; perhaps resentful of Michaels’s friend Simon usurping so much airtime, Belushi was quoted as calling Simon a “folk singing wimp.”<sup>3</sup> “We knew it was a big deal to have them on the show, but we really weren’t all that excited about it,” says Beatts. “That wasn’t really our kind of music. I do remember that Artie sang off key, as usual, though.”

The most memorable music-related comedy bit of the first season centered around a Lorne Michaels pitch that opened the April 24, 1976, broadcast:

Hi, I’m Lorne Michaels. Right now we’re being seen by approximately twenty million viewers, but please allow me, if I may, to address myself to just four very special people—John, Paul, George, and Ringo—the Beatles. Lately there have been a lot of rumors to the effect that the four of you might get back together. That would be great. In my book the Beatles are the best thing that ever happened to music. It goes even deeper than that. You’re not a musical group. You’re a part of us. We grew up with you.

It is for this reason that I am inviting you to come on our show. Now, we've heard and read a lot about personality and legal conflicts that might prevent you guys from reuniting. That's something which is none of our business. That's a personal problem. You guys will have to handle that. But it's also been said that no one has yet to come up with enough money to satisfy you. Well, if it's money you want, there's no problem there.

The National Broadcasting Company has authorized me to offer you this check to be on our show. (*Displays check.*) A certified check for three thousand dollars. Here it is right here. Dave—can we get a close-up on this? Which camera? Oh, this one. Here it is. A check made out to you, the Beatles, for three thousand dollars.

All you have to do is sing three songs. “She loves you, yea, yea, yea.” That's one thousand dollars right there. You know the words. It'll be easy.

Like I said, this is made out to the Beatles—you divide it up any way you want. If you want to give Ringo less, it's up to you. I'd rather not get involved. I'm sincere about this. If it helps you to reach a decision to reunite, it's well worth the investment. You have agents. You know where I can be reached. Just think about it, OK? (*Shows check again.*) Thank you.<sup>4</sup>

Two weeks later, Michaels upped the ante to \$3,200, and threw in other perks if the Beatles agreed to appear. They would be picked up from the airport in a “radio-dispatched checker cab” that would whisk them to the Cross Town Motor Inn, “located in the heart of New York's fashionable garment district.” Pitchers of ice water would be “hand-delivered” to their rooms, and so on. It was an ingenious if innocuous prank, conceived with writer Michael O'Donoghue and Chevy Chase, but Michaels secretly harbored the hope that his childhood heroes would take him up on his “offer.” He instructed SNL's head of security Neil Levy to keep NBC's pages on full alert in case the Fab Four did in fact show up.<sup>5</sup>

Alas, nothing happened. But it almost did. In separate interviews seventeen years apart, both John Lennon and Paul McCartney confirmed that they were indeed together that night, watching the show



at Lennon's New York apartment, and almost turned Michaels's pipe dream into a reality. "[Paul] was visiting us [John and Yoko] at our place in the Dakota," Lennon told *Playboy* magazine a few months before his death in 1980. "He and I were just sitting there, watching the show and we went, 'Ha, ha wouldn't it be funny if we went down?' But we didn't"<sup>6</sup> As recently as 1997, McCartney was asked about the incident on a VH1 special to promote his album *Flaming Pie*, and echoed Lennon's response.

The Beatles nonreunion notwithstanding, the 1976-77 season abounded with indelible musical performances. One of the Beatles did in fact take Michaels up on his offer; George Harrison appeared on the November 20 broadcast. During the opening segment, Michaels pulled Harrison aside to tell him that the \$3,200 offer was for *all* of the Beatles; he couldn't give the money to just one member. Paul Simon made a return appearance as that evening's host and opened the show by singing "Still Crazy After All These Years" in a chicken suit, the only time in Simon's career he's shown any willingness to mock himself. Simon and Harrison did provide one of the more stirring musical segments in the show's history when they sat on a couple of stools and dueted on an unplugged medley of "Here Comes the Sun" and "Homeward Bound." Unfortunately, it wasn't live; scheduling conflicts prevented Harrison from hanging around to perform with Simon on the show.

The most unexpected musical moment in *Saturday Night Live's* history (at least until Sinead O'Connor's infamous papal desecration in 1992) occurred during the appearance of Elvis Costello and the Attractions on the December 17, 1977, broadcast. Costello's label Columbia had high hopes for Costello's *SNL* appearance. He had already broken through in England with the nihilist anthem "Less than Zero" from his debut album *My Aim Is True*, and it was decided by Columbia records and *SNL* that "Less than Zero" would be one of two songs that Costello would perform on the show. But no one had consulted Costello about this game plan, and he railed against it. "The guys at Columbia were insistent that Elvis sing 'Less than Zero,' but he just didn't want to do it," says Jenene Nichols, who served as *SNL's* musical coordinator from 1976 to 1979. "He told them he had

a million songs, why play that one? But then he appeared to acquiesce, 'cause he played 'Less than Zero' in rehearsals."

Costello, for his part, was put off by what he perceived to be the high-minded arrogance of *SNL*'s cast members. "My first reaction was that everybody on the show was pretty pleased with themselves," Costello said. When Dan Aykroyd pretended to be a janitor and had a laugh at Costello and the band's expense, the singer vowed vengeance would be his: "We sat in our dressing room, guzzling vodka, getting more and more determined to kick up a fuss and be remembered on the program."<sup>7</sup>

Just before show time, Nichols remembers going to Costello's dressing room to escort him to the stage, only to find him and his band crouched in a huddle. "It didn't occur to me that they were scheming to switch songs," she says. After playing the first four bars of "Less than Zero" on the air, Costello turned to the band and abruptly cut them off. "I don't want to do that song," he mumbled, then quickly cued the band, who tore into a furious, frenetic version of "Radio, Radio," and in so doing sent the technical staff and the network censors into a tizzy. "It was sort of horrifying," says Howard Shore. "It was the first time the show went out of control." Hermino Traviesas, *SNL*'s Standards and Practices watchdog, demanded that director Dave Wilson cut Costello off in midsong rather than flirt with a potential FCC knuckle-wrapping, but Wilson refused to pull the plug.<sup>8</sup>

Michaels, meanwhile, was fuming in the wings. "That was just against the rules," says Beatts. "The network had to pre-approve all songs before we went on the air, and Lorne was very upset, because even though we were live, there was a tremendous effort on everyone's part to ensure that we weren't just winging it. But in a way it was a great PR move, because it's a moment that no one has ever forgotten."

Another residual benefit of Costello's appearance was the fact that it inspired Beatts to invent the Loopner Family, the benighted, noogie-ing nerds played by Bill Murray and Gilda Radner. "When I saw him on our show I thought, this isn't punk rock, this is nerd rock," says Beatts. "He had the big glasses, the white socks, the clunky shoes with the toes turned together." The very first sketch involving the

Loopners, in fact, was something called “Nerd Rock,” in which Murray and Radner come to a radio station to promote their new record album, *Trying Desperately to Be Liked*.

Carrying on the musical parody tradition blazed by the *National Lampoon Radio Hour*, the *Saturday Night* writing staff produced a number of rock-inspired sketches during the first few seasons: Garrett Morris’s frighteningly accurate Tina Turner spoof, Paul Shaffer’s Don Kirshner goof, and a good-natured parody of Lower East Side poet/punk rocker Patti Smith.

The “Candy Slice” sketch, which aired on December 9, 1978, featured Gilda Radner as a cocaine-besotted rocker who’s plied with “tootskie” administered by smug, satin-jacketed A&R sleaze Jerry Aldini (Bill Murray) in order to make it through a recording session. It was a typically distended, one-joke *SNL* sketch, gamely held aloft by Radner, and hardly the stuff of real, biting satire. But sketches like “Candy Slice” made *SNL*’s comedy-as-rock connection explicit; for many younger viewers, the routine was their first exposure to punk rock.

*Saturday Night Live*’s biggest home-grown phenomenon of the 1970s was a musical act borne out of Dan Aykroyd’s love of the blues. One day in 1975, while doing God-knows-what in a junkyard with John Belushi, Aykroyd hummed a few bars of James Cotton’s “Rocket 88,” and just like that, heavy-metal fan Belushi was hooked. The newly converted acolyte started hitting blues clubs in New York and voraciously consuming old albums. During the first season of the show, Aykroyd and Belushi thought it might be a kick to dress up in the outfits from their recurring “Killer Bee” characters and sing Slim Harpo’s classic “(I’m a) King Bee.”

The audience loved it, but it remained a one-off until 1978, when Lorne Michaels, who had caught Belushi doing some blues numbers at the New York club Trax, suggested that the two perform a few songs to warm up an *SNL* audience.<sup>9</sup> Aykroyd, for his part, now wanted to spit-polish the act with some visual appeal. Drawing inspiration from an old Chicago running buddy of his named the Hawk, he contrived an outfit—dark suit, skinny tie, porkpie hat, sunglasses—that was equal parts pool-hall hustler and blues cat.

The Blues Brothers made their formal debut on the April 22, 1978, show hosted by Steve Martin with a performance of the blues shuffle "I Don't Know." Six months later they made a return appearance, singing three numbers this time. Viewer response was overwhelming, and Aykroyd and Belushi convinced themselves that the Blues Brothers could be something more than a novelty act.

Using \$100,000 of his own money, Belushi taped the Blues Brothers' nine-night engagement at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles, where they opened for Steve Martin, and then had his manager Bernie Brillstein cut a deal with Atlantic Records to release an album. *Briefcase Full of Blues* was released in December 1978, and a month later it shot up to number one on *Billboard's* album chart. "Belushi's a decent vocalist, and I play semi-decent harp," Aykroyd recalled in the summer of '78. "But it wasn't only the music. It was a look and a feeling and a mystique, the enthusiasm of the audience and realizing, 'Hey, this might work!'"<sup>10</sup>

Aykroyd and Belushi's blues trip fostered jealousy and resentment among fellow *Saturday Night Live* cast members, who regarded it as nothing more than a drawn-out, albeit very successful, joke. "I'm sure there was grumbling and mumbling about what they were doing," says Anne Beatts. "My point of view was they were having fun, and that it was neat. It's every boy's dream to be a rock star, after all."

The Blues Brothers were now as big, if not bigger, than *Saturday Night Live*. Universal Studios agreed to bankroll a big-budget film based on the characters, and the two committed to a multi-date concert tour with their band of heavyweights: R&B legends Steve Cropper and Donald "Duck" Dunn on guitar and bass, drummer Steve Jordan, and sax player Bones Malone, among others. But because they made the blues safe for suburban mall rats, Aykroyd and Belushi were castigated by purists as outside agitators cashing in on an African-American art form. The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia articulated the anti-Blues Brothers sentiment: "Too good to be a parody, and not good enough to be good for what it is."<sup>11</sup>

"They got a lot of flack 'cause people thought they were white boys ripping off black artists," says Beatts. "But they were bringing notoriety to a neglected genre, and most of the black artists felt the



John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd playing the blues as killer bees. (© Edie Baskin/Corbis Outline)

same way. They kind of jump-started a lot of people's careers with the movie." Aykroyd struck back at his critics: "One of the blues magazines said it's a shame that kids have to learn about blues through the mass appeal of an ersatz album like *Briefcase Full of Blues*. They're right. It's too bad that they aren't buying Fenton Robinson and John Lee Hooker. But, you know, the fact of the matter is, we can do something about that. And we are."<sup>12</sup>

The success of the Blues Brothers would prove to be the catalyst for Belushi and Aykroyd's departure from *Saturday Night Live*, but without that crucial weekly forum, the act withered. The Blues Brothers' subsequent albums failed to sell as vigorously as the debut, and the novelty wore off in short order. Even blues-ignorant white kids started to wonder what the fuss was all about after a while.

Writing music into sketches was one thing; having artists actually work in sketches was another. For starters, musicians couldn't be expected to act with any degree of competence, let alone in live comedy sketches with split-second cues and tricky camera blocking. But Michaels was intent on upending TV's typical variety show format in any way possible, and the hiring of pop stars provided him with a built-in ratings boost. If that meant suffering the occasional blooper, Michaels was willing to endure it in the name of precious PR.

The second musical guest to host the show after Paul Simon was Kris Kristofferson, who presided over the June 31, 1976, broadcast. A singer-songwriter ("Me and Bobby McGee," "Sunday Morning Coming Down") and Rhodes Scholar turned actor, Kristofferson was a hot Hollywood property in 1976; he had costarred in director Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* the year before and was about to be seen in the much-hyped remake of *A Star Is Born* with Barbra Streisand. But Kristofferson was also an alcoholic, and a member of director Sam Peckinpah's inner circle of rowdy reprobates. From three o'clock onward every day during *SNL*'s rehearsal week, Kristofferson would start hitting the wine, and then switch to tequila at night.

"Kristofferson was a doll; he was just drunk the whole time," says Anne Beatts. "It was the only time where we went, 'Black coffee, what'ya think?'" By show time, Michaels made sure that Bill Murray knew all of Kristofferson's lines just in case Kristofferson crashed and burned.<sup>13</sup> In the end, Kristofferson fumbled through, but just barely. "He actually did OK in the sketches, like the one [*SNL* staff writer] Rosie Schuster and I wrote where Gilda Radner tells him she's the real Bobby McGee, and Kristofferson tells her that he really wrote the song for a girl named Bobby Goldstein," says Beatts, "but he could have done better if he hadn't been so loaded the whole time."

Frank Zappa is one of the most reviled hosts in *Saturday Night Live's* history, if only because he committed the cardinal sin of thinking that he was somehow too good for the show. Gonzo satire had been a key component of Zappa's act since his earliest days with the Mothers of Invention, and he was enjoying the first Top 40 hit of his career with the antidisco parody "Dancing Fool" at the time of his appearance in 1978.

But Zappa's overweening ego and silly power plays were met with fierce resistance by the cast. He had a laundry list of unproducible ideas, such as a pumpkin tree that ate people's faces.<sup>13</sup> He mugged for the cameras and regurgitated some food while "consuming mass quantities" during an unfunny Coneheads sketch. When it was time for the closing good nights, the cast maintained a discreet distance from Zappa. "Zappa was a genius, but he had his own ideas about what was funny," says Jenene Nichols. "He was pretty arrogant, and didn't get on at all with the cast. They completely froze him out. It was painful for Howard [Shore], 'cause he idolized Zappa." Adds Anne Beatts, "Part of the problem with Zappa was that he was a comic innovator. He had come from another world of hipness, and he saw TV as being crassly commercial. He was from another school, and that tended to make him a little less cooperative."

For the first show of *SNL's* fourth season, Michaels had managed to book the Rolling Stones to perform and cohost, along with that other degenerate bad boy, New York mayor Ed Koch. For Michaels, this was history in the making, something that could rival the Beatles' appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* as a watershed moment in TV history. By 1978 *Saturday Night's* popularity rivaled that of even the mighty Rolling Stones; John Belushi's role in the year's top-grossing comedy, the frat-boy romp *Animal House*, had made him a far bigger youth cult hero than Mick Jagger.

Belushi and Aykroyd were also tight with guitarist Keith Richards, and the three could frequently be seen partying together at the Blues Bar in downtown Manhattan. This was more than a booking; it was a clash of the titans. "It was the only time we had two weeks to prepare for a show, but in a way that hurt us, because we messed around too much with the sketches," says Anne Beatts. "We had too much time

to think about everything, but Lorne wanted this to be a great show because of the Stones.”

Michaels took every precaution to ensure the Stones’ comfort. No detail was overlooked, from the complete overhauling of the Stones’ dressing rooms (furniture was filched from the offices of more than a few NBC execs) to the constant delivery of Rebel Yell whiskey whenever the band happened to run dry.<sup>14</sup> After Thursday’s rehearsal, Michaels rallied the troops with a pep talk, urging them to give it their all, lest the Stones upstage them. “We better be good,” he implored.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps sensing that they too had something to prove to *SNL*’s young audience, the Stones gave it their all in rehearsals as well, charging through their three allotted songs—“Respectable,” “Miss You,” and “Shattered”—with boozy brio. “They knew how hip we were, and vice versa,” says Nichols. “There was no way they were gonna get out-hipped by us.”

Thirteen years after fudging the lyrics for “Let’s Spend the Night

Together” for Ed Sullivan’s audience, the Stones once again found themselves being monitored closely by a nervous network. Even though they were now regarded as rock ‘n’ roll elder statesmen and were approaching middle age, the Stones were still a menace to society as far as NBC was concerned. All week long, Standards and Practices fretted about the potentially scandalous tactics the Stones might pull on the show, and safeguarded against any transgressive antics by



**The Rolling Stones on *SNL*, 1978.**  
(© Edie Baskin/Corbis Outline)



issuing a warning to the Stones camp that such behavior would not be tolerated. It's doubtful, however, that the Stones ever got wind of any of this.

NBC brass, fearful that hordes of underage, rowdy Stones fans would converge on Studio 8H the night of the show, took extra security precautions all week, requiring personnel to wear photo IDs to gain admittance to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the building that houses NBC's New York studios. "That was a real pain, having to show your ID every time you wanted to enter the building," says Beatts. "This normally lax security became very hostile. It was like needing an ID to get into your house." Adds Nichols, "The technical staff was terrified of the Stones."

Despite the battalion of security cops lurking around Studio 8H all week, the Stones were oblivious to it all, openly drinking Scotch and snorting coke in full view of the security. They showed up to Saturday's rehearsal three hours late, and Keith Richards's part in two sketches had to be cut when he botched his only line and missed an entrance. Said cast member Laraine Newman of Richards's acting, "It's nice to be standing and working with a dead person."<sup>16</sup>

Despite the enormous buildup, the show failed to generate the kind of heat Michaels was seeking. If anything, the *Saturday Night* cast scored a TKO over the lackluster Stones, who had blown their wad in rehearsals and turned in a tired and tepid performance. Dan Aykroyd's turn as the half-assed refrigerator repair man with the exposed crack all but upstaged them. The only remotely shocking moment came when Jagger turned to guitarist Ron Wood and licked him on his pursed lips. It was a canned contrivance, and hardly the kind of immortal rock 'n' roll moment Michaels had hoped for.

Erratic behavior among visiting musical guests was far more prevalent during the brief post-Lorne Michaels era of the mid-1980s, when former associate producer Jean Doumanian took over as executive producer of the show. Eccentric iconoclast Captain Beefheart was arguably *SNL*'s most unpopular booking in the show's twenty-five-plus-year history. Not only did the cast and crew despise his dissonant, abrasive music (the cue card guy refused to print

Beefheart's lyrics), but the audience was thoroughly repulsed; had tomatoes been handy, Beefheart surely would have been pelted. Hal Willner, who has worked as musical consultant for *Saturday Night Live* since 1980, remembers the scene vividly: "The cast was afraid of him, 'cause he would run around barking at everyone, and no one really understood what that was all about. When he finally performed, everyone had a very strong negative reaction. The crew was holding their noses, members of the crowd were holding their ears. When he finished his song, there was stunned silence. No one applauded for a few seconds. Then someone in the balcony yelled 'Shit!' It was horrible."

Prince was a virtual unknown when he appeared on the February 21, 1981, broadcast in his underpants. An artist whose subject matter included masturbation and cunnilingus, Prince was slotted to close the show at 12:50, and it was Willner's job to make sure he toned down the licentiousness. "I basically told him, 'Look, if you don't change the lyric, you won't be seen by a third of the country, 'cause the censors will cut your segments for the West Coast,'" recalls Willner. "So it was up to him, really." The Prince song in question, "Party Up," included the word *fuckin'*, so it was decided that Prince would alter the line in order to obscure the expletive. But once he was on the air, there was no fudgin' the fuckin'.

"Eddie Murphy turned to me and yelled, 'Did you hear that?'" says Willner. "He was all jazzed about it." So was fellow cast member Charles Rocket. Perhaps emboldened by Prince's brashness, Rocket said 'Fuck' during the closing good-byes and was fired from *SNL* shortly thereafter. His career never recovered.

Neither did Sinéad O'Connor's. When the outspoken Irish performer tore up a picture of the pope to the tune of Bob Marley's song "War" on the October 3, 1992, broadcast, it sparked the show's biggest controversy and for all intents and purposes killed her career. This wasn't the first time that O'Connor had butted heads with *Saturday Night*, which was once again being produced by Lorne Michaels: three years earlier, the brazenly outspoken artist had bowed out of an appearance when she learned that smut merchant Andrew Dice Clay was scheduled to host the show. But nothing could

have prepared the staff for the last-minute maneuver pulled off by O'Connor on the 1992 show.

An ardent opponent of the Roman Catholic Church, O'Connor had included an untitled spoken-word anti-religion diatribe on her 1992 album *Am I Not Your Girl?* "Exactly why do you think Christ was assassinated?" O'Connor asked. "Look at the one wearing the collar."

"War," the Bob Marley song O'Connor had chosen to perform without any musical accompaniment on the show, was adapted from a speech given by Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, and decried the use of warfare as an inappropriate response to racial injustice, child abuse, and other wanton cruelty. While it is an emotionally charged song, its sentiment was hardly controversial.

"Everything had gone fine in the dress rehearsals," says Willner. "Lorne had agreed to allow O'Connor to tear up a picture of a child during the song, which was an antiwar protest, so that made sense." But when O'Connor came to the end of the song during the broadcast, it was a picture of Pope John Paul II she produced. "Fight the real enemy!" she yelled, and tore the photo in half. The phones began ringing in NBC's production offices; 5,000 protest calls were received in two hours. "We felt like we were taken advantage of," says John Zonars, who's worked as *Saturday Night's* music supervisor since 1985. "She knew we were gonna get a tight shot of her face, and planned it all out in advance without any one, not even her manager, knowing about it."

The negative fallout from prominent religious leaders was swift and unrelenting. New York archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor regarded Sinead's papal protest as an affront to Catholics the world over. "As his spiritual sons and daughters, we Catholics, even the most mature among us, are deeply offended," he fumed. Sociologist-priest Andrew Greeley characterized the stunt as "tasteless."

Overwhelmed by the sheer volume of vitriol directed at the network, and hoping to distance themselves from the incident, NBC released an official statement disavowing the stunt two days later. "The incident involving Sinead O'Connor on *Saturday Night Live* was a spontaneous act. NBC had no knowledge of what she was going



Totally excellent: Wayne Campbell (Mike Myers) and Garth Algar (Dana Carvey) doing it to death on "Wayne's World." (© Edie Baskin/Corbis Outline)

to do. Had we known, NBC would not have permitted it. NBC is offended and outraged by her act. We apologize to viewers who share our reaction." According to Willner, Lorne Michaels was so incensed that he tried to prevent artists who recorded for O'Connor's label Chrysalis from appearing on the show.

O'Connor got a bitter taste of the public's displeasure over her *SNL* appearance a week later, when she appeared as a guest performer on Bob Dylan's thirtieth-anniversary pay-per-view concert at New York's Madison Square Garden. Ironically, she was scheduled to perform Dylan's love song to Jesus, "I Believe in You," but she was viciously heckled and driven to tears before she could even

sing a note. To this day, however, O'Connor remains unrepentant about the *SNL* incident. "When I performed the song 'War' on *Saturday Night Live* and ripped up the picture of the pope, it was a Rasta thing," O'Connor told British magazine *Q* in 1997. "It hurt that people reacted to me as some fucking nutter. They didn't care about the things I was talking about enough to sit down and discuss it or think about it." NBC never aired Sinead's performance again. In 1999, O'Connor became an ordained priest.

As *Saturday Night Live* entered its dotage in the early 1990s, it skirted any topic that emitted even the faintest whiff of controversy, preferring instead to rely almost exclusively on spineless satire. Witness "Wayne's World," the most successful *SNL* skit of the 1990s. The brainchild of cast member Mike Myers, "Wayne's World" was a

raucous, and occasionally funny, celebration of the heavy metal culture that lurked in the suburban tract houses of Reagan America, where pasty-faced losers drank beer, played air guitar, and dreamed of trysts with Heather Locklear backstage at a Van Halen concert.

The sketch, which debuted on *Saturday Night Live*'s February 18, 1989, broadcast, featured Myers as Wayne Campbell, a devil-may-care dingbat, Aerosmith fan, and unfulfilled Horn Dog, and fellow cast member Dana Carvey as Wayne's sidekick Garth Algar, a bespectacled, socially dysfunctional drummer with a talent for clunky sexual double entendres. *Wayne's World*, the public access cable show that the doofy duo broadcast from Wayne's basement, was based on an all-night talk show in Toronto that Mike Myers had cohosted as a high school kid during the early 1980s. 'I'd go on and talk about suburban stuff, local Toronto stuff,' recalled Myers. "Actually, I've been doing the character longer than that because I used to just make fun of my friends."<sup>17</sup> "Wayne" was the official nickname for the members of Meyer's high school clique.

As with so many other wildly popular *SNL* sketches, "Wayne's World" catchphrases—"Schwing," "Not!," "Excellent," "Way" (as in "No way"—"Way!"), "We're not worthy"—entered the teenage lexicon. And just as the Blues Brothers sparked an overblown cross-promotional bonanza, the sketches' shaggy-dog shenanigans quickly snowballed into must-see TV for millions of kids. By the 1990 season real rock stars (Aerosmith, Madonna) were dropping in on "Wayne's World" sketches, and Myers and Carvey had signed on with Universal Studios to write and star in a feature film based on the characters. Alas, like so many recurring *Saturday Night Live* bits ("The Church Lady," "Cheerleaders," "Buckwheat," "Stuart Smalley," "Pat"), "Wayne's World" lasted as long as the kids could stomach it before being shoved aside. Now, isn't *that* special?

## ***Last Night a Veejay Saved My Life***

To the extent that visual flash has always played a crucial role in the selling of rock and rock stars, MTV was hardly revolutionary. To the extent that it irrevocably altered modern culture, MTV is the only revolution that matters.

Given the ways in which television, over its fifty-year life span, has subsumed just about every facet of popular culture and spat it out in homogenized form, MTV was inevitable. Just as radio had sparked rock 'n' roll's first wave in the 1950s by disseminating the sound of rebellion, so MTV delivered its own brand of polished anarchy for a youth culture weaned on television. By delivering music videos (and numerous other highly influential programs in the late 1980s and early '90s) twenty-four hours a day for an audience that was an all-too-willing coconspirator, MTV became the world's most influential cultural common denominator, an unavoidable arbiter of cutting-edge cool whose smash-cut aesthetic seeped its way into other media like toxic effulgence.

MTV's impact on pop culture has been monumental. By carpet-bombing Madonna and Michael Jackson videos into millions of households, the channel helped turn those two media-savvy artists into global superstars. MTV made careers out of whole cloth for B-

grade celebrities like Weird Al Yankovic, Pauly Shore, Carson Daly, Jenny McCarthy, and Daisy Fuentes, “broke” countless new artists into the mainstream and, in the 1980s, resuscitated the floundering careers of veteran acts like David Bowie, Dire Straits, and Tina Turner. But most important, MTV codified the three-minute music video, much as radio codified the three-minute song, as the record business’s most important promotional vehicle. Those videos, with their disjunctive narrative logic and loud textural palette, not only redefined the visual language of film and television, but made MTV the most potent marketing tool in the history of popular music.

MTV, in short, made us all look at practically everything in our culture with a new set of eyes. But we should have seen it coming. Rock music, after all, had long ago abandoned any pretensions of being an agent of social change, the tired shibboleths of the 1960s counterculture having been drowned out by the shrill clamor of 1980s corporate consumer-speak. Even the raging firestorm of the late 1970s punk movement had died down to a few flickering embers by the turn of the decade, Sid Vicious’s bloody T-shirt having been replaced by Duran Duran’s sleek, glammy couture. In Reagan America, rock’s attitude toward mass culture verged on compliant resignation—a tacit acknowledgment that nothing worth fighting for could ever be won with guitars.

The seeds of MTV’s counterrevolution were planted at the tail end of the 1970s. Rock’s audience had gorged on mediocrity for too long, and was being lured by new corporate diversionary tactics designed to siphon the disposable income of American teens away from record stores toward other leisure time pursuits. Video games had turned into a multibillion-dollar business by 1981, while revenues from



**You know you want it.** (Artwork courtesy of: MTV: Music Television)

the sale of records and tapes had slipped more than 10 percent from 1978 to 1979.<sup>1</sup> Add to that the onslaught of other home-tech products like laser discs and the continued sales growth of videocassette recorders, and it was all too obvious that rock was facing its stiffest competition yet.

Into this breach stepped young, preternaturally polished media phenom Robert Pittman. Among his contemporaries, the twenty-seven-year-old Brookhaven, Mississippi, native was already a superstar, having made an astonishing climb up the corporate radio ladder since landing his first job as a fifteen-year-old intern for hometown station WCHJ-FM in order to pay for flying lessons. At twenty-three, college dropout Pittman was already a seasoned veteran, with two *Billboard* Program Director of the Year awards under his belt. During his tenure as program director for Chicago's NBC-owned WMAQ-FM, Pittman shifted the playlist from middle-of-the-road pop to country music, which was experiencing a commercial renaissance at the time thanks to the John Travolta film *Urban Cowboy*. "I was ridiculed by other radio professionals and country-music experts," Pittman told *Time* magazine in 1985. "They thought I was nuts. They were making primal sounds. But then the ratings showed we'd become the No. 1 country-music station in America."<sup>2</sup>

From there, Pittman graduated to WNBC in New York, where he promptly reversed the sagging fortunes of the network's flagship radio station. Pittman, by this time a white-hot commodity, was hired by Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company, a joint venture between Warner Communications and American Express, with a mandate to look for ways to capitalize on the still largely untapped cable TV market.

Among the shows that Pittman supervised at Warner Amex was *Album Tracks*, a primitively produced affair cohosted by Pittman and future MTV executive Les Garland that aired short promotional videos of rock artists. *Album Tracks* was short-lived, but its decent rating numbers and tiny budget lit a spark in Pittman. What if there was a way to integrate rock music with television on a grander scale—say, as a stand-alone network? This was a radical notion in 1980.



Numerous attempts by corporate giants to create viable cable channels, such as CBS's cable arts channel, had already crashed and burned, and the concept of "narrowcasting"—creating niche programming for specific target audiences—was still risky TV business. Television's trash heap was already piled high with short-lived rock 'n' roll shows. More important, advertising revenue generated from cable channels was scarce, and the Big Three television networks still bestrode the media landscape like a hydra-headed colossus. "The big debate at Warner Amex was whether a specialized, narrowcast channel would work, or whether we should be trying to do another network," says Pittman.

Videos were actually nothing new to the music business. Performance clips featuring countless close-ups of guitarists' fingers flying up and down their fretboards had been produced for bands with healthy record sales since the mid-1960s, usually for broadcast on British TV shows like BBC's *Top of the Pops*. Conversely, British acts with product to peddle would often throw together cheaply produced clips for American shows like *Midnight Special* and *Rock Concert*.

Whether these short films, which employed a remedial film school visual vocabulary, actually helped sell any records is doubtful. If anything, they might have scared off viewers they intended to seduce. Certainly, artists paid little attention to them. Then, in 1975, a short film for Queen's loopy epic "Bohemian Rhapsody," directed by British variety show director Bruce Gowers, aired on *Top of the Pops* and became a fixture on the show for months, until it eventually turned the song into a number-one hit in England. The clip then found its way onto American shows like *Midnight Special* and *Rock Concert*, and played a huge role in helping Queen crack the American market. It was the first time a video had sparked record sales in a significant way, but it would be years before history would repeat itself.

Venturesome British artists, forced to work in a country with a small, state-subsidized rock radio presence and influential TV outlets, embraced video as a way to toy with interpretation and lure eyeballs with scenarios that cobbled together images from modern art,



Up with People!: The original MTV VJ cast. (Artwork courtesy of: MTV: Music Television)

Salvador Dalí's surreal mindscapes, Kenneth Anger's mid-1960s experimental films, and various other iconic avant-garde totems. David Bowie and director David Mallet, a veteran of *Shindig* and British shows *Juke Box Jury* and *Top of the Pops*, collaborated on a series of visually striking clips for the songs "Ashes to Ashes," "DJ," "Look Back in Anger," and "Boys Keep Swinging" in 1979 and '80. American audiences caught glimpses of these videos, and those of such new wave artists as Duran Duran and Lene Lovich, in nightclubs like the Ritz and Danceteria in New York, or on late-night television. But they were still novelties, visual dispatches from abroad that bore no relation to the clunky performance videos being produced by American record companies.

So many British bands were producing clips, in fact, that it led to the creation of a TV show in late 1978. Despite the annoyingly frenzied tone of its hyper-zany host, *The Kenny Everett Video Show* was the first British program to regularly showcase music videos. In the States, *The Kenny Everett Video Show* was syndicated for late-night

consumption, but few paid attention, perhaps because Everett's high-keyed antics could be off-putting after a few beers at one in the morning.

In 1981 Pacific Arts, the video company that former Monkee Mike Nesmith had founded in the late 1970s, produced a video show called *Popclips*. Hosted by professional doofus Howie Mandel and broadcast on Warner Cable's nascent Nickelodeon channel, *Popclips* was essentially MTV without the calibrated cool. Warner Cable offered to buy out the concept from Nesmith and his collaborator Bill Dear, but, recalls Dear, the two "nearly had heart attacks, from disgust and laughter"<sup>3</sup> when they got wind of how Warner wanted to turn *Popclips* into what eventually became MTV. The notion was dropped, but a seed had been planted.

Pittman was well aware of the potential pitfalls of an all-music channel—*Popclips* was canceled after a single season, and *Kenny Everett* pulled in meager ratings—but he was enamored of the business model. With record labels bankrolling the videos, the channel would be structured like a network that airs nothing but commercials. It was practically a no-lose proposition, with low overhead and potentially huge profit margins. "Our view was that consumer convenience is the greatest motivator," says Pittman. "Viewers don't want a programmer to select what they want to see. They want to program themselves using a menu of specialized channels, MTV being one of those channels."

Pittman pitched the idea to Warner Communications chairman Steve Ross and American Express chairman Jim Robinson, who signed off on a research budget. Using the techniques that had served him so well in the radio business, self-described "research maniac" Pittman and his handpicked team went to work. By meticulously deconstructing the lifestyle impulses, or "psychographics," of the fourteen-to-thirty-four demographic, Pittman would be able to pinpoint exactly what his potential audience would want to see and hear. The research produced some startling numbers—of the 600 potential viewers queried to determine if there would be interest in such a channel, over 85 percent responded affirmatively. Surveys were conducted to determine what artists would be represented on

the channel, and whether record companies, cable operators, and advertising agencies would be enthusiastic about such a venture.<sup>4</sup>

The feedback was positive, with the exception of a few record companies like MCA and Polygram, who demanded payment in return for supplying videos. Pittman won them over in short order (“I had broken a lot of hits for a lot of labels. They owed me one”), and set about mounting his all-music channel, which was to be called Music Television, or MTV.

If there was one cardinal rule that Pittman had gleaned from the radio business, it was that iron-clad formats were essential to gaining loyalty from advertisers and listeners. There was security in carefully calibrated repetition; it created a sturdy, reliable product. But TV was a far more sophisticated medium than commercial radio—less strident, and more inclined to insidiously manipulate its audience. A music channel would require an approach that combined radio’s micromanaged programming techniques with an amiable, casual cool that toned down the hard sell into a pleasantly churning hum. A sexy gestalt would have to be devised for MTV to make the cutting edge seem prosaic. “The music videos weren’t the program, it was only an element of the programming,” says Pittman. “What you’re selling is mood, emotion, and attitude. What mattered was that the mood created by the videos matched the mood of the music.”

Working with a brain trust that included Warner Amex executive vice president John Lack, executive producer Sue Steinberg, and creative director Bob Morton, Pittman worked out the basic elements of MTV style. After rejecting countless designs for the set, Steinberg finally arrived at an informal, basement rec-room design, complete with a diner counter and self-consciously “funky” touches like a barber’s chair and “The Pickle Wall.” Five “veejays” were plucked from an auditioning pool that numbered in the thousands—struggling L.A. actress Nina Blackwood, twenty-six; NBC intern Martha Quinn, twenty-two, the stepdaughter of economist Jane Bryant Quinn; Mississippi actor Alan Hunter, twenty-four; and veteran radio DJs Mark Goodman, twenty-eight, and J. J. Jackson, thirty-five. A fourteen-year veteran of Boston’s WBCN, Jackson was the channel’s only black on-air hire. “We didn’t want the veejays to be

stars. They were more like moderators,” says Pittman. “More Ed McMahon than Carson.”

Armed with Pittman’s arsenal of market research statistics, a carefully conceived music format that favored AOR, or album-oriented, rock artists, and a cast of fresh-faced veejays, MTV debuted on 300 cable systems on August 1, 1981, with what has now become the legendarily prescient “Video Killed the Radio Star,” by the British duo the Buggles. A vaguely avant-garde clip full of surreal imagery and chilly synthesizers, “Video Killed the Radio Star” was pointing the way toward MTV’s future, even if it was anomalous at the time. Most of what MTV aired during the first months of its existence consisted of stilted performance videos from old-line guitar bands like the Outlaws, REO Speedwagon, and April Wine, some old concert films, and puffy rock gossip. There were hardly any ads to be seen, because MTV’s audience, by network standards, was minuscule—less than 3 million homes.

Pittman’s team made some minor tweaks. Instead of having the veejays read from teleprompters, they would be free to ad-lib from scripts. The hard-edged lighting scheme was toned down to give the “wraparounds” a softer look. By early 1982 MTV began to resemble the offhanded yet rigidly programmed “environment” that Pittman had originally envisioned. And the early numbers were encouraging: viewers were tuning in and not dropping out. “We thought MTV would be secondary to television,” Pittman recalled, “but our research showed that people watched it seventy percent more intently. MTV turned out to be even more hypnotic.”<sup>5</sup>

The effect on record sales was immediate. Six weeks after MTV went on the air, artists with videos in heavy rotation began to experience significant sales spikes.<sup>6</sup> “I sent [two of our executives] Tom Freston and John Sykes down to Tulsa to collect some evidence as to how we were doing,” says Pittman. “They found a record store in the middle of nowhere selling Tubes and Buggles records. The radio wasn’t playing them, so it had to be us.” Record companies began to view MTV as something more than just a secondary promotional vehicle, and started pumping more money into video production. Cable systems, encouraged by the early numbers, began to sign up

for MTV en masse. Within a year MTV had turned into a full-blown cultural phenomenon, with the channel receiving over 100,000 pieces of viewer mail a month.<sup>7</sup> The music business, after a four-year slump, had finally found its savior—and Pittman had created the cable industry's first success story.

MTV had grown so large by late 1982 that its programming choices bestowed the Midas touch on otherwise nondescript acts. In a culture where visuals were beginning to take precedence over music, artists who delivered videos with a strong style quotient were likely to find themselves slotted into heavy rotation (four to five plays in twenty-four hours). And it was no surprise to find British acts staking their claim on MTV's new video frontier.

Image-obsessed to an even greater extent than American acts and far more willing to sacrifice artistic integrity for the sake of a good photo op, the new wave of British acts latched onto the idea, perfected during the glam-rock movement of the early 1970s, of the rock star as fashion accessory. Influenced by the personality cult of David Bowie, acts like Duran Duran (named after the androgynous archangel from the 1968 sci-fi film *Barbarella*) and Adam Ant built their personas from the wardrobe up, struck a pose in front of a camera, and watched the royalty checks roll in.

Duran Duran was already a veteran act by the time MTV got to them. Founded in Birmingham, England, in 1978, the band had notched three top-twenty hits in the U.K. but had barely scraped the bottom of the charts in the States. For the quintet's 1981 album *Rio*, the band's label, EMI, decided to gamble with some high-budget videos and spent \$200,000—an unheard-of sum at the time—to shoot three clips in Sri Lanka with commercial director Russell Mulcahey. One of them, "Lonely in Your Nightmare," was moderately successful with MTV viewers, but the other two—for the songs "Save a Prayer" and "Hungry Like the Wolf"—made Duran Duran the first MTV-generated teen idols.

The scenario of "Hungry Like the Wolf" was supremely silly: a supermodel-type stalks lead singer Simon Le Bon through a Sri Lankan jungle while his bandmates search for him. MTV's female viewers ate it up with a spoon. The video went into heavy rotation,

and *Rio*'s album sales soared, a trend that could be directly attributable to MTV. According to *Time*'s 1985 cover story on MTV, "*Rio* was being sold out at half the record stores in Dallas and gathering dust in the other half. A check of the local television listings showed that parts of the city that were wired for cable and carrying MTV were the very same parts where the album was flourishing."<sup>8</sup>

MTV kept giving a leg up to artists who might not otherwise have had a fighting chance. The Stray Cats hailed from New York, but their hyperbolic rockabilly act—guitarist Brian Setzer wore his hair in a cloud-busting pompadour, and drummer Slim Jim Phantom played his snare-and-cymbal drum kit standing up—initially caught on in England, where the band's first two albums *Eponymous* and *Gonna Ball* sold respectably. In an attempt to break the Stray Cats domestically, the band's label hired twenty-seven-year-old hot shot Julien Temple, the Cambridge-educated director who had lensed the Sex Pistols' notorious docu-film *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*, to direct the video for the band's 1982 single "Stray Cat Strut."

The clip used the most obvious back-alley Teddy Boy imagery, with babes in poodle skirts, garish neon, grimy clotheslines, even animated hepcats that looked like something produced from the Hanna-Barbera factory. It was essentially cartoonish gangster noir for the kiddies, and it clicked in a big way with MTV's viewers, whose cramped cultural frame of reference no doubt made the clip look startlingly innovative. "Stray Cat Strut" went into heavy rotation; the band's album *Built for Speed* zipped up to number two on *Billboard*'s Top 200 album chart and eventually sold over 2 million copies.

Melbourne quintet Men at Work tapped into the emerging American fascination with Australian culture for their video "Down Under," which featured kangaroos, the Outback, and references to Vegemite sandwiches. The band capered through the video like merry pranksters, wisely surmising that a benign, self-mocking approach would provide MTV's viewers with comic relief after Duran Duran's fussed-over preening and the Stray Cats' macho posturing. The videos for "Down Under" and "Who Can It Be Now?" turned Men at Work into *Rolling Stone* cover boys. The band's debut *Business as Usual* was the number-one album in the country for fifteen weeks.

MTV continued to expand at an exponential rate. In 1981 the channel debuted on only 300 cable systems; by the end of 1983, it was being carried by almost 1,775 cable operators, making it the fastest-growing cable network in the history of television.<sup>9</sup> Its 1.2 Nielsen rating in June 1983 was the highest for a twenty-four-hour basic cable service in TV history.<sup>10</sup> Pittman became a media sweetheart, with glowing profiles in *Esquire* and *Time* magazine. A new infusion of image-conscious artists like Cyndi Lauper and Culture Club provided fresh clips for MTV's insatiable maw; veterans like the Cars, the Police, and the J. Geils Band quickly acclimated themselves to MTV's realpolitik, and heavy-metal bands like Judas Priest, Quiet Riot, and Twisted Sister produced adolescent revenge fantasies that stirred the latent rebel soul lurking in every male suburban coach potato.

MTV had legitimized itself as a crucial media outlet for record labels looking to make a big impression in a hurry. But Pittman's demographics-driven programming skewed so heavily toward rock and pop that what had initially looked innovative started to resemble the rest of the TV landscape—conservative, smugly self-satisfied, and far too white. Of the 750 videos that MTV aired during the first eighteen months of its existence, a paltry 24 featured black artists.<sup>11</sup> Granted, Pittman was simply following the radio business model of narrowcasting to the largest constituency, which in MTV's case was affluent suburban neighborhoods that carried cable. But too many significant African-American artists were being ignored, and most (including Grandmaster Flash's video for "The Message") were rejected outright for not being "rock 'n' roll."

MTV was branded a racist institution by black activist groups and even a few artists. Rick James, whose video for "Super Freak" was rejected by the network, charged that MTV set black people back 400 years. "They should call themselves 'White Rock TV' or something," he told *Nightline's* Ted Koppel.<sup>12</sup> David Bowie openly questioned the network's closed-door policy during a postinterview grilling of veejay Mark Goodman:

*Bowie:* I'm distraught by the fact that there are so few black artists featured [on MTV]. Why is that?



*Goodman:* I think we're trying to move in that direction. We seem to be doing music that fits into what we want to play on MTV. The company is thinking in terms of narrowcasting . . .

*Bowie:* There seem to be a lot of black artists making very good videos that I'm surprised aren't used on MTV.

*Goodman:* Of course, also we have to try and do what we think not only New York and Los Angeles will appreciate, but also Poughkeepsie or the Midwest. Pick some town in the Midwest which would be scared to death by Prince, which we're playing, or a string of other black faces, or black music . . .

*Bowie:* Isn't that interesting.

*Goodman:* We have to play music we think an entire country is going to like and certainly we're a rock 'n' roll station . . . We grew up in an era where the Isley Brothers meant something to me. But what does it mean to a seventeen-year-old?

*Bowie:* . . . I'll tell you what the Isley Brothers or Marvin Gaye means to a *black* seventeen-year-old and surely he's part of America.<sup>13</sup>

Pittman lashed out at the network's critics, insisting that it was the format, not racial considerations, that dictated what was shown and not shown on MTV. "I don't know who the fuck these people are to tell people who they should like," Pittman told writer Steven Levy. "They sound like Hitlers or people from Eastern-bloc communist countries. The good thing about America is that people rule. That's the essence of America!"<sup>14</sup> The anti-MTV backlash continued to grow more heated and vociferous, and when Michael Jackson's second solo album *Thriller* reached number one in the winter of 1983, Pittman's narrowcasting started to look like cultural separatism.

Michael Jackson couldn't be ignored in 1983. The former frontman for the Jackson Five was already a huge star at the time of *Thriller's* release in December 1982, having mixed an irresistible candied sheen into his funkified R&B on the 1979 album *Off the Wall*, which sold over 8 million copies. But *Thriller* was something else altogether, a crossover masterpiece that spiked its glittering dance

fantasias with swatches of metal guitar, euphoric singalongs, and Paul McCartney on the album's first single, the top-five hit "The Girl Is Mine." "All that criticism caused us to look a lot harder to find black artists that would fit our format," says Pittman. "When Michael Jackson came on the scene, it was like manna from heaven."

MTV had been on the air for a year by the time Jackson went into the studio to record *Thriller*, and he was already thinking about videos for the album while he was recording it. Jackson had seen what the music video channel had done for middling talents like Duran Duran and Adam Ant; surely he could wield its power to his advantage in a far more sophisticated way.

Jackson was video literate at an early age, having made numerous television appearances with the Jackson Five on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and countless other variety shows of the 1960s and '70s. A big aficionado of Disney films, Jackson had also appeared in some crudely produced videos for the singles "Rock with You" and "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" for *Off the Wall*. His image had been refracted through television for so long, in fact, that by the time he made "Billie Jean," his first video for *Thriller*, he was one of pop music's most recognizable faces.

"Billie Jean" was directed by Steve Barron, a music video veteran who had shot the Human League's "Don't You Want Me" and Adam Ant's "Antmusic," among others. The video's plot was hazy, with Jackson eluding a trench-coated stalker, and bore no relation to the song's paternity-suit theme. What's more, Barron had the '80s video director's penchant for using seemingly every facile visual effect. Yet "Billie Jean" was undeniably powerful, almost in spite of its awkward plasticity. With the song's walking bass line providing just the right touch of benign menace, Jackson's tightly coiled intensity and fluid dance steps effortlessly cut through Barron's tired artifice.

MTV added "Billie Jean" to its regular playlist in March 1983. Shortly thereafter, it added Jackson's "Beat It," a video whose elaborately choreographed gang-banging scenario was orchestrated by Bob Giraldi, one of Madison Avenue's top commercial directors at the time (he lensed those popular Miller Lite ads featuring baseball personality Bob Uecker). Giraldi's style was whiz-bang but fastidious;

he was a craftsman with a talent for packing a huge amount of visual and textural information into four-minute scenarios. “Beat It” was a marvel of narrative compression. In it, Jackson plays a hotfooted peacemaker who intervenes in the nick of time to defuse a gang fight, then leads the warring factions in a wildly inventive war dance that owes as much to Twyla Tharp’s languid choreography as to Jackson’s genius for reworking modern dance tropes.

In May 1983 Jackson secured his title as the decade’s most important pop artist when he appeared on NBC’s *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*, a quarter-century anniversary celebration of the Detroit label that had been the Jackson Five’s first home. Clad in a black-sequined outfit and a white-sequined glove—the costume that would become his trademark—Jackson reunited with his brothers for a few songs, then told the audience that, as much as he liked the old songs, he also “liked the new songs.” Jackson then segued into “Billie Jean.” It was a lip-synch, but no one really cared. This was more about Jackson’s physical prowess, a prime-time opportunity for him to strut his stuff. Jackson pulled off his complete repertoire of moves, in-



**Michael Jackson.** (Photofest)

cluding the first public performance of his gravity-defying Moonwalk, in a graceful, sexually charged urban ballet that brought down the house at the Pasadena Civic Center. Fifty million people watched Jackson turn into the definitive pop artist of the moment virtually overnight. "I had never seen anything like it," recalls songwriter Earl Brown, who worked on the special. "He brought the house down. I had chills. It was one of the moments where you just knew you were lucky to be there."

The *Motown 25* appearance, coupled with MTV's repeated airing of the "Billie Jean" and "Beat It" videos, established Jackson as the definitive videogenic artist, combining a strong, clearly defined visual persona with vigorous athleticism and a chaste eroticism. He single-handedly tilted the MTV universe on its axis. Now it was no longer acceptable or even possible for artists to get over with a wink and a sneer. A higher premium had to be placed on dancing and choreography, and videos would have to aspire to the slick, Hollywood-style production values of "Beat It." Jackson had become the 1980s' emblematic pop star as song-and-dance man, the model that every other MTV superstar of the decade would have to emulate.

And he was just getting started. For "Thriller," which premiered on MTV in December 1983, Jackson spent over \$1.1 million of MTV's money on a fourteen-minute video that resembled a high-budget horror film. Directed by John Landis, who had made *An American Werewolf in London*, one of the decade's more stylish horror movies, "Thriller's" movie-within-a-video scenario portrayed Jackson as a latent wolfboy in love with a sweet innocent thing who is clueless about his gorgon alter ego. Jackson, in a prophetic bit of dialogue, tells his paramour, "I'm not like the other boys." Then, with the help of Academy Award makeup artist Rick Baker, Jackson, after much writhing and grimacing, is transformed into a hideous creature of the night.

Jackson understood early on that music videos' primary function was not to sell music, but spectacle. If the "Thriller" video could provide a thrill for its viewers, the song would sell itself. Jackson was taking a big risk—no one had ever spent close to this kind of money for a single video—but he guessed right. No video has made a bigger splash on MTV before or since. "We paid for 'Thriller,'" says

Pittman, “but we didn’t want everyone to know. So we paid for a TV show that showed the making of ‘Thriller,’ but that really just financed the clip. It was just a sham to hide the fact that we produced the video.” When Vestron Video distributed *The Making of Thriller* (for which they reportedly paid \$500,000 for the rights), it sold over 400,000 copies.

Whatever the merits of *Thriller* as an album, which are considerable, the trio of ambitious videos that Jackson produced for “Beat It,” “Billie Jean,” and “Thriller” were instrumental in sending the album’s sales into what had heretofore been unfathomable heights. The fact that they were being shown at a time when MTV was growing into a ubiquitous brand name certainly helped Jackson immeasurably. *Thriller* wound up selling over 25 million copies domestically.

Jackson broke though the color line at MTV, but his legacy has more to do with presentation than it does with race. As critic John Swenson wrote in 1987, “Jackson, more than any other performer, turned pop music from a playing to a dancing and performance medium.”<sup>15</sup> Which is why the network was primed for someone like Madonna to come along when she did. The Michigan native was not, like Jackson, a supremely gifted entertainer, but she had the requisite skill (Madonna studied dancing at the University of Michigan and, for a brief time, with Alvin Ailey’s dance troupe), the courage to be fearless about her creative choices, and more important, a fully formed template of looks that morphed rapidly and regularly, thus keeping her image fresh.

Her early videos for “Borderline” and “Holiday,” two songs from her 1983 debut *Madonna*, were simplicity itself. Clad in her downtown floozy garb and wielding her sexuality like a Molotov Cocktail, Madonna high-steps it through these videos with a couple of anonymous dancers against spartan white backdrops and clichéd inner-city landscapes. On a formal level, these videos were the antithesis of Jackson’s elaborate productions, except in one crucial respect: they were primarily concerned with selling a persona that was undeniably alluring, and letting the rest take care of itself.

More important, Madonna was reclaiming female sexuality from the dunderheaded misogynist fantasies being perpetuated in count-

less videos by male heavy-metal artists. That was crucial; it provided an opening for female performers who weren't necessarily androgynous art snobs (like the Eurythmics' Annie Lennox) or goofy grotesques (like Cyndi Lauper).

Madonna bent MTV to her will. When the network began airing the MTV Video Music Awards in 1984, Madonna seized upon the show as a great forum for image renewal. In 1985 she appeared in a white wedding dress cinched at the waist with a "Boy Toy" belt buckle and writhed across the stage at Radio City Music Hall singing "Like a Virgin." In 1990 she appeared in a Victorian-era hoop skirt and performed "Express Yourself" in a cotillion set piece that could have been choreographed by Helmut Newton. These and other MTV Music Video Award performances led to significant album sales upticks.

By the mid-1980s, MTV was so firmly entrenched in the zeitgeist that it was driving the culture. The media, eager to pick up on the channel's highly stylized look, saturated everything with loud pastel colors (the TV show *Miami Vice*, whose working title was "MTV Cops") and deconstructed narrative into impressionistic dreamscapes (*Pink Floyd: The Wall*; *Diva*; *Grandview U.S.A.*). Madison Avenue ratcheted up the sex and soft-focus quotient in its advertising. More rock music was being used to shill products; Michael Jackson, who owned the publishing rights to the Beatles catalog, was branded an infidel when he sold the rights to "Revolution" for use in a Nike ad. Hollywood began to integrate pop music and dancing routines into more films than ever before (*Footloose*, *Flashdance*).

But omnipresence started to breed contempt, mainly because MTV's flash-cut, pop-surreal aesthetic had curdled into mannered cliché. Copycats began sprouting up; Ted Turner and the Discovery Channel announced plans for video channels, and NBC initiated a late-night show called *Friday Night Videos*. The glittery residue of MTV had settled on everything, making the videos themselves ripe for satire. Weird Al Yankovic, an accordionist from Lynwood, California, whose father was a polka star, staked his career on MTV video parodies, the first of which, a takeoff of Toni Basil's MTV hit "Micky" called "Ricky" that replaced Basil's cheerleading motif with a riff on *I Love Lucy*, became an MTV staple in 1983. The fact that MTV will-

ingly played Yankovic's video parodies (which also included "Eat It" and "Like a Surgeon"), says as much about the network's eagerness to maintain a coolly subversive distance from anything passé, even itself (thereby turning self-mockery into a marketing stratagem), as it does about the disposability of the videos themselves.

There was simply too much MTV out there for the market to bear, and it began to have a destabilizing effect on the network. *Time* wondered, was MTV "an idea whose time has already gone?"<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding big event programming like its seventeen-hour coverage of *Live Aid* in July 1985, the channel's ratings began to slump. Its 0.6 rating in the fourth quarter of 1985 represented a 33 percent drop from the previous year (a figure that MTV president Tom Freston publicly disputed.)<sup>17</sup>

Still, the warning signs led to a shake-up. By July 1987 the original five veejays were out, and new recruits Dweezil Zappa (son of Frank), Kevin Seal, Adam Curry, and black British TV personality Julie Brown were in. Programs like the new music showcase *120 Minutes*, dance show *Club MTV*, and heavy metal feast *Headbanger's Ball* (in which Nirvana's Kurt Cobain showed up wearing a dress in 1991, proclaiming, "I'm dressed for the ball") were introduced. MTV also broke with its usual policy and began to pay for exclusive rights to certain videos, thereby shutting out its competition for the most coveted artists. "The challenge," Freston told *Time*, "is to maintain freshness."<sup>18</sup>

It worked. By breaking up its relentless stream of music videos with stand-alone shows—essentially hewing more closely to conventional television programming—MTV began to lure back viewers. And then along came hip-hop. In 1986, Def Jam Records label heads Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin were looking for a way to get their act Run-DMC exposed to more white kids, so Rubin cooked up an idea whereby the band would perform a cover of Aerosmith's metal classic "Walk This Way," with Aerosmith band members Steven Tyler and Joe Perry providing the necessary rock cred.

The resulting video for "Walk This Way" is the stuff of which crossover dreams are made. The video's scenario presented Aerosmith and Run-DMC as dueling bands, each performing its own

version of the song on opposite sides of a wall—the wall, of course, being a metaphor for the breach that separated rap and rock fans. The wall is then torn down by both parties, who bring it home with a rock-hop jam. MTV viewers loved it, and “Walk This Way” became a watershed event for rap’s emergence as a mainstream force.

Other rap videos followed—the Fat Boys’ “Wipe-Out” (a black appropriation of a white surf-rock song), the Beastie Boys’ “Fight for Your Right (to Party)” (white rappers emulating black rappers), Tone-Loc’s “Wild Thing” (black rapper nicking guitar riff from white heavy metal band Van Halen), and so on. These videos all emerged from hip-hop’s mainstream flank and played to white viewers’ familiarity with rock. Edgier acts were still left to languish at the margins—at least until *Yo! MTV Raps* began airing in August 1988.

Cocreated by a former MTV intern and future film director Ted Demme (*The Ref, Rounders*), *Yo! MTV Raps* was the least hide-bound, most daring program devised by MTV thus far—a state of affairs that could be attributed to the fact that MTV execs were simply clueless about hip-hop and kept themselves at arm’s length from the show. Hosted by New York’s downtown demi-legend Fab 5 Freddy Braithwaite (the Fab 5 Freddy name-checked in Blondie’s “Rapture”), *Yo! MTV Raps* played rap videos from the under- and overground: Big Daddy Kane, Schoolly D, EPMD, LL Cool J. It maintained a decidedly loose-limbed vibe, with performers periodically “dropping by” to talk up their records. The weekly show soon expanded into a daily, with new hosts Dr. Dre and Ed Lover—the Laurel and Hardy of MTV—providing winning comic interplay.

By the late 1980s, however, rap was mutating into something more menacing—and hence more threatening to MTV’s advertisers. Gangsta rap, with its lurid “guns and booty” imagery and graphic lyrical content, was a bitter pill for the channel to swallow. “When N.W.A. came up and rap started to get gangsta, and guns started coming out, everybody got really scared,” recalls Demme. “And suddenly MTV’s standards went berserk.”<sup>19</sup> Safe acts like MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice became MTV staples, while the gangsta fringe got the shaft.

Meanwhile, on the rock front, Seattle was brewing grunge, as well as some of the most visually forward-thinking videos MTV had ever



seen. Nirvana's video for "Smells Like Teen Spirit," shot by director Samuel Bayer for \$33,000, was a spooky, ominous evocation of teen ennui, its high school pep rally scenario culminating in a tangle of moshing bodies. The video was that rarity—it resonantly captured the tone and mood of the song it was designed to illustrate.

So did the 1992 video for "Jeremy," Pearl Jam's *cri de coeur* about teen suicide. As directed by Mark Pellington (who, like so many MTV auteurs, eventually graduated to feature films), "Jeremy" was like an *ABC Afterschool Special* gone terribly awry. The story unspools like a fever dream—there's Jeremy getting harassed by some school toughs, there he is trying to talk to his inattentive parents, there he is blowing his brains out. That Beaver Cleaver-in-hell scenario is intercut with tight close-ups of lead singer Eddie Vedder's garishly grimacing face, which eventually takes on the appearance of a death mask. It's a genuinely unsettling video, but it was a little too effective in turning the Seattle band into MTV darlings. The members of Pearl Jam were so put off by the channel's relentless stoking of celebrity culture that it would be six years before they would make another video.

Hip-hop artists weren't so reticent, and MTV's PG-13 programming policy in the late 1980s provided an opening for other TV outlets to take advantage of all those hard-core videos that were collecting dust in MTV's slush pile. And it wasn't just hard-core rap that was being denied, either. Sometimes it was hard-core sex, or at least a sleek simulacrum of it. In 1990 Madonna's racy video for her trip-hop single "Justify My Love" was banned from MTV. Directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, "Justify My Love" was ultimately harmless stuff—a soft-porn version of a Calvin Klein perfume ad with bondage—but it quickly became a cause *célèbre*, and a ratings bonanza for everyone except MTV. *Nightline*, *The Howard Stern Show*, and *Saturday Night Live* all scored season-high ratings after airing the video.

If you were really itching to see "Justify My Love" repeatedly, one channel was more than willing to oblige. Founded in 1985 in Miami, the Box, or Video Jukebox Network, obviated the need for programming gatekeepers by turning over its decision making to its viewers. The channel's concept was analogous to a video jukebox: Viewers

were provided with an on-screen “menu” of over 300 videos and could then call a toll-free number to view their selections. Inasmuch as it provided hip-hop artists that had been shunned by MTV with a national forum, the Box played a key role in the genre’s phenomenal growth during the early nineties.

The Box’s playlist may have been more ecumenical than MTV’s, but its bare-bones functionality (no veejays, no nifty bumpers between videos) gave it the generic look of public access television. It carved a niche, but it hardly presented a threat, especially when MTV finally got hip to gangsta rap in 1993 and began playing videos like N.W.A. alumnus Dr. Dre and Long Beach rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Ain’t Nothing but a ‘G’ Thang,” the first single from Dre’s debut album *The Chronic*. To a greater extent than any other video, “Ain’t Nothing but a ‘G’ Thang” brought ghetto style to the suburbs. It may have been pure Hollywood product, but it flashed all the correct signifiers of inner-city authenticity—low-riders, booty-thumping bitties, and Snoop and Dre’s Colt 45—swilling, roughneck personas. MTV viewers, especially its white viewers, just couldn’t get enough of the video, and its popularity eventually led to MTV’s total embrace of hip-hop in the 1990s.

Dr. Dre notwithstanding, authenticity was in short supply at MTV at the time. Music videos, despite huge strides in formal and technical sophistication, had become a tired art form for MTV’s viewers; nothing, it seemed, was shocking anymore. So MTV did an about-face and went in the opposite direction. The result was *Unplugged*, a stripped-down performance show where artists could wield acoustic guitars and perform without the benefit of special effects, busty babes, or shock edits. For a generation of kids weaned on MTV’s endless barrage of image manipulation, real musicians playing real instruments had become the new new thing.

*Unplugged*, which the network led its viewers to believe had been spun off from an acoustic performance by Bon Jovi’s Richie Sambora and Jon Bon Jovi on 1989’s Music Video Awards (the show had in fact already been sold to the network prior to the awards), quickly became de rigueur for every act that longed to show off its chops. This was a post-Milli Vanilli universe, after all, the first *Unplugged* having

debuted only months after the revelation that the dreadlocked duo had not sung a note on its debut album *Girl, You Know It's True*. No one, it seemed, wanted to be tarred with the brush of fakery, and *Unplugged* provided the perfect vehicle for artists to set the record straight.

It also quickly became a potent sales tool. When Eric Clapton appeared on the show in March 1992, few at the time could have predicted that it would result in the biggest-selling record of the aging rock legend's career. Clapton's *Unplugged* album eventually sold over 10 million copies, netting him six Grammy Awards and a top-five single, "Tears in Heaven." Other veteran acts, like Rod Stewart, 10,000 Maniacs, and Neil Young, hopped on the *Unplugged* gravy train, while others used it as a forum to tinker with old material. Working with a live band for the first time in his career, rapper LL Cool J turned in a blistering set in 1991 that realized the show's potential for musical reinvention.

By the mid-1990s, MTV had grown so large and influential, and had become compulsory viewing for so many teenagers, that the network could afford to slowly wean itself away from video dependency in favor of programming that resembled a shadow version of traditional network TV, with soap operas, cartoons, newsmagazine-style documentaries, and call-in talk shows interspersed among video programming "blocks." The one true breakout show among this new breed of MTV beast, however, relied on a combination of animation and videos from the network's archives.

*Beavis and Butt-head* was the brainchild of bassist and former physics major Mike Judge, a twenty-nine-year-old wiseguy with a mordant streak and a soft spot for teenage suburban losers. His benighted meatheads Beavis and Butt-head were loosely based on heavy metal burnouts Judge knew while attending junior high in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 1992, with nothing but two line drawings of his characters to work from, Judge came up with an animated short called *Frog Baseball*, in which the dynamic duo blow up a locust with a firecracker (Butt-head: "Light one in his butt") and then bat around a live frog. In September 1992, a week after Judge exhibited the short at an animation festival, it was picked up for inclusion in MTV's short film showcase *Liquid Television*. Two months later,

MTV put *Beavis and Butt-head* into heavy rotation on the network, ordering sixty-five episodes to be shown nightly.

*Beavis and Butt-head* immediately pulled in huge numbers; whereas most music videos averaged a 0.6 rating, *Beavis and Butt-head* netted a gaudy 2.4—remarkable for a show whose format was so facile that it verged on the imbecilic. Most of the early episodes featured Judge's crudely drawn, concert-T-shirt-garbed characters sitting on a dingy living room couch, providing a running critique of music videos in their inimitably pithy, scatological dumb-speak.

*Beavis and Butt-head* spoke to the Inner Numbskull of every MTV viewer, or at least those who railed at the stupidity of lame videos while they cranked up the volume on the remote. Judge's creation was a sneaky triumph of junk culture that provided an unapologetic rebuke to all the sociological cant that had swirled around MTV since its inception. Beavis and Butt-head didn't care about whether music videos were cruel toward women or employed facile film-school imagery. They just wanted MTV to rock.

Around the time that Beavis and Butt-head were shoring up MTV's sagging image among the mall-rat demographic, the network's

**Beavis and, heh, heh, Butt-head.** (Artwork courtesy of: MTV: Music Television)



sister station VH-1 was pointing the way toward music television's future by mining its past. Established, according to network vice president Bill Flanagan, as a means "to prevent anybody else from coming in and creating another music network"<sup>20</sup> in 1985, VH-1 (Video Hits 1) began as a kind of clearing house for obsolete MTV videos, then quickly morphed into a video channel for safer, middle-of-the-road artists, TV sitcom reruns, and lame stand-up comedians. Its ratings had been paltry for nearly a decade, with about one-third of MTV's audience tuning in on average. Tele-Communications, the largest cable operator in the United States, had yanked VH-1 from a million homes in 1993, and other cable companies were threatening to do the same. The channel was irrelevant and reviled. *Entertainment Weekly* music critic David Browne wrote that the network "made The Weather Channel seem like compelling viewing."<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 1994 MTV Networks chairman Tom Freston hired former talent manager and MTV executive John Sykes to rehabilitate the channel. Shortly thereafter, the network revamped its format by programming videos that targeted a slightly younger audience. Instead of baby boomers, the channel would highlight acts with twenty- and thirtysomething appeal—Counting Crows, Sheryl Crow, and Melissa Etheridge, among others. The channel lost the hyphen in its name, hired a clutch of sexy young veejays, and ran ads with Madonna and Sting delivering its urgent new motto: "VH1. It'll suck you in."

Few were sucked. Despite its makeover, VH1 was still mired in MOR video muck and bad stand-up comedy. Then, in 1995, a subtle shift began. The network acquired the rights to old TV rock shows like *Midnight Special* and *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* and musical segments from the Ed Sullivan, Dick Cavett, and Mike Douglas shows, gave the old clips an image makeover with slick wraparounds, and saw its ratings soar to unprecedented heights. Just as fading FM radio stations had reclaimed large market share with the classic rock (Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Yes) formula a decade earlier, VH1 had repackaged the musical revolution as warm, fuzzy nostalgia, and boomers responded.

"Rock 'n' roll, for better or worse, is the music of commercials," observed VH1 vice president and editorial director Bill Flanagan, a

former music journalist who was one of the “new” VH1’s architects. “It’s the music people have been playing at their weddings for years. It’s the sound track to every major motion picture. It’s everywhere.”

But it wasn’t all about old TV clips. *Behind the Music*, VH1’s most successful show under its new guise, cleverly tapped into boomer nostalgia at the same time that it tweaked ’90s audiences’ insatiable hunger for tabloid sensationalism. The documentary series tended to focus on artists who had suffered a fall from grace in a maelstrom of drugs, booze, and ego-infighting, only to find redemption with an ill-considered comeback attempt and a clean and sober lifestyle. Curiously, the most popular *Behind the Music* subjects were B-grade acts like Leif Garrett, David Cassidy, and Tony Orlando. The kids in the 1970s who had swallowed whole the airbrushed lies about their idols in the teen magazines were now eager to have the veil lifted off those well-tended myths. When Leif Garrett tearfully confessed to his druggy transgressions or Tony Orlando discussed his public breakdown after the death of his friend Freddy Prinze, it made for deliciously voyeuristic viewing.

*Behind the Music*’s star-driven morality plays represent TV’s ultimate co-optation of rock as a vehicle for cheap thrills. By neglecting (with rare exceptions) serious artists and foregrounding trivial pop oddities, *Behind the Music* has in essence reduced a complex and diverse art form to the subtabloid level of a Barbara Walters weep-athon. Perhaps that’s the best way for rock ’n’ roll to survive within the two-dimensional landscape of television, a place where the singer, and not the song, nabs the bigger ratings—especially when that singer has a tawdry tale to tell.

As television drones into its seventh decade, it seems that TV rock has played itself out, even as there’s more music on television than ever before. Talk shows remain an important promotional vehicle for pop stars, as daytime shows like *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* and *The Rosie O’Donnell Show* showcase a steady stream of artists. The Big Three late-night network shows—*The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*—maintain an open-door policy for both breaking acts and veterans. The performances seen on those shows, however,

are for the most part so perfunctory and unimaginatively staged as to be practically interchangeable. There are good reasons for this, the most obvious being that too many contemporary artists are charisma-deficient and unwilling to engage in the kind of on-camera risk taking that used to make the best TV rock such a cheap pop thrill in the 1960s and '70s. The proliferation of media outlets has also diluted the excitement. Everybody is practically everywhere these days, and one only has to linger around the music video channels long enough to witness a steady procession of boy bands, icons, and ego-flexing MCs. A few shows, such as HBO's *Reverb* and PBS's *Sessions at West Fifty-Fourth*, still program venturesome music in an unmediated nightclublike context. But they remain fringe attractions, seen by relatively minuscule audiences during off-peak viewing hours.

At this point, it might be a tad too pat to trot out the usual messianic pronouncements about the Internet revolution, and gush about how artists, freed from corporate constraints, are using the World Wide Web to create a TV rock paradigm shift. While its true that MP3 technology is funneling new music unsullied by record label spindoctoring into millions of homes via computers, relatively few Web sites are devoted to music video, or some visual equivalent. In one sense, that's a sign of pop-cultural health; fans who have been trained to listen to music with their eyes are now burrowing back into sound for sound's sake. Meanwhile, MTV's influence on pop culture is more pervasive than at any time during its twenty-year history, but it's airing fewer videos. What does it all mean? As the Web grows, one can only speculate as to how fans will view its icons. As holographic downloads? Or perhaps computer-generated pixels? Stay tuned. And while you wait, there's always those old *Ed Sullivan Shows* on videotape.





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