

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #39

By the mid-1960s winds of change in popular music came to the United States from the Beatles, four working-class Brits whose awe-inspiring music – sometimes lyrical and sometimes driving – spawned a commercial and cultural phenomenon known as “Beatlemania.” Almost overnight, John, Paul, George, and Ringo, otherwise known as the “Fab Four,” joined an elite group of the most famous entertainers in the world.

The Beatles became a sensation in the United Kingdom in 1962 and 1963, about a year before anyone in the United States knew much about them. However, before that, the Beatles had honed their craft playing in nightclubs and other gigs dating to the late 1950s. Known by earlier names, including The Quarry Men, Johnny & the Moon-dogs, and the Silver Beatles, they played a variety of venues, with some alternating personnel during those early years. Sixteen-year old John Lennon was an original member of the Quarry Men in June, 1957. Paul McCartney, fifteen years old, joined the group in October of that same year. George Harrison was added to the band just before his fifteenth birthday in February, 1958. While playing at the Indra Club, a nightclub in Hamburg, Germany, they officially changed their name to The Beatles. By early October, 1960 they also had a new drummer, Richard Starkey (a.k.a. Ringo Starr), who was the oldest of the group at age 20.

Beginning in 1960, they worked steadily playing in small nightclubs throughout Continental Europe and England – putting in long hours, perfecting their stage act, increasing their range of music, and writing their own songs. They offered their own versions of music by Buddy Holly, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry. By late 1961 they were playing to packed houses at the Cavern nightclub in Liverpool, England, their hometown, where they were discovered by their manager-to-be, Brian Epstein, in November, 1961. Epstein did a wardrobe and style make over on them, cleaning them up for the music industry.

In May, 1962, after being rejected by a number of U.K. record labels, they signed a deal with EMI – the leading music company in the U.K. at that time. During 1962, their songs began hitting the British Melody Maker music chart. A Lennon/McCartney composition, “Love Me Do,” reached No. 21 in the autumn. Their first No. 1 hit came with “Please, Please Me” on February 22, 1963. It was not until their appearance on the British television show, “Val Parnell’s Sunday Night at the London Palladium” and the release in April of their first album, *Please, Please Me*, that “Beatlemania” began to take hold in the U.K. Within four weeks it became the No. 1 U.K. album, followed by their second album, *With the Beatles*, later in that year. The Beatles’ music permeated U.K. radio. The “Fab Four” even performed for the royal family. It was only after this burgeoning success at home that the Beatles and Epstein chose to launch their American invasion. They decided that, when they had a No. 1 song on the U.S. charts, they would lock in a date for performing in this nation.

In the autumn of 1963 “Beatlemania” was a raging epidemic in Britain, and it was rapidly spreading across the European continent. But in the United States, John, Paul, George, and Ringo could have walked through the terminal at Grand Central Station completely unnoticed. In the American music industry there was an initial hesitancy about the Beatles. Especially in 1963, some record executives and disc jockeys did not think that British acts would do well in the United States. That perspective soon changed.

On October 31, 1963, it was London Heathrow Airport through which the Beatles were walking. On that very day Ed Sullivan, a renowned American television variety show host, and his wife, Sylvia, were traveling through London after a talent scouting tour of Europe. Their flight out of that airport was delayed by a screaming crowd of teens welcoming the Beatles home from their highly successful tour in Sweden. As a result of the pandemonium he witnessed as he and his wife attempted to catch their flight to New York, Sullivan purportedly inquired about booking these rising British music stars with strange haircuts – perhaps as a novelty act for his Sunday night television show on CBS.

Late in 1963 Sullivan and Epstein reached an agreement to bring the group to New York City to perform live for the first time on American television. Following dinner at the Hotel Delmonico in New York City, a handshake between the two men sealed the deal for a performance on three shows to air in 1964. In return, the Beatles would receive \$10,000 for their three appearances as well as top billing.

Prior to their debut on the Sullivan show, the Beatles’ record, “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” was leaked to radio stations across the country in advance of its planned U.S. release. When attorneys for Capitol Records were unable to stop American DJs from spinning the tune, the record label relented and put out the album ahead of schedule on December 26, 1963. The record sold 250,000 copies in the first three days. By January 10, 1964, it had sold over one million copies, and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” was the No. 1 song on the American Billboard charts by the end of the month.

In the weeks leading up to the Beatles’ performance on The Ed Sullivan Show, “Beatlemania” went viral. Radio stations played the band’s music nearly non-stop. Teenaged fans sported “Beatle” wigs, and bumper stickers across the nation warned “The Beatles Are Coming.”

The Beatles touched down at New York’s Kennedy Airport on February 7th, 1964, with a No. 1 record in the U.S. already to their credit. They were met by a throng of reporters and a hoard of 3,000 screaming fans. Upon disembarking the plane, the Beatles were whisked to a press conference hosted by Capitol Records in which they playfully answered questions from the media. When asked, “How do you find America?”, Ringo Starr jokingly replied, “Turn left at Greenland.”

While the Beatles spent the next two days cooped up at The Plaza Hotel, fans did all they could to get closer to the band. Groups of teenagers set up camp outside the hotel, some even posing as hotel guests in an attempt to see their favorite group. As the time for the show approached, over 50,000 requests for seats came into CBS. However, The Ed Sullivan Show, which originated from CBS's TV Studio 50, could only accommodate an audience of 700.

For weeks, celebrities had been calling to get tickets for their kids. Walter Cronkite and Jack Paar gained tickets for their daughters. Composer Leonard Bernstein tried but failed. Richard Nixon's 15-year old daughter, Julie, became one of the lucky ones to get a seat. Even Sullivan himself had trouble getting extra tickets. On his show the week before the debut of the Beatles, he had asked his audience, "Coincidentally, if anyone has a ticket for the Beatles on our show next Sunday, could I please borrow it? We need it very badly."

At the same time, one must remember that, while this excitement was occurring, an air of gloom still prevailed in the United States. Just 78 days prior to the Beatles' appearance on the Sullivan show, President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. By February, 1964 the nation was ready for some much needed diversion. It came in the form of four young lads from Liverpool – their sound, their look, their energy, and their charisma.

At 8:00 p.m. EST on Sunday, February 9, 1964, Americans tuned in to CBS and The Ed Sullivan Show. This night, however, was very different. 73 million people gathered in front of their TV sets to see the Beatles' first live performance on U.S. soil. The television rating was a record-setting 45.3 – meaning that 45.3% of households with televisions were watching. That figure reflected a total of 23,240,000 American homes. The show garnered a 60 share, which meant that 60% of the televisions turned on were tuned in to Ed Sullivan and the Beatles.

Sullivan opened his show by briefly mentioning a congratulatory telegram to the Beatles from Elvis Presley and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker. Then Sullivan temporarily threw the show to advertisements for Aero Shave and Griffin Shoe Polish. After the brief commercial interruption, he began his memorable introduction: "Now yesterday and today our theatre has been jammed with newspapermen and hundreds of photographers from all over the nation, and these veterans agreed with me that this city never has witnessed the excitement stirred by these youngsters from Liverpool who call themselves the Beatles. Now tonight, you're gonna twice be entertained by them. Right now, and again in the second half of our show. Ladies and gentlemen, The Beatles! Let's bring them on."

John, Paul, George, and Ringo came onto the stage, opening with “All My Loving” to ear-splitting screams from teenaged girls in the audience. The Beatles followed that hit with Paul McCartney taking the spotlight to sing, “Till There Was You.” During the song, a camera cut to each member of the band and introduced him to the audience by displaying his first name on the screen. When the camera focused on John, the caption below his name also read, “SORRY GIRLS, HE’S MARRIED.” The Beatles then wrapped up the first set with “She Loves You,” and the show went to commercial.

Upon return, magician Fred Kaps took the stage to perform a set of sleight-of-hand tricks. Concerned that the Beatles’ shrieking fans would steal attention from the other acts that evening, Ed Sullivan admonished his audience, “If you don’t keep quiet, I’m going to send for a barber.” As hard as he tried to protect them, the other acts that night suffered from the excitement surrounding the Beatles. Numbered among those performers were impressionist Frank Gorshin, acrobats Wells & the Four Fays, the comedy team of McCall & Bill, and Broadway star, Georgia Brown, joined by the cast of “Oliver!”

The hour-long broadcast concluded with the Beatles singing two more of their hits, “I Saw Her Standing There” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” to the delight of the fans in attendance and those watching at home. The show was a huge television success. Over 40% of the entire American population had watched the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show.

A week later, the cover on the February 24th issue of *Newsweek* magazine featured a picture of the Beatles with the title, “Bugs about Beatles.” Inside, the review of their debut on The Ed Sullivan Show began, “Visually, they are a nightmare: tight, dandified, Edwardian/Beatnik suits and great pudding bowls of hair. Musically, they are a near-disaster: guitars and drums slamming out a merciless beat that does away with secondary rhythms, harmony, and melody. Their lyrics (punctuated by nutty shouts of “yeah, yeah, yeah!”) are a catastrophe, a preposterous farrago of Valentine-card romantic sentiments.” The article ended with the following prediction, “...the odds are they will fade away, as most adults confidently predict.”

John Moffitt, then assistant director of The Ed Sullivan Show, recalled: “Nobody realized the impact to come, how momentous it would be. We didn’t talk about making history. It was more like, ‘What are we going to do next week? Not only are we doing this again, we’re on location.’”

That was because the Beatles' second appearance on February 16, 1964, was broadcast from The Deauville Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida. Moffitt later described how fans took over the venue. When it was time for the Beatles to perform, a throng of teenagers blocked the group's access to the ballroom. As security guards wedged a passageway through the crowd for the band members, the show was being broadcast to America. Unaware of the delay, Sullivan was about to introduce them: "And now, here are – (a pause) – the Beatles right after this." He went to commercial. Finally at the end of the commercial, Moffitt said, "The Beatles broke through, they came running up the aisle, they got hooked up, and I believe there was one microphone that didn't get hooked up. But you couldn't tell because all you could hear was the screaming."

Audio difficulties aside, the boys from Liverpool plowed through "She Loves You," "This Boy," and "All My Loving" for their first set. Then they turned the stage over to the comedy team of Allen and Rossi, singer/dancer Mitzi Gaynor, acrobats The Nerveless Knocks, and monologist Myron Cohen. The Beatles returned to close the show with performances of "I Saw Her Standing There," "From Me to You," and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." After they finished, Sullivan called them over and congratulated them, passing along the word that legendary composer Richard Rodgers was one of their "most rabid fans."

Once again, the Beatles on the Sullivan Show proved to be a huge ratings success – nearly duplicating the record-setting performance of their first appearance. The second show also attracted 40% of the American population.

The third performance by the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show – according to their contract – was technically their first. That show was taped prior to their live February 9th debut but saved for broadcast until February 23rd. On that show the Beatles sang "Twist and Shout," "Please, Please Me," and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Other guests that evening included stand-up comedian Dave Barry, Gordon and Sheila MacRae, and the legendary American jazz singer Cab Calloway. These three historic appearances by the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show led to five more No. 1 songs in the next twelve months.

On September 12th, 1965, the "Fab Four" returned to the Ed Sullivan stage one last time. They played "I Feel Fine," "I'm Down," "Act Naturally," "Ticket to Ride," "Yesterday," and "Help!" This performance was taped in New York on August 14th, 1965, just one day before the Beatles kicked off their North American Tour with a concert at Shea Stadium that set an attendance record for an outdoor show at the time. Over 55,000 people saw the Beatles at Shea Stadium. Moreover, the gross profits for the concert exceeded \$300,000 – the largest ever in the history of show business. This demonstrated that outdoor concerts on a large scale could be successful and lucrative.

The final appearance of the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show, like those in February, 1964, aired in black and white. At the end of the evening, however, Sullivan broke the news that the following week his show would start broadcasting in color. Therefore, the Beatles were just one week from having their performance captured and preserved forever in color.

These four historic performances by the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show featured 20 Beatles songs – seven of which became No. 1 hits. Cumulatively, the four shows attracted an audience of a quarter of a billion people. In terms of percentage of the population of the United States, the first two shows remain the highest viewed regularly scheduled television programs of all time.

The success of the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show paved the way for future rock ‘n’ roll groups, who comprised the so-called “British invasion,” including the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Dave Clark Five, Herman’s Hermits, the Searchers, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Peter and Gordon, the Yardbirds, the Kinks, and the Zombies. As young Americans embraced the music of the Beatles and these even more rebellious rock bands, the generational divide deepened between those young people and their elders.

The genius of the Beatles and the American institution that was The Ed Sullivan Show combined to create one of the most defining and indelible moments in the history of music, television, and pop culture. It was a remarkable convergence which came at a special time in the United States. From then on, the Beatles produced a string of No. 1 records and No. 1 albums until the group broke up in the winter of 1969/1970. Thereafter, each of the “Fab Four” enjoyed a highly successful individual career.