



THE BEATLES ON SULLIVAN

by Tim Riley

By early 1964, Beatlemania had seduced Britain and Europe, but American success was still elusive. Capitol Records had rejected “Please Please Me,” “From Me to You,” and “She Loves You,” and was about to snub “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” when manager Brian Epstein intervened. Tired of the runaround, Epstein called Capitol president Dave Dexter, who confessed he hadn’t heard these silly Beatles. Dexter agreed to listen, and quickly overruled his underlings (and his wife) in November 1963. Epstein thanked him and demanded a \$40,000 promotional campaign as he played his trump: Ed Sullivan had booked the band for three consecutive weeks in February 1964. Epstein wanted a hit record for their arrival. Dexter, who admired Epstein’s gumption as much as the prime-time booking, agreed to the purse, and the stars quickly aligned.

On February 9, 1964, alongside the Broadway cast of *Oliver!*, comedian Frank Gorshin, and Olympian Terry McDermott, the Beatles played five numbers, starting with “All My Loving,” “Till There Was You,” and their first U.S. number one, “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” For viewers, time froze: it had been seven years since Elvis Presley had graced this same stage, but it must have felt like forever for fans of rock and roll. With “She Loves You” and “I Saw Her Standing There” especially, rock and roll cracked open again—the music sounded bigger, more provocative, and more pressing than ever. In their Sullivan debut, the Beatles reframed all of rock and roll history up to that point, and hinted at a thousand enticing new directions.

The overpowering immediacy of the Beatles’ impact was a key part of their appeal, and largely ironic. What seemed fresh and spontaneous to Americans was actually a polished act of songs and quips refined throughout 1963. Stories of Britain’s peculiar Beatlemania phenomenon had trickled in via Jack Paar and Walter Cronkite—the Beatles were news fluff (“mop-tops” with “screaming girls”) even before their songs began playing on Top 40 radio over Christmas and the New Year.

Early 1964 was not, however, what many historians routinely call a “fallow” period for rock and roll. In fact, John, Paul, George, and Ringo saw themselves as participants, not saviors; the Beatles symbolized less a resurgence of rock and roll than an argument for its ongoing richness. The week “I Want to Hold Your Hand” reached number one, it ranked just above the Trashmen’s “Bird Is the Word,” and the Kingsmen’s “Louie Louie,” both absurdist juggernauts. If anything, the Beatles somehow made sense of such inanity, or at least lent it new context and bearing.

The Sullivan audience, and fans who picked up Capitol's *Meet the Beatles!* (compiled from UK singles and their second album), heard a galloping embrace of American styles, from swooning doo-wop ("This Boy") to rakish rhythm and blues ("I Saw Her Standing There," their first in Chuck Berry's "classic" mode). Alongside their Little Richard and Carl Perkins covers, they slung Motown (Barrett Strong's "Money" and Smokey Robinson's "You've Really Got a Hold on Me"), girl groups (The Marvelettes' "Please Mr. Postman" and the Shirelles' "Boys"), and soul that threw off giddy, intractable sparks (the Isley Brothers' "Twist and Shout"). The Beatles were already tinkering with the style of rock—exploiting new cracks in the sound, writing songs that implied even more than they entertained (the gigantically coy understatement of "I Want to Hold Your Hand," for example). Performing with supernatural self-confidence to the largest TV audience before or since, at least half the fun was watching the Beatles light their sonic firecrackers right in Sullivan's staid living room, his embalmed gaze acquiring the look of a catatonic Tin Pan Alley. "So you think America bounced back after the war, do ya?" their British attitude chided, while outmaneuvering the witless Yanks at their own game.

The Beatles played right into Sullivan's variety show format while transcending it. Their first number, a jaunty original ("All My Loving"), was followed by bassist Paul McCartney singing "Till There Was You," from the 1960s

Broadway hit *The Music Man*. How could a band so hip get away with such hokey sentimentality? (The arrangement, complete with flamenco acoustic guitar, was lifted off Peggy Lee's 1958 *Latin ala Lee!* album, not remotely rock and roll.) Elvis sang gooey ballads, but that was almost the only rule he didn't break. The Beatles delivered this "girly" stuff with relish, as if scribbling love notes between tossing cherry bombs.

Many had thought rock and roll was dead. Not only was it proven to be a vital, healthy style, but the Beatles abruptly redeemed it—"the biggest long-shot of all the biggest long-shots in the history of the world," says critic Richard Meltzer. That this renewal came as an import from Britain made it irresistible. It gave the Beatles their halo effect. Rock's second act began on a familiar stage with a transformational new context: these British youths, brash yet appealing, completely new yet instantly recognizable, held up an astonishing cultural mirror to Americans. Their command of rock and roll made it seem like they'd always known us, grinning strangers who had cracked our aesthetic DNA and were suddenly, inexplicably, lifelong friends.

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