

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky



John, Paul, George and Ringo. The Fab Four. Every girl loved them, and every boy wanted to be like them.

America would never be the same after Feb. 7, 1964 when four young men got off their Pan Am Flight 101 at Kennedy International Airport in New York City. Radio stations were already saturated with their music, and 3,000 screaming teenagers were there to welcome them to America. The young musicians had already made their mark in Britain and much of Europe, but now...now the Beatles were ready to capture the heart of America.

The British rock group included John Lennon on rhythm guitar and vocals, Paul McCartney on bass guitar and vocals, George Harrison on lead guitar and vocals and Ringo Starr on drums and vocals—an exceptional combination of talent, stage presence and good looks.

The 21 and 23-year-olds were scheduled to appear on The Ed Sullivan Show, which was regarded as America's most popular variety program at the time. Legend says it was by chance Sullivan saw the commotion the Beatles were making in Britain only months earlier.

For weeks people were warned, "The Beatles are coming!" Excitement was building.

The CBS television office on West 53rd Street in New York City received over 50,000 requests for tickets to a studio that held only 703 viewers. These 703 people were lucky enough to see the Beatles' first live performance in the United States, a moment that would change history forever. Over 73 million more people watched the event at home—an estimated 45 percent of the country.

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky

Todd Leopold said in his “When the Beatles Hit America” article the show remains one of the highest-rated non-sports programs of all time.

Julie Wiebke remembers how she and her family always watched The Ed Sullivan Show—so sitting down to watch it Sunday, Feb. 9, 1964 wasn’t out of the ordinary, although, the Beatles were far from ordinary.

Sullivan began with his famous introduction: “Now yesterday and today our theater’s been jammed with newspapermen and hundreds of photographers from all over the nation, and these veterans agreed with me that the city never has 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.”

“Everyone was glued,” said Linda Sandstrom.

“From the moment they strummed those electric chords, wagged their mops of hair and smiled those beaming, ironic, isn’t-this-cool-but-also-a-bit-absurd smiles, we all knew it was something from a different galaxy,” said Fred Kaplan in his article “Teen Spirit.”

The Beatles mesmerized viewers as they sang All My Loving, Till There Was You, She Loves You, I Saw Her Standing There and their number one single on the U.S. charts, I Want to Hold Your Hand.

Everyone stopped to watch the Beatles—even criminal activity in major cities was put on hold.

Wiebke, who hadn’t heard of the Beatles before that Sullivan show, said she was simply “fascinated.”

“The Beatles became the topic of conversation,” said Wiebke who was attending Holyoke High

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky

School at the time. She remembers everyone talking about the Fab Four during their physical education classes at school.

Sandstrom, a 13-year-old girl living in Long Island, N.Y. when the Beatles arrived in 1964, said she was “the perfect age to be madly in love with a rock group.” She remembers having all-girl sleep overs with her friends where they played Beatles records all night. They would sing at the top of their lungs because, of course, they knew all the words to the songs. “We would scream and hoot and holler!”

The band appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show nine times including three Sundays in a row—the historic first Sunday, Feb. 9 as well as Feb. 16 and Feb. 23.

“If they were on TV it was a group activity,” said Sandstrom who watched with her friends. One of these friends was the envy of the group as she had the lucky opportunity to see the Beatles live in concert because she had older brothers who could get her tickets, explained Sandstrom.

The young, fresh feel of the musicians is one thing that made them attractive to women and an icon for men. It was hard to hear them at their concerts because of all the screaming girls, said former HHS student Charlie Harvey.

Sandstrom said it was essential that all the girls pick a favorite band member. She and Wiebke both said George was their favorite. Wiebke added all the girls noted that “Ringo’s a good drummer—too bad he’s so homely.”

As for the boys, everyone wanted their hair cut like John, Paul, George and Ringo’s. Their long hair style was so different from what everyone was used to. Harvey said in Holyoke schools it was against the rules for boys to have their hair that long at that time. He does, however, admit to having a Beatles wig. Everyone wanted to be a part of the long hair craze.

The hair was not the only thing to change. Men wore tighter pants like the Beatles, and of course the short boots they made popular were at the top of the fashion list.

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky

Other merchandise focused on the Beatles included everything from ice cream sandwiches to Beatles bubble bath.

Everything began to revolve around the Beatles, said Sandstrom, including having all Beatles music at school dances and other events.

Holyokans will remember cruising in their cars listening to the Beatles on KOMA, an Oklahoma City radio station that could come in at night.

That first appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show was only the beginning for the young men from Liverpool as “Beatlemania” took the country by storm.

“They hit like nothing ever hit,” said Sandstrom. “They hit everybody. America fell in love with them and that led to their success.”

Some say the Beatles had such an impact because they brought America out of the slump caused by JFK’s assassination in 1963. Kaplan argues that the thousands of screaming teenage girls weren’t really affected that much by JFK—the Beatles truly were a sensation.

Wiebke said this international phenomenon was “definitely the biggest event in our era.”

“It was a major turning point for most music,” added Sandstrom. “Everyone wanted to be the Beatles.”

By April 1964 the Beatles held the top five spots on the Billboard Hot 100 chart—something that has never been done before or since—including: 1. Can’t Buy Me Love, 2. Twist and Shout, 3. She Loves You, 4. I Want to Hold Your Hand and 5. Please Please Me.

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky

According to www.history.com, Meet the Beatles was the fastest-selling album in the U.S. to date, and the group scored more number one hits on the Billboard charts than any other group in history with 20 chart toppers.

Sandstrom and Wiebke said it was hard to think of other groups that compared or who had such a huge impact on music.

“They will never be forgotten,” said Beatles fan Steve Cogburn. “They changed the face of popular music in the U.S. and the world.”

As the Beatles were paving the way for other rock groups to break on to the scene, an important part of their success was the approval coming from parents. Even though the Beatles were a bit rebellious, it was “playful, not menacing,” said Kaplan. It was alright for boys to comb their hair down and play guitars just as long as they didn’t play too loudly. The lyrics “I want to hold your hand” are fairly innocent. Sullivan even called the musicians “fine youngsters.”

“They were stars,” said Wiebke. With only three channels on the television, limited coverage of the band allowed them to control the info their fans saw. Wiebke said there were few negatives about the band.

The Beatles were an acceptable transition to bands like the Rolling Stones whose music was much more edgy than the Beatles’ early songs.

Kaplan said, “You can draw a line in the historical sands of popular culture at 1964.” Pop music that came after that still sounds fairly modern, but pop music before 1964 sounds ancient.

Other bands in the “British Invasion” that conquered America were the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Kinks, Dave Clark Five, Herman’s Hermits and Freddy and the Dreamers—all gaining popularity in the wake of Beatlemania.

Beatlemania: John, Paul, George and Ringo charm America in 1964

Written by Darci Tomky

On top of being great musicians, the Beatles made movies including their first film A Hard Day's Night released in July, 1964.

1964 pop culture remembered

While the Beatles were taking over the music scene in 1964, what other popular culture crazes stormed the country?

Popular films that year included The Carpetbaggers, The Unsinkable Molly Brown, My Fair Lady and Mary Poppins. Premiering on New York's Broadway in 1964 were Hello Dolly, Funny Girl and Fiddler on the Roof.

Hasbro launched G.I. Joe, an action figure for boys to join the Barbie Doll for girls. Car experts will remember Ford Motor Company made its first Ford Mustang in 1964, and what would we do without bubble wrap which was invented that same year.

Gas cost 30 cents per gallon according to www.thepeoplehistory.com, and a loaf of bread cost 21 cents while a U.S. postage stamp was only five cents.

Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight Championship in 1964, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received the Nobel Peace Prize.