

# The British invasion: the making of a modern myth

By Alwyn Turner

If one had to put a date on the birth of Britain's Swinging Sixties, the most plausible candidate is perhaps August 1956, with the London exhibition "This Is Tomorrow" that launched the Pop Art movement. And the key to British Pop Art was a fascination with the mass culture of America, with the imagery of Hollywood and Madison Avenue.



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It was an infatuation that reflected its times. For a British population, emerging from an age of austerity (wartime rationing did not end until 1954, just a few short months before "Shake Rattle and Roll" by Bill and His Comets became the first rock and roll hit), the visions of conspicuous consumption in movies and magazines made America seem like a fabled land of plenty. Pop Art was the first creative expression of that attitude, the first attempt to remake and remodel American culture, giving it a specifically British spin, adding a sense of wit and experimentation, a necessarily ironic take born of distance from the source material.

The same slightly tongue-in-cheek embrace of America lay at the heart of British pop music in the early 1960s, as a generation of art school students – John Lennon, Pete Townsend, Ray Davies – took the sounds that came over the Atlantic and created their own collaged impression of what rock and roll could be. "They put together the rockabilly scene", said Roger McGuinn of the Byrds, talking about the Beatles. "They mixed it with blues and bossa nova and classical and all kinds of influences. They kind of made a stew of all these different forms of music." They also added a visual literacy that ultimately resulted in the most famous work of Pop Art, Peter Blake's design for the cover of the Sgt Pepper album (1967).

What had changed in the years since "This Is Tomorrow" was the growing affluence of Britain. Harold Macmillan's "You've never had it so good" might still have left the country lagging some way behind America, but there was now at least the possibility of competition, and the idea of British artists finding an audience in the States no longer seemed as implausible as once it had. By the early years of the 1960s a number of photographers were making

their names in the international fashion industry, the new wave of cinema was securing Oscar nominations and critics were talking about the "British domination of Broadway", with hit plays, revues and musicals transferring effortlessly from London. (Ironically one of the few failures was a 1963 exhibition in New York of British Pop Art.)

And then came the Beatles. Having conquered their homeland in 1963, the group released "I Want to Hold Your Hand" in America in January 1964, visited the country the following month and, by the end of March, held all top five places in the US singles charts, accounting for 60 per cent of all record sales. In a society still reeling from the shock of President Kennedy's assassination, their cheerful simplicity swept all before them. In their wake came a host of other bands, from the Dave Clark Five to the Rolling Stones, and where the previous year had seen just one British record in the American top ten ("Telstar" by the Tornados), the figure rose to 34 in 1964. Thus was born the British Invasion.

Artistically the major contribution was the expansion of what had been an exclusively teenage tradition. The best of the British bands suggested that rock and roll was about more than soda pop and high school hops, offering an overtly aesthetic sensibility in opposition to the folk traditions that had originally spawned rock and roll. What had been restricted to the grubby pages of the weekly pop press now found itself welcome in the glossy world of the colour supplements, with mainstream critics on hand to endorse the significance of it all.

There was too a financial dimension, the export earnings of pop recognized in the award of MBEs to the Beatles in 1965. It was, however, only a brief moment of triumph and, for all the originality on display, was ultimately dependent on selling a very limited vision of Britain. The Union Jack imagery of the Who, the Edwardian uniforms of

Sgt Pepper, the music hall anachronism of Herman's Hermits' biggest hit "I'm Henry VIII, I Am" – all spoke of a country steeped in its own past, in the same way that the biggest television exports of the era (The Saint and The Avengers) purveyed a more or less jokey self-parody of Englishness.

In the absence of such instantly recognisable symbols, when the next generation of art school acts – David Bowie, Roxy Music, T Rex – created glam rock in the early-1970s, they met with a markedly diminished level of acceptance in the States. The self-conscious artifice, the intellectualism and the playing with sexual imagery shared the same roots as the earlier bands, but proved a much more difficult sell to an America that, faced with recession, with defeat in Vietnam and with the Watergate scandal, was anyway becoming increasingly inward-looking.

The memory of that moment in the mid-1960s became one of Britain's great myths. In the 1990s, as the country took stock of what it had lost during the years of Margaret Thatcher, it looked – as ever – to the past for images that might reassure. There were inevitably evocations of the Second World War, particularly with the 50th anniversary of VE Day, but it was the ghosts of the Swinging Sixties that shaped the new decade, with Brit Pop, the Young British Artists and the movies of Danny Boyle. The echoes were reinforced by the emergence of a young Labour leader after a long period of Conservative government (Harold Wilson seemingly reincarnated as Tony Blair) and by Euro 96, the first major football tournament to be staged on British soil since the 1966 World Cup.

This time, though, there was an active rejection of America, with the likes of Suede and Blur deliberately setting themselves up in opposition to American culture. And, for the most part, the States responded in kind: the most successful bands of the Brit Pop era were Oasis, who allowed no trace of art school pretension to sully their revivalism, and Radiohead, the least British and the least pop of them all. In Britain there felt, briefly, as though there were a new cultural movement; from an American standpoint, there were merely isolated moments.

The conditions that created that 1960s phenomenon, specifically the post-war infatuation with American culture, is unlikely to be repeated. Its legacy, however, continues to be felt, not only in the permanent transformation it achieved in rock music, but also in the creation of another chapter to add to the British folk memory of past glories.



**Conquest of America.** The Beatles on arrival at John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York, 7 February 1964.