

## FIFTY YEARS OF BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE

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**Q**UEEN Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee celebrations in June this year began with a nostalgic rendition of The Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*. The song recalled its recording exactly 35 years earlier as part of the first worldwide satellite television link-up. As such, its use could not have been more appropriate as an introduction to 50 years of Elizabethan popular culture, whose two outstanding expressions have been TV and popular music. As if to drive home the point, the celebrations concluded with the televised Party at the Palace, attended by the Queen herself, with former Beatle Sir Paul McCartney singing his comic love song to the Queen, *Her Majesty*.

In one respect, the central role played by TV in the Queen's Jubilee celebrations nicely rounded a circle. It was the Queen's Coronation, after all, that ushered in the television age, with half the adult population viewing the ceremony 'live'. Most of those watching did not own a television at the time. In 1951, BBC TV, the only available channel, had just 600,000 viewers. By the end of the century, watching TV was the most popular leisure activity everywhere. In Britain, around 94 per cent of homes now have at least one colour TV and 66 per cent a video cassette recorder. British people spend an average 25.5 hours a week watching TV, with, on a typical day, 80 per cent of the population tuning in. Moreover, when it comes to TV programmes made in this country, the UK is second only to the US in terms of worldwide exports, with sales amounting in 2001 to around two-thirds of a billion dollars.

Perhaps the best statistic to bring home the ubiquitous nature of TV at the turn of the century, and of British TV in particular, is the fact that the internationally televised funeral of Princess Diana from London in September 1997 was watched by an estimated 2.5 billion people, that's 2,500,000,000 viewers!

If the Queen's Coronation was the beginning of the television age, however, BBC Radio remained the pre-eminent form of popular culture throughout the 1950s, with *The Goon Show*, a favourite of Prince Charles, providing a highlight. The 'Goons' ran from June 1952 to January 1960, capturing a pre-eminent British characteristic of the last 50 years: a surreal form of humour that lampooned all forms of pomposity and hypocrisy.

The 'Goons' gone, TV quickly adopted the same theme through situation comedies such as *Till Death Us Do Part*, with its working-class bigot Alf Garnett, which, for a time in the 60s, was the most popular programme in Britain with 18 million viewers. (It was then adapted into a new version with Alf Garnett becoming Archie Bunker.)

More cerebral TV comedy in the 60s came in the form of contemporary satire such as *That Was The Week That Was* and the accessible absurdity of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which, surprisingly, perhaps, in view of the fact that British comedy is so typically British, has been viewed in every country in the world.

In the meantime, Independent TV (ITV), funded, in contrast to the BBC's licence fee, through televised advertising in the form of commercials, began broadcasting in 1955. The number of TV channels grew to three with the start-up of BBC 2 in 1964, to four with Channel 4 in 1982, and five with Channel 5 in 1997, while colour TV was available from 1968.

Throughout this period, Britain led the world in certain kinds of programme. One of the most notable is the 'costume' or historical drama, with English novelists such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Evelyn Waugh becoming as familiar in Beijing as in Bagshot (Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, filmed by Granada in 1979, proved popular in China).

Educational documentaries such as Sir Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969), Dr Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* (1973) and Sir David Attenborough's *Life on Earth* (1979) also provided instructive entertainment. The close of the Millennium brought a landmark BBC series that broke all viewing records for documentaries and has so far been exported to more than 70 countries. This was *Walking with Dinosaurs*, which took the latest computer animation to pre-history.

Children's programmes are another British TV speciality, with Carlton's animated *Mole's Christmas* having already been sold to over 200 countries, and the BBC's *Teletubbies* to more than 125. Quiz programmes such as the BBC's *The Weakest Link* have also had impressive international sales, together with police or detective series such as *Inspector Morse*, currently on view in 211 countries.

But all these genres become mere niche markets when compared to the dominant force in UK TV, and everywhere else, come to that. This is the 'soap opera', which has around a third of the nation addicted to its multifarious expressions.

Britain's first, longest-running, and still most popular 'soap' is *Coronation Street*, aptly titled for a survey of Elizabethan pop culture, which started on ITV in 1960. Not only is the programme Granada's biggest seller in terms of income, due to the volume available, it has also proved almost as potent in maintaining Commonwealth ties as the Queen herself. In fact, the 'Street' is watched as avidly in Canada and New Zealand as it is in Britain and the *Coronation Street* web site has more 'hits' from Canada than anywhere else.

In 1985, the BBC launched its own soap, *EastEnders*, which occasionally even overtakes the queen of all soaps in viewing figures. If soaps are an international phenomenon, however, British soaps are very different from their main, US and Australian, rivals. And that difference says a lot about the British character. For while American soaps concentrate on the rich, and Australian soaps on the middle class, the British brand has both a strong working-class bias and an overwhelming regional identity. *Coronation Street*, for instance, is both filmed in and representative of Manchester, while *EastEnders* is London in nature, accent and location. Moreover, unlike their foreign rivals, both series are committed to ideas of community and determined to engage in social issues.

In this respect, they are arguably the most authentic expression of the popular culture of our times.

One interesting detail which is highly revealing of the quality of British TV is the number of visitors to this country who comment on the humour and originality of British television commercials, for which writers including Salman Rushdie and Fay Weldon are reputed to have written memorable slogans such as 'Go to work on an egg' and 'Naughty but nice' (cream cakes, in case you were wondering). Directors of TV commercials such as Ridley Scott have even gone on to make Hollywood feature films including *Blade Runner* and *Thelma and Louise*, now regarded as classics.

Undoubtedly, then, television has proved the most visible expression of pop in Britain since 1952. But the start of the new Millennium revealed an astonishing statistic: people were suddenly spending more time listening to the radio than watching the 'box'. And their favourite station by far is BBC Radio 2, which has 13 million listeners every week. What is particularly interesting about this statistic is that Radio 2 specialises in nostalgia for the 'pop' music of the last 50 years, a period dominated by The Beatles.

Someone once said that Western Philosophy essentially consists of a collection of footnotes to the philosophy of Plato. Similarly, the 'pop' music of the last half-century is defined by The Beatles, the rest being categorised as what came before, during, and after. The Beatles recorded a total of less than 200 songs, but, to misquote Winston Churchill, never have so few songs meant so much to so many. To date, The Beatles have estimated worldwide sales of 600 million records, including 109 million albums in the US, together with numerous world records (the other kind). Paul McCartney's song *Yesterday*, for instance, has been played six million times on American radio alone, over two million more than any other song. Its closest contender is *Michelle*, also written by Sir Paul.

If truth be told, however, The Beatles' first appearance owed not a little of its brilliance to the Dark Ages that preceded it, certainly where native pop is concerned. In the drab old days of the Cold War, the Chinese Communists were fond of referring to America's allies as the 'running dogs' or 'lackeys' of American Imperialism. Certainly, where the US influence on the British pop culture of the 1950s is concerned, they had a point. Before The Beatles, our pop music amounted to little more than a pale imitation of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, et al. Other heroes of the new 'teenagers' and 'Teddy boys' of the time included American film stars such as Marlon Brando and James Dean.

This US cultural colonialism, however, with its defiant rebelliousness, together with the loss of Britain's once defining role in world affairs and the growth of a vulgar consumerism led to a backlash from youthful idealists who came to be known as the 'Angry Young Men'. These included John Osborne, whose play *Look Back In Anger* in 1956 was followed by novels and films such as *Room at the Top* (1959) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960). The nature of this movement was essentially one of frustration and presaged both a

'decline of deference' for whatever qualified as the Establishment and a youth revolution. A bonfire of the old certainties waited to be lit and it was The Beatles who provided the spark.

Not that The Beatles looked like a force for renaissance when they first appeared. Their name was actually inspired by that of the Crickets, American rock 'n' roller Buddy Holly's backing band. Their apprenticeship years in Liverpool and Hamburg, moreover, were marked by 'cover' versions of American songs. Where they were different, however, very different, was in the fact that John Lennon and Paul McCartney also wrote their own songs, at that time almost unheard of in Britain for performers.

Lennon and McCartney are now regarded as two of the greatest songwriters of the second half of the twentieth century. Although they often wrote separately, their influence on each other's work was incalculable. For while McCartney's songs were melodic, optimistic, and invariably non-personal in their expression, Lennon's were rhythmic, pessimistic, and more 'subjective'. Each, that is, had what the other lacked and curbed the other's excesses. The two songwriters were also each other's biggest rival, each trying to outdo the other. But, for the better part of 10 years, they collaborated and with the musical talents of lead guitarist George Harrison, who also came to write songs, drummer Ringo Starr, and producer George Martin, who used his highly original approach to recording to complement rather than confine their genius.

Ironically, another factor in The Beatles' creation of an essentially British pop music was the influence of Bob Dylan. It was Dylan who first began the transformation of popular music by introducing significant lyrics to rock 'n' roll songs, thus inventing 'rock music'. But it was The Beatles who made 'rock' accessible to the masses. And not only through their lyrics either. The Beatles pioneered multi-tracking in the studio, introduced 'classical' musicians onto 'pop' records, (in one case, a whole orchestra), and incorporated studio accidents such as feedback, twisted tapes, and random lyrics into their songs to create a new kind of music which put a premium on creativity.

The outcome of all this was that The Beatles set a standard of excellence in the writing and recording of British popular music which legions of pop idols have been striving to emulate ever since. They made pop music artistically respectable.

Their songs were also tremendous fun, providing the perfect soundtrack for the explosion of youth culture in the 60s. It was this sense of the joy of being young and alive which communicated itself through their early songs such as *She Loves You* and *I Want To Hold Your Hand*. It was hardly surprising, then, that the effect of what became known as 'Beatlemania' spread like wildfire. Their first film, *A Hard Day's Night*, followed soon after and is often cited as the precursor of MTV and the rock video.

The 'Fab Four' also spearheaded what became known as the British Invasion of the US – cultural colonialism in reverse – appearing on American TV in front of 73 million viewers. After The Beatles came The Rolling Stones, also strongly influenced by American popular music, but gradually singer Mick Jagger and

lead guitarist Keith Richards established their own songwriting credentials with songs like 'Satisfaction' and 'Jumping Jack Flash'. Whereas The Beatles quickly became a 'respectable' studio-bound group, however, the Stones performed in relentless tours that continue to this day. Jagger and Richards were also the first rock stars to be arrested on drugs charges.

Slowly, the media responded to the new music. A number of pop programmes had already been established on TV in the 50s, but New Year's Day, 1964, saw the launch on BBC of the daddy of them all, Top of the Pops, which celebrated its 2,000th programme in September. Top of the Pops is now a brand name, licensed to 90 countries, with CDs, DVDs, games, its own magazine, and an award ceremony.

In radio, offshore 'pirate' stations were also set up in 1964, the first, Radio Caroline, having seven million listeners within a week. The BBC responded in 1967 with Radio 1, still the nation's premier contemporary pop station.

By that time, the 60s pop party was in full swing, London, the centre of it all, being officially named 'Swinging' in April 1966 by *Time Magazine*, followed by the Italian press, which called it 'the happiest and most electric city in Europe and the most nonconformist.' And it wasn't only the music either. Mary Quant had invented the mini-skirt, while Carnaby Street and Chelsea's King's Road were the new shrines of pop fashion.

The party ended at the close of the decade when The Beatles, plagued by business difficulties and differences following the death of their manager, Brian Epstein, separated. But only after producing sufficient method out of the madness to record the Abbey Road album in 1969, which rounded off an oeuvre that began with John Lennon's *Love Me Do* in 1962 with Paul McCartney's *The End*: 'And in the end, the love you take/Is equal to the love you make,' calling to mind T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.'

By this time, British pop was such a massive industry that there were literally scores of groups, or 'bands' as they later came to be called, to take up The Beatles' fallen baton. But it was in a totally unexpected direction that UK popular culture next excelled, a direction that, as with 'pop', was an area almost totally dominated by the USA – the musical.

The West End had produced its share of British musicals in the 50s and 60s with shows such as *Oliver*, based on the Dickens novel by Lionel Bart, but his was the only native offering to make a mark in New York. For this was essentially the golden period of made-on-Broadway musicals with shows such as *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, and *West Side Story* enjoying massive worldwide success on stage and celluloid.

The British challenge to this American domination could not have appeared in a more unlikely place: a London boys' preparatory school. Yet this was the only theatre lyricist Tim Rice and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber were offered to stage a twenty minute pop oratorio by the name of *Joseph and the Amazing*

*Technicolor Dreamcoat* in early 1968. Not, at first sight, much of a threat to the American stranglehold on the musical! As Tim Rice put it in his autobiography: 'It was a bit like being offered an outside chance of writing a hit Latin text book.'

But a second production led to a rave review in the London Sunday Times, which, in turn, led to an album of *Joseph* and a production deal enabling Rice and Webber to develop the idea for *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As with The Beatles, Tim Rice was at least partly inspired with the idea for an oratorio about the death of Jesus from Judas's point of view by Bob Dylan, whose *With God on our Side* included the lines: 'You'll have to decide/Whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side.'

But the originality of the musical concept was such that no theatrical establishment was willing to take a risk on *Superstar*. This apparent failure sowed the seeds of the work's phenomenal success. For Rice and Webber promptly set out to write the musical as a 'hit' album. This led to the lyrical concision and musical dynamism that defined a new form of sung-through 'rock opera', establishing in the process a model for the musicals of the next 30 years.

Released in 1970/71, the album became a recording phenomenon everywhere in the world – except Britain. Ironically, it was the biggest-selling British album up to that time and spawned literally dozens of 'pirate' stage productions in the US. The 'official' show version, however, opened on Broadway in October 1971, running for two years. The West End version followed in 1972 and ran for a staggering eight years. Everywhere it appeared, and it appeared everywhere, it won new audiences for the musical.

*Superstar* was followed by *Evita*, the story of Eva Peron, which again first appeared as a record album and a single, *Don't Cry For Me, Argentina*, whose success prepared the ground for a successful stage show. This ran for nine years in London and four in New York.

Andrew Lloyd Webber went on to write *Cats*, which is the most successful musical of all time, playing for 21 years in the West End. Based on T.S. Eliot's children's verse collection, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, the show expanded the successful sung-through formula of *Superstar* and *Evita* by also becoming the first completely choreographed musical.

*Starlight Express* (roller-skated train races!), *The Phantom of the Opera*, based on a French melodramatic novel, and *Sunset Boulevard*, silent movie star makes comeback, were among the musicals that followed from Lloyd Webber's pen, helping him to become the first person to have three musicals running in New York and London simultaneously, not just once, but three times.

But if British world domination of the musical seems extraordinary enough, what happened at the end of the Millennium was stranger still.

Ultimately, *Phantom*, which has just celebrated its 16th birthday in London, may well achieve records for a musical that will never be beaten. It is claimed that 58 million people in 105 cities in 19 countries have already seen *Phantom* and that earnings from the show amount to \$2.5 billion, which makes even some of

the fabulous sums earned by Hollywood blockbusters seem modest by comparison.

The period in British popular culture following The Beatles break-up saw an increasing emphasis on marketing to ever younger audiences as the 'teeny' became one of the most lucrative markets. Thus, in music, for instance, while The Beatles' successors produced albums and shows of ever-greater complexity, the music industry created and packaged 'boy' bands and 'girl' bands for the teenies. This reached its apogee with the Spice Girls, the pop phenomenon of the 90s and the most successful teenpop act ever in the USA, who showed how the use of singles on radio, videos on TV, interviews and photo-shoots in magazines, scandals in the popular press, and an ideological package – 'Girl Power' – could conquer the world.

Alongside this was the remarkable rise in personal computers and computer games, which, together with the ubiquitous nature of TV, kept millions of young people glued to a screen of one kind or another for most of their 'free' time.

In such a climate, reading books was just about the last thing anyone would have predicted for the young as the cultural phenomenon of the New Millennium. But such literary pessimism had never yet seen anything like the wizardry of *Harry Potter*.

J K Rowling's Harry Potter novels are one of the greatest publishing feats of all time. So far, the first four of the seven books planned have sold 170 million copies worldwide and been translated into 200 languages. Harry Potter has already been on the cover of *Time Magazine* and achieved the unprecedented feat of occupying the top three places in the *New York Times Book Review* of bestselling hardbacks. Warner Bros' film version of the first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, smashed industry records when it was released late last year, in its first three days bringing in an estimated \$93 million in the US and \$23 million in the UK. And what is particularly interesting about all this is that the novels, although classed as children's books, are read almost as avidly by adults. This is hardly surprising, considering that the books are highly original, very funny, and have complex plots.

The story of how the first book was written has now become almost legendary, a fairytale for our times: how Rowling as a poor and depressed single mother living in a cold flat in Edinburgh on £69 a week, wrote much of it at the table of an Edinburgh café while her baby slept in a pushchair; how the idea for Harry Potter came to her on a delayed train journey from Manchester to London, how she began writing the book while grieving for her dead mother; how the collapse of her one-year marriage to a Portuguese journalist drove her to finish the book.

Eventually, more than a year later, the book was published by Bloomsbury. It failed to take off immediately in the UK, but interest in the US was both more urgent and more publicised. The second book in the series, *Harry Potter and*

*the Chamber of Secrets*, went straight to No 1 in the bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic. Harry Potter had arrived.

The Harry Potter phenomenon confirms a remarkable common thread that runs through Elizabethan pop culture. This is the 'special relationship' that has existed between the UK and the US in the field. Whether it is a case of influence, whether on or by, or working together to bring about the fulfilment of artistic and commercial potential, or simply speaking the same language and liking the same things, there is no question that the two nations are closely bound together in 'pop'. The Beatles knew what they were doing when the first song they wrote to appeal to the American market was *I Want To Hold Your Hand*.

The second factor that stands out with regard to Elizabethan pop culture is how enormously it has grown in size and prestige over the last 50 years. Many of the leading figures have been knighted by the Queen and Lennon and McCartney's childhood homes in Liverpool bought for the nation by the National Trust. During her Jubilee tour the Queen presided when Liverpool Airport was renamed after John Lennon. Jagger has now become Sir Mick in the Queen's Jubilee year. Pop festivals such as the 30-year-old Glastonbury are now as essential to our culture as the Proms. Merely an appendage of the US entertainment industry at the outset of Elizabeth's reign, UK pop culture has become a major industry in its own right.

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