

Saturday February 9th, 1964. New York City.

Written by Andy Owen



A unique live TV performance that had more impact and significance on popular music, than anything before or since...

Those of us fortunate enough to be around in 1964, will remember well, the day when four guys from Liverpool changed the face of American and World music forever.

They changed a hell of a lot more too.

But that's for another article.

This is about Saturday February 9th 1964.

The Beatles' momentous American debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.



They were watched by a staggering 73 million people. Just over 40% of the total population of this vast country.

It was the largest television audience America had ever seen.

The lead up to this incredible piece of musical history, started a few days before, on 7th February 1964, at Heathrow Airport - when the Beatles boarded Pan Am Flight 101 to New York.

They had a noisy and emotional send-off.

Over three thousand young girls screamed and sobbed as the plane took off. The lines of British bobbies struggled to control them.

The British music invasion of America had begun.

As the flight landed at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport at 1.20 in the afternoon, the pilot relayed to the passengers, that there was a crowd waiting.

It was a little bit more than a crowd.

Over 4,000 young people to be exact. And mayhem ensued...

One official at Kennedy Airport said, *"We've never seen anything like this here before. Never. Not even for kings and queens."*

It was mainly girls. Screaming and singing 'Beatles, we love you' and holding up 'Welcome' signs.

When the Beatles' plane finally taxied to their parking spot in front of the terminal building, the girls were singing, 'We want the Beatles'.

On board, there was a fair bit of confusion. *"We could hear this screaming,"* Cynthia Lennon said later. *"We thought it was the engines, but the screaming was the fans."*

The four Beatles all appeared from the plane and stopped on the top of the stairway that had been pushed up to the door.

Paul glimpsed the tumult and it was quite a sight. Thousands of excited young people, screaming, waving and shouting.



Paul turned to John and said, *"Who is this for?"* He later confided that "on a scale of one to 10," he said of the scene at JFK, *"that was about a hundred, in terms of the shock of it."*

The youngsters were hanging over the airport terminal balconies, on top of buildings and six deep behind plate-glass windows.

New York policemen formed lines to hold back the surging crowd. Tom Wolfe – who was covering the Beatles' arrival for the *New York Herald Tribune* – reported *"some of the girls tried to throw themselves over a retaining wall."*

They were whisked off to a press conference hosted by Capitol Records, then driven to the Plaza Hotel in the city, in four limousines—each Beatle had his own Cadillac. A 10-room suite was waiting with 24-hour guards and security.

For the next couple of days, the hotel was under siege by fans. Teenagers set up camp outside, defying the freezing weather, some even posing as hotel guests in an attempt to see their idols.

Police set up cordons and access to the hotel was very tightly controlled.



The Ed Sullivan Show was held at Studio 50 in New York City - a theatre that had been used as a venue for live and taped CBS broadcasts since 1936.

It was located at 1697–1699 Broadway, between West 53rd and West 54th Streets in Manhattan.

The boys were smuggled out of the hotel for camera rehearsals the day before the show - and again on the morning of the show, under heavy police protection.

On Saturday, George was confined to the hotel with a sore throat, while John, Paul and Ringo rehearsed and toured New York by car.

Neil Aspinall, the Beatles' roadie, stood in for George so that they could mark where everyone would stand and he had a guitar strapped around him. It wasn't plugged in, as nobody was playing.

On the day of the show, there was real doubt as to whether the group would be able to make their way into the studio, as masses of teenage fans had gathered outside, trying for a glimpse of their idols.



But hundreds of Manhattan Police, including mounted officers, shoved back the eager fans and cleared a path for the boys.

The show went on air at 8pm and Ed Sullivan opened the show by telling the audience that Elvis and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker had sent a congratulatory telegram to the boys - and then the show went to an ad break for Aero Shave and Griffin Shoe Polish.

After the break, Ed began what has since become a 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 has never witnessed the excitement stirred by these youngsters from Liverpool who call themselves The Beatles."

"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."

The boys bounded out on to the stage, to a level of audience noise never before heard in the theatre.

One technician said later, he had never heard anything like it in his whole career.



The first song they did, was "All My Loving" followed by Paul McCartney singing "Til There Was You."

During this song, a camera cut to each member of the band and introduced him to the audience, by displaying his first name on screen.

As each Beatle was showcased, pandemonium ensued...

When the camera cut to John Lennon, 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 another commercial break.

First up after the break was a magician called Fred Kaps, who tried to calm the mood as best as he could, by performing a set of sleight-of-hand tricks.

But the girls were still shrieking and screaming - and calling out 'John', 'Paul' 'Ringo' and 'George'.

Ed Sullivan became unhappy with this, as it was stealing attention from the other acts on the show. He came on stage and admonished the audience, *"If you don't keep quiet, I'm going to send for a barber."*

Try as he may to protect them, he was fighting a losing battle. The other acts were impressionist Frank Gorshin, acrobats Wells & the Four Fays, the comedy team of McCall & Brill and Broadway star Georgia Brown joined by the cast of "Oliver!"

Mayhem was restored to full volume when Ed invited the boys back on stage to conclude their set, with "I Saw Her Standing There" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand".

Ed Sullivan closed the show and, once the cameras had stopped rolling, breathed a huge sigh of relief. They had done it.

And they were pretty sure, that what had just taken place, was something unique and very special. They were right. But they had no idea of the significance of it.

The show was a massive television success. But, great as that was, it turned out to be a hell of a lot more than that.

It was a *volcanic* event in the history of popular music. Something like this will never happen again.

Ever.

If you were in any doubt about the importance of this event, have a read of these comments from some of our greatest music and media legends:

"The Beatles came out and just flattened me. To hear them on the radio was amazing enough, but to finally see them play, it was electrifying. I think the whole world was watching that night. It certainly felt that way.

You just knew it, sitting in your living room, that everything around you was changing. It was like going from black-and-white to color. Really.

Tom Petty

"The minute I saw The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show — and it's true of thousands of guys — there was the way out. There was the way to do it. You get your friends and you're a self-contained unit.

And you make the music. And it looked like so much fun. It was something I identified with".

Bruce Springsteen

"That one performance changed my life.

Up to that moment, I'd never considered playing rock as a career. And when I saw four guys who didn't look like they'd come out of the Hollywood star mill, who played their own songs and instruments - and especially because you could see this look in John Lennon's face - and he looked like he was always saying: 'F— you!'

I said: 'I know these guys, I can relate to these guys, I am these guys.' This is what I'm going to do — play in a rock band'."

Billy Joel

"I took one look on the Ed Sullivan Show - and it was 'Fuck school'.

'This makes it.' I memorised every Beatles song and went to Shea Stadium and screamed right along with all those chicks."

Joe Walsh

"After the Ed Sullivan Show, Feb 9th 1964, at approx 8:04pm, after that moment, every album, every guitar, every set of drums that was ever sold - 10% should have gone right into their pocket!"

George Thorogood

"The British Invasion changed everything musically and culturally.

Like a 'big bang' there was a before and an after. Ideas changed, music changed, society changed - and the impact of The Beatles alone, will keep fans and historians busy forever.

A defining moment in the 20th Century, that continues to resonate and will continue strongly for all time."

Todd Sucherman, Styx

"From one generation to the next, The Beatles will remain the most important rock band of all time.

The Beatles are the foundation of everything we do. If it weren't for The Beatles, I would not be a musician."

Dave Grohl, Foo Fighters

"That's when the world turned. That's when we escaped from the doldrums and moved on to a brighter, better, more joyful future."

Every record was an event, every cut was an opera, the entire story told ours. It was like hearing the future."

Tom Hanks

"The lightning bolt came out of the heavens and struck Ann and me the first time we saw the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show. There'd been so much anticipation and hype about the Beatles, that it was a huge event, like the lunar landing: that was the moment Ann and I heard the call to become rock musicians."

Nancy Wilson

"Seeing them on TV was akin to a national holiday. Talk about an event... I never saw guys looking so cool. I had already heard some of their songs on the radio, but I wasn't prepared by how powerful and totally mesmerising they were to watch. It changed me completely. I knew something was different in the world that night."

Next day at school, the Beatles were all anybody could talk about".

Joe Perry

I'd never seen anybody that looked like them. It was like a revelation.

And when you're a little kid, you don't know it's a revelation, but it was like the whole world lit up. Suddenly I felt like I could be friends with them - and I'm black!

I never thought of them as white guys. They were The Beatles. They were colourless, you know, and they were fucking amazing! The Beatles gave me this idea that everybody was welcome. If you weren't the hippest kid in the neighbourhood, it didn't matter, because you could be a Beatles fan, and I liked that."

And that sort of carried me into these older days where it's like I am my own person. I can look the way I want, I can be the way I want, and it's okay. And I got that specifically from them."

Whoopi Goldberg

"There is no way I'd be doing what I do now, if it wasn't for the Beatles."

I was watching The Ed Sullivan Show and I saw them. Those skinny little boys, kind of androgynous, with long hair like girls. It blew me away that these four boys from the middle of nowhere could make that music."

Then they spoke and I thought 'What are they talking like?' We had never heard the Liverpool accent before. I thought that all British people spoke like the Queen."

Gene Simmons

"It was like aliens landed. Look at that and look on how they act and they — wow."

Micky Dolenz, The Monkees

"One of my earliest memories was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the living room of the house I grew up in and looking up at the black-and-white TV set and watching the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show."

I was 5 years old and I remember thinking, 'Wow! That's what I want to do.'

I know it sounds absurd – most 5-year-old boys say they want to be firemen or policemen or baseball players, or even the President.

Not me. I wanted to be one of the Beatles".

Richie Sambora

"They blew the walls down for everybody else."

Barack Obama

"This was the main event of my life."

It was certainly the major event for many others, whether or not they knew it at the time.

For me, it was no less dramatic than aliens landing on the planet. There's no equivalent of that today, TV shows that literally everybody watched.

All ages, all ethnic groups, all in black and white on a 14-inch screen. It was their sound, their looks, their attitudes. It was so many things. A time to look at things differently, question things a little bit.

Steven Van Zandt

"I remember exactly where I was sitting. It was amazing."

It was like the axis shifted.

It was kind of like an alien invasion.

If you were a little virgin and didn't want to grow up like I didn't, didn't want to enter the adult world like I didn't, it gave you some kind of new avenue of sexuality.

The day after, the boys all combed their hair down and made bangs! Me too! I could never set my hair in rollers again.

I combed it out straight and cut my bangs. Oh yeah. It was a whole other thing."

Chrissie Hynde

"The Beatles were the ON switch to my life. I can't even put into words the impact they had on my seven-year-old soul.

It is almost 50 years ago I saw them on Ed Sullivan and this was the music that changed my life. I got a copy of Meet the Beatles and a guitar for my seventh birthday - and the guitar has been welded to me ever since.

I was drawn to the sound of the guitars and the songs and the vocals, the way they looked and how they acted - well really everything about them! It was pure magic to me. I learned to play to those records, and like all the people my age that play music, we all wanted to be the Beatles.

I think the Beatles are my generation's classical music and as time has shown, they still are our musical gold standard. John, Paul, George, and Ringo changed the entire planet like no one ever will again.

They are and always will be, the greatest band of all time."

Steve Lukather, Toto

Two days later, on February 11th, they played their first American concert at the Coliseum in Washington, in front of 8,000 fans.



The ticket price was four dollars. Including tax.



There are a number of stories regarding exactly how The Beatles came to appear on The Ed Sullivan Show.

One of the most popular, is this one...

In 1963, Ed Sullivan and his wife Sylvia were arriving at Heathrow on vacation and saw thousands of youngsters at the airport waiting excitedly in the rain.



He asked what all the commotion was about - and was told that a very popular British rock band called The Beatles, were returning home from a tour in Sweden and the fans wanted to welcome them back.

When he got to his hotel room in Central London, he called a few people and inquired about booking the group for his show.

Nothing came of those calls, but, later that year, The Beatles' manager Brian Epstein reached an agreement with Ed Sullivan to bring the group to America to perform live for the very first time on U.S. television.

Epstein and Sullivan had dinner at the Hotel Delmonico in New York and concluded the deal with a handshake. The deal was the Beatles would do three shows that would air in 1964.

In return, The Beatles would get top billing and \$10,000 for their three appearances.

When news of the group's US debut on the Sullivan show came out, The Beatles' record "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was leaked to radio stations across the country, in advance of its planned US release.

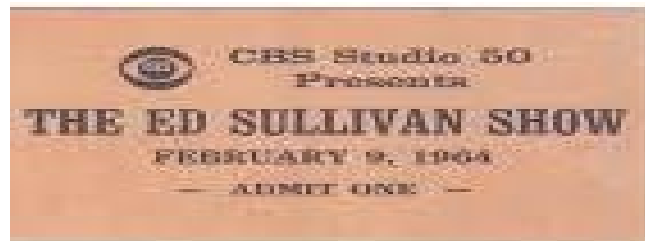
Capitol Records were very unhappy and hired attorneys to try and stop the stations from playing the song. But, they failed and had no other option but to release the album ahead of their planned schedule.

On December 26, 1963, the album was released and it sold 250,000 copies in the first three days. By January 10th, 1964 it had sold over one million copies.

The single "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was the number one song on the 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 in the US.

Radio stations played little else but Beatles songs. Some of them non-stop. There were "Beatle" wigs everywhere and bumper stickers across the country warned, "The Beatles Are Coming."

As the show approached, the demand for seats was unprecedented. Over 50,000 requests for seats came into CBS. The Ed Sullivan Show could only hold an audience of 700.



For weeks, celebrities tried to use their influence to get tickets for their kids. Walter Cronkite and Jack Paar were successful, whereas composer Leonard Bernstein was not.

Richard Nixon's 15-year old daughter, Julie, became one of the lucky few to get a seat. Even Sullivan himself had trouble getting extra tickets.

On his show the week before The Beatles' debut, Ed asked his audience, *"Coincidentally, if anyone has a spare ticket for The Beatles on our show next Sunday, could I please borrow it? We need it very badly."*

Saturday February 9th 1964 was indeed a monumental date in the history of popular music. We knew then, that the world was never going to be the same again.

We saw it. We felt it. We *lived* it.

They pooh-poohed us. They laughed at us. But we were right.

I'll leave the last word to Ed Sullivan himself:

"The city has never experienced the excitement stirred by these four youngsters from Liverpool, called The Beatles.

They first appeared on our show on February 9, 1964, and I have never seen any scenes to compare with the bedlam that was occasioned by their debut.

Broadway was jammed with people for almost eight blocks. They screamed, they yelled and they stopped traffic. It was indescribable.

There has never been anything like it in show business - and the New York City police were very happy it didn't - and wouldn't - happen again."

