Dreamboats, Boybands and the Perils of Showbiz: Pop and Film, 1956-1968

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The first appearance of rock and roll music in film seems to have been something of an afterthought. When Richard Brooks's *Blackboard Jungle* was released in 1955, the producers made a last-minute decision to accompany the opening and closing credits with an obscure B-side called 'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and the Comets. The record had been released the previous year with little success. Although an instrumental version of the tune does appear in the middle of the film, *Blackboard Jungle* is barely concerned with rock or pop music at all. In one notable scene, the delinquent teenagers trash their teacher's treasured collection of jazz records; while in another, one of the students, Gregory Miller (played by Sidney Poitier) performs a gospel song with his black class-mates. However, the inclusion of Haley's track made it an immediate chart hit; and it also contributed to the remarkable success of the film with teenage audiences. Indeed, the use of 'Rock Around the Clock' seems to have encouraged dancing and even wilder behaviour in cinemas, both in the US and in the UK. When the film was shown in South London in 1956, Teddy Boys in the audience reportedly rioted and slashed the seats; and this led to similar behaviour in cinemas around the country. On both sides of the Atlantic, the film was banned in several cities on the grounds that – as the Atlanta Review Board put it – it was 'immoral, obscene, licentious and [would] adversely affect the peace, health, morals and good order of the city.'

The first 'pop films' followed shortly afterwards, at least in the US. Haley and his band featured in *Rock Around the Clock* (1956); and this was rapidly followed by a brief Hollywood cycle of films featuring early rock-and-roll performers, including *Shake, Rattle and Rock!, The Girl Can't Help It* and *Rock, Rock, Rock!* (1956) and *Rock, Pretty Baby* and *Don't Knock the Rock* (1957). However, the most successful and most lasting of these films featured the emerging star Elvis Presley: following his first appearance in a supporting role in *Love Me Tender* (1956), Elvis starred as a musical performer in three films, *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958) before he was called up for army service.

In the UK, equivalent films took a little longer to emerge. Tommy Steele appeared in his own biopic *The Tommy Steele Story* (directed by Gerard Bryant, 1957), although he quickly moved away from anything resembling rock-and-roll to more mainstream light entertainment. It is Cliff Richard who is most frequently seen as the British equivalent of Elvis: his first appearance was in a supporting role in a late 'juvenile delinquent' film called *Serious Charge* (1959), followed in the same year by the music industry satire *Expresso Bongo*. Starring roles came with *The Young Ones* (1961) and *Summer Holiday* (1962) and the less successful *Wonderful Life* (1964) – by which time he was in direct competition with the Beatles, whose first film *A Hard Day's Night* had just appeared.

I'll be discussing several of these films in this essay, but it's important to start by defining my terms. The films I'll be considering all feature already successful pop performers playing 'themselves' – or at least versions of themselves. There is some blurring at the edges here: in one of these films, *Catch Us If You Can* (1965), the Dave Clark Five play television stunt-men rather than musicians. However, I am not concerned with films in which pop or rock music is used merely as part of the soundtrack; with music documentaries; or with films in which noted pop performers appear as 'straight' actors playing other roles. To a greater or lesser extent, all the films I discuss are *about* the music (or performance or media) industry: and while the earliest tend to relate stories of a rise to stardom, the later ones are more concerned with the effects of fame.

There is a large hinterland of such films in the period I'm considering. In the UK, for example, the early 1960s saw several cheaply produced films starring less well-remembered performers such as Billy Fury (*Play it Cool*, 1962; *I've Gotta Horse*, 1965), Joe Brown (*What a Crazy World*, 1963), Freddie and the Dreamers (*Every Day's a Holiday*, 1964), Gerry and the Pacemakers (*Ferry Cross the Mersey*, 1965), and several others. Few commentators have explored this subterranean world, perhaps for good reason. However, in this essay I've chosen to focus on more well-known and commercially successful examples: in addition to three Elvis films and two featuring Cliff Richard, I go on to consider the first two Beatles films, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), as well as *Catch Us If You Can* and a later film starring the American band the Monkees, *Head* (1968).

Beyond the binaries

These films span a historical period in which youth itself was somewhat of an emerging category. The term 'teenager' was apparently not coined until the 1940s; and the notion of 'youth culture' emerges, both in academic sociology and in marketing literature, at around the same time. While this was partly to do with the discovery – or at least the segmentation – of a new consumer market, it was also accompanied by a sense of teenage behaviour as a growing social problem. This latter view found its most obvious cultural expression in the 'juvenile delinquent' movies I've considered in a previous essay. Here youth are frequently represented as troubled or deviant, and in need of firm adult guidance. By contrast, the rise of youth as a distinctive market – and as a source of energy and enthusiasm – is most obviously apparent in the pop films I'll consider here. In this respect, these pop films might be seen as a kind of counterpart to the JD movies.

According to Dick Hebdige, representations of youth tend to reflect a binary logic: either we have 'youth as trouble', or we have 'youth as fun'. However, many of these films are more complex than this. They refer – directly or indirectly – to quite contradictory ideas about what young people are, or should be. While they have strong elements of 'fun', they also draw upon the idea that youth is in some way subversive of adult authority, even if they appear to defuse this apparent threat. Rock-and-roll (or pop music more generally) becomes a particularly ambivalent phenomenon here: while it might be associated with violence or dangerous sexuality, or with a more general sense of young people as being 'out of control', it is also a

product of an adult-dominated entertainment industry with its own economic imperatives. In the process, the binary of 'trouble' and 'fun' can turn out to be somewhat less clear-cut.

In his broader study of the US 'teenpics' of the 1950s, Thomas Doherty makes a further distinction between what he (rather confusingly) calls 'imperial' and 'indigenous' representations of youth. While the former adopt an implicitly parental perspective, the latter are more directly aligned with young people themselves. The former view youth from the outside, while the latter appear to speak from within – to, and for, young people themselves. For example, a film like Frank Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) features several noted rock-and-roll performers of the period; yet, as Doherty maintains, it is only 'nominally' a rock-and-roll film. It is essentially a satire of youth culture, and of the ephemeral nature of the pop music scene (and in this, it has much in common with the British film *Expresso Bongo*). By contrast, Doherty argues, Richard Thorpe's *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) may be an unapologetic vehicle for Elvis Presley; but it treats the man and his music in a much more respectful and sympathetic way. The former is an 'imperial' film, which implicitly considers teenage tastes to be 'crass and bewildering'; the latter is an 'indigenous' one, which accords validity to the music and those who follow it.

This is a useful distinction, although in my view these films are often more ambivalent – they are not *either* 'imperial' *or* 'indigenous', but often combine elements of both perspectives, not least in attempting to appeal *both* to young audiences *and* to adults. For example, as I'll suggest, *Jailhouse Rock* represents the Elvis character less than positively, especially once he has achieved fame. Several of these films show *both* teenage and adult characters in sympathetic ways, and provide images of reconciliation across the generations. At the same time, they all emphasise – and in some cases, quite strongly criticise – the commercially constructed nature of 'youth culture'.

As this implies, the pop film can be quite an ambivalent phenomenon. On one level, these films are obviously part of the marketing of popular music. They are routinely described as 'vehicles' for musical stars, and sometimes as 'exploitation' films that seek to capitalize on a star's success. In this period, there was a sense that making movies was the logical next step in an emerging pop artist's career. Few believed that rock-and-roll would be anything more than a short-lived fad; and in the case of artists like Steele, Presley and Richard, their managers were keen to ensure the longevity of their careers – which often meant appealing to a broader (and older) audience. Many of these films offer what purports to be a 'back story' (albeit sometimes in fictional form) or a 'behind the scenes' account of who the performers 'really' are, endowing them with a kind of authenticity and depth that cannot be found elsewhere. Perhaps more obviously, they also provide fans with extended opportunities to gaze admiringly at the objects of their affection on a large screen, in ways that were less immediately available through the still emerging medium of television.

Yet on another level – and to different degrees – these films are also precisely *about* the marketing of popular music, and of the star as a kind of commodity. They demonstrate how the music business (and the wider media business) operates. They show how the image and persona of the star is constructed and manipulated by

others, whose intentions may be more or less benevolent. They show how stars struggle with the difficulties of their own fame, and how they seek to preserve the private 'reality' – the honesty and authenticity – behind the public image. They show how Elvis becomes 'Elvis', or how Cliff becomes 'Cliff'; they show how the individual Beatles cope with – and seek to escape from – being 'the Beatles'. As such, these films expose the processes of which they are themselves a part; and while some of them do so with a kind of innocent optimism, some maintain a cool irony, and others are much more cynical and disaffected.

A key dimension of this is the complex relationship between rock-and-roll and 'show business'. In almost all these films, the star performers do not speak from within a fully-developed, autonomous 'youth culture': on the contrary, they operate in the context of more mainstream forms of family entertainment (not just music, but also television). In some instances, the star's rise to fame is part of a 'coming of age' story, in which they gradually accommodate to the requirements of an adult commercial world. In others, there remains a tension between the performer's 'real' personality and the constructed image that the industry (and the media) appear to require; and in the case of the later films, authenticity itself appears to be little more than an illusion. Many years before postmodernism was dreamed of, films like *Catch Us If You Can* and (especially) *Head* are highly self-reflexive, almost to the point of imploding into themselves. Pop, it seems, began to eat itself even before it had fully come to life.

Elvis on film, 1956-58

Elvis Presley's first appearance on film was not in a musical, but in a Western set at the end of the American Civil War. *Love Me Tender*, directed by Robert D. Webb, was released in November 1956. Self-evidently, Elvis does not play 'himself' in this context, or even a version of himself: he has a relatively minor role (third in the billing) as one of four brothers in what is primarily a family melodrama. Elvis's growing popularity as a singer (following his first recordings and TV appearances) became apparent once the film was in production: his part was expanded, and he was given four songs to sing. However, to the dismay of his fans, he was actually killed off in the closing scenes.

By contrast, the films I want to discuss here were all conceived as starring 'vehicles' in the wake of Elvis's early musical success. *Loving You* (directed by Hal Kirtner, 1957), *Jailhouse Rock* (Richard Thorpe, 1957) and *King Creole* (Michael Curtiz, 1958) are all films about the discovery and early success of a young singer and performer. While there are some obvious differences, each of them has some striking similarities with Elvis's own rise to fame. In all three cases, the Elvis character is shown to overcome early obstacles, not least to do with his own background and temperament. He is aided in this by older characters who serve as mentors or managers; and while these characters are ultimately benevolent, they also face others who are less so. To a greater or lesser extent, all three films are essentially *about* the music business – although their views of that business are decidedly ambivalent.

In *Loving You*, the Elvis character (Deke Rivers) is a delivery boy with a talent for singing, who is discovered by a tough and determined music publicist, Glenda Markle.

Deke sings with the country-and-western band that Glenda manages, and quickly rises to the top of the bill. *Jailhouse Rock* finds Elvis playing Vince Everette, a construction worker who accidentally kills a man in a bar-room brawl. While incarcerated, he is taught guitar by a washed-up country singer, Hunk Houghton; and on his release, he is helped to success by another female manager, Peggy van Alden. In *King Creole*, Elvis plays Danny Fisher, who abandons his attempts to graduate from high school in favour of a job singing on New Orleans's Bourbon Street. He comes into conflict with a criminal club-owner, Maxxie Fields, but is encouraged and protected by Fields's mistress, Ronnie, and by an honest club-owner, Charlie LeGrand. In each case, the film ends as the Elvis character looks set to move on to wider national success.

Clearly, there are elements of a familiar 'rags to riches' narrative in all three films; and in this respect, they can be linked back to a much older tradition of Hollywood musicals. However, there are also elements of the much more recent 'juvenile delinquent' movie cycle here. While *Jailhouse Rock* reveals little about Vince Everett's background, in the other two films the Elvis character is shown to come from a background that is in some way troubled. In *Loving You*, we learn that Deke was brought up in an orphanage, from which he eventually escaped: he took his name from a tombstone in a nearby cemetery, on the basis of an inscription that read 'he was alone but for his friends, who miss him'. In *King Creole*, Danny Fisher still lives at home, although his father appears to have been broken by the death of his mother: the family has been forced to move to a down-at-heel part of town after his father was unable to hold down a job. These factors are shown to have a continuing influence on the characters' behaviour: Deke is partly driven by his desire to find friends and family; Danny's concern about his father makes him an easy target for manipulation by the evil Maxxie. In all three films, the Elvis character is shown to have a propensity for violence when provoked. Vince's arrest in *Jailhouse Rock* follows a fight in which he mistakenly kills a drunken woman-beater; in *Loving You*, Danny gets into a protracted brawl when provoked by a boyfriend who is jealous of his appeal; and in *King Creole*, his graduation from school is prevented when he attacks a couple of classmates who are laughing at him.

In these respects, the films undoubtedly overlap with the juvenile delinquent cycle. This is particularly apparent in the case of *King Creole*, where Danny appears caught between the need for money (and the temptations offered by Maxxie and his gang) and his innate good nature. Indeed, it's notable that the leading part was originally intended for James Dean, in the role of a boxer, as in the original novel. The film also sees Vic Morrow as 'Shark', in a reprise of his delinquent role from *Blackboard Jungle*. Danny resists getting involved with Shark's gang, and even defends one of its weaker members, who is dumb; and it is only his desire to help his father that ultimately draws him in.

In all three films, the Elvis characters are generally shy and inarticulate, and sometimes surly towards those in authority; although only in the latter part of *Jailhouse Rock* does Vince come across as unpleasantly selfish and arrogant. In terms of 'violence', they may be short-tempered, but they are always well-intentioned and honourable: they stand up for themselves, but they also frequently protect others from harm. At this point in his film career, Elvis is not exactly a troubled delinquent of the James Dean or Marlon Brando variety; but neither is he simply a 'clean teen',

on the model of other singing idols of the time (Frankie Avalon or Pat Boone, for example).

This ambivalent 'edginess' is also partly apparent in the music itself. In each of these films, Elvis's music is represented as something new, and to some extent a challenge to established musical forms. In *Loving You*, he brings a fresh voice and style to the fading country-and-western band that Glenda has been managing; while in *Jailhouse Rock*, his music is also seen as more appealing than the old-fashioned country style of his prison mentor. When his manager Peggy arranges a recording session for him, he asks to listen back to his first attempts, and then decides to sing the song again with a more rhythmic, less crooning vocal style. If these two films explain something of Elvis's relationship with country music, *King Creole* focuses on his other major influence, African-American music. Remarkably, the opening scenes feature him singing an earthy, bluesy call-and-response song with the black food-sellers in the street outside his family's apartment.

Elvis's music and performances are clearly identified with youth, at least in the early stages. This becomes a particular focus in *Loving You*, which – like some of the earliest rock-and-roll movies (*Don't Knock the Rock* and *Shake, Rattle and Rock* in particular) – seeks to address some of the generational animosity the music was provoking. When local citizens in a town pointedly called 'Freegate' attempt to ban one of Deke's performances, Glenda is required to take on City Hall: she gives them a lecture on the history of adult concerns about young people and music, going back to the Charleston and early jazz, as well as Stravinsky and Debussy. Rock-and-roll, she claims, is simply a 'harmless outlet' for the young, rather than a dangerous influence: 'you can't blame the behaviour of young people on music'. The Mayor and his cohorts eventually agree to a television debate about the issues, in which Deke is exonerated (needless to say); and in his final performance, even the censorious old ladies in the audience are seen joining in the enthusiasm.

Of course, any apparent subversion here is partly to do with sex appeal. Especially in the first two films, a great deal is made of Elvis's appeal to screaming audiences of girls and young women, which derives as much from the characteristic pelvic twists and gyrations of his dancing as from the music itself. (His television appearances at this time were famously shot from the waist up, in order to forestall any over-stimulation among the audience.) This appeal is not only recognized by the more sexually experienced older women, but affects them as well: Glenda's energetic, businesslike support of his career in *Loving You* is complicated by her attraction to him; while Ronnie in *King Creole* is a troubled and somewhat vamp-like 'fallen woman', whose love for Danny is ultimately doomed.

There are signs that the Elvis characters experience sexual desire in their own right. In *Jailhouse Rock*, Vince aggressively kisses Peggy, and follows this with the memorable line, 'that ain't tactics, honey, it's just the beast in me'; in *King Creole*, Danny deceives the innocent Nelly into going to a hotel room with him, but eventually thinks better of it. Yet despite this, all three Elvis characters remain curiously innocent. At several points, they seem nonplussed or mystified by their sexual appeal; and even the romantic clinches are strangely mechanical. In *Loving You*, Deke ultimately chooses the homely country girl Susan; while in *King Creole*, the death of Ronnie enables him to turn back to the wholesome and devoted Nellie. In

both cases, the innocent younger girl represents the authentic moral values that Elvis is at risk of losing by virtue of his success. Only in *Jailhouse Rock* does the Elvis character end up with the (slightly) older manager, Peggy.

As I've suggested, these films are all to some extent about the music business itself. They all show how 'Elvis' (or his various fictional surrogates) is tutored and guided by older, more experienced characters; and they also show how he is at risk of exploitation. Of the three, *King Creole* is the least directly concerned with the business as such (which may reflect the fact that this was not an aspect of the original novel). The evil Maxxie is a club-owner, who is contrasted with the honest Charlie; but he is more of an all-purpose gangster, in line with the film's hard-boiled *film noir* style.

Jailhouse Rock provides more direct insight into the operations of the industry. Vince's cell-mate Hunk recognizes his talent and tutors him on the guitar; although he also conceals the fan mail he receives after a performance by the inmates is broadcast on television, and convinces him to sign an unfair contract. However, his promoter Peggy is a consistently honest broker, who at one point is herself deceived by a disreputable record company executive. Notably, she succeeds in taking on the music business as an independent, by making, distributing and publicizing his records through their own company. She tries to keep their relationship 'businesslike', although of course she eventually falls for him. Perhaps more strikingly, this film is the only one of the three to show the potentially negative consequences of fame: after Hunk is released, Vince treats him as a kind of flunkey, and when he attempts to sell their record company, Peggy accuses him of being dominated by a 'lust for money'. Vince may be essentially good, but he has to overcome his selfishness and learn to love if he is to come to terms with his success.

In fact, it's the earliest film, *Loving You*, that offers the most detailed and complex – and to some extent, satirical – picture of the music business. In this respect, it may owe something to what Doherty calls 'imperial' films like *The Girl Can't Help It*. Glenda is portrayed as a skilful and calculating operator: she understands how to maximize Deke's appeal, and how to make the most of publicity opportunities. She encourages some older ladies to voice their disapproval of his performance, recognizing that this will encourage his younger fans; and when a potentially scandalous photograph of him kissing a determined fan is published in the newspaper, she is excited by the publicity. As I've described, she displays great skill in handling the controversy that erupts towards the end of the film.

From time to time, Deke expresses concern about this: he finds the publicity 'fake and phoney', and accuses her of 'selling' him like 'a monkey in a zoo'. While she seeks to overcome Deke's reluctance and uncertainty, Glenda is also inclined to shift his image in a more glamorous, showbizzy direction: at one point she buys him an ostentatious new outfit that clearly makes him uncomfortable (although he wears it). She also deceives him at various points, in one instance spinning a yarn about a rich benefactor in order to encourage him to take possession of a flashy white convertible. At one point, she responds to the accusation that she is simply 'selling sex' with a forthright capitalistic argument: 'sex is a healthy American commodity,' she says. 'It sells cold cream, steam engines, shampoo, real estate and toothpaste. It can sell singers too.' Yet as with Peggy, there is no implication that Glenda is merely

cynical, or that she has anything other than Deke's best interests at heart – and while it's clear that she desires him, her affections ultimately turn back to the more age-appropriate character of her ex-husband Tex, the leader of the band.

As this implies, the images of youth and of pop music in these films are quite ambivalent. In all his various roles, 'Elvis' may be troubled, but he is fundamentally good: he is authentic, honest and straightforward – if perhaps a little too trusting and naïve, and occasionally simple-minded. He may be misunderstood and unfairly treated by those in authority, but he is not fundamentally resistant to authority *per se*. Despite occasional confrontations with adults, he is mostly polite and respectful. While he is sometimes short-tempered, surly and even arrogant, he is very far from delinquent material. Yet Elvis's authenticity, and even his apparent innocence, depends upon (and is constructed by) the business of which he becomes a part – and this is a business that might easily seek to exploit or manipulate him.

As these films proceed, Elvis gradually accommodates his on-screen persona and his music to the demands of show business. Like Glenda in *Loving You*, the films seem designed to assure anxious adults that rock-and-roll is really nothing new, and that it is far from threatening. In the first two films, his music is still understood primarily in terms of its youth appeal – although in *Loving You*, there are certainly signs that it might eventually attract a wider following. Yet by *King Creole*, youthfulness no longer seems to be an issue. While the film appropriates some elements of the Dean/Brando teenage rebel character, it leaves Danny reconciled to family life: his final song is sung, not only to the wholesome Nelly, but also to his father, with whom he is finally reunited.

Cliff Richard: a clean teen?

Like Elvis, the British singing star Cliff Richard made his film debut in a relatively minor role. *Serious Charge* (also known as *A Touch of Hell*, directed by Terence Young, 1959) is a drama about a vicar falsely accused of 'interfering' with a teenage boy. The trailers and publicity emphasized the film's 'adult' themes, but they also made much of Cliff's brief appearances, playing the accuser's cute younger brother: he sings three songs (shown only in part), including 'Living Doll', which became the year's top-selling single. Cliff provokes some wild dancing in the church youth club, to the consternation of the vicar, and there is some teddy boy clothing on show; but *Serious Charge* is not exactly a JD film, or indeed a teen musical either.

Later the same year, Cliff had a somewhat larger role in *Expresso Bongo* (produced and directed by Val Guest). Here, he plays a singer called Bert Rudge who is 'discovered' by a music talent agent performing in a Soho coffee bar. The agent secures a contract, re-names him 'Bongo Herbert' and transforms him into a teen idol; although he is eventually out-manoeuvered by more powerful players within the music business. While much of the publicity for the film placed him centre stage, *Expresso Bongo* is not primarily a vehicle for Cliff (although he does appear in a shapely pair of swimming trunks in one scene). The film does enact his character's rise to fame, much in the manner of *The Tommy Steele Story*, although this is not 'Cliff's story', and he sings only three songs.

The central character here is actually the talent agent (Johnny, played by Laurence Harvey): like Glenda in *Loving You*, we see him determinedly building the buzz of media interest, not least through television. 'Bongo' gradually becomes uncomfortable with the way he is being manipulated: like Deke in *Loving You*, he complains that he is just something Johnny sells, 'like rat poison or fish and chips'. In many respects, the film is a good example of the 'imperial' teen musical: like *The Girl Can't Help It*, it largely takes an adult point of view. Johnny and the other adults make the running, while Bongo is merely the innocent victim. By comparison with *Loving You*, however, it gives much less status and credence to the young performer's music.

As K.J. Donnelly notes, the sequence of music in the film effectively prefigures Cliff's subsequent career. His first song, 'Love', is delivered to a young audience in the coffee bar, and its wild beat is matched by some fast editing: notably, it is sung in an American accent. The second, 'Voice in the Wilderness' (which was the major hit) is a slow ballad that is sung primarily to please older listeners, particularly a record label manager and the host of a TV show whom Johnny is keen to impress. Finally, under the tutelage of a rather washed-up older American star, Cliff is seen performing a gospel-style song dedicated to his mother, 'The Shrine on the Second Floor', on a traditional stage variety show, accompanied by a choir. Both these latter songs are much more mainstream 'Tin Pan Alley' material, and the editing and visual composition are significantly more sedate and conventional. Through this sequence of songs, Bongo Herbert effectively makes the transition from youth culture to mainstream 'show business' – a transition that was replicated through the films and records that Cliff himself made in the following few years. Although he was initially hailed as Britain's answer to Elvis, any vague aura of youth cultural rebellion that might have been apparent at the outset was quickly dispelled as Cliff's career progressed; and for the ensuing decades, he has been synonymous with wholesome, all-round family entertainment – and accordingly derided by almost all rock critics.

I'd like to spend a little more time here on Cliff's two subsequent films, *The Young Ones* (Sidney J. Furie, 1961) and *Summer Holiday* (Peter Yates, 1962). Both are starring vehicles in the manner of the Elvis movies, and both feature significantly more music than the two films discussed above (the latter has no fewer than 18 musical sections). However, there are some significant differences between these and the Elvis movies. Both these films are traditional musicals, in which the characters spontaneously burst into song and leap into complex dance sequences; the lyrics of the songs frequently serve to advance the narrative, as opposed to being club or concert performances, as in the Elvis movies. While a few of the songs might be described as rock-and-roll, many of them are much more mainstream musical fare: conventional pop ballads or swinging stage songs accompanied by big bands and strings, and in one case even a waltz. There is also a good deal of jolly incidental music. By contrast, while the Elvis films do include ballads, most of the music would be described as rock-and-roll, doo-wop or rhythm and blues.

Cliff's screen persona is also rather different from the 'Elvis' of the films I've considered. 'Cliff' is not a troubled adolescent from a difficult background; he is not inarticulate, surly, or resistant to authority; and he is not even vaguely at risk of falling into juvenile delinquency. While he is given some marginal love interest, he is consistently chaste (there are no Elvis-style clinches); and although he does

occasionally appear with his shirt off, he is presented as dreamily good-looking rather than 'sexy'. (I'll leave aside the potential for 'queer readings' of Cliff's allegedly androgynous appeal, although some critics have managed to find some.)

In all these respects, these films are much more conventional family entertainment than the Elvis movies; and the star persona they promote is more wholesome and less potentially dangerous. In many respects, these movies (along with *Wonderful Life*, which followed them in 1964) epitomize Hebdige's notion of 'youth as fun': they create a wholly optimistic 'youthtopia' that is full of energy and free of care, and almost devoid of serious risk. It's hardly surprising that this safe, anodyne view of youth was very popular with mainstream adult critics, even if the films were derided by some of the more upmarket, specialist publications.

The Young Ones focuses on the attempts of a group of youngsters to save their London youth club from the clutches of a millionaire property developer. Cliff plays Nicky, who tends to be the leader of the group, and is also a talented singer; but he also happens to be the son of the property developer, Hamilton Black (played by Robert Morley). In seeking money to buy back their lease, the young people decide to put on a show in a disused theatre, although their efforts are repeatedly obstructed and outsmarted by Black. The group publicises the event through pirate broadcasts, in which Nicky performs a love song as 'The Mystery Singer'. As the show approaches, some members attempt to kidnap Hamilton Black, but Nicky comes to his father's aid; and his father eventually decides that the show must go on.

On the basis of this brief summary, the film might appear to be about inter-generational conflict, although this is defused in several ways. Hamilton Black is comically posh and pompous. He views young people in general with disdain, referring to them as 'a crowd of untidy adolescents, milling around in their leather jackets brandishing bicycle chains'. He claims that he will not visit the club because he does not want to be 'coshed' by 'thugs' and 'hoodlums'. Yet the clean-cut, wholesome members of the club could not be further from this juvenile delinquent stereotype (even if some of them do attempt to kidnap him). Nicky's conflict with his father might (at a stretch) be seen in Oedipal terms; but Hamilton Black comes to regard it as a necessary training exercise that will teach his son to assert his independence and maturity. The end of the film brings about a generational reconciliation: father and son agree that they are 'on the same side' and appear on stage together, while an implausible solution is found to create a new youth club in the middle of Hamilton Black's office development.

The Young Ones re-works several elements drawn from traditional Hollywood musicals. It begins with an elaborate overture, in which the characters prepare and assemble for their Friday night dance; and as they agree to come together to fight for the club, there is an extended ensemble dance routine whose style resembles *West Side Story* or *Guys and Dolls* (the choreography in both these films was by the American Herbert Ross). The central narrative of 'putting on the show right here' is very familiar from Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 1940s, and was apparently borrowed specifically from the 1939 film *Babes in Arms*, featuring the young Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. The young performers' rehearsals are captured in a long stage-bound sequence of show business staples, including vaudeville comedy, silent film slapstick, can-can and lederhosen dancing, and even country house mystery. This

is all accompanied by the song 'What D'You Know, You've Got a Show'; and while the music hall clichés are painfully familiar, there is no sense of irony here whatsoever. In the show itself, Cliff croons a ballad as 'The Mystery Singer' to the restrained adoration of his girl fans (needless to say, he is eventually given a recording contract); and he then goes on to perform a rather more exciting Elvis-like rocker, 'We Say Yeah!', accompanied by his backing band the Shadows, all dressed in shiny maroon suits. However, this brief incursion of a vaguely dangerous youth culture is curtailed as the finale brings back 'You've Got a Show', with Nicky and his father (along with Nicky's sensible girlfriend) singing and dancing together centre stage.

As Stephen Glynn suggests, *The Young Ones* embodies many of the familiar utopian values of Hollywood musicals: there is a sense of community, energy and even abundance, all conveyed without a hint of cynicism or manipulation. The group of young people effortlessly overcomes class differences; and Cliff's appeal as 'The Mystery Singer' seems to draw in older ladies and young girls, as well as (more implausibly) sunglasses-wearing hipsters. The young people are unfailingly enthusiastic and optimistic; and aside from occasional outbursts of 'zany' humour, they are distinctly anodyne and safe. The boyish Cliff is uncomfortable with the overt sexuality of a singer who (with her unscrupulous publicist) tries to muscle in on the show: he prefers his chaste, unthreatening girlfriend Susan, even if there seems to be little sexual spark between them. In the title song, sung by Cliff to Susan and a group of children against the curious backdrop of a kind of leisure park (complete with water-skiers), youth is defined as a passing stage on the way towards stable maturity and family life: 'we won't be young ones very long…' he croons, 'one day when the years have flown, then we'll teach the young ones of our own'.

Summer Holiday marks a further step towards wholesome family entertainment, and to the style of Hollywood musicals. Here Cliff appears as Don, the leader of group of young bus mechanics who drive a London bus on an adventure-filled journey across Europe, ending up in Athens. They pick up a group of British girls along the way, as well as a young woman who turns out to be an American singer on the run from the pressures of fame. Like *The Young Ones*, this was no small-budget 'exploitation' film, but a high profile technicolour production, which was energetically marketed and achieved considerable box office success (as well as a hit soundtrack album).

Here again, there are elements of generational conflict between the runaway singer, Barbara, and her manipulative mother and agent: they initially give chase to Barbara, although they eventually come to recognize the potential for publicity, claiming that she has been kidnapped. (As in the figure of the music agent in *The Young Ones*, there are weak vestiges of the more cynical view of the music business that dominates *Expresso Bongo*.) Yet here too, the young people themselves are entirely anodyne. They are clean-cut and polite, and relentlessly enthusiastic and optimistic.

Queer readings are certainly possible, although not wholly convincing: Cliff/Don has a brief topless moment as he exits from the shower, and he wears a particularly fetching string T-shirt in one of his final numbers; and some critics have made much of the fact that Barbara initially disguises herself as a boy, although needless to say she eventually gets together with Don, and their impending marriage is announced in the final scene. (Both of them claim they want to be independent – Cliff's famous

song 'Bachelor Boy' is one of the hit numbers – but of course this is little more than a conventional rom-com device.) Elsewhere, the gender roles are entirely unreconstructed, even for 1962: the British girls they pick up seem content to prepare the food and do the washing up, and while there is some suggestion of coupling up with the boys, their relationships remain entirely chaste. As in *The Young Ones*, kisses are frequently interrupted before they happen, and even the climactic kiss between Don and Barbara is shown in long shot.

The music itself is largely mainstream pop, and there are even fewer elements of rock-and-roll than in *The Young Ones* (although the Shadows do feature briefly in a basement nightclub scene). In one notable sequence, the group ends up in an Austrian beer garden, where there is an extended waltz routine; and for good measure, there is also a 'let's put on the show right here' moment when the group mounts an impromptu performance (along with a group of mime artists they have picked up) in order to avert the threat of being held in a French jail. Along with a fairly offensive sequence in which Don appears to be drawn into marrying a Slavic peasant woman, the film is not exactly free of ethnic or national stereotypes either – although mention should be made of the closing appearance of the Shadows as a bouzouki band, which makes it all worthwhile. While *Summer Holiday* might be read as a travelogue, and even as an early reflection of the emergence of the tourism industry, it can hardly be said to broaden the mind.

Constructing 'the Beatles'

Re-viewing these Cliff Richard films serves as a reminder of how shocking some of the early British beat groups must have seemed, at least to the older generation. By the time of *Wonderful Life*, groups like the Animals, the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds were already making their way into the charts with a much more raucous, sexy and seemingly rebellious form of rhythm and blues music. However, the most popular of these groups, the Beatles, was perhaps something of a different matter, at least at this point in their career. Here I want to discuss the Beatles' first two films, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). Both were directed by Richard Lester, who had previously worked on translating the zany radio comedy *The Goon Show* to television; he also directed an early youth-oriented music film *It's Trad, Dad!* (1962), featuring representatives of the British traditional jazz boom alongside early rock-and-roll performers.

Made in black and white, *A Hard Day's Night* is presented as a quasi-documentary about 36 hours in the life of the band. Hand-held camerawork and jumpy editing give parts of the film an improvisational feel that some have compared to the French 'Nouvelle Vague' of the time, and to the documentaries of the British 'Free Cinema' movement; although it's likely that Lester was also influenced by a backstage verité documentary about the band's first US tour, directed by the Maysles Brothers (broadcast on British TV in February 1964 as *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! The Beatles in New York*). The four Beatles (John, Paul, George and Ringo) play 'themselves', although the characters who surround them are obviously fictional: many are played by well-known television comedy actors of the time – most notably Wilfred Brambell of the BBC's *Steptoe and Son* (1962-65 and 1970-74), who plays Paul's irascible and badly behaved grandfather and generates a good deal of the comic mayhem. The film

begins with the band and their entourage catching a train from their home town of Liverpool to London, pursued by screaming fans; it follows various back stage activities, including rehearsals and a press conference; and at various points, the band escape the control of their manager, for example by sneaking out to a casino and a night club. Later, the drummer Ringo absconds and wanders aimlessly around the city, while the others search for him; and the film culminates in the recording of several songs for a television special, in front of a live (and quite hysterical) audience.

By the time *A Hard Day's Night* was released in the Summer of 1964, the Beatles were already enormously successful on both sides of the Atlantic (the so-called 'British invasion' began with their appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in February of that year, which were reportedly watched by 73 million people). The Beatles were apparently not interested in making a 'rise to fame' movie, along the lines of the Elvis films, or a traditional musical like *Summer Holiday*. Indeed at one point in the film John ironically exclaims 'Hey kids, I've got a great idea! Why don't we put on the show right here!' – although in fact there are elements of the backstage musical here. Ultimately, though, both this film and *Help!* are more concerned with the perils of fame once it is achieved, rather than with showing how it arises.

The film was made quickly and inexpensively, and for the express purpose of generating a lucrative soundtrack album. As with Elvis and Cliff, feature films were part of the band's multimedia marketing strategy, driven by their manager Brian Epstein: by this point, Beatles merchandise already included lunchboxes, toys and puzzles, wigs, action figures, posters and other fan paraphernalia, and would shortly extend to TV cartoons. Epstein was carefully shaping the band as lovable 'mop tops' suitable for a mass audience: the rock-and-roll edginess of their earliest work was smoothed out in favour of a wholesome, family-friendly image, and the leather jackets were replaced by distinctive smart-casual 'Beatles suits'.

Another key aim of *A Hard Day's Night* was to differentiate the members of a band that had hitherto been seen largely as a single entity. The four Beatles were given 'personalities' that may or may not have reflected their real identities (although how one might ever know that remains a moot point); and it was these personalities that remained with them for the rest of their careers. The film shows the band interacting as a group, and in performance, but each of them is also given a sequence that is intended to provide them with some individuality – although Paul's sequence ended up on the cutting room floor. Thus, John is characterized by his sarcastic intelligence; Paul by his good looks and boyish charm; George is 'the quiet one'; while Ringo is affable and funny, as well as being the butt of much of the others' repartee. In order to ensure their imaginary availability, the band are all single: there are occasional flirtatious looks and remarks, and a little sexual innuendo, but there was no question of showing them as being romantically involved (despite the fact that John had married in 1962).

While the film purports to show the 'real' backstage lives of the Beatles, it says remarkably little about the operations of the music business (for example when compared with *Loving You* or *Expresso Bongo,* or even *Jailhouse Rock*). Norm, their manager, and Shake, their road manager, are more like long-suffering parents or teachers than business-like Svengalis; while the harassed TV director is also played primarily for laughs (his middle-class 'media-type' status amply signalled by his absurd

mohair sweater). Nevertheless, the film also shows the Beatles as effectively imprisoned by their success. In the opening sequences, they are shown running from their rapacious fans, using various forms of disguise and deception. As Paul's grandfather notes, their apparently exciting lives seem to consist of 'a train and a room, and a car and a room, and a room and a room': they are constantly moving, but they are almost always trapped.

The band are frequently seen attempting to escape, and in one of the most notable sequences, they abscond from a press conference and burst though a fire escape ('we're out!' shouts Ringo): we then see them playing and running about on a recreation ground, shot largely in fast motion, and with some pixellation. (Snappily edited to the hit song 'Can't Buy Me Love', but without lip-synch, this section is characteristic of the visual style and play with realism developed in Lester's previous work, and is often credited as the origin of the contemporary music video.) Meanwhile, Ringo's 'personality' sequence – which is much the longest and most naturalistic of the three – finds him donning disguise and wandering along the banks of the Thames, to a vaguely melancholic instrumental accompaniment ('This Boy'), again escaping in order to rediscover his 'real' identity.

At the same time, there is a notable preoccupation with the visual and media construction of the band's image. The performance sequences particularly emphasise the process of production: we see sound booms and cameras, and there is a recurring focus on the multiple screens of the vision mixing desk. There are also occasional 'deliberate mistakes' in continuity: the band members swap instruments, or sing each other's lines. Shot with multiple cameras, often using large close-ups and unexpected camera angles, these sequences were also strikingly innovative for their time, and have been highly influential ever since.

This image construction is a phenomenon that the Beatles occasionally resist. At the press conference, they offer facetious or sarcastic replies to the journalists' questions; and while they satirise the neurotic TV producer, they do of course bring off the performance successfully. At one point, George accidentally wanders into the office of a kind of youth style guru, where he makes a point of rejecting the man's contemptuous assumptions about the teenage market; he describes the company's resident teenage model as a 'posh bird who gets everything wrong'. Meanwhile, John's individual 'personality' sequence consists of a dialogue with a woman he meets backstage, as various performers go back and forth in costume. The woman recognizes him but isn't able to place him, and an absurdist dialogue follows: 'you look just like him' she says, although she isn't sure who he is – and John eventually concludes 'she looks more like him than I do'. At the very end of the film, as the Beatles leave in a helicopter, photographs of the band that Paul's grandfather has been trying to sell (complete with forged signatures) float down to the ground; and the film closes with a montage of still images of the band.

To some extent, the Beatles are seen to resist the authority of the older generation, although this resistance is mostly comical rather than more directly challenging. In their train carriage, they are joined by a bowler-hatted businessman who attempts to assert himself (they argue about closing the window, and the noise from their radio). When he blusters 'I fought the War for your sort', Ringo quips back 'I bet you're sorry you won'. Yet their challenge to authority is ultimately fairly tame. They talk

back, and provide some sharp one-liners in their best deadpan Liverpudlian accents; but when their mucking about is curtailed, for example by the park-keeper at the recreation ground, or by Norm, their manager, they are always amenable. The Beatles are certainly cheeky and playful, but they are more like naughty boys than juvenile delinquents, let alone youth revolutionaries. If anything, it is the character of Paul's grandfather who emerges as the true force of disorder, in a kind of generational reversal – a 'senile delinquent' perhaps. In one notable scene, when he is apprehended (along with Ringo) by the police, he retorts with a burst of Irish nationalist rhetoric.

A Hard Day's Night achieved great critical acclaim and box office success on its release, and has remained massively popular: it features repeatedly on lists of the best British films of all time. (The noted US critic Andrew Sarris famously described it as 'the *Citizen Kane* of jukebox musicals'.) While nostalgia might account for some of this, the film still appears fresh and innovative fifty-five years later – and remarkably more contemporary than many of the other pop films of the period. Nevertheless, in terms of my interests here, it is also a film that wants to have its cake and eat it. It purports to be realistic and authentic, and to expose the image-making process: yet, like the other films I've discussed, it actively participates in that process itself. It works to construct the 'personalities' of the four Beatles, providing the illusion that we are getting to know them as they really are – and of course it also offers ample opportunities to gaze adoringly at them, often in large close-up. Its self-reflexivity doesn't really endanger its basic aims.

Likewise, the film allows the Beatles to send up adult authority, and occasionally to escape its constraints; although ultimately they remain little more than loveable mop-tops, whom you would be quite happy to take home to meet your mother. Having said this, the film's final performance sequence does cross some lines in this respect. Especially in the closing number, the editing gradually shifts the focus of attention from the band itself to the live audience; and here we see actual documentary footage of individual girls screaming out to their idols, many of them breaking down in tears. The 'Beatlemania' that is captured in the staged sequences of fans chasing the band right at the start of the film now returns, but with an almost troubling edge. What is going on here, it seems to ask. Of course, subsequent critics have offered various answers to this. Barbara Ehrenreich and her colleagues claim that Beatlemania was an assertion of 'an active, powerful female sexuality', a form of protest and defiance that was the first 'uprising of the women's sexual revolution' – and there could be some evidence for that here.

Following the success of the Beatles' first film, the following year's *Help!* enjoyed a much larger budget – some might say too large for its own good. While some elements are effectively carried over from *A Hard Day's Night* – Lester's emerging 'music video' style in particular – this is in many respects a much more overblown and tiresome film. It combines musical elements with an elaborate plot reminiscent of the James Bond secret agent thrillers (which were becoming very fashionable at this time), or indeed the camp excesses of television's *Batman* and *The Avengers*. The influence of Lester's previous work with the Goons – the zany humour, slapstick and cinematic trickery – is also much more in evidence: along with the absurdist dialogue, there are ironic captions and incidental music, as well as a wearying plethora of secret weapons and gadgets, elaborate costumes, stunts and chase

sequences. While the film was a commercial success – which would have been hard to avoid – the critical response was much more lukewarm.

Very briefly, the story centres on a ring that Ringo has been secretly sent by a fan. The ring is needed as part of a sacrificial ritual to be conducted by an Asian religious cult; but because he cannot remove the ring, Ringo becomes next in line for sacrifice. The cult members give chase to Ringo, using a range of devious means in their efforts to retrieve the ring; and they are subsequently joined in this by a mad scientist and his bumbling assistant. One female cult member, Ahme, changes sides and seeks to thwart them. The picaresque pursuit takes the film to a range of locations, including the Austrian Alps, Buckingham Palace, Salisbury Plain (where they are caught up in army exercises) and eventually the Bahamas.

The Beatles again play 'themselves' (at least as established by *A Hard Day's Night*), but they are not seen primarily as musicians or performers: there is an album to record, but the film effectively loses sight of this as it proceeds. Musical performances in various locations are repeatedly interrupted by plot shenanigans, and there is very little Beatles music in the final twenty minutes. As John Lennon reportedly said several years later, the Beatles felt rather like extras in their own film; although their lack of interest in the proceedings was accentuated by their consumption of considerable amounts of marijuana, which they had recently discovered (and which is briefly acknowledged in a scene where they are seen smoking hookah pipes).

As in *A Hard Day's Night*, there are occasional references to the pressures of fame. Right at the start of the film, they draw up in a Rolls Royce, and are spotted by two elderly working-class ladies; 'they're so natural,' one of them says, 'and still the same as they was before they was'. Yet as the Beatles enter their adjoining front doors, what we expected to be four separate houses are revealed as one single dwelling, with a range of high-tech facilities and luxury modern accoutrements resembling a James Bond-style bachelor pad. As in *A Hard Day's Night*, the Beatles seem equally constrained or trapped – although in this case not so much by fame as by the evil forces who are pursuing them.

To an even greater extent than its predecessor, *Help!* locates the Beatles within mainstream light entertainment. Most of the other parts are played by well-known comedy and character actors, and many of the settings seem to come from TV sitcoms and conventional British film comedy. Once again, there are some choice Liverpudlian one-liners, but the sarcasm and mild rebelliousness apparent in *A Hard Day's Night* has largely been subsumed in self-consciously 'zany' humour. The film would certainly win few awards for political correctness: with the exception of Ahme, women appear largely as marginal decoration, and the portrayal of Eastern religions is astonishingly patronizing, not to mention the frequent use of white characters in blackface.

Any 'indigenous' sense of youth culture is entirely absent here: this is unthreatening entertainment, suitable for all the family. At least at this point, there are some similarities between the Beatles' direction of travel and that of Cliff Richard, although they would significantly diverge a year or so later. Like Cliff, the Beatles quickly became part of the British 'establishment' – they were awarded MBEs in 1965 – although some of them clearly struggled with this, and sought to break away from it

(with mixed results) as the decade progressed. Indeed, for some critics, the Beatles were little more than an early 'boy band': John Muncie, for example, argues that they are best seen as forerunners of the Osmonds, New Kids on the Block and Boyzone, rather than as rock revolutionaries. Certainly when compared with some of their contemporaries, they seem to represent a kind of healthy exuberance that is far from dangerous or challenging: 'youth as fun' once again.

Catch Us If You Can

Catch Us If You Can, directed by John Boorman, was released in Britain in April 1965, a couple of months ahead of *Help!* (It was retitled *Having A Wild Weekend* for its US release.) The film was conceived as a vehicle for the Dave Clark Five, a band that was decidedly in the second rank of British pop – although they achieved great success in the USA in the period of the 'British invasion', making no fewer than eighteen appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. In fact, the band do not play musical performers, but a team of stunt-men, thereby slightly stretching my earlier definition of the 'pop film'; although the soundtrack features four songs specially written for the film, as well as several of the band's earlier recordings. (Clark himself had been a stunt man before moving into music.)

Anyone expecting a rather unpromising B-movie (as I confess I was) would probably find the film quite startling. It is shot in black-and-white, but as Andy Medhurst puts it, it provides 'a liberating jolt of nowness', especially in the 'shiny plastic immediacy' of its first thirty minutes: this is, he says, the moment 'where the pop film becomes the Pop film' – that is, a work that can be aligned with emerging movements in the visual arts of the time. To some extent, the film is influenced by *A Hard Day's Night*. There are elements of Lester's zany humour and cinematic trickery in the rather tiresome chase sequences that dominate the second half of the film; but, much more interestingly, it also builds upon its predecessor's sceptical view of media and image-making, reflecting the ambivalence and irony that was central to much Pop Art.

Like some of the other films I've discussed (both Beatles films, but also *Summer Holiday*), the narrative takes the form of a picaresque 'road movie'. Disaffected with his work, Dave Clark as 'Steve' absconds from his job as a stuntman filming an advertisement for meat, at the suggestion of the campaign's star model, Dinah, a blonde Julie Christie type. The two drive around London, pausing to go scuba diving in an open-air pool and to find an orange tree in a botanical conservatory. They then start to make their way across the south of England, aiming to reach an island that Dinah is thinking of buying. They are pursued by two men working for the advertising executive who is leading the meat campaign, Leon Zissell: while Zissell is initially keen to recapture Dinah, he subsequently realises the potential for publicity, and tells the newspapers that she has been kidnapped (a specific echo of *Summer Holiday*).

In their travels, Steve and Dinah encounter a group of beatniks in some abandoned buildings on Salisbury Plain, which turn out to be a mock battleground for the army; and they are then picked up by a strange middle-aged couple who live in a smart house in Bath. Here they are joined by the other members of the stunt team, and attend a wild fancy-dress party at a costume museum. Eventually, with the police also

in pursuit, they arrive at the island, only to discover that it is not really an island, but is dependent on the tides. When they wander into an abandoned hotel, they find that Zissell is waiting for them: at the end of the film, Dinah returns to Zissell, surrounded by journalists and photographers, while Steve drives off with the other band members in disgust.

The opening sequences of the film introduce the members of the stunt team – that is, the Dave Clark Five. The boys live in a converted church on a public housing estate, equipped with a trampoline and other pieces of gym equipment, as well as a range of technological gadgetry: its walls are covered, in Pop Art style, with collages of incongruous images and objects, and signs with slogans like 'Thrills' or 'Ripe and Ready'. The set is reminiscent of the Beatles' collective bachelor pad in *Help!*; while the low-key, absurdist dialogue and repartee as they prepare their breakfast echoes that of *A Hard Day's Night* (both of which, of course, have echoes of Harold Pinter). The boys are seen exercising, and then driving off to work in a topless Mini-Moke, despite the fact that it is the depths of winter. After a scene on the set of the meat advertisement, Steve and Dinah escape in a stolen E-type Jaguar that has been used in the filming. There are extended montage sequences of London streets, including new tower blocks, flyovers and tunnels, street signs and advertising hoardings (particularly those for the 'meat for go!' campaign, which again feature very contemporary large scale images and slogans).

In these opening sequences, the film displays much of the modernist style and iconography associated with the 'swinging London' of the 1960s; as well as creating an image of youthful zest and vitality (the band's stunt company is called 'Action Enterprises Ltd.'). Yet, as it proceeds, its stance is revealed to be more critical. Pausing on their journeys across town, Dinah defaces one of the meat advertisements by drawing on her own face, and Steve throws paint at it. Their journey is intercut with scenes featuring Leon Zissell in his penthouse office, smoking cigars and symbolically looking down over the London cityscape. Zissell and his colleagues debate the motives for Dinah's disappearance: one of them reports that Dinah has been spotted calling on people in the street to 'change their way of life'. However, the advertising men see this in terms of image: 'that's why you chose her, wasn't it?' says one. 'That's her image. Rootless, classless, kooky, a product of affluence. Typical of modern youth.' Zissell reassures his clients from the Meat Promotion Council that they will be able to make capital from the story of Dinah's 'abduction' (and sell more meat); he tells them that advertising is not a game that should be played by the rules, but 'a total war, that should be played with any weapons that come to hand'.

This is a war that Zissell ultimately wins. When he reappears at the very end, like some kind of evil mastermind, he gloats over the success of his plan: 'the client is delighted, the agency is delighted, every butcher in the land will be delighted'. 'Ours is a tasteless business', he tells Steve and Dinah. When Dinah asks Zissell what she should tell the press, he agrees with Steve that she should tell the truth – yet his interpretation of the truth is almost a cynical parody of the film itself: 'Deny the kidnapping. Say that was the middle-aged deadbeats' misunderstanding of the spontaneous and impulsive spirit of youth, et cetera. You were just two young people who felt yourselves caught up in the mechanisms of mass communication.' While Dinah is drawn back into his world – she is last seen disappearing into the

pack of journalists – Steve's only means of escape is to drive away across the beach into the distance. There is no triumphant victory for youth, nor indeed any romantic happy ending.

What motivates Steve and Dinah's journey is clearly a desire to escape from this world of superficial imagery to a more authentic setting – not just to a rural environment, but even more radically, to an island. This sense of escape and freedom is cued by the airy, lyrical jazz music that accompanies their driving; and there is a striking contrast between the energetic, flashy editing of the London sequences and the calm of the snowy rural landscapes they eventually reach. They travel, in effect, from culture to nature. In one short scene, they are seen riding horses, and this is followed by a short lyrical montage just of the horses running free. There is an almost Zen-like attitude here: when Steve expresses his wish to get to the island, Dinah asks why he can't just 'enjoy the journey' – and she later shows pity for Zissell, on the grounds that he too has 'missed the journey'.

Yet when they arrive at a farm owned by one of Steve's former teachers, they discover it has been turned into a kind of proto-theme park with a Wild West saloon and go-karting track. And with more than a hint of symbolism, it turns out that the island is not in fact an island at all: as the tide retreats, one can walk across to the mainland. Dinah draws the obvious parallel with advertising: 'it's not even a proper island – it's just a gimmick in the sea.' Yet if physical escape proves impossible, other kinds of escape seem no more valid. The beatniks Steve and Dinah encounter on Salisbury Plain are bizarrely stereotyped: they ask Steve and Dinah if they have drugs, although they also condemn them as 'weekend ravers'; and they follow a 'guru' who rambles incoherently as Steve and Dinah make their exit.

The film's apparent critique of image-making and consumer culture again has echoes of *A Hard Day's Night*: Zissell is a worked-up version of the style guru whom George encounters – although his apparent obsession with Dinah, as he surrounds himself with enlarged images and tape recordings of her, gives him a more sinister edge. Yet the film goes a little further than this, playing with the relation between image and reality more broadly. At several points, we are left uncertain as to the reality of what we are seeing. This is particularly apparent in the scene on Salisbury Plain, where the army invades the abandoned buildings with grenades and rifles, and rounds up the beatniks (they also destroy Steve and Dinah's E-type, although the pair manage to escape).

The wealthy middle-aged couple they meet in Bath, Guy and Nan, are also distinctly untrustworthy. Like Zissell, they both have a predatory, voyeuristic interest in younger people: Guy describes them as 'collectors… of anything that takes our fancy – she has her pieces and I have mine'. Guy and Nan claim that they are fighting the 'forces of corruption', in the form of dry rot, woodworm and death watch beetles in their old house. 'Isn't it awful,' Dinah says, 'how everyone has to get old, and everything gets broken. Not much hope, is there?' Guy responds, saying 'young people are callously hopeful', but Dinah rejects this. 'Then you should be,' Guy retorts. 'If only to set us an example.' To some extent, the film appears to imply that the older generation as a whole is not to be trusted; but any apparent hope in youth is no more than ambivalent.

Again, there is a considerable amount of play with the 'image and reality' theme here. Nan collects costumes, while Guy collects optical toys, which he calls 'the Pop Art of history': 'these are just a few of the desperate measures that people have taken to immortalise the moment', he says. When the whole group decamp to the fancy dress party, they wear the costumes of silent film stars – and in their efforts to escape the police and Zissell's henchmen (not to mention the pack of journalists who are now following them), they go on to exchange costumes, crossing genders as they do so (the party itself seems to prefigure some of the 'decadence' of the later 1960s represented in films like Donald Cammell's *Performance*). 'Hardly anyone can bear reality,' Guy pompously avers (with echoes of T.S. Eliot).

As this implies, the mood of existential disillusionment that recurs throughout *Catch Us If You Can* often seems closer to an art movie – like Polanki's *Repulsion*, or even some of the works of Antonioni – than it does to a pop film. It appears uninterested in being a vehicle for the band: Dave Clarke remains difficult to read or engage with (although this is partly an effect of his acting), and the other band members are given very little to do. Although it has several elements that are reminiscent of the other films I have considered, in many respects it moves beyond them. It certainly shows the older generation in a negative light, but it also takes an ironic stance towards the idea of youth as therefore somehow free – not least by implying that this too is a kind of commercial construction. *Catch Us If You Can* may not be an 'indigenous' teen film, in Doherty's terms, but nor is it merely 'imperial': it makes a strong critique of 'the mechanisms of mass communications', but it also seems to undercut this, in favour of a more general despair over the possibility of authenticity itself.

The Monkees in *Head*

If *Catch Us If You Can* is a surprising film, Bob Rafelson's *Head* (released in 1968) is frankly astonishing. The film was a vehicle for the US boy band the Monkees, who were widely considered to be America's answer to the Beatles. The band was originally brought together for a television series, which aired 58 episodes between 1966 and 1968: Rafelson (later to become a leading 'indie' director) was executive producer. The band did not play the instruments on their early records (although they did sing), and they were widely dismissed as manufactured and 'plastic'; yet at their peak, they outsold the Beatles and the other 'British invasion' bands. While Rafelson and the Monkees were happy to rake in the cash for a couple of years, they became increasingly disenchanted. *Head* might well be seen as the culmination of a growing struggle for control – if not as a kind of cinematic suicide note.

The film was initially scripted by Rafelson and co-producer Jack Nicholson, along with members of the band, while all were apparently tripping on LSD. Trailers – and the opening credits – described the resulting film (not so inaccurately) as 'the most extraordinary adventure, western, comedy, love story, mystery, drama, musical, documentary satire ever filmed (and that's putting it mildly)'. The studio (Columbia) didn't quite know what to do with the film. After an enigmatic publicity campaign (in which the band itself was not mentioned), low-key early screenings resulted in 25 minutes of cuts; but even then, the film was a commercial and critical disaster.

While *Catch Us If You Can* owes a certain amount to *A Hard Day's Night*, *Head* owes a good deal more to *Help!* – although if *Help!* was partly fed by marijuana, *Head* is definitely fuelled by acid. (It's worth noting that Jack Nicholson's previous film as a writer was Roger Corman's *The Trip*, made in 1967.) Like the Monkees' TV series, the film is heavy on a kind of manufactured 'zaniness': the narrative leaps from one improbable event to another with little apparent logic, and there is a good deal of surreal humour and cinematic trickery. In a 2010 interview, Rafelson described how he saw the film as being in 'a continuum of the American experimental way of making movies', mentioning avant-garde film-makers like Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger and Norman MacLaren – although he claimed that making such a movie with the Monkees was highly 'contradictory', 'like making an ice cream cone out of mud'.

Summarising the plot of *Head* is rather like attempting to write a précis of an acid trip. The film follows the Monkees through a range of settings, many of which appear to exist on a Hollywood studio back-lot: these include the set of a war film, a horror movie and a Western, a desert, a factory, and a boxing match. In the process, the Monkees are sucked into a giant vacuum cleaner, trapped inside an empty black box (and eventually an aquarium), and transformed into dandruff; they smoke hookahs while watching belly-dancers, meet a swami who purports to offer the key to enlightenment, and (in the opening and again in the conclusion of the film) they jump off a suspension bridge and swim with mermaids.

Individual Monkees also perform vignettes: Davey does a *Top Hat*-style song-and-dance routine, Peter gets into a fight with a transvestite waitress in a café, Mickey has strange encounters with a surrendering Italian army in the desert, while Mike is the focus of an unwelcome psychedelic birthday party. There are also guest stars performing often incongruous roles, including the faded Hollywood star Victor Mature, the boxer Sonny Liston, the Disney actress Annette Funicello, and the rock musician Frank Zappa (as 'The Critic'), as well as brief appearances by Rafelson, Nicholson and their associates Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda. All this is interspersed with 'music video' sequences in which the band performs several songs, seemingly unrelated to the main action.

If there is a consistent narrative thread through all of this, it is to do with the Monkees being confined in ways they do not want or understand: they are held in boxes, cages and a glass aquarium, and in one scene they are chained to a wall. They are also seemingly trapped in illogical narratives from Westerns, melodramas and horror movies, and in surreal dream-like encounters. They are hunted and interrogated, and frequently come into conflict with adult authority figures – police, soldiers, the factory owner, 'Big Victor' (Mature) and 'Lord High 'n' Low' – from whom they are constantly seeking to escape. For much of the time, they seem powerless, lost and confused in a world of representations; yet they also frequently express their disgust and rejection of the roles they are having to perform.

To some extent, this kind of formal play is carried over from the Monkees' TV series. The programme often featured parodies of media genres, and musical numbers and comic sketches were inserted with little apparent logic. The Monkees would sometimes deliberately overact, pull out their scripts, or break the 'fourth wall' by directly addressing the camera; and episodes frequently concluded with excerpts from interviews purporting to be with the 'real' Monkees.

As on TV, the band members play 'themselves' here, but the film announces its rejection of the prefabricated construct of 'The Monkees' right from the outset. In the pre-credits sequence, Mickey bursts through a police cordon and leaps from the bridge in an apparent suicide attempt; and as he swims with mermaids (in bright psychedelic solarised colours and slow-motion), the soundtrack plays 'the Porpoise Song' ('an overdub has no choice, an image cannot rejoice…' and 'the porpoise is laughing goodbye, goodbye, goodbye…'). We then cut to black screen, with a montage of small television screens gradually filling the shot. This is accompanied by a recited version of the theme song from the TV show. Entitled 'Ditty Diego', it is worth quoting at some length:

Hey hey, we are the Monkees
You know we love to please
A manufactured image
With no philosophies…

For those who look for meanings
And form as they do fact
We might tell you one thing
But we'll only take it back…

You say we're manufactured
To that we all agree
So make your choice, and we'll rejoice
In never being free

Hey hey we are the Monkees
We've said it all before
The money's in, we're made of tin
We're here to give you more!

Shortly afterwards, we see the Monkees running to escape their screaming fans (dressed all in white, as compared with the Beatles' black); and they then perform a live version of 'Circle Sky', an anti-war song that is significantly more 'rocky' than many of their best-known hits. The audience's chant changes to the letters 'W – A – R', and their screams are gradually mixed in with footage of war atrocities, and especially of Vietnamese women and children, including the notorious shot of the execution of the Vietcong soldier Bảy Lốp. At the conclusion of the song, the girls invade the stage and appear to tear the band to shreds, only to reveal that they are in fact mannequins. 'The Monkees' are literally deconstructed.

Elsewhere, this commentary on media image-making turns even more specifically to the phenomenon of the boy band. At one point, they encounter a crazed marketer called Lord High 'n' Low, who tries to sell them his merchandising plan: 'the idea is this: by-products! Imagine the tie-ins! Blonde wigs for kids! Swords! The whole phallic thing is happening!... Millions, I'm tellin' ya, millions!' They then enter a café, where a sarcastic cross-dressed waitress greets them: 'well, if it isn't god's gift to the eight-year-olds!' She goes on to suggest that the producers 'write some talent' for the band, and she goads Peter: 'are you still paying tribute to Ringo Starr?' A fight

ensues, and when the director (Rafelson as 'himself') shouts 'cut!', Peter remonstrates with him that being seen to hit a girl will not be good for the band's image – 'it's a movie for kids… kids aren't gonna dig it'.

This critique of the 'mechanisms of mass communications' is one that can also be found in *Catch Us If You Can* and (more marginally) in several of the other films I've considered – although here it serves to undermine the illusion of realism and the logic of the narrative. *Head*'s view of the media is enraged, and almost vicious at times, and seems to reflect a particularly 1960s countercultural paranoia. When Mickey encounters a Coca-Cola machine in the desert, he attacks it, and then eventually blows it up with a missile from a tank, accompanied by the familiar advertising jingle. At one point, a mentally disabled man appears to support Mike's protests about the unwanted birthday party – but the Monkees are then urged 'don't never make fun of no cripples'. There is then an illogical series of vox pop street interviews in which people give their views on the dangers of laughing at others, and offer increasingly authoritarian solutions. Several sequences are interspersed with rapid montages of TV and advertising clips, seemingly reinforcing the idea of mass culture as a kind of illusion – a view that became part of the zeitgeist at the time, not least through the popular dissemination of writers like Marshall McLuhan and Herbert Marcuse. At the very end of the film, the Columbia studios logo gets trapped in the projector and burns in the gate – a final incendiary gesture towards the 'media machine'.

To some extent, this view is reinforced by a hippy metaphysical strain, which is partly announced in 'Ditty Diego'. This film is not going to be about 'form' and 'fact', the lyric informs us, and the narrative may not be presented in a logical sequence: there will be many stories, rather than just one. When the Monkees encounter the swami, he offers them a familiar metaphysical analysis (accompanied by the obligatory sitar twanging):

> *Psychologically speaking, the human mind or brain is almost incapable of distinguishing between the real and the vividly imagined experience. Sound and film, music and radio, even these manipulated experiences are received more or less directly, uninterpreted by the mind. This process, unless we give it tremendous attention, begins to separate us from the Reality of the Now. For we must allow the Reality of the Now to just happen as it happens. Observe, and act with clarity. Because where there is clarity, there is no choice. And where there is no choice, there is misery.*

Of course, it's hard to know how far these truly cosmic insights are intended to be satirical – although they are later repeated almost word-for-word by Peter when the band are confined in the box. Both Peter and the swami hasten to add that they 'know nothing', and Davey then rejects their advice in favour of fighting their way out. Yet the film is not only about escaping from the constraints of stardom and the music industry; it is also about escaping from personality and the illusion of the self. And as its title implies, there is the possibility that everything we are seeing is in fact taking place in the mind.

Despite its reflection of these elements of sixties culture, the box-office failure of *Head* isn't difficult to understand. One of the central problems was to do with the

intended audience. The film took elements of the TV series, but accentuated them beyond absurdity: it was unlikely to make much sense to the band's established fan base of young kids and pre-teens – and indeed it was marketed with the come-on 'not suitable for children', and as 'a movie for a turned-on audience'. *Head* might well be seen as the Monkees' attempt to transform themselves into an 'adult' rock group – or indeed (as Paul Ramaeker suggests) to achieve some kind of credibility in the counter-culture. Yet this was a fundamental contradiction in terms: the Monkees could only escape, or make this move, by destroying themselves. As Mike puts it in the film, 'you think they call us plastic now, but you wait till I get through telling them how we do it'. Even amid the psychedelia of the late 1960s, this seems to have been a story that audiences were not ready to hear.

Fifty years after its release, *Head* has acquired a substantial cult status: it has been screened several times on television, and re-released in high-status DVD series, as well as attracting more positive critical attention. Considerable numbers of bytes have been expended on explaining the film's many in-jokes and references; and it seems that the director and the surviving band members are revising their earlier negative opinions of it. In my view, it's rather banal to conclude (as some have done) that the film was postmodern before its time, or that it somehow speaks to our contemporary condition. Rather, I would see it as a highly sarcastic, almost vitriolic commentary on the phenomenon of the pop film itself – and by extension, on the mediated, commercialized nature of pop stardom at the time. After little more than ten years of its existence, the pop film had effectively imploded.

Conclusion

The pop film, at least as I've defined it here, was essentially a phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s. Writers on the genre have pointed to several subsequent films that might fit the description. Stephen Glynn, for example, traces the 'decadence' of the pop film in the late 1960s and 1970s through movies like *Performance* (directed by Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg, 1970) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicholas Roeg, 1976) – although in my view, the appearance of pop performers in acting roles (in these instances, Mick Jagger and David Bowie respectively) does not qualify them as pop films. David Essex's movies *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973) and *Stardust* (Michael Apted, 1974) might reflect a lingering of the genre into the early 1970s, although interestingly both are set in the past, and should probably best be seen as film musicals; and one shouldn't forget Slade (*Slade in Flame*, Richard Loncraine, 1975). Later instances – or perhaps throwbacks – might include the Spice Girls' *Spiceworld* (Bob Spiers, 1997) or even Plan B's *Ill Manors* (Ben Drew, 2012); and of course there are countless films that make extensive use of rock music in their soundtracks, as well as concert films and documentaries. However, the pop film *conceived as a star vehicle* effectively reached its end – and indeed, its final moment of self-destruction – with *Head*.

This was, most obviously, because of the rise of television – and perhaps specifically, of colour television (in the mid-1960s) and of more sophisticated video editing. As Andy Medhurst declared in the mid-1990s, pop films may not be dead, but they are 'terribly unnecessary', 'like 78s in a CD world'. Particularly with the rise of music videos, the promotional purpose of the pop feature film effectively became

superfluous. And yet, as I hope to have shown, the study of pop films during this relatively brief period can provide some broader insights into the way youth - and youth culture – were represented during a key period of historical change. These films reflect a continuing ambivalence, not only in ideas about youth, but also about the media and the music business, and about the process of representation itself.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Cross-references to other essays in this series are starting to appear! I discussed the 'juvenile delinquent' movies in the essay 'Troubling Teenagers': https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/troubling-teenagers-how-movies-constructed-the-juvenile-delinquent-in-the-1950s/

I also considered the British movies *Expresso Bongo* and *Beat Girl*, and the wider context of youth culture in the UK at the end of the 1950s, in my essay on the 'British beatniks': https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/before-london-started-swinging-representing-the-british-beatniks/

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Andy Medhurst (1995) 'It sort of happened here: the strange life of the British pop film', in Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (eds.) *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies Since the 1950s* London: British Film Institute

There are two very useful book-length studies of pop films, both British:

Stephen Glynn's *The British Pop Music Film: The Beatles and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013) provides very detailed analyses of several of the films I discuss here, as well as a wider historical survey of UK-produced movies.

Andrew Caine's *Interpreting Rock Movies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) focuses on the critical reception of pop films (both British and American) in the UK, in the context of wider debates about cultural value and 'Americanisation'.

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