

9 February 1964
CBS Studio
1697-1698 Broadway
New York, New York

“All of us on this show,” Sullivan solemnly introduced the performance, pretending as if it were, in fact, 23 February, “are so darned sorry, and sincerely sorry, that this is the third and thus, our last current show with The Beatles.”ⁱ Hands clasped in front of him, eyes lifted to the balcony rows, Sullivan was the picture of earnestness.ⁱⁱ “Because these youngsters from Liverpool, England, and their conduct over here, not only as fine professional singers but as a group of fine youngsters, will leave an imprint on everyone over here who’s met them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And oddly enough, even though he had only been introduced to them a scant few days ago, Sullivan was sure that *this* was exactly how he would feel when The Beatles departed some twelve days hence.

His son-in-law, Bob, liked the boys. The staff enjoyed the boys. The Beatles were relaxed, witty, and honest. It was easy to speak of them with unfeigned affection.

Under fire of applause, Sullivan backed into the wings and watched the band ease into “Twist and Shout.” Dressed in dark, conservative, vested suits, they sang the song at a slower pace than he’d heard them do, giving the tune an almost calypso beat.^{iv} It was reserved, relaxed, and inoffensive to the scores of mothers and dads who’d be taking in the program.

Good, Sullivan thought, tapping his toe. *Nice call on Epstein’s part.*

John Lennon, who sang the number, Sullivan mulled, was serious – concentrating and giving each word earnest attention. But the others were smiling now and then, and the McCartney boy tossed his head side-to-side a little during the lead break.^v

In the forefront, Lennon stood tall – his mind on his work, his pride in the group obvious. When he released the final note of their upscaled “ahhh’s,” John issued two rock’n’roll shouts and shook his head as an animal shakes its prey, finishing it off.^{vi}

Then, “Please Please Me” rolled out,^{vii} lighter and faster. Infectious – hard to forget. Both Lennon and McCartney, Sullivan observed, were singing lead in tight harmony. And at the “C’ mon, c’ mon” cue, George stepped to Paul’s mic to offer his own voice.

Trooper, that Harrison kid. He’s here to perform, no matter how ill he really is.

Each of the boys shone; each had his own peculiar mannerism. Lennon – his up-down-up-down bounce to the music; McCartney (perspiring heavily), his slight smile and head wag; Harrison, a constantly beating heel, and Ringo – back a bit from the others – drummed with his whole body, his head and shoulders putting (cleverly enough) a very definite “English” on his work.^{viii}

Sullivan had warned the girls in the theatre that if they screamed or became unmanageable, he would “send for a barber,” right then and there.^{ix} But watching The Beatles now, he could empathize, could understand how easy it would be to get caught up in the moment, swept away by enthusiasm. The boys from Liverpool were coated in charisma. And even Leonard Bernstein’s daughters, wiggling in the front row, were utterly overcome.^x

It was uncomfortable (and almost un-American) to concede, but someday, Sullivan mulled, these British kids just might be bigger than Elvis. They had all the essential ingredients.

After Cab Calloway and the orchestra offered a rendition of “Old Man River” that showered the musicians with applause^{xi} and Morty Gunty delivered his stand-up routine, it was time for The Beatles again. During the commercial break, Sullivan admonished the girls in-house to stay in check. He could do

nothing about the ones at home.

This time, the smartly-suited British boys were surrounded by a woven, royal blue backdrop,^{xii} a lattice of interlaced ribbons – nothing too fancy, nothing to distract from the band. But Sullivan sincerely doubted that anything could. The Beatles were utterly dynamic.

Already, the group was immersed in “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” oblivious to anything but their Number One song.

The Harrison kid had been revived – glassy-eyed, but smiling now – grinning actually. And Ringo was singing a word here and there – joining his comrades on the single-syllabled “haaaaand.” It was the band’s communal high-note.

Crossing his arms atop his expensive jacket, Sullivan squinted and watched the performance with a sharp, discerning eye. That bass player, McCartney, seemed the liveliest – snapping his fingers three or four times during the second “haaaaand,” and smiling effortlessly and often. Lennon, completing each phrase with a distinctive overbite, seemed most “in charge,” his body tense with command. And on this final song, Ringo tossed his hair about and grinned a sweet, almost childish grin. Even lead guitarist, George, began to “shag about,” his feet shuffling to the song, his eyes bright. The Beatles were animated.^{xiii}

On the last note, as the boys bowed low, Sullivan moved swiftly forward. He shook Paul’s hand and then George’s, John’s, and finally (to a wild volley of cheers), Ringo’s. The drummer had been receiving overwhelming press for the last few days, and from the reaction now, he appeared to be the most popular.^{xiv} Despite his melancholy blue eyes – or perhaps because of them – the drummer was beloved.

Sullivan swept his hand broadly towards the combo, and the girls – only human, after all – violated the prime directive: they gave into hysterical screams. At first, Sullivan raised his hands in protest, but then he paused and relented.

“All right, let’s hear it!” the television mogul permitted. And the crowd – fortunate to have seen The Beatles in their first American performance – wailed their approval. Epstein’s boys were a hit.

ⁱ From many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and other artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3 and also found in print in Lewisohn’s *The Complete Beatles Chronicle*, 114.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0-0c1senp0> You may watch the video of this event here. This description of Sullivan is taken directly from this shortened video and from many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewisohn, *The Complete Beatles Chronicle*, 114, Buskin, 174, and from many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{iv} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0-0c1senp0> Listen to the song here. It is certainly not the “Twist and Shout” of the Cavern days. Also can be viewed on “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^v All observations in this paragraph and the next come from many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{vi} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0-0c1senp0> and from many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” Goodtimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{vii} Lewisohn, *The Complete Beatles Chronicle*, 114.

^{viii} All observations in this paragraph are taken directly from numerous viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{ix} Goldsmith, 140.

^x Goldman, 158.

^{xi} Lewisohn, *The Complete Beatles Chronicle*, 114 as well as numerous viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{xii} On black-and-white television screens, this appeared as a light background. You can see the actual colour in photographs such as the one in Hill’s *John, Paul, George, and Ringo*, p. 84.

^{xiii} All observations in this paragraph come from many viewings of “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3.

^{xiv} Listen to the reaction for Ringo on “The Four Complete Historic Ed Sullivan Shows Featuring The Beatles and Other Artists” GoodTimes Entertainment Video, Disc 3. It may be one reason that Rolf Harris was prompted to write and record the single, “Ringo for President” which was released in August of 1964.