

50 years ago, the sound
changed in the United States



The 1964 BEATLES

Numbers never lie. Here is a mathematical equation reflecting a revolutionary time in U.S. history: 45.3 plus 60 equals four guys with mop-top hairstyles and an international frenzy.

BY GREGORY CLAY/MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

On Feb. 9, 1964, "The Ed Sullivan Show" increased its legendary status by leaps and bounds, with three guitars and a drum set. For an hour, beginning at 8 p.m. ET, Sullivan owned the television stratosphere as a mind-boggling 45.3 percent of U.S. households with televisions tuned in to see those four guys in their customary dark suits and ties. Let's take it a rock 'n' roll beat further. An astounding 60 percent of the nation's households with televisions in use watched his New York-based show.

Yes, CBS was living a dream scenario.

On Feb. 7, 1964, Pan American Airlines Flight 101 with the inscription "Beatles" on its side panel landed at New York's newly named Kennedy International Airport. A musical tsunami was arriving in the form of "The Beatles Coming to America" party.

Has it been 50 years already since Paul McCartney (age 21 and the only left-hander), Ringo Starr (23), George Harrison (20) and John Lennon (23 and married with child) left London's Heathrow Airport for a red, white and blue first-time hello?

Jackie DeShannon was among several artists, including the Righteous Brothers, performing as warm-up acts for The Beatles' North American Tour in '64. She vividly remembers their sense of humility.

"They were great," said DeShannon, now 72, during a telephone conversation from her Los Angeles home. "They were not stuffy. They were very nice to everybody. They weren't standoffish. They were lots of fun. And their wit — they had a very wicked sense of humor.

"You could go to any country in the world and people could sing along with Beatles songs. They were a once in a lifetime group; the only person who comes close is Elvis Presley. They had God-given talent and they worked hard, so they earned their stripes."

Those stripes resulted in the unprecedented top five spots on the Billboard Hot 100 song chart in 1964: No. 1, "Can't Buy Me Love"; No. 2, "Twist and Shout"; No. 3, "She Loves You"; No. 4, "I Want to Hold Your Hand"; No. 5, "Please Please Me."

The Beatles got the party started with their first news conference on U.S. soil, held at Kennedy Airport. The occasion was part welcome mat and part hilarity. When one media member asked how much money the band expected to make in the United States, drummer Ringo Starr calmly responded, "Ten dollars."

With that, the "British Invasion" had been launched. It was a veritable orgy of jostling crowds, teenage screams, law-enforcement officers and a

most curious media.

Amid the high-decibel hoopla, the United States needed The Beatles — unquestionably.

The country was mired in a perpetual state of mourning — a nation of grief and disbelief. When the Beatles first arrived in New York, it had only been 77 days since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, had delivered his first State of the Union address only 29 days before their arrival, espousing the virtues of JFK's ideals.

"John Kennedy was a victim of hate," Johnson said, "but he was also a great builder of faith — faith in our fellow Americans, whatever their creed or their color or their station in life; faith in the future of man, whatever his divisions and differences."

Then the Beatles made a difference; they brought the buzz; they gave Americans reason to cheer and applaud again; they also supported the transformative U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s, refusing to perform before segregated audiences in the South.

In '64, Bert Shipp was a television news correspondent-camera man for WFAA in Dallas. When the Beatles arrived there for a concert at Memorial Auditorium on Sept. 18, 1964, he utilized his knack for stealth to sneak into the Fab Four's dressing room for a rare one-on-four private interview.

"The Beatles were good for the country," said Shipp, now 84, via telephone. "Their songs were popular; they were such a spirited group.



ZUMA PRESS/MCT

February 1964, the Beatles appear during rehearsal on the "Ed Sullivan Show" in New York — the group's first American appearance. From left, Ringo Starr, George Harrison, Ed Sullivan, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Top left, fans wait for Beatles to arrive at Miami International Airport on Feb. 13, 1964. The ecstatic girls jumped the rail moments later.

A healthy atmosphere followed them everywhere they went."

Simply, The Beatles were iconic game-changers.

Their first appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" garnered 73 million viewers; the nation's population in 1964 was about 190 million. That means approximately four out of every 10 Americans were watching. Simply put, those stats can only be explained in Super Bowl terms.

"To put the viewership total for the Beatles' appearance on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' in perspective," said Neil Best, sports media-sports business columnist for Newsday in New York, "it wasn't until 1978 that the Super Bowl surpassed that figure for average viewership — attracting 78.9 million viewers for the Cowboys' victory over the Broncos. By that point, the estimated United States population had

grown to about 221 million."

On Feb. 11, 1964, the Beatles performed their first U.S. concert, at the Washington Coliseum in the nation's capital during their winter tour.

Ironically, on that same snowy day, the mother of Lee Harvey Oswald, the man who assassinated Kennedy, was entrenched in her second day of testifying a few blocks away on Capitol Hill before the Warren Commission, charged with investigating the murder.

Concert ticket prices were an affordable \$2 to \$4. It was a sellout with 8,092 fans, including a wide-eyed 16-year-old who later became vice president of the United States — Al Gore.

"We all loved their music," Gore told The Washington Post, "but clearly there were a lot of people in that crowd who loved it even more than I did because they couldn't stop screaming. I'm thrilled that iTunes now has the film of that concert, because I'll get to hear the words clearly for the first time."

The screaming shrills by mostly female fans induced several Washington police officers representing the huge law-enforcement presence to stuff their ears with bullets to cushion the sonic boom.

Afterward, the Beatles again performed on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in Miami, where they found a new friend in Cassius Clay (now Muhammad Ali), who was there training for his "I-

shook-up-the-world" fight with heavyweight boxing champion Sonny Liston. Following a return to Britain for their United Kingdom spring tour, the Beatles were back in North America for an extensive summer tour — 24 cities in 32 days with each performance lasting approximately 30 minutes.

The first stop was the Cow Palace in Daly City, Calif., on Aug. 19, 1964. "The audience was screaming, 'We want the Beatles; We want the Beatles.' It was great exposure for us," recalled DeShannon, whose signature song was "What the World Needs Now Is Love."

The warm-up groups and the Beatles sometimes would engage in jam sessions on plane trips, DeShannon recalled. And they had a pillow fight, too.

Before the Beatles headed south to play at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla., on Sept. 11, they wanted assurances of desegregation in crowd seating. John Lennon, at the time, added major clarity on the Beatles' stance: "We never play to segregated audiences and we aren't going to start now. I'd sooner lose our appearance money."

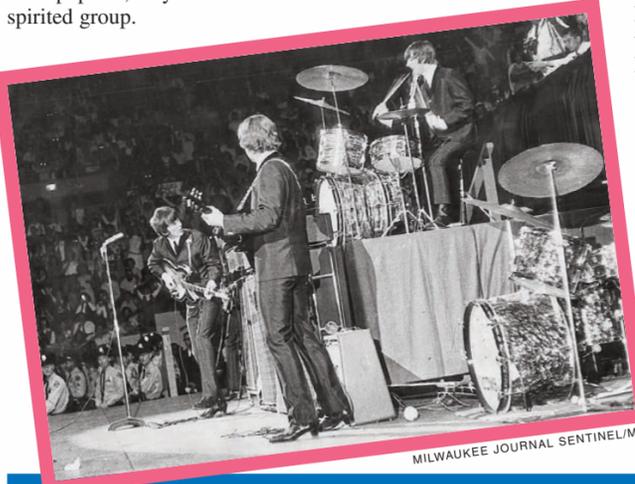
Message understood. And they ultimately played on in the Sunshine State.

After their earlier winter tour, the Feb. 24 edition of Newsweek magazine published a cover story titled, "Bugs About Beatles."

Its premise was harsh in tone: "Visually they are a nightmare: tight, dandified, Edwardian-Beatnik suits and great pudding bowls of hair. Musically they are a near-disaster: guitars and drums slamming out a merciless beat that does away with secondary rhythms, harmony, and melody. Their lyrics (punctuated by nutty shouts of 'yeah, yeah, yeah!') are a catastrophe, a preposterous farrago of Valentine-card romantic sentiments."

The conclusion: "And so the odds are that they will fade away, as most adults confidently predict."

Now, approximately 1.6 billion records sold ... and counting ... numbers never lie.



MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL/MCT



WILLIAM LA FORCE/ BALTIMORE SUN/ MCT

Mobs of screaming teenagers hoping for a glimpse of The Beatles are kept at bay by police barricades in Baltimore on Sept. 14, 1964. Above, The Beatles perform at the Milwaukee Arena in Milwaukee, on Sept. 4, 1964.