

16 REASONS WHY THE '60s WERE THE BEST



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“Fighting to stay free”

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...it has occurred to me that it is no longer possible for most people who love contemporary music and its history to fairly judge what came before. Radio, which once embraced history, now obscures it. Demography rules, meaning if you grew up during the 1960s, you are out of the advertising sweet spot, so your music is harder to find on conventional radio. That's nothing you didn't already know.

Something else you probably already know: ask anyone about the best era for contemporary music, and the answer he or she is most likely to give will be that era when he or she was a teenager or in college. That makes sense, as we're more likely to associate any music that came later with life not being as easy. But maybe there's a way to determine the real best time for music, judging by what the world was like when that music was made.

I didn't grow up in the '60s. I grew, just not that far up. I loved the music because it's all I knew; I wasn't aware of the history or what came before, or maybe I'd have liked the '50s better.

So that decade shouldn't be an automatic-best-time-ever for me personally. There's your disclaimer. That said, let's go over why I feel the '60s were indeed the best era ever for popular music.

1. A LABEL WILD WEST. Three record companies? Try 43, plus all the indies that had a better shot at striking gold with a record, even if it happened just once.

2. NO CRITICS. Alright, there were critics, but they were focused on 'adult music.' Meaning the only people with music recommendation clout were...? Anyone? Radio DJs! What a concept, huh? It took until the decade's end for Rolling Stone et al to bring criticism to rock 'n soul, and it's been downhill for the DJ ever since.

3. NO PLAN, AND NO QUALITY CONTROL. Just release the freaking song and see what happens. That WAS the plan, or lack thereof. Unless you had the nationwide distribution muscle of Columbia, RCA or Capitol, you hoped some station somewhere would play your song and it grew from there. Those, of course, were always the best stories. Which brings us to...

4. RADIO RULED. The idea of a DJ playing a song from an album because he or she likes it - and the listener response is so strong that the label releases a single, and that single goes to #1 - not that unusual during the '60s. That was the story of Kyu Sakamoto's "Sukiyaki" in 1963, but it could have been the story of a dozen other chart-toppers in that era. Of course, radio ruled because there was no other way to hear new music short of buying a record. With more stations independently owned and operated, it meant more of those stations could take a chance on a song someone heard as a potential hit. Which explains why, with more station owners and more labels, there were more hits.

5. PHYSICAL MUSIC - AND 45S - RULED. While it's never been easier than now to measure song popularity, there was a greater commitment and clearer love of a song involved when a person made the effort to go to the store and buy the 45. Which leads us to...

6. SALES RULED TOP 40. Until the late '60s and more request-driven formats, most top 40 stations' weekly rankings were based on the top selling songs in the listening area. If you did that today, many songs would become radio hits earlier. That's what you had then. This is why the songs stations added each week (and there were more of those) had greater importance: the many listeners who heard the countdown or saw the list in stores knew instantly if a new song would hit or miss. And because it was about sales, a record not necessarily for top 40's primarily teen audience could live, and live comfortably, alongside the trendiest of the trendy. Anyone who ever heard Al Martino followed by the Stones on 1960s top 40 understands.

7. MORE HITS FASTER. We covered this a little above, but it deserves its own reason. The pace of popular music was frenetic because of top 40's wide reach: it was easier to get to everyone quicker, and therefore easier for us kids to buy records on the spot (compared to today, where in some cases it could take as long as a year for a song to become an accepted mainstream hit). There was one way to hear music, one type of station you could depend on for the hits, and one way to buy those hits. The '60s was the last era of such pop purity, before radio formats splintered, songs were available in multiple formats and the number of station and label owners shrank and, in the process, made the hit making machinery much more structured.

8. THE DANCE CULTURE. Yes, there were dances and “Bandstand” in the late 1950s, but it wasn’t until the ‘60s – and Chubby Checker’s “The Twist,” really – that dances defined pop music. A sociologist would have a field day (in fact, probably already has had one) examining the evolution of teen dances just during these ten years. From “Twist” to “The Jerk” to “Tighten Up,” the history of contemporary music during the 60s was in great part a history of dances and the kids who lived to learn them.

9. MUSIC WASN’T AS DERIVATIVE. Although many of those dance-based hits of the early ‘60s may have sounded like what came before - and like each other - there was plenty of innovation in contemporary music before the point of explosion in the mid-‘60s, particularly in three areas: R&B, pop production (not just Phil Spector, but his name surely tops the list) and folk. As for music after 1964, as most of us know, the gloves were off.

10. AMERICA, MEET CALIFORNIA. At the time it may not have seemed like a, pardon the expression, sea change, but that’s exactly what it was, and not just musically, when “Let’s go surfin, now” opened the Beach Boys’ debut national hit, “Surfin’ Safari.” Over the next few years the Beach Boys created not just the fascination with the West Coast but also, through the imagery of most songs, a youth-based soap opera of boards and bikinis, romance and racing, that even with sound alone rivaled daytime drama (and the beach movies they surely inspired). We may have taken it for granted at the time, but Brian Wilson and Mike Love raised the bar for song lyrics and storytelling.

11. THE BEATLES. Not just their music, which is of course chiefly responsible for the changes in pop that came after, but how they were marketed. The Beatles phenomenon has never been duplicated, much as others have tried. Anyone who remembers 1964 can tell you that there’s never been another situation like that, where radio and fans fell head over heels for an artist to the point of every one of their songs being played all day long, and to the point where promotions and products were developed around the Beatles. During those first six months of 1964, you would really had to have gone into hiding to not know about them.

12. **SONGS THAT SAID SOMETHING.** As early as 1965, many artists were making a purposeful 180-degree turn from standard teen-targeted fare lyrically, commenting on the state of the world and taking a deeper view of love and life itself. Folk-rock, and acts like Bob Dylan, the Byrds and Simon and Garfunkel, was the catalyst for this change, but by 1967, it had become almost more the rule than exception. Which segues nicely into...

13. SONGS WITH ‘LYRICAL BALLS.’ Because parents had tuned out rock ‘n roll, and major corporations weren’t yet involved in the music and radio businesses, artists were able to get away with a lot more than they do now. It’s amazing how the songs of that period that made reference to drugs or sex, or spoke out against the war and government, have been given a pass on today’s classic rock and classic hits radio. Had most of these songs come out now, artists would have had to re-record them or they may not have been played at all. And that brings us to...

14. THE NEWS MATTERED ON ROCK RADIO. There were always listeners who'd twist the dial when the news came on top 40 every hour, but if you stayed and listened – like I recall having done at the same time Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" was a hit – you'd have appreciated the symbiotic relationship between news and music during that time. Because of the lyrical nature of so many songs, having both on the same station was not just important (and, at the time, required by the FCC) but maybe even necessary. From a historian's perspective, it is amazing to listen to an unscoped aircheck from radio during the '60s and, because of news being there and prominently, hear the true soundtrack of the '60s.

15. MOTOWN. It wasn't the first record company to manufacture its own distinct sound – Sun did that with rockabilly, as Philles had with Spector – but it was the first to consistently bring rhythm-based music to a mass appeal audience. Over most of the decade, Berry Gordy et al created a music brand as dependable as Colgate or Cheerios: when you saw the Motown label, you knew what you were gonna get. And while some may have accused Motown of 'white-washing' R&B, their successful run in no way stunted the evolution of the genre, which exploded in the late 60s with Aretha, Otis and so many releases out of Chicago, Philadelphia, Memphis and beyond.

16. LIVE MUSIC EVOLVED. Prior to Monterey, Woodstock et al, the idea of what a live contemporary music performance was had already changed with concerts that enhanced the experience of enjoying the recorded song, such as the T.A.M.I. Show. It was performances that weren't necessarily all live - like on TV's *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* - that suggested what live rock could be. A wave of artistry that made performance as important as what came out of the studio took that to the next level and wrote the book for what we see in concert today.

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