

More than just a TV show, Ready Steady Go! was the place to be seen, and watching it made you part of something special, says Steve O'Brien

POP goes the Sixties

Of the two big pop shows of the Sixties, the BBC's Top of the Pops outlived its ITV rival, Ready Steady Go!, by nearly four decades. Yet Ready Steady Go!, despite its brief three-year life, has arguably the greater cultural imprint. Top of the Pops, even in the Sixties, was never cool or ahead of the curve. If you were a hip and plugged-in teen during the beat-boom era, you weren't getting your kicks watching boring old Top of the Pops.

Instead, Ready Steady Go! had the trendiest presenters (hello Cathy McGowan and Dusty Springfield), the most innovative directors (step forward Michael Lindsay-Hogg), the hippest dancers (all picked from the most fashionable clubs of the time) and, importantly, it wasn't tied to the charts, so there were no buttoned-up squares like Frank Ifield or Matt Monro or Val Doonican, just because they were flying high in the hit parade.

Ready Steady Go!, in contrast to Top of the Pops, was free to book the most happening bands and singers simply because there was a buzz around them. Because of Ready Steady Go!'s more discerning door policy, it's where The Beach Boys and Jimi Hendrix made their British television debuts and where, in its historic Motown special in April 1965, we got our first tantalising taste of The Supremes, Stevie Wonder and Martha and the Vandellas.

SATISFYING DEMAND

At the time Ready Steady Go! took its TV bow on August 9, 1963, there weren't many music shows for it to compete with. Six-Five Special and Oh Boy! were already long-gone and its only real rivals were the rather staid Thank Your Lucky Stars and the BBC's music panel show Juke Box Jury. In fact, at the beginning of the Sixties, TV seemed almost entirely indifferent to

what was going on in the world of pop. But by the time Beatlemania exploded in 1963, pop seemed too important to ignore so when Associated-Rediffusion's Elkan Allan dreamed up the idea of a music programme to ride the new beat wave, it felt like there was a ready-made audience out there, eager to savour the era's biggest names and hippest sounds.

Not that its success was instant. Ready Steady Go! took time to find its groove. Its most famous presenter, Cathy McGowan, didn't even make her first appearance until the show's 34th episode, replacing Keith Fordyce, who, at 35, always seemed an ill-fit for the show's youth-chasing demographic.

TEEN TALENT

Talk to anyone today about Ready Steady Go! and there's only one presenter they'll name. McGowan was a 19-year-old secretary earning £10 a week when she applied for the job of 'teenage adviser' to the show, along with 600 other hopefuls. Despite her callowness, the teen impressed Elkan Allan: "She was awfully gauche and raw and desperately nervous," he recalled, "but she was worth taking on because she was obviously terribly switched on in a teenage way." ➔

DID YOU KNOW?

On an episode aired on October 4, 1963, Paul McCartney (seen above with a fan) judged a competition where four teenage girls mimed to Brenda Lee's Let's Jump The Broomstick, choosing 13-year-old Melanie Coe as the winner. Three years later, after Coe's disappearance made the news, Macca wrote She's Leaving Home about her. Below: Ringo Starr and Cathy McGowan.





Tony Blackburn presented Top of the Pops in the Seventies along with Ed Stewart, Noel Edmonds and Dave Lee Travis.



McGowan's brilliance as a presenter was in quite how un-brilliant she actually was. She'd often stumble over lines or miss a cue, but nobody much minded, due to her infectious enthusiasm and modish, pelmet-fringed beauty. George Harrison once memorably described her as "the posh bird who gets everything wrong".

TO BOLDY GO GO

The rawness of McGowan's presenting style was actually perfectly in sync with the show itself. Whereas Thank Your Lucky Stars and the Jack Good-produced rock and roll programmes of the Fifties strived for a certain level of slickness, Ready Steady Go! never seemed to be interested in looking polished or professional. The show made little attempt to hide its cameras, which would roam the studio floor like malevolent Daleks, sometimes mowing down a dancer or tripping up a member of the audience. Even today, the show looks thrillingly chaotic, as if a bunch of plucky teens had invaded the studios of Rediffusion and locked the adults out.

But while it was the beat boom that had helped birth Ready Steady Go!, it was its demise, and the increasing importance of albums over singles,

that signalled the show's end. Ratings had been gradually shrinking and Top of the Pops' more populist appeal was stealing much of its audience. Yet despite lasting just three years, Ready Steady Go! has left a sizable cultural footprint.

It's not hard to see its influence in the anarchic stylings of The Tube or the revved-up revelry of The Word, and it's telling that neither Thank Your Lucky Stars nor Six-Five Special or Juke Box Jury have been deemed worthy enough to be the subject of an hour-long BBC Four documentary. Even now, Ready Steady Go!'s name is bigger than many of the artists that guested on it.

That it still looks fresh more than 50 years since it bowed out is testament to its bold rebel spirit. Many shows that came after it tried to do what Ready Steady Go! did, but the one thing they didn't do was do it first.



Dusty Springfield, a huge fan of Motown, hosted Ready Steady Go!'s Motown Special in 1965 and joined Martha and the Vandellas to sing a duet of Wishin' and Hopin'.



Iconic artists including The Supremes (below) and The Who (right) performed on Ready Steady Go!



TAKE FIVE

Memorable Ready Steady Go! performances

THE ROLLING STONES: PAINT IT BLACK (OCTOBER 1966)

For one of the Stones' very best tracks, director Michael Lindsay-Hogg dramatically dipped all the lights in the studio over the course of the song, until Mick Jagger was the only member of the band visible.

JIMI HENDRIX: HEY JOE (DECEMBER 16, 1966)

The flamboyant guitarist made his UK TV debut on Ready Steady Go! with an electrifying and intoxicating performance of the classic Hey Joe.



THE BEATLES: CAN'T BUY ME LOVE (MARCH 20, 1964)

The Fabs performed this and three other songs on Ready Steady Go!'s highest-rated episode.

MARTHA REEVES & DUSTY SPRINGFIELD: WISHIN' AND HOPIN' (APRIL 28, 1965)

Two of soul music's biggest names gave a memorable performance on RSG's Sound of Motown special.

THE WHO: ANYWAY, ANYHOW, ANYWHERE (JULY 1, 1965)

The Who made the most appearances of any artist on RSG, a total of 18 between January 1965 and December 1966.

