

There was a feature film spin-off of pop show Six-Five Special in 1958. It featured performances from Lonnie Donegan, Dickie Valentine, Jim Dale and Petula Clark, among others.



The Sixties were the heyday of pop music movies, which as part of the British invasion could showcase a band's talent. They were also a way of showing a band's wacky side, says Steve O'Brien



POP. goes the **movies**



There are few pop cultural phenomena more archetypically Sixties than the pop music movie. Sure, in the decades since, we've had the odd music film here and there (the Spice Girls' *Spice World* (1997), the Pet Shop Boys' *It Couldn't Happen Here* (1987), the Sex Pistols' *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980)), but for the most part, record labels are no longer trying to turn their brightest pop names into movie stars.

Of course, before the advent of MTV, putting your hottest new signing up there on the big screen was the easiest way for a record label to project their star around the world. A *Hard Day's Night* (1964) may have ridden on the coattails of Beatlemania, but Richard Lester's movie also served to bolster it, introducing the group to territories that hadn't yet gone crazy for the Fab Four.

Yet *A Hard Day's Night* wasn't the first of these pop music cash-ins. Arguably, the first bona fide British pop flick was 1957's *The Tommy Steele Story*, which starred the then 21-year-old rock 'n' roller as himself in a highly fictionalised biopic that became the 13th most

popular film at the British box office that year.

Across the pond, Elvis Presley had made his thesping debut a year before in the musical western *Love Me Tender*. The King would go on to make 31 movies but, significantly, he didn't appear in probably the Fifties' most impactful pop music movie, *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), a Jayne Mansfield-headlining comedy that showcased such high-voltage performers as Eddie Cochran, Little Richard, Gene Vincent and Fats Domino. In fact, Twentieth Century Fox wanted Elvis for the picture, only Presley's manager Colonel Tom Parker made them an offer – he would flip a coin, and if it came up heads, Fox would get three songs from the King for free; tails, and Fox would have to cough up £100,000. The studio declined.

THE SIXTIES SWING

Though there were plenty of teen exploitation flicks being made in the Fifties, the pop music movie really came of age in the Sixties. Cliff Richard and The Shadows made three popular musicals in the first half of the decade (*The Young Ones* (1961), *Summer Holiday* (1963) and the less-remembered



John, Paul, George and Ringo are constantly trying to escape their fans in *A Hard Day's Night* as they prepare for a televised concert. The Fab Four deal with various disasters including Paul's grandfather making mischief and Ringo being arrested and arriving at the studio with just minutes to spare.

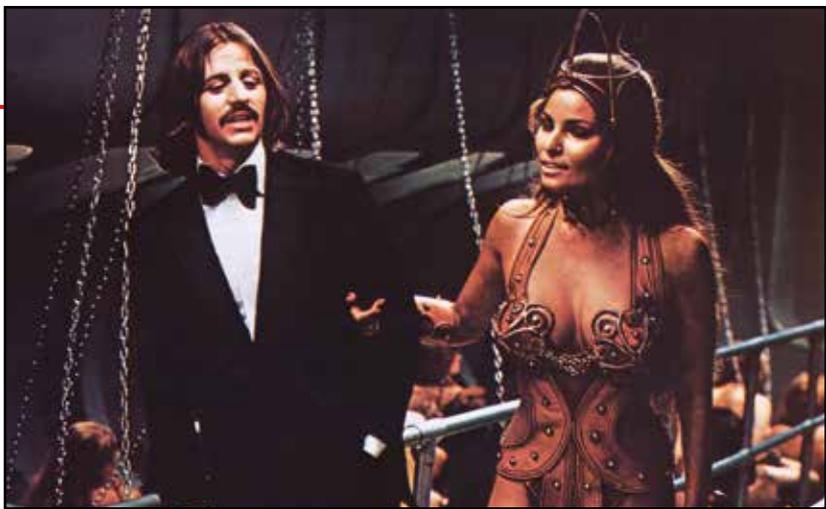
Wonderful Life (1964)) and it's likely more people knew the Peter Pan of pop from these than from his appearances on Top of the Pops.

But it was the box-office-busting success of *A Hard Day's Night* that shattered the wall between the pop business and the movie world. Within a year, The Dave Clark Five were clowning around in *Catch Us If You Can* (1965), a zany, new-wave-influenced runaround that was the feature film debut of director John Boorman, who'd later find fame with such films as *Deliverance* (1966) and *Excalibur* (1981).

HIT AND MISS

Not all the pop music movies that arrived in the wake of *A Hard Day's Night* had such impressive pedigrees, however. *Gonks Go Beat* (1964) is a toweringly bad film, even if it's priceless as a pop culture curio. It headlined Carry On goofball Kenneth Connor as an alien sent to an Earth that has been divided into Beatland, where polo-necked hipsters listen to the latest pop sounds, and *Ballad Isle*, where all the squares reside. In spite of its sci-fi trappings, it was a showcase for some of the lower-level beat bands of the era, including *The Trolls*.

1965 also saw The Beatles make their technicolour follow-up to *A Hard Day's Night*. Directed once more by Richard Lester, *Help!* was bigger, brighter and more ambitious, yet, for all its success, it would prove to be the band's final big screen effort.



Ringo Starr joins a star-studded cast including Peter Sellers, Richard Attenborough, Wilfrid Hyde-White and Raquel Welch in *The Magic Christian*.

Hot on its heels was *Hold On!* (1966), tagged around 11 Herman's Hermits' songs. The plot was nonsensical, but the tagline – 'Destination way way way out! The beauties, the beats and the bikinis have one hullabaloo of a rendezvous!' – pitched it squarely at teen fans.

The influence of *Help!* was seen in a TV show launched in the US a year later. The Monkees was imbued with the daffy, irreverent spirit of both of Richard Lester's Beatles movies, but when it came to spinning off the series for the big screen, the resulting *Head* (1968) took its cue more from European art movies than the *Goon Show*-like craziness of *Help!* *Head* was penned by Bob Rafelson and Jack Nicholson (yes, that one) and was a psychedelic deconstruction of the idea of a manufactured pop group. Too avant garde for their fans, *Head* crashed at the box office.

By now, studios were less keen on building movies around bands,

and were instead casting pop stars alongside more seasoned actors in often non-pop roles. Richard Lester hired John Lennon in his Second World War comedy *How I Won the War* (1967), while Ringo Starr popped up in Joseph McGrath's 1969 film *The Magic Christian*. Privilege (1967) borrowed Manfred Mann's Paul Jones for leading man duties, while Marianne Faithfull was the leather-clad lead in Jack Cardiff's *The Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968).

There were a few band-centred movies after this, but the Sixties would be the peak point of the marriage between the movie and pop worlds. As big as *Little Mix* or *Coldplay* are, it's not likely we're going to see them on a movie poster any time soon. With YouTube giving fans instant access to their favourite pop stars, bands don't need to sign up for an expensive, time-consuming film to help boost their profile. The era of the pop movie is, it seems, now a thing of the past.



Slade in Flame

In 1975, glam rockers Slade headlined a movie that has been called the "Citizen Kane of rock musicals" by esteemed film critic Mark Kermode. Noddy Holder, Dave Hill, Don Powell and Jim Lea star as members of a band called Flame, and the movie depicts their rise and fall in unflinching detail. Gloomier than you might expect from a band as effervescent as Slade, its box-office failure hurt the group. "It just took such a big chunk out of our career," reflected Holder. "We didn't tour for a long time, we were not able to record for a long time, or write."