Monkee Business: The Musical and Commercial Revolution of the 1960s

Andrew T Murphree, *Liberty University*
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

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THE MUSICAL AND COMMERCIAL REVOLUTION OF THE 1960s

A PAPER
SUBMITTED TO DR. DAVIS
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE HIST 490
ELVIS PRESLEY AND AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

001

BY
ANDREW T. MURPHREE

LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA
DECEMBER 8, 2014
Very few bands in the history of American popular music possess a more captivating story of rapid ascension to commercial acclaim than that of The Monkees, an American rock band that was brought together in 1966 by executives at Screen Gems, a division of Columbia Pictures. Originally conceived for the purpose of a television show that followed the everyday life of four young musicians aspiring to become the next Beatles, their artificial construction as a band represented their primary purpose as a commercial venture as opposed to a traditional artistic endeavor. While The Monkees rose to success as a merchandising powerhouse in the late 1960s, they also managed to carve out a considerable niche in popular culture, creating a unique musical sound and fan following that would, at times, rival the successes of The Beatles themselves.

The idea of a made-for-TV-band first came to aspiring filmmaker Bob Rafelson in 1962, and its viability a successful commercial venture was legitimized by Richard Lester’s *A Hard Day’s Night*: a revolutionary feature-length film starring The Beatles. Commenting on the inception and pitching of The Monkees as a concept, Rafelson comments, “I had a hard time selling it until The Beatles came along and lent credence to the popularity not only of the music but of using film in the fashion it was being used by them.” After failing to sell the idea to Revue, the television subsidiary of Universal Pictures, Rafelson collaborated with Bert Schneider two years later in May of 1964 after taking a job with Screen Gems Television. Bert Schneider, son of one-time Columbia Pictures president Abraham Schneider, shared Rafelson’s creative vision and endorsed his ideas. Schneider’s substantial power of opinion at Screen Gems as ‘the boss’s son’ undoubtedly contributed to the success of their pitch.

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Schneider also points to The Beatles in his recollection of The Monkees origins and getting started in Hollywood:

The Beatles made it all happen, that’s the reality. Richard Lester is where the credit begins for The Monkees and for Bob and me. Our ambitions were to make movies. We began with a TV series because that was a foot in the door. It was easier to get a pilot of a TV series made than it was to get a movie made.\(^2\)

By the summer of 1965, rumors in the entertainment industry were beginning to surface surrounding the formation of a band that would film a TV pilot for Rafelson and Schneider. The casting process for *The Monkees* would prove to be one of the most momentous junctures in the band’s fascinating history. Davy Jones was Rafelson and Schneider’s established entertainer who would anchor the band as a project worthy of the small screen. Despite the fact that he was only nineteen years old in the summer of 1965, Jones boasted an impressive résumé that included an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in ’62 (the same night as The Beatles’ first appearance on the show, as fate would have it) and a Tony nomination in ’63. On September 8 of 1965, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety* ran advertisements to cast the rest of the cast members for the show:

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Madness!!
Auditions
Folk & Roll Musicians – Singers
for acting roles in new TV series.
Running Parts for 4 insane boys, age 17-21.
Want spirited Ben Frank’s types.
Have courage to work.
Must come down for interview.\(^3\)
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As Monkees chronicler Eric Lefcowitz explains, even the auditions call was crafted with the thoughtfully cryptic touches of Schneider and Rafelson: “‘Ben Franks’ was a reference to a


popular Sunset Strip eatery where the mods mused over burgers and fries. ‘Must come down,’ according to Rafelson, was ‘a sly reference to being high.’” ¹ From the very beginning, the young producers possessed a clearly defined image for the entertainers they were to create, and their hope was to attract candidates who could emulate their artistic ambitions. Although it is safe to say that most of the aspiring actors who responded to the auditions call could have cared less about the nuanced language, the advertisement itself is a testimony to Rafelson and Schneider’s deep commitment to finding the right guys for the job.

To the surprise of the young Screen Gems team, the advertisements brought a substantial wave of interest. As Lefcowitz explains, “Everybody who was anybody in LA took a crack at the auditions, including the cream of the burgeoning rock scene, among them: Harry Nilsson and Paul Williams (both of whom later penned songs for The Monkees), Danny Hutton (later of Three Dog Night), Bobby ‘Boris’ Pickett (who already had a hit with “The Monster Mash”), Van Dyke Parks (who later collaborated on Beach Boy Brian Wilson’s Smile album), and legendary disk jockey Rodney Bingheimer.” ² The turnout would connect Raybert Productions with an invaluable network of emerging artists, many of whom would contribute to the growth and development of The Monkees as a unique creative enterprise. Rafelson and Schneider put their candidates through a grueling audition process which, as reconstructed through various memoirs and unpublished accounts of those involved, resembled the harsh, unapologetic critiques of popular contemporary reality shows like Survivor and American Idol. Seeking to peel back the overtly polite, ‘yes-man’ attitudes of the actor-musicians, Rafelson and Schneider were remembered for their persistent and deconstructive lines of questioning. The daunting

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² Ibid., 12.
screen test inquisitions not only provided insightful character studies in casting, the footage of the foursome who were hired to be The Monkees proved to be a goldmine resource for the TV show.

After the production team had analyzed the screen test reception data and verified the appeal of their top candidates, The Monkees became comprised of Davy Jones, Micky Dolenz, Peter Tork, and Michael Nesmith in the final months of 1965. Jones, whose audition tape was the most well-received by sample audience results, explains the producers’ response to the uniformity of the ‘Fab Four’ from Liverpool who seemed to be one in the same: “Their [the creators, producers] answer was that The Monkees should be four guys who are so different from each other, that if you stuck their heads in the sand with their arses sticking up, you’d know who was who.”  

The individuality that each Monkee expressed would allow a fan from anywhere in the nation to gravitate towards the band member that resonated most with his or her distinct regional context. Thus, even the casting process became a conscientious marketing plan that would, with any luck, ultimately achieve the mass consumer appeal Raybert Productions was looking for. Jones, in compliance with the producers’ wishes, jests, “So that’s exactly what we did for three years. We were perfect—Mike the Texan, Peter from Connecticut, the Skillet [Micky] from California, and me from Manchester. Four arses!”

Rafelson and Schneider understood that image is everything in when it comes to artist development and promotion, and as Micky Dolenz explains in his memoir I’m A Believer, the success of The Monkees hinged upon a fresh, ‘Americanized’ iteration of The Beatles’ cool and edgy presentation:

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Davy Jones, They Made a Monkee Out of Me (Beaverton, PA: Dome Press, 1987), 53.

Ibid., 53.
The Beatles smoked cigarettes, drank, lounged around like wise old soldiers, and exuded an air of extraordinary sophistication compared to the teen beat, surf-city, Presley pelvic, folky-wolky influences that had dominated the American music and fashion scenes for a decade. That gritty, streetwise sophistication came, primarily from the fact that the Beatles had grown up in what was essentially a ghetto: postwar Liverpool.8

As Dolenz so deftly explains, The Beatles’ tendency towards a darker presentation stemmed directly from their British environment of postwar disillusion. Contrasting sharply with the glam of the West Coast surf music scene and an emerging teenage culture fueled by newfound economic freedom, The Beatles offered American popular culture something that was entirely different and authentic at the same time. As an entertainment endeavor that was primarily visual, however, the potential for scrutiny and censorship was much higher for The Monkees, who had conservative network television executives to please if the show was even to get off the ground. The duality of motivation for a television series that showcased a youthfully rebellious upstart band while maintaining a disarming sense of Middle America charm proved to be complicated, yet successful entertainment formula.

On Monday, September 12, 1966, The Monkees television series infiltrated American homes for the first time after three months of filming and a full year of intense planning. From its national debut, the four comical, long-haired boys and their pop-folk music won the hearts of their viewers by introducing them to a gleeful, simplistic portrait of an American experience that possessed far more social and moral complexity in reality. Lefcowitz notes how the show facilitated a ‘careful exposure’ of its adolescent viewers to the more benign facets of the enticing counterculture: “On a subliminal level The Monkees established a conduit to mainstream America, allowing kids to connect, however ephemerally, to the counterculture that was

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emerging in the 1960s.” The *New York Times* praised the pilot episode for Rafelson and Schneider’s unorthodox approaches: “Wild cutting of the film, screwball irrelevancies, extreme contrasts of pace and a handful of good sight laughs contributed divertingly to the half hour. But best of all, the Monkees were generally kept away on a tight chain from oppressive histrionics and electric guitars.” Both visually and sonically, The Monkees had struck a tasteful balance between trendy rebellion and traditional values that made the show a smashing success in American living rooms.

The opening song for the title sequence of *The Monkees* exemplified all that the stars of the show aspired to be. Written and performed by Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart’s studio band The Candy Store Prophets, the “Theme From The Monkees” was an energetic piece that set the tone for the television series. Boyce and Hart, who had both originally auditioned to be in the show, became responsible for the unique musical sound of The Monkees in time. In his commentary *Monkee Music*, Andrew Hickey explains how the theme song’s lyrics exhibit The Monkee philosophy: “Lyrically, the song is a perfect introduction to the TV show for which it was the theme, though I’m not too keen on the line ‘we’re the young generation and we’ve got something to say,’ which seems slightly patronizing—especially since at the time the band members were prevented from saying anything slightly controversial.”

Indeed, the Columbia Pictures executives behind the show exercised strict control over the actors’ interaction with the press as well as their time in the studio recording material to accompany the show.

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The Monkees quickly developed an incredible chemistry on the set, and their unique personalities found a pleasant cohesion in spite of, or perhaps due to, the show’s chaotic flow. Micky Dolenz remembers Mike Nesmith as the guy with a, “dry, witty sense of humor, intelligent, cool, generous, somewhat insecure, and definitely a control freak. One of the funniest men I have ever known.” Peter Tork, on the other hand, was, “Bohemian, [with] a heart of gold, tortured, compassionate, sometimes annoying, intellectual, altruistic, and one of the kindest men I have ever known.” Davy Jones was, “stylish, talented, very short, puckish, unselfish, somewhat vain, congenial, streetwise, and one of the nicest men I have ever known.” Dolenz, who was and intelligent, gregarious, and charismatic himself, would become one of the most iconic voices in of the 1960s pop music through his work with The Monkees. Collectively, the young men were breaking new ground in their zany half-hour endeavors.

Their debut single, “The Last Train To Clarksville,” was released on August 16, prior to the show’s premier as a promotional effort. It quickly ascended the charts to hit number one in the U.S., and its heavy radio play became a crucial factor in the success of the pilot episode. Featured on their debut album also titled The Monkees, the song’s lyrics expressed subtle antiwar sentiments, but the song’s meaning was buried underneath the ‘McCartney-esque’ guitar riff that inspired Boyce and Hart. Hickey notes, “Of all the Boyce/Hart tracks on this album, this one is far and away the best-thought-out, both lyrically and musically - it's simplistic, but in all the right ways, the product of people who've been listening to every record on the radio and stripped all of them down to their most basic essentials, then rebuilt them into a pop masterpiece.”

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12 Dolenz and Bego, I’m a Believer: My Life of Monkees, Music, and Madness, 66.  
13 Ibid., 66.  
14 Ibid., 66.  
15 Hickey, Monkee Music, 22.
Monkees LP, released in October of 1966, would sell over five million copies and sit atop of the Billboard charts for an impressive thirteen weeks. The prospect of The Monkees as a money-making juggernaut was quickly becoming a reality.

The commercial success of The Monkees’ musical offerings are attributed to one man in particular, the supernatural hit-maker Don Kirshner: ‘the Man with the Golden Ear.’ As Lefcowitz explains, “At 32, the hottest music publisher in the business could brag about having sold over 150 million recordings.” Rafelson and Schneider skillfully managed to add Kirshner as a supervisor to what became a songwriting dream team. “As president of Screen Gems Music Publishing, he lorded over a virtual goldmine of songwriting talent, including Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil and a superstar-in-the-making.” With an abundance of musical talent at their disposal, Raybert Productions was able to anchor the television series with chart-topping singles. By the end of 1966, the demand for Monkees product represented an unquenchable thirst the producers could not keep up with.

Under Kirshner’s direction, The Monkees had found a lucrative niche in the music industry that was vacated by the very band they were created to emulate. Dolenz comments, “The Beatles already belong to their older sisters and brothers, and they [young teenagers] wanted a group of their own. Anyway, the Beatles had left a sort of vacuum when they evolved from ‘I Wanna Hold Your Hand’ to the much more sophisticated Rubber Soul and Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” The Beatles’ decision to exercise more artistic freedom and experimentation in the studio left much of their mainstream audience feeling deserted. All of a

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17 Ibid., 39.
18 Ibid., 39.
sudden, American popular music was left with a substantial musical and commercial void to be filled by musicians and producers with enough foresight: “These up-and-coming teeny-boppers didn’t have anything to listen to that they could appreciate, understand, or relate to—until the Monkees. The void was there, and we filled it . . . very successfully.”

From a commercial standpoint, 1966 was everything Raybert and Screen Gems Productions had hoped it would be and more. The television show enjoyed solid ratings, and the debut album was highly competitive in a market that, in retrospect, contained some of American popular music’s greatest works. However, the incredible success of The Monkees led to the enhancement of personal egos within the band, a development that would have serious consequences in the months to come. Coupled with the unreasonable level of stress the young men were facing, arguments and confrontations became an increasingly routine occurrence. Central to these frustrations was a plea by the members of The Monkees for a greater voice in the musical aspect of the business. Jones elaborates on the feeling of confinement shared by everyone in the band, “The point was, we weren't disputing the fact that he'd [Kirshner] done a great job picking songs for us—-he was pretty much revered in the business for his 'ears'—-and frankly, he'd been largely responsible for putting us right up there in the record side of things. But from our point of view that was the whole argument—we were trapped in what we'd become.”

Tork and Nesmith, in particular, lobbied for more active roles in the studio as the two trade musicians of the outfit. They also observed the potential of greater royalty benefits from songwriting and pushed harder for their personal compositions to make the even the B-sides of singles. All of these factors resulted in some extremely tense moments behind closed

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20 Ibid., 85.

21 Jones, They Made a Monkee Out of Me, 112.
doors. Nesmith is remembered, now infamously, for punching a hole in the wall at the Beverly Hills Hotel after receiving the news from Kirshner that their follow-up album, *More of the Monkees*, would entail very little input from the actors.\textsuperscript{22}

The sales of Monkees merchandise was in full swing by 1967, solidifying the cultural imprint of *The Monkees* brand: “Lunch pails, wool hats (modeled after Nesmith’s signature green cap), and bubblegum cards had the bigwigs from RCA, NBC and Screen Gems smiling from coast to coast.”\textsuperscript{23} In a captivating frenzy reminiscent of the U.S. arrival of The Beatles, some 91 uniquely trademarked items filled the shelves of major retail stores.\textsuperscript{24} However, the actors’ contracts were completely void of any compensation clause concerning revenue from merchandising. In fact, all of the band members confessed frustrations over a lack of fair payment during their tenure with The Monkees. Commenting on their fixed weekly income, Jones recalls, “That $450 a week covered all the concerts, live appearances—everything. We were on salary—no percentage of the gate like groups get these days.”\textsuperscript{25} Concert revenue was another issue. Lamenting over the underhanded maneuvers of their managers later in their career, Jones explains, “On the very last tour we did—Japan and Australia—I personally saw $90,000, and then on another night, $60,000, being counted out in our hotel room. And that was the last time I saw it!”\textsuperscript{26} Nevertheless, the expansion of merchandising and limited live touring created an international interest for The Monkees as well.

\textsuperscript{22} Lefcowitz, *Monkee Business: The Revolutionary Made-For-TV Band*, 78.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{25} Jones, *They Made a Monkee Out of Me*, 80.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 80.
In February of 1967, Davy Jones and Micky Dolenz took a brief holiday in the United Kingdom for promotional purposes as well as some personal relaxation. Their arrival in London was met with an outpouring of fan appreciation and press coverage. It was in the same month that Beat Publications published the first issue of *Monkees Monthly*, the world’s first Monkees-only magazine. Although only two of The Monkees (albeit the most prominent band members) spent time in London during February, the entire spectacle was regarded as temporary ‘exchange’ of sorts between America and the U.K.’s hottest bands. During one press event that is now remembered as one of rock history’s great moments, Dolenz traveled to Paul McCartney’s home in St. John’s Wood, north London to spend the afternoon with the Beatle. When addressing the Monkees-Beatles comparisons in the media, Dolenz kept The Monkees entertainment venture in perspective: “It’s often been said that the Monkees were America’s answer to the Beatles. Nothing could be farther from the truth. That would be like saying *Star Trek* was Hollywood’s answer to NASA’s space program.” However, these comments did not prevent Dolenz from becoming completely star-struck in McCartney’s presence. The special meeting of the two entertainment icons was interpreted as symbol of mutual respect, a vital public relations move that guaranteed The Monkees continued acceptance in the U.K. and beyond.

In July Colgems Records, The Monkees’ exclusive record label, released the single “Pleasant Valley Sunday.” Gerry Goffin and Carole King’s mild critique of the monotonous suburban lifestyle would become an instant hit on the pop charts. Hickey unpacks the song’s meticulous arrangement to reveal the reasons behind its surprising critical acclaim:

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Given the song itself is relatively weak, being just an example of the mid-60s tendency to cruelly mock people for daring to want a comfortable life (see for example every song George Harrison ever wrote), the power of the track must be attributed entirely to the performance, production and arrangement. And every element is spot-on (as can be heard on the 'karaoke' version made available on a Japanese best-of CD, where every detail of the backing can be heard).\(^{28}\)

The song features one of The Monkees’ most recognizable guitar riffs as well as a creative ending where Nesmith and Dolenz’s wailing vocals are lost in a wall of reverb that is fed back on itself. As Hickey notes on the bold choice of the producers, “The ending wouldn’t be out of place on a Led Zeppelin record, but because it’s been contextualized as part of piece of simple pop music, no-one blinked an eye.”\(^{29}\) “Pleasant Valley Sunday” remains one of the best songs in the Monkee catalogue, and its position as a summer smash of 1967 epitomizes the success of the year on the whole for The Monkees.

The summer of 1967 also included some live performances on the road at larger venues like the 18,348 seat Chicago Stadium. By this time in their careers, the foursome were making real strides in their musicianship, and their increased confidence on stage was clearly evident. In yet another interesting twist of rock music history, The Monkees would introduce the world to the Jimi Hendrix Experience as their opening act. However, the collaboration only lasted for a few engagements due to the Experience’s controversial image and musical content, which left Monkee teeny-boppers feeling alienated. As The Monkees moved from one city to the next, the fan outpouring became overwhelming at times. *The Milwaukee Journal*, for example, reported an indefinite postponement of the city’s August concert due to the threat of a ‘riot emergency’:

“A youth curfew is currently in force and, despite hopes that the concert can be rescheduled, the


\(^{29}\) *Ibid.*, 81.
group will not perform in this city until June 22nd 1969.”

Music critics and historians typically point to this period of ‘Monkeemania’ as the apex of the band’s short career.

Unfortunately, the rapid ascent of The Monkees as a national cultural force was matched with an equally precipitate decline. As Jones reflects, personalities and conflicting agendas spoiled the band’s sense of cohesion and direction: “A clash of interests was inevitable, nerves were frayed, and some of the resulting tension started to erupt on set between the boys themselves.”

With over forty episodes on television by the end of 1967, The Monkees was pushing through its second season. The actors’ spontaneity and unruliness that had made the show a delightful frenzy in the early days was quickly growing stale and uncontrollable. In addition, further defiance for creative control in the music had led to compromise—but it came at a serious price. Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn, & Jones Ltd. was released in November of ’67 and featured serious input from the actors. Classified as an experimental project that bordered on the edge of psychedelic pop, the album was a commercial disappointment. Essentially, The Monkees deliberately exchanged their mainstream appeal for artistic license, and the result was a rapidly deteriorating relationship with the executives at Columbia.

In 1968 NBC confirmed that The Monkees would not be renewed for a third season, effectively drawing things to a close for the band. Maverick Monkees director Jim Frawley told the press he was indifferent to whether the show was either dropped or canceled, stating, “We knew we had squeezed it dry.”

The Monkees creators Rafelson and Schneider seemed content to part ways with the project, with Rafelson admitting, “We had proved what we set out to prove.

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30 Sandoval, The Monkees: The Day-to-Day Story of the ‘60s TV Pop Sensation, 128.

31 Jones, They Made a Monkee Out of Me, 110.

32 Sandoval, The Monkees: The Day-to-Day Story of the ‘60s TV Pop Sensation, 142.

33 Lefcowitz, Monkee Business: The Revolutionary Made-For-TV Band, 162.
I think that when the TV show went off, a little of the bloom was off the plant—it didn’t have that force.”

Although the initial incarnation of The Monkees suffered a prolonged demise steeped in pride, contempt, and disagreement, their impact on American popular culture was firmly cemented through the syndication of the television series for decades to come.

In conclusion, historical studies will often group The Monkees alongside The Beatles for their alleged, “pursuit of a young teen or ‘tween,’ predominately white female audience in the 1960s,” and credit them for inadvertently ensuring, “all the elements were in place for the blossoming of the millennial boy bands.” However, the thrilling history of The Monkees as a twentieth century popular culture fixture warrants far more comparisons to The Beatles in terms of cultural stature and musical influence. The band received substantial criticisms for their poor musicianship and seemingly shameless portrayal of established musical acts—The Beatles in particular—but these early complications did not restrain The Monkees from becoming one of America’s most beloved and important pop sensations. Conceived by the minds of innovative entertainment executives, The Monkees revolutionized the television and music industries simultaneously, creating a cultural phenomenon that, at its early peak in 1967, gave The Beatles a run for their money.

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34 Ibid., 162.

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