

WORLD OF THE PLAY

THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW



Just as the 21st century phenomenon *American Idol* has all but taken over Tuesday and Wednesday nights, the 20th century TV landmark called *The Ed Sullivan Show* owned Sunday nights. *The Ed Sullivan Show* premiered in 1948 and brought talents, both high brow and low brow, to the American people every Sunday night for twenty- three years. Sullivan showcased over 10,000 acts in his more than two decades on the air, including some of music's biggest legends. Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and later the Jackson 5 all truly burst onto the American pop culture scene with their appearances on Sullivan's show. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, an appearance on Sullivan's show temporarily unites the older and younger McAfees; in real life America, Sullivan's variety



hour also brought generations together— even justifying rock as “real music” to skeptical parents in the 1950s and 1960s. Sullivan invited artists and performers of all kinds on his program, with a bill that ran the cultural gamut nearly every week. Opera singers like Beverly Sills, comedians like Jackie Mason and George Carlin, rock legends like The Rolling Stones and The Who, and Broadway stars like Julie Andrews and Richard Burton all mingled on Sullivan's program. He even invited the cast of *Bye Bye Birdie* onto his show to sing none other than the song “Ode to Ed Sullivan!”

Even today, Sullivan's legacy lives on in ways that we might not even notice. Every weekday David Letterman films his *Late Night with David Letterman* on the same stage on 54th and Broadway that Sullivan used for his broadcasts. The venue is the same, but it has now been renamed in honor of a great TV legend— in 1993 it was christened the Ed Sullivan Theater.

THE DRAFT



Although *Bye Bye Birdie's* heartthrob Conrad Birdie claimed to have volunteered to join the army, he had, in fact, like thousands of others in the 1950s and 60s, been drafted into the United States Army. Our country no longer utilizes the draft today, but in the 1950s and 60s, conscription, which allowed the government to compel any young man to serve in the army, was very much in action and causing all kinds of unrest. Despite deferments and exemptions for college students, the youth of the 1960s demonstrated, resisted conscription and burned their draft cards on street corners and college campuses across the nation as more than 2 million men were forced into military service.

The U.S. first instituted the draft during the Civil War, following the Confederacy's lead, to help fill out the Union ranks. This new lottery system, as well as a provision for buying one's way out of service, caused massive riots. The largest instance of draft- related violence was the 1863 Draft Riot in New York City during which tens of thousands of people, many of them poor Irish from the Lower East Side, took to the streets, burning and looting dozens of stores in the process. The draft was also used during both World Wars and, in a limited way, during the peacetime that followed the end of WWII.

Once the full draft was reinstated, widespread draft dodging soon followed. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali became the most famous accused draft dodger when, in 1967, after being drafted, he refused to serve, saying that his new religion, Islam, did not allow him to fight. Ali was convicted of draft evasion, stripped of his titles and banned from the sport of boxing.

Perhaps the most famous man to be drafted and to actually serve in the U.S. military was Elvis Presley, who later became the inspiration for *Bye Bye Birdie's* story of teen idol Conrad Birdie's conscription into the armed forces.

ROCK MUSIC AND THE GENERATION GAP

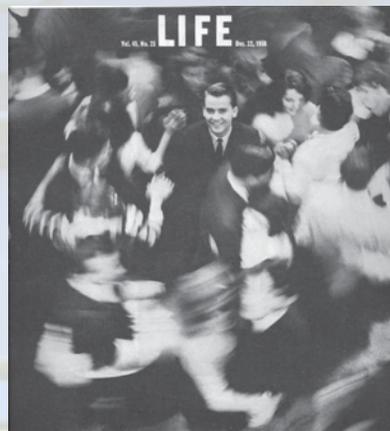


Before the late 1950s, the popular music of Middle America was pretty mellow— there was the synchronized finger snapping of Doo-Wop groups and the crooning of singers like Frank Sinatra. Then, in the late 50s, came the rock revolution. Teenagers now had their own music, with its own new sound. Rock was aggressive, loud and blatantly sexual— the antithesis of mainstream adult culture. It absolutely flummoxed and outraged parents, who, like the adults in *Bye Bye Birdie*, asked, “What’s the matter with kids today?”

When Elvis Presley, a Tennessee truck driver who had become rock n’ roll’s first real superstar, hit national TV, he was quickly shot from the waist up only; his suggestive pelvic shaking was simply too much for the older generation to handle. Shortly after, the shaggy-haired Beatles and prancing Mick Jagger along with the

Rolling Stones burst onto the music scene. Besides *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *American Bandstand*, hosted by Dick Clark, was the most popular portal through which teens got their fix of rock. On the show, popular musicians stopped by to perform, Clark played the latest rock songs to make the top of the charts, and a cast of teens danced along with the music, showing off the latest dance steps.

Rock ‘n roll was perhaps the leading element in the creation of the generation gap. Kids had, for the first time, a popular culture entirely their own, and became fanatical worshipers of teen idols like Elvis and Conway Twitty (from whom Conrad Birdie gets his name). Parents like *Birdie*’s ready-to-pull-his-hair-out Mr. MacAfee, simply didn’t know what to make of “those crazy kids.” The teenagers, for their part, didn’t put much stock in their parents’ way of life either— by the 1960s young people declared, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty!”



Check out these videos:

[Elvis Presley](#)

[Conway Twitty](#)

[Frank Sinatra](#)

