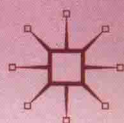




THE BRITISH POP MUSIC FILM

THE BEATLES AND BEYOND

STEPHEN GLYNN



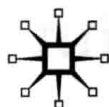
The British Pop Music Film

The Beatles and Beyond

Stephen Glynn



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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 Introduction: Genre, Academia and the British Pop Music Film	1
Generic focus	1
Genre terminology and empirical parameters	2
Genre and the problems of definition	4
Genre and life-cycles	5
Genre and academia	7
2 The Primitive Pop Music Film: Coffee Bars, Cosh Boys and Cliff	10
Introduction: evasions and imitations	10
Coffee bar pop idols	14
Coffee bar cosh boys	33
Cliff Richard	47
3 The Mature Pop Music Film: Bombs, Beatlemania and Boorman	69
Introduction: rockets and rehearsals	69
The pop music film as political allegory: <i>It's Trad, Dad!</i> (1962)	74
The canonical pop music film: <i>A Hard Day's Night</i> (1964)	82
The colonial pop music film: <i>Help!</i> (1965)	94
The Chekhovian pop music film: <i>Catch Us If You Can</i> (1965)	104
Coda	114
4 The Decadent Pop Music Film: Politics, Psychedelia and Performance	116
Introduction: <i>Blow Up</i> and the backlash	116
The pop music film as personal polemic: <i>Privilege</i> (1967)	120
The pop music film as underground parable: <i>Yellow Submarine</i> (1968)	131
The pop music film as political diptych: <i>One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil</i> (1968)	141

The pop music film as finale: <i>Performance</i> (1970)	152
Coda	163
5 Afterlife: The Historical Pop Music Film	164
The grit and the glam	164
The punk and the Pink	177
The postmodern and Plan B	191
6 Conclusion: Music Matters	210
An affective genre	210
 <i>Notes</i>	 213
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Filmography</i>	240
<i>Index</i>	244

List of Illustrations

2.1	'Take Me Back, Baby' – <i>The Tommy Steele Story</i>	17
2.2	The new direction: rock and religion – <i>Expresso Bongo</i>	29
2.3	He's got the look – <i>Serious Charge</i>	38
2.4	From breakneck racer to broken-necked guitar – <i>Beat Girl</i>	46
2.5	Cliff as cock rock – <i>The Young Ones</i>	55
2.6	Beefcake on the bus – <i>Summer Holiday</i>	61
3.1	Acker Bilk and the apocalypse – <i>It's Trad, Dad!</i>	81
3.2	Mediation and generic maturity – <i>A Hard Day's Night</i>	91
3.3	Alpine anarchy – <i>Help!</i>	98
3.4	The Dave Clark Five and plastic pop – <i>Catch Us If You Can</i>	108
4.1	Paul Jones at the Cliff's edge – <i>Privilege</i>	128
4.2	A film entitled <i>Yellow Submarine</i> but imbued with <i>Sgt. Pepper</i>	135
4.3	The Stones rolling – <i>One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil</i>	147
4.4	Mick the Ted – <i>Performance</i>	160
5.1	Phoney Beatlemania – <i>Stardust</i>	167
5.2	Rock gods and goddesses – <i>Tommy</i>	174
5.3	James Ferman betters Julien Temple – <i>The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle</i>	182
5.4	Pink in his Barrett home – <i>Pink Floyd: The Wall</i>	188
5.5	Bowie does Busby Berkeley does Big Brother – <i>Absolute Beginners</i>	195
5.6	Photo pomo – <i>Spice World</i>	203

1

Introduction: Genre, Academia and the British Pop Music Film

Generic focus

Roughly halfway through Terence Fisher's *Kill Me Tomorrow* (1957), a low-budget Renown film shot in London and starring Pat O'Brien as a reporter needing cash to fund his son's eye operation, the hero discusses with the leader of a diamond-smuggling racket how much they would pay him to take the blame for a murder he saw them commit. This key scene, where morality cedes to money, is set in a dimly lit coffee bar, already a short-hand site for youthful anomie, deviancy and promiscuity. The nefariousness of the setting is underlined by the presence of a singer-guitarist: as the plot negotiates its major development, the camera diverts our attention onto Britain's first rock'n'roll star, Tommy Steele, singing snatches of 'Rebel Rock' to a young and enthusiastic audience. While O'Brien exchanges his good name for the sake of his son's health, Tommy is engendering teenage obstruction and ingratitude. 'Are you ready, rebel?' he sings, before presenting his strategy of non-cooperation: 'If they're gonna ask you nice, / Make them have to ask you twice. / Have a heart of ice / When you're at home.' The first film appearance of a British Rocker is simultaneously the focus for teenage energy and the voice of anti-parental rebellion. This fresh if uneasy relationship between the cinema and the teenager that Fisher's February release narratively illustrates had, on a broader scale, already been musically brokered with the January announcement that Steele would star imminently in a semi-biographical feature film.¹ The British pop music film was about to be born.

Kill Me Tomorrow is remembered, if at all, for Steele's brief screen debut,² but the cinematic sub-genre that it heralded is the focus of this study. The film's yoking of an ageing American star with an emergent

indigenous crowd-puller carries both economic and ideological import and enacts in microcosm many of the competing factors that would shape the British pop music film genre. Indeed, this initial employment of British rock'n'roll mirrors the tensions that have historically existed in British cinema, between trying to emulate increasingly dominant American cultural forms and to build on declining indigenous traditions of popular culture. These tensions are inevitably translated into production and marketing strategies, but also inform generic development, which this study will trace. It therefore involves a *diachronic* investigation of generic roots and industrial interpenetration, especially the relationship to the American film musical and the developing pop music industry, and analyses the production ideology and working practices of filmmakers. A survey of the critical and popular reception of key pop music films, and how this fed into the success of associated musical product, is surrounded by a close analysis of the films themselves from both contextual and textual viewpoints. This *synchronic* textual approach will focus on the films' visual style and their narrative ideologies including, where appropriate, the construction of a national variant on the musical genre. This is necessarily informed by the contextual approach, since any analysis of popular music's visual grammar must be sensitive to the economic, institutional and social factors that shape its development as a cultural form. Indeed, particular to this sub-genre is the *necessity* of immediacy, with many judging the music and its stars an ephemeral phenomenon needing instant exploitation. In brief, this genre study will illustrate the institutional relationships between film and popular music and the manner in which the visual representations of pop have been inserted into a matrix of economic, socio-cultural and aesthetic ideologies.

Genre terminology and empirical parameters

This study is purposefully named 'The British Pop Music Film' since 'pop' is understood as more broadly inclusive of the competing musical styles encountered from 1956 onwards *and*, although the terms rock'n'roll, rock, prog, punk, reggae and hip hop can be used in an oppositional, even antagonistic sense, 'pop' indicates the dominant direction that these styles inevitably take.³ The British 'pop music' film's life-span is roughly concurrent with what Arthur Marwick has termed 'the long sixties'.⁴ For Marwick 'some time between the early fifties and the early seventies a "cultural revolution" took place in Britain' resulting in the creation of distinctive cultural artefacts including 'pop music

(above all).⁵ Marwick points out the binary oppositions with which the new music was involved: 'The central feature, undoubtedly, of the cultural revolution was the transformation of the popular music scene ... It sprang out of the separate culture of youth, yet it depended upon the spending power of the affluent teenager. It expressed protest against established society and the organised music industry, yet it became a massive commercial enterprise. It was genuinely innovative musically, yet it spawned a mass of repetitive trivia.'⁶ Throughout the 'long sixties' a further duality saw youth both celebrated as the harbingers to an exciting and prosperous future and/or condemned as exemplifying a new moral and cultural bankruptcy. They are key motifs around which dominant interpretations of social change were formulated, and British pop music films work within the dynamic of these twin tropes, the thesis, antithesis and final synthesis of what Dick Hebdige has termed 'youth-as-fun' and 'youth-as-trouble'.⁷

Attempts to define a generic taxonomy are notoriously difficult. Christine Gledhill notes that there are no 'rigid rules of inclusion and exclusion' and that genres 'are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items'.⁸ A flexible model notwithstanding, empirical assumptions need to operate and this study addresses a comparatively narrow range of films in which British 'pop' musicians star and in which their music features diegetically:⁹ these *pre-existent* pop stars will be seen to offer both an ideological reading to the viewer and an economic spin-off to the industry. As such, this study will not explore pop music's contribution to mainstream film scoring: therefore while John Barry's appearance and performance in *Beat Girl* (1959) will be analysed, his work for Bond movies will not and, while their music contributes significantly to the feel of their respective film vehicles, Traffic do not appear in *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (Clive Donner, 1967), nor do Manfred Mann in *Poor Cow* (Ken Loach, 1967): their music is not a vehicle to enhance the musicians' iconic status, nor does it make a direct narrative contribution to the film. David Bowie's 'straight' acting roles either side of *Absolute Beginners* (1986), as in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976) and *Basquiat* (Julian Schnabel, 1996), are omitted since Bowie does not sing in the course of these films – hence they cannot be categorised as pop music films. In addition, this study has limited its scope to fictional and narrative films, partly because documentaries – such as concert films aka 'rockumentaries' – necessitate a different set of generic criteria already rehearsed elsewhere,¹⁰ but mainly, agreeing with the editors of *Celluloid Jukebox*, because of a 'belief in pop itself as a form of fiction making'.¹¹

The intended advantage of this precise categorisation and systematic approach is to avoid the overriding weakness in film genre study, notable from André Bazin and Robert Warshaw's pioneering essays on the western and gangster film respectively,¹² which is termed by Barry Langford as 'endemic critical selectivity'.¹³ Conversely, a cursory glance at the music film output of Elvis Presley¹⁴ illustrates Steve Neale's claim that many films demonstrate a degree of 'overlap' between genres.¹⁵ For Andrew Caine 'the pop film constitutes the definitive hybrid form of production'¹⁶ and several of the musical films under discussion here could also be classified as British examples of the biopic, the social-problem film, exploitation cinema, comedies, the faux documentary, even a gangster film. It is for this reason that the term 'pop music film' is employed in this study rather than the generically 'purer' term 'musical'.

Genre and the problems of definition

Genre remains a troublesome constant in film studies. Is it a theoretical concept of analysis or a function of industry and market forces? Does it work to ease or restrict the changes in national cultural forms? Is it best assessed as a product or a process? Rick Altman explains genre as a polyvalent concept: it acts as a blueprint, 'a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production'; as a structure, 'the formal framework on which individual films are founded'; as a label, 'the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors'; and as a contract, 'the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience'.¹⁷ Steve Neale concurs, seeing genres as a kind of 'systematised articulation' that 'are not to be seen as forms of textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject'.¹⁸ This study will replicate this tripartite structure for its case studies, investigating production histories (including marketing), the film texts and their consumption.

The latter category extends beyond Neale's industrial emphasis to recognise how critics, spectators and cultist fans, alongside production publicists, contribute to the 'intertextual relay' in which any film is embedded and its genre status established.¹⁹ Generic marketing can thus be categorised as 'all the different discourses of hype that surround the launching of a film product onto the market, while consumption refers not just to audience practices but also to practices of critics and reviewers'.²⁰ While it will collate trade and national press reviews to

demonstrate the 'parental' culture's critical reaction to 'youthful' pop music films, this study will not elaborate the role of taste formations among critics and audiences since this area has been explored in detail by Andrew Caine's *Interpreting Rock Movies*, using the critical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*.²¹ I follow Caine in defining the genre as housing films that 'all starred figures who were primarily pop artists rather than actors'²² but believe that extensive/exclusive scrutiny of these intertextual relays can lead genre criticism away from the film text itself, which this study sees as central to its dual investigation of the genre's formal and socio-historical import.

Genre and life-cycles

Literary theorist Franco Moretti offers a beneficial metaphor for genres when he calls them 'Janus-like creatures, with one face turned towards history and the other to form'.²³ Commenting on Moretti, Andrew Dix advocates that genre critics should 'turn cubist themselves, looking both at sets of formal conventions that define different film-types and at what these conventions signify historically'.²⁴ Formal conventions and historical significance constitute the twin concerns of this study. Dix understands that his elaboration of this metaphor introduces 'a false dichotomy between form and history' since formal or internal elements of a genre are not separate from historical processes but are imbued with them: genre criticism, he concludes, should be 'historicist through and through'.²⁵ While genres were traditionally seen as fixed forms, media theory increasingly regards them as dynamic in form and function. For David Buckingham 'genre is not ... simply "given" by the culture: rather it is in a constant process of negotiation and change'.²⁶ A tripartite schema to describe this process has proven very popular in genre studies. For Thomas Schatz a genre's three stages are 'experimental' before it has a recognisable self-identity, 'classical' when its conventions are stable and most coherent, and 'formalist' when its original purpose has been outlived and its conventions are openly quoted, even parodied.²⁷ Richard Dyer proposes a comparable directory of 'primitive', 'mature' and 'decadent' phases, though his labels could be said to add an air of moral judgement to Schatz's aesthetic-based terminology. 'The first shows the genre in embryonic form, the second the full realisation of its expressive potential and the third a reflective self-consciousness about the genre itself'.²⁸ It has proven an enduring concept: Jane Feuer,²⁹ John G. Cawelti,³⁰ and Brian Taves³¹ all discuss how genres develop, become articulate and self-conscious until, predictable and

worn-out, they self-destruct. There is, of course, a danger in this model sketching a single line of development, not allowing for deviant films 'mature' before their time or still 'primitive' when the genre has moved on. Nonetheless, this 'biological' model of a generic life-cycle is a paradigm highly pertinent to the pop music film which, perhaps more than other genres, has to be sensitive to and is susceptible to cyclical trends, being deeply rooted within a distinct cultural timeframe. Over a dozen years the British pop music film allows us to see the unfolding of the full life-cycle of a distinct sub-genre, beginning with the uncertain steps to ape or shape existing codes and conventions (1956–64), followed by the establishment of a more expressive, culturally varied format, one inclusive of a critical self-questioning (1964–67), and finally its deconstruction, a changing of its orientation from a narcissistic over-the-counter 'gospel of happiness'³² to a politicised tract with counter-cultural aspirations (1967–70). Employing Dyer's terminology, this study will structure the British pop music film into 'primitive', 'mature' and 'decadent' phases. Thereafter, the genre shows occasional spasms of resuscitation, a lengthy if intermittent 'afterlife' that repeatedly investigates its previous incarnations. This will be explored as a fourth historical or revisionist phase, a component of the latterly labelled 'youth heritage' cinema.³³

Whatever model is employed, the history of a genre must take into account broader historical processes since its dynamics are socially overwritten. For Terry Threadgold a genre's evolution is never 'the simple reproduction of a formalistic model, but always the performance of a politically and historically significant and constrained social process'.³⁴ Many commentators see mass media genres as recording and 'reflecting' or constructing and 're-presenting' values dominant at the time of their production and dissemination. John Fiske, for example, contends that generic conventions 'embody the crucial ideological concerns of the time in which they are popular'.³⁵ There is a further double danger here, both of reductionism, an avoidance of complexity within a set of films to make them fit into an overall social pattern, and of exaggeration, a facile, quasi-automatic correlation of generic changes with larger socio-cultural shifts. The difficulty with the simple assertion of a genre's ready capacity for historical revelation is that textual as well as contextual issues need to be taken into account. A pioneering generic analysis such as Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society* effectively demonstrated that the changes undergone by a genre 'reflected' social change and audience expectations, but it omitted any investigation of the relationship with other media.³⁶ Since genres are far from stable entities and are always in a state of relative transformation with the

production of new films, we need, as noted by John Hartley, 'to understand genre as a property of the relations between texts'.³⁷ Genre is a complicated concept, for this intertextuality functions not just *within* the film canon. Film itself is rarely generically pure, an evident point if, as Susan Hayward notes, we consider the medium's heritage which is derivative of other forms of entertainment (vaudeville, music hall, theatre, photography, the novel, etc.).³⁸ Steve Neale contends that film constantly refers to itself as a cross-media generic formation³⁹ and this will be explored for the British pop music film which is composed of several intertexts that rework, extend and transform its codifying norms. Hayward also reminds us that genres act as vehicles for stars: they are the iconographic site in which the star can display the body or have it displayed.⁴⁰ This study has decided to focus on the cinematic casting of 'pre-existent' rock'n'roll stars since they illustrate how, from the inception of this new musical form, careers and star personas were strengthened through cross-media alliances of records, radio, press, television *and film*, a strategy indicative of the expanding synergistic rapport within the British and increasingly global entertainment industries. Thus the 'primitive' phase has Cliff Richard at its core, the 'mature phase' centres on the Beatles, while the 'decadent' phase belatedly brings the Rolling Stones to the cinema screen. These are very different pop stars, bringing an associative 'baggage' to the part they played and so, in addition to the capital importance of pop performers on celluloid, I explore their emblematic value, the way they signify, sometimes unwittingly, as what Christine Gledhill terms 'condensers of moral, social and ideological values'.⁴¹

Genre and academia

The critical reservations of the national and trade press to early British pop music films – for Margaret Hinxman *Beat Girl* was a reminder of 'how ghastly British films can be'⁴² – was long mirrored by academic rejection. An indication of the enduring neglect of pop music films by film historians is shown by the fact that almost all books on pop and film emerge from fan culture before academia. These books can be placed in two camps. First are the celebratory, anecdotal works on specific stars or films, such as Roy Carr's colourful production history, *Beatles at the Movies: Scenes from a Career*.⁴³ Then come the concise critical compilations, list books with plot summaries and quality ratings, such as Marshall Crenshaw's *Hollywood Rock*.⁴⁴ Even the first fully academic study, K.J. Donnelly's 2001 *Pop Music in British Cinema*, is encyclopaedic before analytical, dominated by lists of films and musicians. Though

it provides a highly knowledgeable decade-by-decade overview, a contemporary review complained that 'surely there's more to say about the contribution of *A Hard Day's Night* et al. than a few paragraphs'.⁴⁵

How to explain this critical neglect? Overall, it has been part of the academic avoidance given to the British musical *tout court* – until 2007 the previous full treatment of the home-grown genre had been John Huntley's (less than laudatory) *British Film Music* of 1947. Also, and paradoxically, the pop music sub-genre initially suffered for the absence of a strong, imposing director – an auteur. At the time that most pop music films were being made, emergent film studies championed the work of directors with an identifiable style and content before 'mere' genre films: the early cinematic efforts of British pop stars with their formulaic plots and narrow characterisation were pointedly dismissed as valueless examples of filmmaking by numbers. Even the subsequent critical attention given to directors ranging from John Boorman to Michael Winner (sic) has largely bypassed their 'pop apprenticeship' pieces. Then, when British film criticism eventually turned its attention to genre, it long preferred the twin bastions of cultural integrity, 'realism' and 'quality', and as, through the sixties, seventies and most of the eighties, orthodox film criticism fought shy of the fantastic and the frugal, one can understand why pop music films with their song and dance sections and their cheap production values were excluded from the canon of critical respectability. Since the late 1980s, however, film historians have been increasingly willing to engage with films marginalised by the dominant realist discourse, termed by Julian Petley the 'lost continent' of British cinema.⁴⁶ Several critically despised but commercially successful genres benefited from this new revisionism as the nineties and noughties brought forth studies on Gainsborough costume melodramas, Hammer horror, British Crime, Science Fiction and Comedy cinema,⁴⁷ leaving Petley's continent now fully 'found'/(over?) excavated – bar one uncharted country, the British musical.

Then, after waiting for 60 years, two full-length academic studies, like *Summer Holiday* buses, come along at once. The year 2007 saw the publication of John Mundy's *The British Musical Film* and K.J. Donnelly's *British Film Music and Film Musicals*, volumes that complement the aims of this third, more narrowly focused study. To reapply Moretti's Janus model, Mundy faces towards the socio-historical, exploring the genre above and beyond escapist entertainment, while Donnelly's orientation is musicological, examining the articulation of music within the visual and narrative components of cinema. Mundy usefully demonstrates how the British musical model, embedded in home-grown traditions

such as music hall, has articulated a national identity inflected with both class and regional differences, and emphasises, as this study will, that 'audiences were always positioned within multimedia entertainment landscapes, including film, radio, sheet music, live variety, records and television'.⁴⁸ His criticism features a number of readings that cogently tie film narratives to their contemporary social and political contexts, openly or allegorically: readings that support this study's approach towards the music film as ideologically inflected and a source of more than just utopian compensation. Reviewers, though, noted the absence of 'fresh information that might have been provided by archival sources, or a thorough reading of the cinema trade magazines'.⁴⁹ This study will explore archival press, trade and censorship sources in establishing production and reception contexts. Donnelly's work is a less unified coverage of the broader field of British film scores and film musicals. A collection of essays ranging from the use of music in Gainsborough melodramas to *Absolute Beginners* (1986) and prefaced by brief histories of soundtracks and musicals, the book persuasively demonstrates the international impact of British film composers. Its attention to the musical numbers themselves, the defining formal feature of the genre after all, is matched in the textual detail of this study.

This genre study is itself written by a Janus-like creature, a film historian *and* a fan of popular music. The historian seeks to contribute to the nascent cultural rehabilitation of the genre; the fan hopes to convey the fun, skill and occasional embarrassment experienced in viewing these films, recognising that the majority's primary function was, and must remain, foot-tapping fun and entertainment.

2

The Primitive Pop Music Film: Coffee Bars, Cosh Boys and Cliff

Introduction: evasions and imitations

The neglect afforded to the pop music film by historians was for a long time shared by the film industry itself. When rock'n'roll began to assail the minds and bodies of American youth in the winter of 1954–55, Hollywood paid it scant attention. It was difficult to judge whether this new craze had any staying power, and months producing a product already past its sell-by date was indefensibly bad (show) business. Thus, while teenagers went wild in down-town dance halls, their elders in the movie industry were happy to stick with Crosby, Sinatra and Armstrong and the commercial certainties of *High Society* (Charles Walters, 1956).

Though unsure about their music, American cinema had not fought shy of teenage emotion. Most surveys claim that the first film to pave the way for the eventual accommodation of rock music was Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953), starring (a 31-year-old) Marlon Brando as the leader of a gang of bikers.¹ However, while Brando's leather-jacketed fighter provides an appealing nihilistic stance (famously answering 'What are you rebelling against, Johnny?' with 'What have you got?'), in America it precedes the existence of rock and post-dates it in Britain where the film was banned for 14 years. The harbinger is more properly Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), a more attainable and sympathetic treatment of teenage rebellion with James Dean's moody introspection re-presenting and in the process reinforcing the growing frustration of young (white) Americans with the values incorporated by parental authority. While Dean's death that same year gave the young their first (and enduring) visual symbol of group identity, their musical rallying point would be concurrently provided by Richard Brooks' *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Ostensibly a standard Hollywood piece in its