

# Introduction

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Ten years ago I found myself sitting in the Bartlett Hills Golf Club restaurant in Bartlett, Illinois, a quaint suburban village forty-five minutes from Chicago. Jack Mulqueen, a polite, soft-spoken, devoutly religious sexagenarian, was treating me to the blandest meal I'd ever tasted. A friend of mine was writing an article about Mulqueen and had asked me to go to his home to pick up some archival photographs. It seems that in the 1960s Mulqueen had produced a local dance show called *Kiddie-a-Go-Go* that featured preteens frugging, swimming, and ponying to the hits of the day. After a pleasant afternoon enjoying Mulqueen and his wife Elaine's hospitality I headed home to the South Side of Chicago, my mission accomplished. The photos were in hand, and to make my journey worthwhile Mulqueen had thrown in a videotape of *Kiddie-a-Go-Go*.

At some time during the next week my wife and I popped the tape into the VCR. My jaw dropped. Though the concept seemed simple—kids dance around—the show was mind-blowing. Elaine (as “Pandora,” the mod harlequin) led a hoot-enanny that was raw, ridiculous, and sublimely surreal. The dancers displayed both the awkward self-consciousness and the total abandon that mark the start and finish lines of the pursuit of cool. The editing and camerawork were as instinctual, imperfect, and dynamic as the best garage rock. The wide shots of the pint-size terpsichoreans evoked a sense of both modernist kinetic artwork and stylized ethnographic ritual. While the rigid formal aspects of television were all in place, the energy of this show somehow fulfilled rock 'n' roll's promise of actual chaos and, to a degree, danger (those children were swept up in hypnotic rites!).

This was possibly the best music-themed television show I had ever seen, which meant that Mulqueen—that mild-mannered gentleman, a bespectacled Bob Newhart look-alike—was one of the greatest rock 'n' roll TV producers of all time!

But that didn't make any sense. This man was no rock 'n' roller. Mulqueen isn't in Howard Stern's demographic; he's in Paul Harvey's. So how could he be so good at capturing the elusive spirit of American teenage music on the boob tube?



Courtesy Jack Mulqueen



Rock critics and the pop music intelligentsia have long viewed authenticity as one of the most crucial elements of rock music. The Alan Lomax field recordings of rock's raw, rural predecessors; Elvis' teenage sexual fury; *Sgt. Pepper's* uncompromised artistic statements; and the rappers who rhyme about gunplay and then die in a hail of bullets have all become icons of legitimacy, spawning reams of celebratory or analytical rock journalism.

But television, print media's usurping sibling, has always demonstrated either disinterest in or disrespect for "realness" by presenting to the kids of America their own music only after coloring it with a tint of artifice darker than Dick Clark's hair dye. Despite rock 'n' roll's King being forced to sing to a dog (in matching tuxedos), despite make-believe bands made of figurative (and literal) puppets, and despite the proliferation of elaborate music videos often designed to hide the shortcomings of "artists," something amazing happened. Was it because the kids didn't notice everything was counterfeit? Or was it perhaps because something real (or, at least, really entertaining) emerged from the falseness? Somehow the fake Monkees shared the charts with the real Beatles. Somehow rebellious Tupac and Slayer fans found themselves voting for corny, wholesome American Idols. And somehow the contrived creations of pleasant squares like Mulqueen captured

the unhinged energy of rock 'n' roll with far greater clarity than most long-haired, hotel-trashing, guitar-smashing hooligans ever could.

Maybe having acts lip-synch to their recordings delivered exactly what the audience wanted—a moving image to go with a perfect-sounding record. Maybe the power of the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was enhanced because they stood where the producers told them (as opposed to hundreds of other bands' free, loose, and unmemorable *Saturday Night Live* performances). And perhaps it's more fun to see a marginally talented teen such as Avril Lavigne deliver pop perfection in a slick music video than to watch her struggle through a live performance. The soul of rock 'n' roll is certainly wild, raw, and dangerous. But as television has proven over and over again in the last half-century, one of the best ways to present this energy is to impose structure, make it adhere to the laws of entertainment passed down from vaudeville stage to vaudeville stage, and, ultimately, constrain it to fit within a box situated right in your living room.



The idiosyncratic history of rock on TV as presented in this book serves two missions. In the essays contained herein I will offer opinionated histories of under-documented aspects of rock on TV (cartoon rock bands, black-audience music programming, punk on television). For the overdocumented subjects (the Monkees, Dick Clark, 1956 Elvis Presley on TV), I will try to examine why the artifice of rock 'n' roll on TV feels so good to me.

When I watch rock music on TV I want to be profoundly entertained. To ensure this experience I put my trust in craftsmen, visionaries, and hacks alike, everyone responsible for making rock 'n' roll rebellion fit onto the family-friendly stage. I don't expect watching a TV show to give me the palpable energy of a live concert or to be as intimate and profound as a meditative late-night listen to an album via headphones. But in some ways what I expect—and often get—is better, more direct, and less pretentious than any other presentation of rock 'n' roll. *Nothing* makes me feel like a crazed fourteen-year-old girl in 1964 the way watching the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan* can. *Nothing* makes me feel funkier than watching a 1973 *Soul Train* line. These are transformative, visceral experiences, possible only because the makers of television rarely consider rock 'n' roll a sacred art form. The efficiency and impact of lip-synching, “fake” bands, image over talent, and scripted interviews makes perfect sense to them.

In this book I want to present both a big picture and a celebration of these usually overlooked, oft-ridiculed moments. Obviously a comprehensive overview

of all rock on TV is impossible. In the 1950s and 1960s it was feasible to catch every nationally televised moment of rock-oriented programming and still be a functioning human. But today, between cable music channels, syndicated entertainment programs, network musical reality shows, and the endless coverage on gossip and news shows of pop stars' shenanigans and legal woes, there are several hundred hours of new music-related programming every week. No one writer could cover everything and nobody would want to read a book that did. But this book is absurdly broad anyway. I'm asking baby boomers to give my musings on *Making the Band II* a chance and Generation Z kids to give my ramblings on Bo Diddley a whirl.

This book features ten freestanding but interlocking essays on various facets of TV rock history. Though the book is arranged more or less chronologically (*Ed Sullivan* toward the beginning, reality TV toward the end), many chapters span decades. The section on dance shows, for example, covers more than half a century.

As an oasis of relief after ten hefty chapters I offer a couple of appendixes that provide dozens of small, tasty chunks of TV rock highlights from around the world and across history. Whether you approach this book as a fun, nostalgic romp or as a somewhat scholarly defense of an art form that is widely considered "low," *TV-a-Go-Go* strives to be as satisfying as lying on the couch and bopping your head to your favorite band on TV.



Meeting Mulqueen profoundly changed my life. After multiple viewings of the *Kiddie-a-Go-Go* tape, my wife and I went down to Chicago's cable access network and signed up to produce our own dance show for kids, *Chic-a-Go-Go*. After almost a decade on the tube we have made hundreds of episodes featuring children dancing to weird music and rock stars being harassed by Ratso, our puppet host. I've done many things in my life, but few have been as satisfying as getting Robo from Black Flag to tell the kids, "School is cool," having the Shirelles sing "Happy Birthday" to my puppet, or watching the members of Cheap Trick flirt with a rat made from an old sock. Of course, our goofy noncommercial endeavor in no way gives me a feel for what it is really like to claw and hustle to create professional rock 'n' roll TV. But the production experience has given me a pretty good eye for watching old (and new) music shows, which I do with great frequency these days.

And that's another result of meeting the Mulqueens. After their video proved so inspirational, I went deep into the world of obscure-TV-show video swapping,

where treasures are there for the taking if you have two VCRs, some good stuff to trade, and a hunch that the Romanian Michael Jackson fanatic who claims to have that elusive *Soul Train* episode is operating in good faith. With the advent of DVD complete-season box sets, this weird world has become more mainstream; obsessive TV collecting has now shifted from the underground to K-Mart. And that's a good thing.

So all you TV rock fans out there—and that includes anyone who ever danced along with *Bandstand*, stayed up late to see your favorite artist on *Saturday Night Live*, or voted on *American Idol*—check out what I have to say here. I hope you groove to it, and if you disagree with something, I'd love to talk about it . . . right after I watch this Romanian bootleg of a Japanese-subtitled *Soul Train* episode.