

The Byrds

The Byrds are best described as, "Dylan meets the Beatles." The Byrds combined the upbeat, melodic pop of the Beatles with the message-oriented lyrics of Bob Dylan into an easy listening type of folk-rock. Their most popular work being cover's of Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" and Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn!" Yet the group continually broke ground during the Sixties, creating a sound that was given names as space-rock, psychedelic-rock, and country-rock. At a time when rock and roll was exploding in all fronts, the Byrds led the way with a curiosity about the forms and directions pop music could take. In so doing, they became peers and equals of their mentors, Dylan and the Beatles.

Roger McGuinn, lead singer, had been a folk-music accompanist for such acts as the Limelighters, the Chad Mitchell Trio and Judy Collins, among others. Singer/guitarists David Crosby and Gene Clark were West Coast folkies, while bassist Chris Hillman and drummer Michael Clarke arrived with bluegrass and rock backgrounds, respectively. Formed in Los Angeles in 1964 (and briefly known as the Jet Set and the Beefeaters), the Byrds built their sound upon the three-part harmonies of McGuinn, Clark and Crosby. Vocal harmonies were a feature of the L.A. pop scene, which also boasted the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, the Mamas and the Papas, and the Turtles. The Byrds were unique among them in their different sounds with each new single and album. There was a dizzying creativity in evidence, particularly during the peak years of 1965-1967, when the Byrds broke the Top Forty seven times while extending rock into new underground areas.

The Mamas and the Papas

The Mamas and the Papas were a major part of the Southern California pop scene of the mid to late Sixties. Along with the Byrds, the Beach Boys, the Turtles and the Association, they bombarded the Top Forty with superbly produced folk-pop songs delivered with lush harmonies. What made the Mamas and the Papas stand out was the mix of male (John Phillips, Denny Doherty) and female (Cass Elliot, Michelle Phillips) voices. Combined with sharp songwriting and arrangements from Phillips and musical contributions from some of Los Angeles' finest session musicians-especially drummer Hal Blaine, bassist Joe Osborne and keyboardist Larry Knechtel, the Mamas and the Papas cut some of the most unforgettable songs of the Sixties. "California Dreamin'," in particular, endures as an anthem of those heady times.

The Mamas and the Papas typified the new breed of groups that followed in the wake of the Beatles as America formulated its own response to the British Invasion. They dressed in colorful hippie garb and projected diverse looks and personalities. Their group identity, in fact, stemmed from their individuality and their rich blending of voices. A string of hit singles followed "California Dreamin'," many of them-including "Monday Monday," "I Saw Her Again" and "Creque Alley"-written or co-written and arranged by John Phillips, who also contributed acoustic guitar. In addition, the group astutely

picked material from the golden age of vocal groups, such as “Dedicated to the One I Love” (originally cut by the Shirelles) and “Spanish Harlem” (by Ben E. King). They even made an unlikely late-Sixties hit of “Dream a Little Dream of Me,” which dated back to the 1930s and was recorded by Frankie Laine, Ella Fitzgerald, Doris Day and others.

The Beach Boys

The Beach Boys’ vocal harmonies are among the most unmistakable and enduring of the rock and roll era. Among rock and roll groups of the Sixties, the California quintet place second only to the Beatles in terms of their overall impact on the Top 40. They were the Fab Four’s most serious competitors on a creative level, too. Paul McCartney has allowed that the Beatles’ masterpiece, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, was their attempt to address the challenge posed by the Beach Boys’ most famous album, Pet Sounds - which itself was inspired by the British foursome’s Rubber Soul.

Major success hit quickly when “Surfin’ Safari,” their first Capitol single, raced up the charts, peaking at Number 14. The Beach Boys’ run of surfin-related hits – “Surfin’,” “Surfin’ Safari,” “Surfin’ U.S.A.” and “Surfer Girl,” all released in 1962 and 1963 – raised the profile of the state of California and the sport of surfing. The group also celebrated the Golden State’s obsession with hot rods (“Shut Down,” “409,” “Little Deuce Coupe”) and the pursuit of happiness in less complicated times (“Be True to Your School,” “Fun, Fun, Fun,” “I Get Around”). Those carefree days were mythologized in George Lucas’s nostalgic 1973 film American Graffiti, but it was the Beach Boys who truly captured the spirit of the era as it unfolded with their anthemic, harmony-filled songs. They were recording at a blinding pace, releasing four albums in 1964 alone.

The Beach Boys’ classic Sixties songs were more than catchy hits that enthralled American school kids. In subtle and artful ways, they shone a light on the state of California and all that it represented, helping to initiate the westward migration of restless youth that would culminate in the hippie subculture of the late Sixties. As biographer Timothy White noted, “Brian Wilson believed in the idea of California more than the fact of himself, feeling that the energy focused on the romantic concept could carry over into the substance of his existence.” For many listeners, the music of the Beach Boys performed a similarly therapeutic function.