

## '60s celebrity icons still rocking today

From the Beach Boys to the Rolling Stones, American counterculture has survived and endured over the years. -AFP

Fri, Jun 01, 2012  
AFP

LOS ANGELES - The Beach Boys release their first album of new songs in years next week to mark their 50th birthday - joining an elite band of icons celebrating half a century of music that still rocks the world.

In the same year the California group first surfed into the charts - 1962 - Bob Dylan was strumming his way into pop culture history, while the Beatles and the Rolling Stones led a revolution on the other side of the Atlantic.

Why the sudden early 60s creative explosion? One answer: as post-war baby boomers came of age in a world of growing wealth, they fervently embraced the freedoms - cultural, financial and sexual - offered by the new decade.

"They were just old enough to be the first people from the white working class in the first world to grow up in relative affluence and education," professor Toby Miller of the University of California, Riverside, told AFP.

"They were white boys who had an interest in black music that transcended color lines, and there were record companies and TV companies and promoters that had identified these emergent market niches for their eventual audiences."

Of the burst of history-making music icons who emerged in 1962, arguably the biggest were the Beatles, who exploded on the world stage as the "Fab Four" from their native Liverpool, via an intense apprenticeship in Hamburg, Germany.

Their first single, "Love Me Do," came out that year, triggering a tsunami-like wave of Beatlemania which swept across the Atlantic at the head of a British musical invasion of the United States.

While they split up as the 1960s ended, and only two members are still alive, their songs influenced generations of musicians and they remain among the most popular tunes of all time.

The grittier and more openly sexual Rolling Stones meanwhile strutted onto the emerging London scene led by flamboyant frontman Mick Jagger, before joining the British musical assault on America in the mid-1960s.

Their five-decade career has included legendary ups and downs, and changes of personnel, but they remain together, even if Jagger seems to have stymied

a 50th anniversary reunion tour hinted at by guitarist Keith Richards.

In the United States, 1962 saw the flowering of two musical icons: the Beach Boys on the West Coast, and Dylan on the East.

The Beach Boys, whose first album of new songs for 16 years - "That's Why God Made the Radio" - is released on June 5 in the United States, actually formed in 1961, but first signed with Capitol Records the following year.

Over the next two decades they produced a string of era-defining hits including "Good Vibrations," and "California Girls," as well as the groundbreaking 1966 album "Pet Sounds,"

But drugs, mental health problems and infighting plagued the quintet, and for years their output was sporadic - before last year's "Smile," a collection of music recorded in the mid-60s, and the announcement of their 50th anniversary reunion.

Dylan has also had his problems over the years, outraging early fans by going electric, alienating others by finding religion, before embarking on his infamous Never Ending Tour, still on the road aged 71.

His standing in the US cultural pantheon was cemented this week when President Barack Obama awarded him America's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in a White House ceremony.

Professor Robert Thompson of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University in New York said the pop explosion 50 years ago was ignited by the sheer rush of post-war change, from rising affluence to women's rights movements, and Vietnam to the Cold War and the space age.

"After World War II it is like a whole new universe ... and sitting right on top of that of course was a big baby boom. All these kids who started being born in 1946... if you do the math, by 1962 they're 16 year olds.

"When you listen to the Beach Boys you can almost hear the fact that this is the new soundtrack for the emerging... generation. And I think you could say that too about the Stones, and the Beatles, every one of these," he added.

Thompson said that similar "bursts" of popular culture were provoked by other major developments, citing the dawn of MTV in 1981 for the explosion of global stars including Madonna and Michael Jackson.

But the prospect of another such major wave is hindered by the fragmentation of what people listen to: while everyone watched the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show, nowadays they have almost infinite choices on TV and online.

"The 1960s were at the peak of this kind of consensus culture... and that is no longer the case. Even among say my students, 18-21 years, I can barely find a single song that every one of them has on their iPod," he said.

"We're talking about the 50th anniversary of groups that everybody not only heard but heard a lot of - even if they were trying to avoid it - and that's not so much the case.

"The culture in 2012, 50 years later, is so fundamentally fragmented... that

those kinds of groups that everybody hears may come along a lot less frequently."

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