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The Pre-Fab Fab Four

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The Monkees premiered in 1966 and quickly achieved a firm hold on the massive audience tuned into American television's recently colorized "vast wasteland" of programming (Phillips, 2018). The show was conceived years earlier by Bob Rafelson, whose original idea was to center a show around the antics of a fictional folk-rock group inspired by his own experience as a member of a band touring in Mexico. When the British invasion brought Beatlemania to the U.S. in the mid-1960s and captured the hearts and minds of American youth, studios became interested in Rafelson's folk-rock band concept. Rafelson eventually found a producer in Bert Schneider, son of Columbia Pictures president Abe Schneider. The team was able to sell the show to Screen Gems for production at NBC (Bindas & Heineman, 1994). As they began their search for the boys who were to become The Monkees, Rafelson and Schneider took an unconventional approach. In the fall of 1965, they placed an ad in Hollywood trade papers which read:

"MADNESS!!
AUDITIONS
Folk & Rock Musicians-Singers
For Acting Roles in New TV Series
Running parts for 4 insane boys, age 17-21
Want spirited Ben Frank's types.
Have courage to work.
Must come down for interview." (Lewis, 1967)

The unorthodox casting sessions consisted of a series of personality tests conducted by Rafelson and Schneider. Rafelson, who had written his college thesis on cultural anthropology, intended to build the group solely based on personality and behavior. This method intended to replicate the Beatles as an entertainment entity, a group whose unprecedented success in record sales, live performance, and film appearances relied on its four beloved members' anarchic, comedic dynamic. The cattle call casting session, attended by later musical successes including Stephen Stills and Harry Nilsson, yielded only one member of what was to become The Monkees. Out of the 437 applicants, Texan Michael Nesmith distinguished himself and went on to join the group. Struggling folk musician Peter Tork was referred to the producers by friend and fellow musician Stephen Stills. Mickey Dolenz, a musician and former child actor, had obtained a private audition. Rounding out the ensemble was Davy Jones, an English-born Screen Gems contracted actor (Lewis, 1967).

Rafelson and Schneider's personality-first approach selected members based on their marketability to a post-Beatles adolescent audience left wanting after the original "Fab Four" decided to forgo live performance in 1966. By attempting to replicate the frenetic disaffected attitude of the Beatles, The Monkees were

chosen to capture and cash in on this recently defined audience's tastes. The boys were trained to act and opportunities for comedic improvisation were built into the series by its creators. Following the style of Richard Lester's Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help*, the group's onscreen avatars wooed girls, ran around in exaggerated chase sequences, and occasionally lip-synced to their hit singles (Stahl, 2002). Producer Schneider told the *Saturday Evening Post*: "I don't think the Beatles can hold a candle to our guys as performers on the screen. Our guys are funnier, brighter, wittier and better actors" (Lewis, 1967). Though most of the group considered themselves to be musicians, the 'band' found that the rigid confines of the studio system largely kept the musical elements dictating their sound out of their hands.

Legendary music producer and president of Screen Gems/Columbia Music Donald Kirshner was brought on to mold the group's sound. Hired writers and studio musicians arranged and recorded the group's songs (Bindas and Heineman, 1994). The Monkees themselves only contributed nominal vocals to their records, lip-syncing along to the prefabricated songs for television and live performances. While members of The Monkees grew to resent the artificiality of the whole arrangement, most notably by Michael Nesmith and Peter Tork, Kirshner's skill as a producer was an undeniably large part of the group's musical success. Their second album released in 1967 outsold the Beatles and the Rolling Stones combined. The television show was a hit, eliciting the enthusiasm of its intended audience who eagerly tuned in to watch the series, devoured the records, and bought plenty of merchandise. *The Monkees* logo was stamped on everything from lunchboxes and backpacks to dolls and chewing gum (Greene, 2012).

The series featured innovative, unconventional production techniques intended to imbue the show with a calculatedly youthful sense of controlled anarchy. Surrealist elements dominated the show as the band's on-screen antics were presented in either fast or slow motion, on film that was either under-exposed or overexposed and punctuated with ironic, fourth-wall breaking text on screen or remarks made directly into the camera (Lewis, 1967). Surrealist elements had become a part of the changing standards of 1960s television sitcoms like *Green Acres* and *Gilligan's Island* (Stahl). Younger directors with less industry experience helmed episodes of *The Monkees* because established professionals rejected the chaotic and rebellious atmosphere fostered by Schneider and Rafelson on set. Scripts were "checked for adolescent jargon by secretaries, baby-sitters, and Schneider's eight-year-old son, Jeffrey" (Lewis).

From the group's inception, The Monkees were criticized for their inauthenticity. This criticism was not unfounded. The group was manufactured to appeal to a growing countercultural sentiment without presenting anything more offensive than counterculture-inspired styles and an overall sense of controlled chaos. Despite an appearance imitative of the radical youth movement sweeping the

nation and the world, the show was ultimately apolitical. Criticisms of the group's musical merits were well-founded because they had no creative control over their musical output. Their music was rooted in the countercultural style but was essentially bubble-gum pop manufactured to capitalize on the marketable fad of the day: youth rebellion (Sanders, 2002).

When Michael Nesmith demanded creative control over their music, he was met with resistance from producers and executives. His frustration was evident in a quote from the *Saturday Evening Post*: "tell the world that we're synthetic because, damn it, we are" (Lewis, 1967). Weeks later, he called a press conference and publicly announced that the band was 'phony' (Lewis). After Nesmith threatened to quit the show, Kirshner was removed from his position. The Monkees were allowed increased control over their next album. *Headquarters*, released in 1967, prominently featured the group's original songs, but it undersold and record sales steadily plummeted (Bindas and Heineman). When the popular series *Gunsmoke* was moved to the Monday night slot on CBS, directly competing with *The Monkees*, ratings fell and *The Monkees* was canceled as a result.

The Monkees further attempted to distinguish themselves from their roles as manufactured studio pawns through their involvement in the 1968 film *Head*. Directed by Rafelson and written by a then undiscovered Jack Nicholson, the film was surreal, largely unstructured, and highly unconventional featuring The Monkees as themselves, shedding their relatively clean TV personas for far more provocative roles. The film turned out to succeed only in alienating their younger fanbase and was ultimately rejected by critics and counterculture alike as yet another manufactured ploy to package youth rebellion for profit (Ramaeker, 2001).

As an experiment in maximizing studio profits, *The Monkees* project was initially a success. However, the nature of the group was inherently paradoxical. Members were cultivated for their ability to express the spirit of youthful rebellion but were also expected to toe the line of mainstream acceptability and make no demands for creative control or autonomy. While the calculatedly rigid confines of their roles as malleable instruments in the hands of producers and executives made their music successful, their authentic personalities on and off the screen gave them the marketability they needed to be accepted by the youth audience. Ultimately, this dynamic proved unsustainable.

As possibly the first real example of a manufactured "boy band," The Monkees left behind an undeniable legacy. For better or worse, the dual forces of rigid studio control and charismatic group chemistry have led boybands in and out of the pop culture arena for decades (Sanders). While The Monkees may never have successfully balanced these forces as a "real" musical group, *The Monkees* as a TV series was able to harness the power of authenticity and controlled comedic anarchy to create an enjoyable and enduring cultural product in its own right.

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