Chapter Twelve

AT 7:30 P.M. EASTERN STANDARD TIME on Monday, September 12, 1966, The Monkees debuted in living color on NBC. The trill of a tom-tom and the finger-popping beat of "(Theme from) The Monkees" announced their arrival with an ominous prediction:

"Anytime or anywhere,
Just look over your shoulder,
Guess who'll be standing there,
Hey, hey, we're the Monkees!"

Over at producer Bert Schneider's house, all four Monkees-gathered to watch the debut of TV's first rock and roll situation comedy. Actress Natalie Wood and assorted guests joined the festivities. In half an hour, it was over.

The next day would bring the most important news—the Nielsen ratings—which were less encouraging than expected, a fact at least partially attributable to the damage done at Chasen's. Of 200 NBC affiliates, only 160 had chosen to run the show.

Another factor in the less-than-stellar ratings was the series' head-to-head competition with ABC's Gilligan's Island, a sacred cow among teens. For discerning couch potatoes, the grave decision whether to watch The Monkees or Gilligan's Island was akin to choosing between Bach and Handel (remember, fair reader, these were prehistoric times when recording shows for playback later was impossible.)

In contrast to the ratings, reviews were glowing. The Los Angeles Times raved about moments of ingenuity, while the New York Times marked the Monkees as "the Marx Brothers in adolescence," noting that "progress can turn up in the strangest places."

Daily Variety singled out the abundance of fresh talent. "Run your eye over the credits and there's not one name that strikes a note of familiarity," the paper reported. "It's that kind of show, too, newly concepted for TV."
A few writers tempered their enthusiasm with back-handed swipes regarding the Monkees’ debt to the Beatles. Time hailed the show as “bright, unaffected and zany” only to conclude it was a “half-hour steal of the Beatles.” Newsweek wrote that the show was “fresh stuff for TV,” but then countered that the Monkees were “direct videological descendents of the Beatles” and that “television is a medium that thrives on thievery.”

It was inevitable, the Monkees were going to be compared to the Beatles, and no amount of Rafelson bluster was going to mitigate that fact. And, yet, Jim Frawley, who did much to shape the TV image of the group, always begged to differ. “The Beatles’ humor was much more English, really, it was subtle and drier,” he argued. “Ours was much more American—it was bombastic and slapstick. We were more inspired by the Marx Brothers whereas Lester’s style with the Beatles was inspired by The Goon Show in England.”

There was another crucial difference, Dolenz notes. “The Monkees was a television show about a group that wanted to be like the Beatles (but) we never made it on the show. We were always the underdogs. It was one of the elements people didn’t always get but it was one of the things that made it charming,” claimed Dolenz.

The debut episode, Royal Flush, set an irreverent tone that would be maintained throughout the entire run of the series. The plot—invoking the Duchess of Harmonica and her evil Uncle Otto—was nearly incidental to the action. It was the cumulative effect of visual wit, winning performances and music that mattered. One thing stood out right away: Unlike standard sitcom fare, The Monkees did not condescend to its audience. The music was rock and roll, the fashions were mod and, for the first time, there were no sage parental figures or dowdy old schoolmasters preaching their gospel.

Underneath the zaniness, The Monkees aimed to capture the era’s most important catch-phrase: freedom. “Believe it or not, long hair at that time was still synonymous with crimes against nature,” claimed Dolenz. “Anything to do with music and long hair and hippies and beads and flowers was anti-American. It was stuff that you got shot for.”

On a subliminal level The Monkees established a conduit to mainstream America, allowing kids to connect, however ephemerally, to the counterculture that was emerging in the 1960s. By the fall of 1966, all but the youngest knew there was a change in the air. A new form of youth culture had begun to express itself with throbbing psychedelic intensity. In stepped The Monkees which, despite