

The T.A.M.I. Show

By David E. James

“The T.A.M.I. Show” (1964) was the first significant rock ‘n’ roll concert documentary film. The concept originated with executive producer William Sargent, who planned it as the first of a series of rock ‘n’ roll films whose profits would fund musical scholarships for teenagers; and indeed the “T.A.M.I.” of its title was an acronym for “Teenage Awards Music International” and/or “Teen Age Music International.” But he lost the rights to the film soon it after went into distribution, and for him it remained a one-off project, though a very similar sequel, “The Big T.N.T. Show” (directed by Larry Peerce), was released two years later. Like the 1950s’ jukebox musicals based on Alan Freed’s theatrical concerts that first popularized rock ‘n’ roll, the film featured both black acts and white ones, specifically the best of current Motown and rhythm and blues artists and British Invasion bands. The mix was augmented by a scattering of surf music (the Beach Boys, and Jan and Dean), “girl” singers (Lesley Gore), and early garage rock (the Barbarians), all accompanied by a house band known as the Wrecking Crew, that included Leon Russell, Glen Campbell and other outstanding Los Angeles studio musicians, all under the musical direction of Jack Nitzsche. The stage contained a minimalist scaffold with steps connecting its several levels for the score or so of racially-mixed go-go dancers, all directed by the most celebrated rock ‘n’ roll choreographer, David Winters, and Toni Basil. Most of the girls are dressed in brief bikinis or go-go shimmy dresses, and they frug and hitchhike furiously, displaying both dancing skills and highly eroticized bodies. And for the first time, a live rock ‘n’ roll concert was made into a feature-length film.

The stellar artists were rehearsed by director Steve Binder on 28 and 29 October 1964 in the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, with the entire film shot on the second day before an invited audience of local high-school students. Binder photographed the concert in Electronovision, a process newly developed by Sargent, in which high-resolution electronic signals from the television cameras were processed directly to 35mm film. It had a short but very influen-



This frame enlargement shows Gerry and the Pacemakers performing one of their hits. Note the go-go dancers in the background. Courtesy Library of Congress.

tial theatrical release by American International Pictures, distributor of teen exploitation movies; but thereafter it circulated only on poor quality video bootlegs until it was restored and released on DVD by Universal Pictures in 2010.

Chuck Berry opens the concert, and then halfway through his hit “Maybelline,” he is joined on stage by Gerry and the Pacemakers. As the two acts trade numbers, their presence together on the same stage and the interracial dancers behind them announce the film’s overall marriage of black and white music. After the Miracles and Marvin Gaye, Lesley Gore completes the first half with “It’s My Party,” and all the previous performers join her on stage as if to literalize her lyrics. The second part showcases Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas and other white bands, and then concludes with the Supremes, James Brown and the Famous Flames, and the Rolling Stones. Topping the bill, the Rolling Stones perform covers of Berry’s “Around and Around” and four other rhythm and blues hits, but only one of their own songs. Binder shifts seamlessly among wide shots of the band, close-ups on Jagger, shots from stage rear showing Jagger’s interaction with the audience, and extended lap dissolves that superimpose the band on the audience, all visually reproducing the act’s sonic synergy. As their set ends with the simple repeated riff of “Get Together,” they are joined on stage by the go-go dancers, then the Supremes, Berry and Brown, and the other performers: young and old, stars and supporting acts, black and white, Mick Jagger and Diana Ross, all singing and dancing together. Finally a wide shot with a slowly rising

camera showing them in joyous biracial terpsichore—an abandon ends the film, positioning the Stones at the center of a black-white, male-female, UK-US musical commonality.

Since the concert was recorded live for an overwhelmingly enthusiastic audience, the film has greater energy and momentum than the lip-synced performances of earlier rock 'n' roll narrative feature films, especially since Binder's camera at the rear of the stage is able to capture so much of the audience's delirious participation. The visual projection of the musicians' vitality is enhanced by their dancing and by the photography and editing. For all the black groups, the visual spectacle of dance is as integral to their acts as their music. But Brown's outstanding set displays his uniquely influential combination of impassioned singing and dancing, and has been recognized as one of the very best rhythm and blues performances ever filmed. But the film as a whole was choreographed by Steve Binder.

Having produced daily episodes of both the Steve Allen and the Jazz Scene shows for several years, Binder was by this time a uniquely skilled director of musical television. For "T.A.M.I." he used Allen's crew with four large RCA studio cameras, three of them on mobile pedestals: two of them on the sides of the stage used mostly for close-ups, one from the rear of the stage facing into the audience, and the fourth mounted on a crane in the auditorium. All controlled by their operators under Binder's direction, they zoom, pan, and move fluidly around the set to provide him at every moment with a choice of four shots, ranging from extreme close-ups to wide angles of the ensemble dancing. In a makeshift control room, he edited the video feeds with a sophistication unprecedented in live-performance filming. Generally his cutting between cameras is understated, but his responsiveness to song structure, the dancing, and the multiple performers is so dexterously coordinated that, while working live in real time, he is able to cut on action and beat count as precisely as the editors had done in the climactic Beatles' set in "A Hard Day's Night," released some three months earlier.

As the concert progressed, his confidence appears to have increased and his treatment of the last three acts is superb, perhaps best of all in Brown's peerless combination of intense vocals and virtuosic

dancing. Brown had been the sole artist who refused to rehearse, but Binder still was able to anticipate the star's pantomimic movements across the stage and among his back-up dancers, and at rhythmically crucial points to cut exactly between wide shots of him dancing and close-ups of his face. Directing the four cameramen to his choice of lenses and angles, he used the switching board to compose the video feeds into the single mix that was processed directly on film. Using television technology and the techniques of live television variety shows, Binder *played* the performers and the entire televisual apparatus as if it were his musical instrument. As he controlled the concert's audio-visual elements, his own performance of television and film composition itself enacted the musicians' combination of disciplined artistry and communal physical spontaneity. Manipulating multiple forms of rock 'n' roll visuality, he used photographic and editing techniques to represent the audience and performers as a united commonality.

A superlative dance between cinema and music, "The T.A.M.I. Show" brought together rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues, black and white performers, audio and visual excitement, and the US and UK musical countercultures. Shot only four months after the end of the fifty-four day filibuster that allowed the enactment of the Civil Rights Act on 2 July 1964, Binder's orchestration of music, dance, and cinema transcended the social reality of its time. And as it became the model for mid-sixties' rock 'n' roll television shows mixing black and white teenagers, especially ABC's "Shindig!" and NBC's "Hullabaloo" (also directed by Binder and choreographed by Winters), its utopian social and aesthetic innovations quickly entered both mass culture and the wider political field.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

David E. James writes primarily about non-corporate cinema. His recent publications include The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles and Alternative Projections: Experimental Film In Los Angeles, 1945-1980. This account of The T.A.M.I. Show is drawn from his Rock 'N' Film: Cinema's Dance With Popular Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).