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## Beatles' First U.S. Visit Still Resonates 40 Years Later

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## *Beatles' First U.S. Visit Still Resonates 40 Years Later*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Next month's 40th anniversary of the Beatles' first appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" is significant because the event signals the start of the invasion that ultimately led to the triumph of rock 'n' roll as a genre of music, says Illinois Wesleyan University historian Michael Weis.

The British rock group arrived in the United States on February 7, 1964, and made the first of a half dozen performances on the popular national television variety show two nights later.

The timing is significant, says Weis, given the mood in America at the time.

"President Kennedy had been assassinated late in the previous November. The nation had gone through a period of mourning prior to Christmas. Then we were coming out of that period into the dead of winter. The Beatles were something that people could focus on," says Weis. "They were the first big thing that happened culturally after the assassination and the holidays. I think that they were helped by that."

The Beatles' Sullivan appearance officially opened what became known as the British invasion which, Weis says, changed popular music forever.

"If you listen to what Americans - especially white Americans - were listening to before the Beatles, it was very, very different," says Weis, who will lead an Illinois Wesleyan study course on the Beatles in England this May. "In the mid-'50s, white audiences had been listening to Elvis and Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Then they stopped, and the popular music went through a trough when the music was not very interesting. It was much safer and very syrupy - music by artists like Pat Boone.

"Then the Beatles arrived and were followed closely by the Animals, then other British bands like the Rolling Stones. Those bands were playing much more raw blues. They created the music that became a soundtrack for the cultural revolution of the 1960s."

The Beatles' phenomenon was about more than the music, adds Weis, who describes their initial appearance as electrifying.

"They created an incredible buzz. Their Sullivan Show appearance was something that we talked about for a long time," says Weis, who has vivid memories of watching that show with his family. "They were new. They had long hair. When they were interviewed, they were very funny. They sounded exotic. Although parents - certainly my own parents - were not wild about them, they didn't really mind them. The Beatles weren't threatening to that generation - at least not initially."

To discuss the impact of the Beatles and their initial appearance in the United States with Weis, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.