

# Impact of top of the pops on tv, culture and music



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*Top of the Pops* (BBC, 1964-2006), a show only intended to last for six weeks, became the major and most successful pop music programme on British Television (Fryer, 1997) (Donnelly, 2004). This 42-year prime time running show was the main music programme on television for years, appealing not only to teenagers, but to mass audiences too. Despite being a program focused on music, particularly in pop hits, it was also the best way of spreading pop fashion and style, especially visually (Fryer, 1997). In this essay we are going to see the reasons behind the importance of this program, the connection this has to its format, style and aesthetics, and its popularity in relation to the show's ethos and what was going on in television history through different decades.

*Top of the Pops*' golden days coincided with the British public service television ones. The 1960s and 1970s were the decades of the duopoly of BBC and ITV, and the time of mass audiences. During this time, both channels were competing for the viewers, and so, following the success of *Ready, Steady, Go* (ITV, 1963-1966), the BBC decided to broadcast a music programme that could compete with it. Thus, in 1964 *Top of the Pops* began with a successful first programme (entry 1). Both programmes served a new generation (Creeber, 2015), however *TOTP* was more conservative. Even though both shows were connected with teen audiences, *TOTP* was more appealing, since *RSG* was a more liberal and alternative programme and it was connected with the mods. Thus, when the movement declined the programme ended (Fryer, 1997), making the BBC show the most popular among young audiences and by the mid-1960s it had 17 million viewers per week (Fryer, 1997).

The 1970s were the best years for the programme. However, the popularity did not only depend on the hits or the personalities of the time, but on the format, style and aesthetics of the show, which hardly varied through the years. The main characteristic of *TOTP* at the time, is that it was broadcasted in colour. This had a huge impact because audiences could see the eccentric colours and outfits singers were wearing. Since then, popular music and fashion trends have gone hand in hand in this programme, hence, everything was glamorised and that made it more appealing to teenagers.

*Top of the Pops* was a chart-based programme, which made it predictable, usually hosted by radio presenters -which added popularity and a face to their radio persona (Donnelly, 2004) – with mimed “live” performances from the top singers and bands of the week. This lip-sync feature restricted the possible improvisations and according to Fryer (1997) this also prevented the loss of control by the show. This was the base of the safeness of family entertainment. Nevertheless, this was changed a couple of times. As K. J. Donnelly (2004) explains, in 1966 the Musicians Union asked to make the performances completely live, which made that, in the early 1970s, the show allowed sung performances with backing tracks, however, by the end of the decade the programme was totally mimed again. Even though the show was still popular, during the 1990s this caused some problems too. Some bands were tired of the format and of faking their performances and so, they would use their time on screen to make the audience aware of the “fakeness” of the show and its ethos. The two most famous examples are Oasis, whose main members, Liam and Noel Gallagher, pretended to be each other (mentioned in entry 2); and Nirvana (entry 8), whose leader, Kurt Cobain

changed some of the lyrics of Smells Like Teen Spirit and sung with a weird operatic voice while his bandmates, Krist and Dave, were overacting their performance. Therefore, we can see how, despite the success of the programme, in the 1990s the format was starting to be obsolete.

In general, the show was very static, both because of the presentations of the performers and the camerawork. Camera movements were restricted at the beginning by the technology of the time, but even when it improved, the style was still very stable. The main figure is the singer, hence the programme favoured solo artists or “bands with featured singers, where the body could be isolated and captured in one shot” (Fryer, 1997). Hence, they used to highlight the faces to make the audience feel close with the performer. This is one of the main reasons for the popularity of *TOTP* and it is thanks to the camerawork. Most of the shots are close-ups of the singer. These types of shots create “an illusion of intimacy” (Cubbit, 1984), a feeling of “closeness to performers only available in the front row of live concerts” (Donnelly, 2004). Thus, looking into the camera means looking into the spectators’ living room (Cubbit, 1984). This communication performer-audience helps intensifying the connection with rock and popular music through television (Fryer, 1997). The perfect example would be David Bowie performing Starman in 1979 and the impact he had since the moment he pointed to the camera (entry 7).

Moreover, another thing that contributed both to the popularity and importance of *Top of the Pops* was the studio audience. They were mainly teenagers whose only role was to be there dancing and enjoying the performances. This was their crucial market (Cubbit, 1984), however it was

not the only one. Thanks to its scheduling young teenagers would sit with their parents during the evening and watch the programme. This is why the show was made pop and rock music “acceptable” for parents. Besides, “music had to be portrayed as safe and deodorized; (...) harmless” (Fryer, 1997). This is closely related to what it has been said before about the mimed performances, which again shows us how the features that made the programme popular, were also the most used arguments against it.

Another issue that some academics, such as Donnelly (2004) or Cubbit (1984), have highlighted is how *TOTP* only played songs going up on the charts, never songs going down. Hence, the programme was quite optimistic with their representation of the music business. The programme also searched for a photogenic sense and focused in the image of the artist or his/her persona, as it has been mentioned before, making the selection of the songs or their quality seem less important. Therefore, the song choice that made the show hugely famous, was also another problem that some people might have had with the *Top of the Pops* and its ethos. Nevertheless, this never affected in a broad way to the popularity of the show.

During the 1980s, even though the show was still one of the most popular television shows in the UK (entry 6), with the increasing popularity of music videos, the producer Michael Hurlll made some minor changes to the set, duration and logo of the programme. However, there was a bigger problem. With the arrival of cable television and music channels specifically aimed at young audiences, such as the MTV (Frith, 1993), *Top of the Pops* decay began. MTV was the antithesis of *TOTP*. This new channel was broadcasting a huge variety of music programmes for the twenty-four hours, and it was

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more liberal (Goodwin, 1993). They offered a mix of new formats and new live music programmes, with other shows following the classic and old style.. Furthermore, during the 1990s and early 2000s the British programme was losing a big part of its viewership. The internet brought a great variety of pages where you could share, download, discover and watch music performances to taste (Beer, 2006). Therefore in 2004 the show was moved from BBC to BBC2 (entry 5) and finally, ended in 2006.

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