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[Bob Stanley on Tony Palmer's film All You Need Is Love](#)

At the tail end of the 1980s, journalist Nick Kent was on TV holding court on the Smiths. They were a great group, he said, no question. The man who had famously and perfectly described Keith Richards as “elegantly wasted” lounged in a plume of smoke. Then he went one step too far. In years to come, he prophesied, the Smiths would be considered the end of the line - the last great British rock group. Just as he spoke, in an abandoned warehouse in Manchester, the Stone Roses were about to take the stage. Very soon, they would render Morrissey's Manchester a piece of history: the NHS specs, the photo op under the Strangeways road sign, the canalside walks of A Taste of Honey - all would be timelocked in the mid-80s. The Stone Roses turned the contrast up and caused a pop revolution. Kent's quote was quickly forgotten.

For some time, I've wanted to write a history of modern pop, the period that began with rock'n'roll. I have had a few dozen conversations over cold drinks about start points, end points, teen culture, formats, haircuts, the importance of slang in lyrics, the involvement of the military-industrial complex. Most people can't see a clear ending to the saga, and, as time goes by, even the dawn of pop is shrouded in a fizz of shellac crackle. Here's my take: Elvis was the Big Bang, the boulder in the middle of the lake; everything since has been a ripple caused by the initial splash; the Beatles (almost as big); psychedelia (less so); punk (adrenalin shot for the old lady); acid house; and so on. Some may consider the Strokes, White Stripes or Arctic Monkeys to have been the ripples of this decade, which pretty much makes my point.

Pop's musical progression ended at some point in the early 1990s. The dance music scene, which had grown from disco and subsequently into house, thrillingly re-morphed every other month at the turn of that decade; finally it imploded with, on one hand, the endless recycling of happy hardcore hits (coming soon: Let Me Be Your Fantasy 08) and, on the other, Goldie's prog-junglist epic Mother, which ran for 60 minutes and five seconds. On either side of the Atlantic, Britpop and grunge signalled the final surrender: pop had eaten itself. Everything since (and I do think 2008 is proving to be a great pop year, don't get me wrong) has been variations on a theme. Ergo, the classic era is over.

Mostly, I've been talked out of writing this book and, of course, it would be a complete folly. Watching British documentary-maker Tony Palmer's All You Need Is Love (just released on DVD and screening in its entirety tomorrow and Saturday at London's BFI), I'm reminded why. A mammoth 17-part series on the history of popular music, it begins in Africa before moving into ragtime, jazz, blues, swing and so forth. Rock'n'roll doesn't make an appearance until episode 13. All You Need Is Love was screened in 1977. Palmer must have thought he had picked a pretty good time to cover a century's worth of popular music, with pop - and the arts generally - suffering a cultural recession, their own three-day week.

Even then, his timing was awry, and the last episode, entitled Imagine: New Directions, was laughably off the mark. Disco is dismissed in less than a sentence. Kraftwerk are ignored in favour of Tangerine Dream. As for

the rest (Black Oak Arkansas, Stomu Yamash'ta, Baker Gurvitz Army), it only seems proper to point out that hindsight is a fine thing. The series ends with a century of music flashing before our eyes to the soundtrack of Mike Oldfield's Ommadawn. When it was first broadcast, the Sex Pistols were simultaneously trashing their record label's offices, and pop was reborn.

On many levels, All You Need Is Love is a powerful brew. Palmer eschews straight narrative, and includes complete performances and extensive interviews rather than clips. And he gets the big names: to see an anonymous-looking man in his early 60s speaking eloquently about Tin Pan Alley, only to realise it is Hoagy Carmichael, is quite something. It makes you want to grab a camera and talk to Carole King, Debbie Harry, Prince, even Goldie, to get their story, to document this whole beautiful noise while we still can.

Palmer loves to antagonise, and this makes the whole series worth a look, in spite of its many faults. Episode 1 begins with a looming, distorted, sweaty red face: "This is Jerry Lee Lewis, the king of rock'n' roll." Even in early 1977, with Elvis at his lowest ebb, this was more than contentious. Soon we hear that the musical is America's greatest cultural contribution and that Leon Rosselson, a largely forgotten British singer with a smug, nasal delivery, is "the best of the contemporary troubadours". We are shown endless shots of slaves and dirt-poor southerners to remind us how much pop is stolen from Africa. This is something, according to the producer Jerry Wexler, that a "little white girl from Scarsdale" wouldn't understand as she screams at the Rolling Stones, a group that had "no suggestion of violation or consummation".

Inverted racism, blunt sexism, and simple wrongheadedness aside, Palmer manages to break pop's golden rule over and over: he lets his show get boring. The best episode is on ragtime, probably because it is the straightest tale and the least trodden road. Elsewhere, lengthy footage of some of the greats - Dizzy Gillespie, Johnnie Ray, Chuck Berry - performing with bored-stiff sidekicks in 1976 or 77 is profoundly depressing and misrepresentative. The racial-theft point (white doo-wop act the Diamonds, Paul Whiteman's Broadway take on jazz, Pat Boone singing Tutti Frutti) is overplayed. It also eats up airtime at the expense of Marie Lloyd, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Domino, George Jones, Joe Meek, the Kinks, the Velvet Underground and Marc Bolan, none of whom gets a mention.

Nik Cohn's Pop From the Beginning, published in 1969 (and reprinted since as Awopbopalooop Alopbamboom), showed that encapsulating the whole deal was not impossible. He snuck Frank Sinatra and Johnnie Ray into the intro, felt a little sympathy for unlikely firestarter Bill Haley, then - revving up - eulogised Elvis better than anyone. In just over 200 pages, he nailed it, the first golden era. It worked because Cohn was "hooked on image, on heroics" and always took dumb noise over high art.

It also worked because, though he was thorough and inclusive, he wasn't afraid to get personal - to play up his unlikely heroes (notably PJ Proby) and shoot down the big names. Bob Dylan and Rubber Soul, that was where it all went wrong for Cohn: "Right then, pop began to be something more than simple auto-noise, it developed pretensions, it turned into an art form, a religion even." And he was right. On a CBS television special in 1966, Leonard Bernstein described the Beach Boys' Surf's Up as "poetic, beautiful in its obscurity". Simple moronic noise (Louie Louie, Wild Thing, I Fought the Law, I Wanna Be Your Dog) would all be bypassed in All You Need Is Love, only to be lauded months later by a new wave of rock reductivists.

Many of these could have been found lurking in a Camden Town record shop called Rock On. Originally, in the early 1970s, this had been a couple of stalls, run by a rock'n'roll enthusiast called Ted Carroll. Mostly, the stalls stocked 45s because of space issues. This suited Carroll - the 45 was the perfect format for good, tough, classic pop. When the shop opened in 1975, the records were always cranked up loud and the door was always open, even in deep midwinter, to lure people in with raw noise. Carroll and his staff had broad taste and good contacts. Jon Savage, Shane MacGowan, Phil Lynott, Bobby Gillespie - they were all regulars. The place was an education. Bob Dylan visited once and bought half the stock.

Rock On was a breeding ground for pub rock, then punk rock, and eventually a whole alternative view of pop history. It brought together people who favoured the two-minutes-30 gutbucket thrill of a pop song - whether rockabilly, girl group, R&B, punk or soul - above everything.

Some of the 45s Carroll used to play have just been compiled on an Ace CD (the label grew out of the shop). Few were hits, but Rock On sold as many copies as they could lay their hands on: Amos Milburn's Chicken Shack Boogie, Jerry Byrne's frenetic rocker Lights Out, the Belfast Gypsies' Gloria's Dream, Peter Holsapple's Big Black Truck, the Shangri-Las' Give Him a Great Big Kiss - two dozen records that span decades and, in their way, share and inform pop history just as well as a 17-hour documentary. Each 45 gets your blood pumping, makes you want to dig deeper, makes you want to dance.

Writers and documentary-makers should always remember that dumb old pop music must never be taken too seriously, while also remembering that nothing in the world is more important. Nik Cohn knew this; Nick Kent didn't, and nor did Tony Palmer. You have to admire Palmer's ambition, and there are moments when he makes links you would never have thought of, makes sense of the difference between Chicago and New Orleans jazz in a single sentence. All You Need Is Love is vast, riveting, rambling - a life's work, and you will applaud its daring. The one thing it really lacks is love.

• **All You Need Is Love** is released by Voiceprint on Monday and will be shown in full at BFI Southbank, London SE1, tomorrow and Saturday. **Rock On** is out now on Ace

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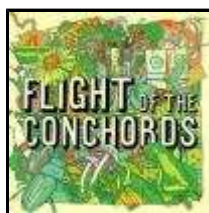
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Bestsellers



Hard Candy

Madonna



Flight Of The Conchords (Original Staging)

Flight of the Conchords



The Age Of The Understatement

The Last Shadow Puppets



E=MC 2

Mariah Carey



Third

Portishead



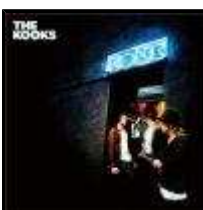
Rockferry

Duffy



Spirit

Leona Lewis



Konk

The Kooks



Bittersweet World

Ashlee Simpson



Accelerate

R.E.M.



When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold

Atmosphere



Shine A Light

The Rolling Stones



Rising Down

The Roots



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Last Night

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