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When rock was thin & pretty

All You Need Is Love was a '70s pop doc for the ages

Chris Knight, **National Post**

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It's tempting to think that the long-form documentary began with the work of Ken Burns. Certainly his multi-part series *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001) and *The War* (2007) have helped set the template for the genre. (If you edit movies on an Apple, the built-in software has a photo-zoom feature dubbed "The Ken Burns Effect.")

But this Tuesday sees the release of British director Tony Palmer's five-disc, 17-part music doc *All You Need Is Love*, which in 1977 took a wide-ranging look at the history, influences and directions of 20th-century popular music. Skip the introductory episode, which amounts to 51 minutes of "oh, the places we went and the people we met!" Just dive into episode 2, "God's Children," which finds the roots of rock 'n' roll in the black musical experience, beginning with the drums of Africa. (As the late jazz bandleader Art Blakey once intoned: "The drum is the most important instrument.")

There are some poignant juxtapositions. Recording executive Jerry Wexler discusses what might be deemed the "white-ification" of black music, noting: "Of course we made some mistakes. I shudder when I listen to some of the things we did to some of those records ... to make them into what we thought would be palatable to the white audience." This is immediately followed by footage of The Buck Ram Platters in frilly pink shirts singing *Only You* in near-castrato tones.

Episode 3, "I Can Hypnotise 'Dis Nation" (OK, not the most politically correct titles) covers ragtime, beginning with this nice single-word distillation: syncopation. It then looks at the life of Scott Joplin, who died in an insane asylum in 1916, but not before being discovered playing piano in the Maple Leaf Club in Sedalia, Mo. His Maple Leaf Rag ignited a musical movement.

Other episodes cover jazz, the blues, vaudeville, swing, R&B, country, folk and, as befits the series title, *The Beatles*, in which a very young-looking Paul McCartney says presciently: "Pop music is the classical music of now."

Part of the joy of this series is that Palmer tracked down and interviewed just about everyone in the business, so a lot of people who are now old or who have passed on deliver what amounts to a historical take on the subject at hand. (Roger McGuinn of *The Byrds* talks about getting into concerts by virtue of his long hair -- security guards assumed anyone shaggy was on the ticket.)

Of course, a 30-year-old history of any aspect of pop culture is going to be out of date. *All You Need Is Love*'s penultimate episode is devoted to glitter rock and features interviews with Donny and Marie Osmond. Still, some things never change. Reverend Jack Wyrzten laments in the final episode, "New Directions," that rock music has been shown to cause birth defects, including mental retardation: "I hate to think what the next generation is going to be like." No need to fear; the kids are still all right.

The "I have seen the future" prize must go to music critic Lester Bangs, who died in 1982. Talking in the final episode over footage of the Rolling Stones in concert, he says the problem with rock myths is they grow old. "Recent pictures of Mick Jagger bear this out well," he says. "His face is turning all flebby and is hanging down 2 his eyes

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