Twenty-five minutes. Twelve songs. 12,603 fans crowded into the 1964 Civic Arena. An airport motorcade followed by 4,000 screaming fans.

Statistics never tell the story of a cultural phenomenon. The numbers could never detail the real fascination people still have with one late summer evening in Pittsburgh: September 14, 1964.

Legends are usually created over years and years. Historical magic is not a predictable event. Yet everyone who listened knew the sound they were hearing carried a resonance that would outlast the usefulness of a 45 r.p.m. Everyone watching could see the up-and-down motion of a bass guitar and the back-and-forth jerking of a rhythm guitar easily flowing into a slow motion fade, like a historical documentary, an anthology. The Beatles Anthology.

Like everything else in their fascinating history, the pre-issue sales of the 368-page Anthology (promoted as the only book about the Beatles actually written by the Beatles) broke all records. The book follows the commercially and historically successful video documentary by the same title, which actually followed the commercially and artistically successful music CD by the same title.

Anyone who was in the vicinity of a television to see the Beatles performance on the “Ed Sullivan Show” on Feb. 9, 1964, or at one of the concerts in the few lucky cities for the concert tour, knew they
PAUL, GEORGE, JOHN, AND RINGO AT THEIR PITTSBURGH PRESS CONFERENCE.
occurred in New York City. Not one hubcap was stolen. Not one pocket was picked. Legends are made of that kind of stuff.

The Sullivan show was watched by the largest documented audience in history (73 million—65 percent of all American television viewers). The morning after, the world viewed this boy-act a little differently. Serious media were taking them seriously. The Plaza Hotel was the site of a record-breaking press conference. Time and The New Yorker found themselves attending a press conference to determine if the “Beatle Boot” was a cultural adjustment. The Saturday Evening Post sent a photographer with $100,000 worth of equipment to shoot a cover. Uncommon notice was being paid by even today’s media standards.

The unrepeated success of the Beatles and the world’s timeless love affair with them has never been adequately explained, though there is no shortage of efforts to try. From Princeton to Pittsburgh, Oxford to Ohio, universities offer courses and programs on various aspects of the 40-year old subject. I taught a course at Duquesne University on the Beatles’ effect upon modern history which attracted quite a mix of students including a 23-year old teacher, a pilot for a major airline, and a 94-year old architect.

The Beatles performed only 46 dates in approximately 36 U.S. cities between 1964 and 1966. The group broke all attendance records as well as any album sales and merchandising sales records that had ever existed at that time. It was obvious at an early stage in the Beatles’ years that they were capable of selling far more than music and records. Perhaps the term “marketability” cut its teeth on their experience. Certainly the concept of merchandising became an art form starting with the Beatles, and still today the merchandising of the Beatles has made many millionaires.

Other than some small-scale reproduction of television puppets by another great marketer, Walt Disney himself, the Beatles were the first icons to be merchandised, beginning in 1963. No precedent existed for their manager, Brian Epstein, to emulate. He saw the merchandising solely as a public relations

were living through a piece of history that would be told over and over for years. You just know a historical moment when you live through one. And the Beatles created an entire historical, cultural and social phenomenon from 1962 (in Great Britain) to 1970. That their CDs are still going platinum 35 years after the albums’ original issues (without any ads, sales hype, or promotion) is a phenomenon.

To understand the phenomenon is an imperfect science. What is it about their music? What was it about their 25-minute, 12-song concerts, all costing an average $5.25 per ticket? What was it about their interviews that makes it all valid and provocative after all these years? Colleges around the world offer more than a casual course on the Beatles in history and music. They are a subject no longer treated as a piece of pop culture. Yes, the image they carried for a generation of underrepresented youths is important; but more remarkable is what they came to represent for the future. Hope. Confidence. Spiritedness. Aloof but intelligent. Passionate.

In America alone, they carried their own brand of good music, quick wit, genuine passion, and intelligence. It is said that during the 10 minutes the Beatles appeared on the Sullivan Show, not one crime

THE SULLIVAN SHOW WAS WATCHED BY THE LARGEST AUDIENCE IN HISTORY. THE MORNING AFTER, THE WORLD VIEWED THIS BOY-ACT A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY.
tool to help fans feel good. Consequently, there were billions of dollars at stake—which certainly was not accumulated by the Beatles themselves. From the perspective of anyone who has seen the “Beatle Conventions” today, even 37 years later, it appears they are still an industry based around the sale of plastic pins, bubble gum cards, pencils, bootleg CDs and dozens of other “collectibles.” From Liverpool, England, to East Liverpool, Ohio, newly created fans and middle-aged oldies gather to get the latest-issue CD, trade an original “butcher cover,” or track down a bobbing head Beatle doll in its original packaging.

The most discriminating and successful collector is the one who realizes that no one can possess a collection of everything the Beatles produced. There is the merchandise produced from 1963 to 1969 that has the Beatles name on it: wigs, bedspreads, badges, belts, jigsaw puzzles, disc racks, trays.... Then there is the variety of music produced and not released by the Beatles: live concerts, studio sessions. There are also the autographs: on album covers, signed letters, words to songs scratched out in their own handwriting on the back of a Sardi’s restaurant menu. Historical gold to a collector. Coveted archeological treasures to a fan wanting to return to the Mecca for just a touch of the magic.

Even the most self-assured non-interested fan would have to be impressed to see John Lennon’s collarless touring suit on display. To hold a copy of the handwritten words to “Yesterday,” scratched out in Sir Paul McCartney’s own handwriting, is a thrill. It is a form of history only explainable by the magic that surrounded the entire time, the entire epic.

My own collection is varied, yet decidedly discriminating. I have most of the bootleg albums, and of course the usual variety of merchandise. But I’ve gone beyond common collectibles into just about anything you can think of—from a “Butcher cover” to the last Music Union cards ever issued to the Beatles to autographs to original art by John, Paul, and early Beatle Stu Sutcliffe.

For Pittsburgh to have been selected as a first U.S. tour city in 1964 is quite a distinction. In 1990, my husband and I had the honor of interviewing Paul an hour before his tour concert at Wembley, England. At that time, he explained to us Pittburghers that he felt quite akin to our city’s “working class people.” He personally selected Pittsburgh for his first solo return tour purposely because, he said, “Pittsburgh and its people remind me of my own hometown of Liverpool.”

The historical importance of their visit lingers as significantly as the magic of their entire existence. Many books about the Beatles actually read like works of fiction—too perfect a story to have been real. The metaphors and symbolism are chilling. It would have to be a great work of invention for such a story to be true and have the consequences it did.

The Abbey Road album is an appropriate example. From beginning to end, it’s a masterful work for a story that needed the stars to be lined up just right. At the time it was produced, Abbey Road was arguably not known to be the last album by the Beatles. Yet it works and weaves the rise and ending to one of the greatest musical epics better than an afterthought. To the final chord—the final note—the final phrase—Lennon and McCartney capped their collaboration the way no one else could have written it about them. “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

McCartney selected Pittsburgh for his first solo return tour because, “Pittsburgh and its people remind me of my own hometown of Liverpool,” he said.