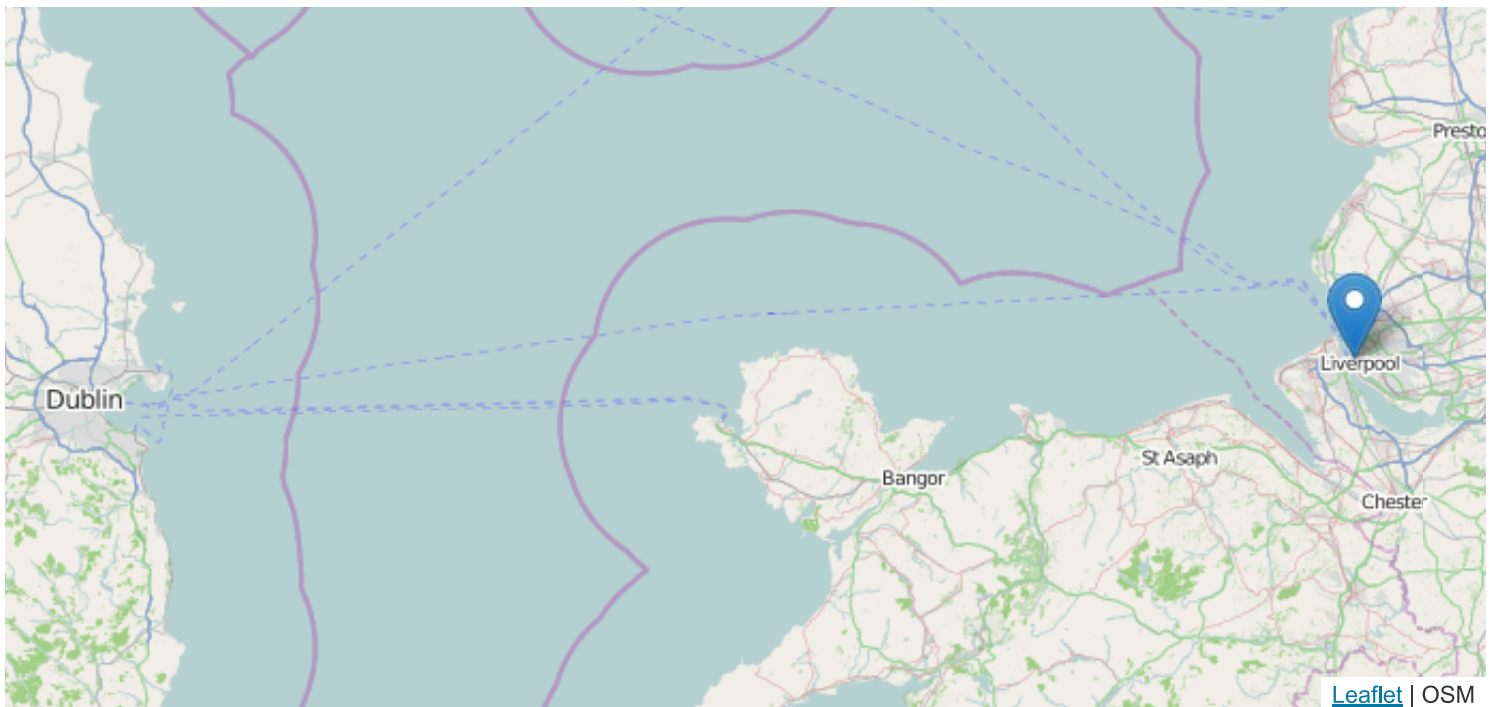


Issue 23 – Music – Growing up as The Beatles

ISSUE 23

# GROWING UP AS THE BEATLES

– BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER –



They were just another boy band, a gaggle of teenagers with too much

energy. They'd meet up in the basement of a friend's suburban home, horsing around and playing guitar. One mischievously began carving his name on a wood wall board— J-O-H — before being smacked in the head by the friend's mum. He'd finish the job later, adding the final "N".

That piece of graffiti etched by John Lennon is but one of the curiosities you'll see on tours of the Casbah Coffee Club where the band that became the Beatles got its start in 1959. The friend was former Beatles drummer Pete Best and the mum their first manager, Mona Best, who opened the coffeehouse that August to give the boys a place to play.

Paul McCartney painted the ceiling of one room in a rainbow of colours, using cans of leftover paint, says Roag Best, Pete's much younger brother and a Casbah tour guide. It was here, in a space so tiny you can extend your arms and touch both walls, that they set up their equipment. They were the Quarrymen, named for Quarry Bank High School where Lennon was a less than stellar student. They were just one of 300 bands in Liverpool at the time.

And they weren't very good.

But when the boys returned from Hamburg, Germany, where they played for hours night after night, honing their craft, the band had changed. Customers at the Casbah didn't expect much, says Best. In fact, they were annoyed that such a mediocre band, now called the Beatles, had been

booked. They played their first song and the mood shifted. As word spread, crowds began pouring into the club's Spiderweb room where Lennon scratched more graffiti on its red ceiling: "John — I'm back."

## **FROM THE CASBAH TO THE CAVERN**

The Beatles drew as many as 1,500 people to the Casbah, dangerously crowding the basement and spilling onto the lawn, upsetting neighbours. Mona Best booked them into larger dance halls around Liverpool and finally convinced the owners of the Cavern Club, who preferred jazz over the new rock sound, to give them a chance.

The Cavern was a teenage hangout in the basement of an old fruit warehouse in downtown Liverpool. It did not serve alcohol so it catered to teens came during lunch and afternoon tea. It was here that Brian Epstein first heard the Beatles and took over as their manager, putting them on the road to stardom. From 1961 to 1963 the Beatles performed at the Cavern 292 times, earning just £5 at the beginning, £300 at the end. Crowds generated so much heat in the humid basement that condensation ran down the walls, shorting out the band's equipment.

The Cavern Club was torn down and has since been rebuilt with the same bricks on part of its original site on Mathew Street, a pedestrian walkway lined with bars, restaurants and nightclubs. The club now serves alcohol and has two stages drawing a range of artists from local bands to rock stars.

A Beatles tribute band plays most Saturday nights.

Outside, where customers wait to be admitted, a Wall of Fame has bricks inscribed with more than 1,800 names of artists who have performed here, among them Jimi Hendrix, Elton John, The Who, Queen and Adele. A life-size statue of Lennon stands alongside. Figures of all four Beatles perch on the second-story edifice of the Beatles-themed Hard Days Night Hotel around the corner.

## **TOURING BOYHOOD HOMES**

What was it about these Liverpool boys that singled them out from all the other local bands? Visitors may get a hint on the National Trust Beatles Childhood Homes Tour that takes them inside Lennon's and McCartney's homes. Both homes are small, so the tour has limited space and often books up months in advance.

Lennon lived with his Aunt Mimi and Uncle George from age five to 23 in a duplex with a cozy garden. He cut the grass with a manual mower to earn pocket money, says tour guide Paula Fay. From his tree house John would peer over the garden wall to the Salvation Army children's home, Strawberry Field. He'd climb the wall to fool around with the kids and was scolded for it by Aunt Mimi, to which he'd reply: "They won't hang me for it."

The lyrics to "Strawberry Fields Forever" contain the phrases "in my tree" and "nothing to get hung about," reminds Fay. "John would have more than one meaning in a song lyric," she says.

Inside the home, visitors step into John's bedroom where pictures of Elvis and Brigitte Bardot hang above a twin bed, and pass by the bathroom mirror he must have used for his first shave. They linger in the living room where he'd practice music with McCartney and George Harrison on Sunday afternoons.

Aunt Mimi didn't care for either boy. She called George "that little scruff" because of his thick Liverpool accent, says Fay. When Paul came knocking on the back door Mimi would roll her eyes and call to John, "Your little friend's here." Fay says Mimi also didn't like John spending so much time devoted to music, telling him: "The guitar is all right as a hobby, John, but you'll never make a living at it."

After Lennon became famous, Beatles fans flocked to the house, upsetting Aunt Mimi. To appease her, he took her on a trip to Dorset and settled her in a home she thought was a holiday rental. When he asked her if she liked it, she said she did and he replied that was good because he had bought it for her—with the money he earned from his "hobby."

At McCartney's house there was no domineering matriarch, so the boys practiced there more often. When Paul was fourteen, his mother, Mary,

died of breast cancer at age 47 and his father, Jim, took over raising him and his brother, Michael. "My dad was very good about letting us rehearse here," says McCartney on an audio that plays during tours of the home.

The family was always musical, says guide Sylvia Hall. Dad played piano by ear and the family sang in harmony, a talent Paul brought to the band. The guitar was his favourite instrument. When he received a trumpet as a birthday present, she says he exchanged it for a guitar, changing the strings around because he's left-handed.

"Love Me Do" and "When I'm 64" were written here, says Hall. When the boys were working on "She Loves You," McCartney's dad suggested they change the lyrics from "Yes, yes, yes" to "Yeah, yeah, yeah." The 1963 single with its catchy refrain became a hit.

Though McCartney's dad was supportive of the boys and their band, he was strict about his sons' upbringing. In the back yard, Hall points to a red drainpipe on the exterior of the house. When Paul missed his curfew, his dad would lock him out and he'd shimmy up the pipe and climb into a first floor window.

## **FINDING THE BEATLES' BACKSTORY**

The musical collaboration that made rock history began in the summer of 1957, when a mutual friend introduced McCartney to Lennon, then nearly

17, at a church social where his Quarrymen were performing. John invited him to join the band, but Paul couldn't take him up on the offer until he returned from scout camp. Later, Paul asked John to allow George, then fourteen, to join the group. John said he didn't want "a kid" in his band, but changed his mind once he heard him play guitar.

The tour bus I am on passes the Anglican cathedral where Paul auditioned for a spot in the choir at age eleven—and was rejected because he couldn't read music. It makes a stop at the red, iron gates supported by graffiti-covered pillars outside the former grounds of Strawberry Field. The sign at the entrance to Penny Lane is another photo op. Brannan, the tour guide, says the boys often waited at the bus stop near the top of the lane, observing their surroundings, as described in lyrics to the song with the clanging streetcar beat:

*"Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes*

*There beneath the blue suburban skies"*

The barber, the banker with his motorcar, the nurse selling poppies and the fireman with his hourglass—beer in a glass large enough to last the lunch hour—all made it into the song. Brannan points out a few of the buildings that remain from the era.

More details of the Beatles' rise from obscurity in Liverpool to

international fame are told at The Beatles Story, a museum and visitor attraction in two Liverpool locations, the historic Albert Dock and the pier for the ferry across the Mersey River.

Exhibits explain how the Beatles' rock sound evolved from skiffle, a mix of folk, jazz and blues popular in America and adopted by Brit kids in the 1950s. Elvis also was a big influence on teens in Britain and the Beatles idolized him.

Other bits of trivia dear to the hearts of Beatles fans can be unearthed here. Paul and George became friends when they rode the school bus together. The Beatles adopted their mop hairstyle while in Hamburg. George was deported from Hamburg because he was too young to get a work permit and had entered Germany illegally. Ringo Starr replaced Pete Best as drummer, a move still shrouded in mystery. The word "Beatlemania" was first used in 1963 to describe the crowd reaction to a performance in London. When the Pam Am jet carrying the Beatles landed in New York in 1964 on their first trip to America the screams from 5,000 fans at the airport were so loud onlookers thought the sound was a malfunction in the jet's engines.

## **BRINGING BIG BUCKS TO LIVERPOOL**

Liverpool remains a lively, young city with about 80,000 students in its three universities. "People come here with low expectations and are



surprised by the shopping, restaurants and attractions," says Phil Coppel, a tour guide and Beatles expert. It was always an important port city, but international tourism didn't pick up until the Beatles became famous. Interest really kicked off after Lennon's death in 1980, he says.

Not everyone in Liverpool recognized the potential the Beatles brought to the city. In a debate about city development in the 1970s Coppel recalls a councilman saying, "What have the Beatles ever done for Liverpool?"

Arguably the most popular rock band in history, whose music crosses generations, the Beatles now bring three million people a year to Liverpool, contributing almost £400 million to the economy.

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