

PART ONE

Background

1 Six boys, six Beatles: the formative years, 1950–1962

DAVE LAING

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.¹ ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Introduction

The chapter deals with the formative years of both the Beatles and the six youths who were group members in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Stuart Sutcliffe and Pete Best, who left the band in 1961 and 1962 respectively. Although it cannot claim to be a complete inventory (to borrow a term from Gramsci in the quotation above), it is intended to present the boys and the band as products of the historical process in the England of the 1950s through the presentation of some of the “infinity of traces” deposited in them by that historical period.

In this account of the dual formation of the group and the six individuals, I will discuss first the various networks within which the six were enmeshed as children, adolescents and young men: those of the family and social class, of the school and youth culture peer group. The second part of the chapter describes and analyses the musical factors and features that coalesced to form first the Quarrymen skiffle group and then the early Beatles.

The data upon which this chapter is based are drawn from published biographies and autobiographies. These publications are of three types: authorized biographies such as those of Shepherd, Davies, Miles, and the Beatles “themselves”;² unauthorized biographies such as Goldman’s, Connolly’s, and Sullivan’s psychoanalytical volume;³ and the memoirs of colleagues, friends, and family such as Epstein, Cynthia Lennon, and Pauline Sutcliffe.⁴ The overall quality of this material is uneven, with a number of errors and discrepancies that have confused the general understanding of the early years of the Beatles.⁵ A useful corrective to much of this is the testimony of Bill Harry, the editor of the *Mersey Beat* newspaper from 1961. Many of the articles that appeared in the newspaper are available on his website (www.triumphpc.com/mersey-beat).

War babies

The United Kingdom was at war with Germany and its allies between 1939 and 1945. All six boys were born during that conflict. John Lennon, Ringo Starr (Richard Starkey), Pete Best and Stuart Sutcliffe were born in 1940, John and Ringo in Liverpool, Pete in India, and Stuart in Scotland. Paul McCartney and George Harrison were Liverpool-born, in 1942 and 1943 respectively. Although all were infants during the wartime period, the conflict continued to shape British society and culture for at least the first decade of peacetime.

One minor but pertinent index of this was John Lennon's middle name. Until he replaced it with "Ono," John's second forename was Winston, after the British war leader Winston Churchill. It was a permanent reminder of his status as a war baby (the name was also very popular for baby boys in Jamaica, a British colony until 1960) – and there was a set of Churchill's works on display in his aunt Mimi and uncle George's house. This name became something of a minor obsession with John (perhaps because Churchill remained a current political figure until the late 1950s, and regained the post of prime minister from 1951 to 1955). The biographical literature provides three instances. A Beatles' instrumental piece included in a Hamburg set-list was named "Winston's Walk,"⁶ and the film *Backbeat* shows John telling an anti-German joke onstage in Hamburg: "My name's John Winston Lennon, Winston after the butcher." Finally, Paul told his biographer of a masturbation session involving several of the Quarrymen in a darkened room. The ritual was for each boy in turn to call out the name of a suitable female sex symbol ("Brigitte Bardot," etc.) but when it was Lennon's turn he deflated the erotic mood by saying, "Winston Churchill." Even the discarding of the name had some anti-imperialist significance, according to Yoko, who told one biographer that John disliked its "implication that he was somehow a subscriber to the spirit of the upper-class British empire and all that."⁷

As a major seaport, Liverpool was one of the main targets of German bombing in the early part of World War II. Paul McCartney's biographer Barry Miles summarized the scale and impact of these air raids:

From the night of 17 August 1940 until 10 January 1942 there were sixty-eight raids and over five hundred air-raid warnings. Every night thousands of people huddled together in basements and bomb shelters as high-explosive, incendiary and parachute bombs rained down upon the city, killing 2,650, seriously injuring over 2,000 others and leaving much of the city centre in ruins. The dead were buried in mass graves in Anfield cemetery. Over 10,000 of the homes in Liverpool were completely destroyed and over two-thirds of all homes were seriously damaged.⁸

During the war years, the whole country was militarized. Over 5 million men and women served in the armed forces, but none of the six boys lost a close family member in the war, although the bomber pilot father of Eric Griffiths, a founder member of the Quarrymen, did not return from a raid over Germany. Millions more people were mobilized on the “home front.” Jim McCartney (Paul’s father) was rejected by the armed forces because of defective hearing, but he worked in a munitions factory and was a volunteer fireman at night. Stuart Sutcliffe’s father was directed to move from Scotland to Birkenhead on Merseyside to take up a post in the shipyard that was essential for the war effort. In many cities, young children were evacuated to the countryside, although it seems that none of the future Beatles was evacuated from Liverpool.

Even after the air raids had ceased, daily life was subordinated to the war effort, most notably through rationing. Consumption of twelve foodstuffs was placed under restriction in 1940 and 1941.⁹ These ranged from meat, butter, and cooking fat to sugar, sweets (candy), and chocolate. In 1940, clothing was rationed and each citizen had an annual number of coupons that could be exchanged in various combinations at clothing stores. The British rock and roll singer Marty Wilde recalled that gray, brown, and black “were all the colours I associate with the war. Almost everything was grey. It wasn’t until the Fifties that all colours started to come in clothes.”¹⁰

The depleted state of the British economy meant that rationing was not lifted at the end of World War II. Of the rationed items, only preserves (jams and marmalade) were de-rationed and freely available before 1952. In that year, tea was taken “off ration,” but meat, butter, sweets (candy) and chocolate were not de-rationed until the middle of 1954. Clothing coupons remained in force until 1948. There were also severe restrictions on imports from abroad, a decision taken to protect Britain’s limited reserves of foreign currency. Among the commodities affected were musical instruments, and it was not possible to import American guitars until the end of the 1950s, when the rock and roll singer Cliff Richard bought one of the first Fender Stratocasters to be seen in Britain for his guitarist, Hank Marvin of the Shadows. The inaccessibility of American instruments in the 1950s meant that the first guitars of aspiring young players were often poorly made imports from continental Europe.

While the wartime army was gradually demobilized after 1945, conscription or National Service was introduced in 1947 for young men. National Service cast a shadow over members of the Beatles until, in 1959, the government announced that National Service would be abolished in 1961, the year in which Ringo, John, Pete and Stu would have become eligible for call-up. The fear of conscription had been enough to prevent Ringo

committing himself to a full-time career as a musician with leading Liverpool group Rory Storm and the Hurricanes. When he heard that National Service was to be abolished, his first thought was “‘Great, now we can play,’ and I left the factory and turned professional with Rory.”¹¹ Paul McCartney went further by hypothesizing that if National Service had not been abolished, and if John, in particular, had been forced to do two years’ military service, the Beatles would have split up: “So that was great luck, the government just stopped it in time, allowing us the parting of the waves, and we went through and we had the freedom and the sixties.”¹² The band had, in fact, been directly affected in 1960, when a drummer called Norman Chapman, who had played with the Beatles for three weeks, received his conscription papers.¹³

British popular culture was saturated with war stories, humour, and references during the 1950s. Second World War movies, made in both the US and Britain, poured into the cinemas, war stories featured in children’s illustrated magazines, and Lennon’s favourite radio series, *The Goon Show*, had its roots in the anarchic humour of World War II conscripts.¹⁴

Family life

In a classic study published in the 1950s, the British sociologist Peter Townsend made a distinction between the immediate family and the extended family. Of the six households in which the boys grew up, all except that of John Lennon conformed to the immediate family model of “one or both parents and their unmarried children living in one household.”¹⁵ However, if the model is limited to the ideal type of “both parents” living with their children, only the Harrisons fully qualify. As Peter Brown put it, “George was the only Beatle whose childhood was not marred by divorce [or] death.”¹⁶ The position of each household was as follows.

Paul McCartney lived with his father Jim (a cotton salesman), mother Mary (a nurse and midwife), and younger brother Michael, until his mother died in 1956, when he was fourteen. John Lennon lived from the age of five with his childless maternal aunt Mimi and uncle George Smith, owner of a small dairy, who died when John was fifteen. John’s father Alfred, a ship’s steward, had separated from his mother Julia when John was three, and Julia had given him up to Mimi when she found a new partner, Bobby Dykins, with whom she had two daughters. Julia died in a road accident when John was seventeen. George Harrison lived with his bus driver father Harold, mother Louise, and older siblings Harry, Louise, and Peter. George’s mother gave ballroom dancing lessons, and his father was a trade unionist and committee member of a bus workers’ social club, where the Beatles

(as the Quarrymen) once performed. Ringo Starr, born Richard Starkey, was an only child whose bakery worker father Richard separated from his mother Elsie when he was three. As a child, Ringo spent long periods in hospital with peritonitis and, later, pleurisy. Elsie supported herself and her son through housework and as a barmaid, remarrying when Ringo was fourteen. His stepfather was Harry Graves, a painter and decorator from Romford, near London. Pete Best lived with his Anglo-Indian mother Mona, his grandmother, his boxing promoter father Johnny, and brother Rory. Mona met and married Johnny, who was from a Liverpoolian family, when the latter was serving in the British Army in India. When Pete was fifteen, his parents separated and his father left the family home. His mother later had a child by Neil Aspinall, the Beatles' road manager. Stuart Sutcliffe lived with his father Charles, schoolteacher mother Martha (known as Millie), and sisters Joyce and Pauline. Each of his parents worked away from home for long periods. After his war work, Charles joined the merchant navy as an engineer in 1945. Millie never liked Liverpool and around 1952 she temporarily returned to Scotland to work. She was a member of the Labour Party and an active worker for local Member of Parliament Harold Wilson, who would become Prime Minister in 1964.

These brief family portraits show that only the Harrisons were a nuclear family unaffected by death, divorce, or separation; while the Sutcliffe household was not broken, Stu's sister wrote that with her husband away at sea, Millie "essentially . . . became a single parent."¹⁷ John's adolescence was the most disturbed, by separation from his mother and the deaths of George and Julia.

Townshend defined the extended family as relatives of the immediate family "who live in one, two or more households, usually in a single locality, and who see each other every day, or nearly every day."¹⁸ Townshend derived his definition from a study of a strongly working class district of East London. In the six families of the Beatles, both John and Paul were part of an extended family. In John's case, this principally involved his regular contact with his mother, especially in his teenage years, although Julia and Millie had two other sisters, and Stuart's sister Pauline has written that "one of John's uncles was Paul's English teacher."¹⁹ In the case of the McCartneys, there was a strong link with the family of his paternal uncle, who had played in a band with Paul's father in the 1920s; and Barry Miles writes of "a large extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins"²⁰ who gave direct support after the death of Paul's mother. In his authorized biography, Paul mentions the Communist husband of a cousin who would regularly visit his father and indulge in political argument.

The existence of an extended family is predicated on the geographical immobility of generations, and five of the six Beatles had roots in Liverpool

stretching back for two generations or more. Beyond that point, ancestors of John, Paul, and Ringo have been traced to Ireland, making these three part of the considerable Liverpool Irish community. However, the biographers of George, Ringo, and Pete do not refer to any wider family network within Liverpool. This may imply that none of these lived within an extended family network, or simply that such issues are of no interest to biographers of rock stars. Stuart Sutcliffe had no local extended family, because of the mobility of his parents, who had moved from Edinburgh in Scotland to Merseyside when Stuart was two. Similarly, no local extended family existed on Pete's mother's side of the family, as she was Anglo-Indian.

Two further features of the family background are religious affiliation and social class. While the 1950s was an era when observance of the main Christian religions was in decline in England as a whole, in certain areas it remained a potent force with sectarian connotations. Such affiliations with either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism had been an important component of Liverpool Irish culture, and Paul's mother was an ardent Catholic, as was Stuart's Scottish-born mother. In his contribution to *The Beatles Anthology*, Ringo stated that as a child he "was a Protestant, my mother had been a member of the Orange Lodge,"²¹ an indication that this was Ulster Protestantism, a virulent strain of nonconformist Christianity that contrasted with the less intense Anglicanism that led Mimi to send John to the Woolton Sunday school and enrol him in the church choir. Ringo added, in what can be presumed to be a deadpan tone, that in Liverpool the Irish Protestants would "beat up" the Irish Catholics on St Patrick's Day, and the reverse would occur on July 12, "Orangeman's Day."²²

Biographers and historians have differed widely in their evaluation of the social and economic position of the family of each Beatle. In *Postwar*, a history of Europe since 1945, Tony Judt (an Englishman teaching at New York University) stated confidently that the Beatles "came from the Liverpool working class, with the exception of Paul McCartney who was a notch or two above."²³ Dominic Sandbrook, in his account of the UK in the 1950s, opined that only Ringo "had a genuine claim to working-class origins,"²⁴ possibly echoing Ian McDonald's comment that "the only working class member of the group was Starr."²⁵ Sandbrook disqualified George Harrison (the son of a trade unionist and public housing tenant) from the working class because "his childhood had been reasonably comfortable."²⁶ A third commentator, Paul's authorized biographer Barry Miles, wrote that John was "middle class, the product of a broken home," whereas Paul was "from a warm working-class family."²⁷

These striking disagreements serve to confirm Henry Sullivan's observation that "the British class system is slippery,"²⁸ and his further contention that "Paul's social background belonged in that shadowy area of the British

class structure between the working class and the lower middle class”²⁹ can serve as a general statement about the six Beatles as a whole.

The “slippery” character of the class system is in large part a matter of definition. A Marxist approach based on the relationship of individual economic agents to the “means of production” would distinguish between George Smith and Johnny Best as entrepreneurs or small-business owners and everyone else as employees of various kinds. The official categories of employment used by British government agencies are based on job status. They place professionally qualified workers such as nurses, engineers, and teachers in the lower middle class, above skilled working class occupations such as bus-driving and unskilled work such as that of Elsie Starkey. A third dimension that should be taken into account is the perception of individuals and families of their own position in the social hierarchy and their aspirations for the future. The individual with the greatest awareness in this respect seems to have been John’s aunt Mimi, and Sullivan speaks for most commentators when he writes that “Mimi’s class ideals were those of the bourgeoisie.”³⁰ Several authors have recounted her initial snobbish disdain for George because of his broad local accent. Mimi’s ideals, of course, provided something for John to rebel against.

The boundary between lower middle and working class was extremely porous, not only because individuals or members of different generations of a family could easily move “up” or “down” the social hierarchy, but because in the 1950s members of these adjacent social classes shared a common culture that might be based on religion, politics, or moral schema. This was most emphatically the case for the war baby generation whose middle class and working class members were brought together by changes in the British school system and by the emergence of a youth culture based primarily on music.

School, work, and youth culture

The British secondary school system was radically reorganized by the 1944 Education Act,³¹ a meritocratic measure that introduced a tripartite structure in the state school sector of grammar, secondary modern, and technical schools. Access to grammar schools was via success in the “11-plus” examination, taken by all final year primary school students. Primary schooling, from the age of five to eleven, was co-educational (boys and girls together), and often schools were run by religious denominations, Anglican, Roman Catholic, or Jewish.

Across England, the number of children admitted to grammar schools averaged about 30 per cent,³² although this varied between areas. Paul

McCartney was one of only four out of ninety children at Joseph Williams Primary School to do well enough to be awarded a place at the prestigious Liverpool Institute. Five of the six Beatles passed the 11-plus and entered single-sex grammar schools on Merseyside: Lennon went to Quarry Bank High School, Best to Liverpool Collegiate, McCartney and Harrison to the Liverpool Institute, and Sutcliffe to Prescott Grammar School. Almost inevitably, because of his long absence from primary school through illness, Ringo failed the exam and went to Dingle Vale Secondary Modern school.

Although numerous working class children attended grammar schools, many failed to adapt to the academic environment.³³ Among them were John and George. Both left school early, John to go to art college and George to find work.

Stuart had a parent who had attended grammar school, and he passed the examinations, as eventually did Paul and Pete. All three had plans for further study. Stu attended Liverpool College of Art, where he met John, while Pete and Paul had nascent plans to train as schoolteachers. When the offer was made for the Beatles to play in Hamburg in summer 1960, these plans were put on hold (permanently, as it turned out).

George and Ringo were the only Beatles who ever had paid employment outside music. Ringo had a succession of full-time jobs after leaving secondary modern school with no examination passes. These included working as a delivery boy for British Rail, barman-waiter on the Mersey ferry, and apprentice joiner. While at school, George had a Saturday job as a butcher's delivery boy. After school, he was apprenticed as an electrician at a department store.

According to the biographical literature, Paul was the only Beatle to benefit culturally from the school syllabus. Through his English teacher, Alan Durband, he was introduced to a wide range of poetry and drama, from Shakespeare to Beckett.³⁴ However, grammar schools and art colleges were also informal incubators of unofficial youth culture as students shared and exchanged new knowledge of music, fashion, films, and books.

In the 1950s the new generation-specific youth cultures existed alongside, and sometimes in tension or conflict with, traditional institutions for the socialization of children. As a young child, John Lennon attended a Church of England Sunday school, was a member of the church choir, and, later, attended a youth club attached to the church. Paul was a Boy Scout, Ringo a Sea Scout, and Stu a member of the Air Training Corps, while George was a motor racing enthusiast, attending the 1955 Aintree Grand Prix. However, none of the future Beatles seems to have been a special fan of either of Liverpool's fanatically supported soccer teams, Liverpool and Everton.

Against that was set the discovery of rock and roll through radio broadcasts and the records discovered by schoolmates. A more directly confrontational practice was the subversion of school uniform through adopting styles of dress associated with the “Teddy boy” subculture.³⁵ The Liverpool Institute, attended by George and Paul, had a school uniform of black shoes, gray flannel trousers, blazer, white shirt, and tie. George (but not Paul) customized his Teddy boy clothes to wear to school. George’s home-made outfit included a cast-off box jacket of his brother’s and a pair of flannel trousers whose legs were “drainpiped” or narrowed. He also had a Teddy boy “quiff” hairstyle.³⁶

Simon Frith and Howard Horne have documented the important role of local art colleges in disseminating unorthodox ideas and cultural practices, as well as the time and space they provided for artistic (including musical) experimentation.³⁷ At Liverpool College of Art, John was introduced by Stu and Bill Harry to the work of the American beat generation, and Paul has said that John was a “bohemian Teddy boy” at art college.³⁸ The Sutcliffe–Harry–Lennon circle occasionally overlapped with a nascent British beat scene,³⁹ and Royston Ellis, a youthful beat poet,⁴⁰ was reportedly backed by John, Paul, and George at a poetry reading in a Liverpool coffee bar. John and Stu also received lurid publicity as beatniks and bohemians in July 1960, when a national newspaper published photographs of their pad at Gambier Terrace under the headline “The Beatnik Horror.”⁴¹

Bill Harry encouraged John’s humorous writings, eventually publishing them in 1961 under the pseudonym “Beatcomber” (a pun on the national newspaper humorist Beachcomber) in early issues of Harry’s local music paper *Mersey Beat*. John was drawn to comedy performance; he went to see variety shows at Liverpool Empire, starring acts such as Morecambe and Wise, Jimmy James, and Robb Wilton,⁴² and he had begun to write poems and nonsense stories influenced by Edward Lear, Stanley Unwin, the Goons, and others at a very early age. When these were published in book form in 1968,⁴³ Michael Wood described Lennon’s humour as mainly composed of jokes that “have already seen good service in most grammar schools in this country.”⁴⁴

Early music training and experience

While the rise of rock and roll is often portrayed in terms of a generation gap or clash, each of the six Beatles received encouragement from parents or other relatives in their early musical endeavours. The major exception to this process was John Lennon’s Aunt Mimi, who often displayed hostility

to his practice sessions and performances with the Quarrymen and the Beatles, although she did buy him a guitar.

Of the future Beatles, only George Harrison and Pete Best had no musical experience prior to the skiffle and rock and roll era. Each of the others received musical training or instruction in the years before 1956. The Sutcliffe children had piano lessons at an early age, and Stuart also sang in a church choir. At the other extreme, Ringo first beat out a rhythm during a hospital therapy session. He maintained his interest on leaving hospital when his stepfather paid for his first drum kit.

In very different ways, both Paul and John came from families with a history of professional music-making, a background that ensured that music would play a role in their early lives. Like Stuart, Paul had piano lessons but also learned harmony from his father, the erstwhile leader of Jim Mac's Jazz Band. Jim's own father had been a brass band player, in the works band of Cope's, a local factory.⁴⁵ Paul was given a trumpet for his fourteenth birthday, which he soon swapped for a guitar. He learned how to play left-handed from seeing a picture of Slim Whitman, the American country artist with a big UK following – Whitman had a number one hit in 1955 with "Rose Marie."

His mother, Julia, taught John the banjo. She had learned the instrument from John's father, who had performed in the 1930s as an amateur with his brother. Further back in the Lennon line, John's grandfather Jack had emigrated to the United States with his parents and toured with a professional minstrel troupe before returning to Liverpool, where he died in 1921.

However, what galvanized five of the six future Beatles into intensive musical activity was the example of Lonnie Donegan and his skiffle group. Then, like thousands of other British youths, these skiffle musicians turned to rock and roll.

Skiffle, rock and roll, and the Quarrymen

Skiffle was a curiously British phenomenon. It was played by acoustic, guitar-based groups with rhythm sections consisting of washboards and tea-chest basses. The skiffle repertoire combined (white) American folk songs, both traditional and newly composed (notably by Woody Guthrie), with blues and other material from the African American tradition, learned mostly from the recordings of Leadbelly. Sometimes, British folk tunes or music hall songs were added to the mix. The spark that lit the prairie fire of the skiffle boom in Britain was the success of Lonnie Donegan's recording of Leadbelly's "Rock Island Line." Donegan's version was faster, more febrile and more hoarse than the original. "Rock Island Line" and other releases

were hits, and Donegan toured extensively, including playing for a week at the Liverpool Empire theatre in November 1956, where he was seen by several future Beatles. The thirteen-year-old George Harrison got his autograph.⁴⁶

However, skiffle's historical significance was not as a genre of music but as a musical event, one which transformed the instrumental locus of *musica practica*, defined by Roland Barthes in a 1970 essay of the same name as “music one plays” rather than “music one listens to.” Barthes wrote that the role of the drawing room piano had been taken by “another public, another repertoire, another instrument (the young generation, vocal music, the guitar).”⁴⁷

In 1957, 250,000 guitars were sold in Britain, compared with an average of 5,000 per year between 1950 and 1955.⁴⁸ The guitars were strummed, and the initial skiffle repertoire of songs was shared, by maybe hundreds of skiffle groups throughout Britain.

The prehistory of the Beatles as a band can be traced to the formation of the Quarrymen skiffle group around May 1956. The evolution of the band can be examined in two dimensions; through its changing repertoire and performance style (skiffle to Merseybeat and rock), and through its changing personnel, which transformed its ethos from that of a homosocial friendship group or gang to an equally homosocial professional band whose membership was based primarily on musical skill and compatibility.

The classic ethnographic, participant-observation description of the transformation of a gang into a music group is the article “Beat and Gangs on Merseyside,” written by Colin Fletcher, a Merseyside student, and published in the magazine *New Society* in February 1964. Fletcher had been a member of a street gang that was inspired to form its own group by such records as “That’ll Be the Day”: “What mattered now was not how many boys a gang could muster for a Friday night fight but how well their group played on Saturday night.”⁴⁹

Liverpool gangs have a peripheral role in the early history of the Beatles, appearing mainly as menacing forces at dances and concerts where the band played, although Ringo had a closer relationship to a gang in the Dingle, where he grew up.⁵⁰ The “gang” from which the Quarrymen emerged was less aggressive, being based on John Lennon’s troupe of friends from primary school, whose infamies were limited to stealing candies from the village shop and misbehaving at the church youth club. If they were modeled on any gang, it was William and the Outlaws, heroes of a whimsical series of children’s books by Richmal Crompton that were among John’s favorite reading as a child.

The nucleus of the Quarrymen consisted of John and two of his gang, Pete Shotton and Eric Griffiths. They recruited another Quarry Bank School

boy, Rod Davis, who had attended Sunday school with John and Pete and was a “good” boy who had acquired a banjo, while gang member Len Garry took over the bass from another schoolboy who had not turned up to rehearsals. Another early member, Colin Hanton, was brought into the Quarrymen because he owned a drum kit.

At the beginning the Quarrymen were a wholly typical skiffle group of the 1956–7 period, as were the Rebels, a very short-lived group formed by George Harrison and his gang of school friends. The name Quarrymen connoted an archaic American rural ethos, while containing a Lennonesque pun on the name of his school.

The songs performed by the Quarrymen in their early months included Donegan’s hits and those of other skiffle groups.⁵¹ The group’s repertoire additionally included “Maggie May,” a Liverpool anthem and the only song from this era to be recorded by the Beatles.

I have referred to the Quarrymen as “homosocial,” a term used by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to describe single-sex affinity groups. These were distinct from homosexual relationships and institutions, although to be homosocial did not preclude an element of sexual contact: “For a man to be a man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men.’”⁵²

Many aspects of English society in the 1950s were homosocial in character. Secondary schools were a prime example; there were few integrated grammar or secondary modern schools that admitted both boys and girls. Many employment situations were similarly segregated. In Liverpool, only men worked at the docks or on the transatlantic and other ships. Almost all employees at clerically based companies such as Littlewoods and Vernons, which operated football pools, were women, who checked the betting slips by hand. Vernons, in fact, had a female choir that, in a smaller version, recorded as the Vernons Girls. Many traditional pubs and drinking clubs still had bars that did not admit women.

Both the Quarrymen and the Beatles reflected the homosocial ethos of the era, something emphasized by the occasional threat to their homogeneity by women. Apart from Liverpool singer Cilla Black, no woman performed with the band. Even then, John Lennon betrayed an uneasiness when he “jokingly” referred to her from the stage of the Cavern as “Cyril,” a masculine name. Cynthia would later describe the Beatles as “a marriage of four minds, three guitars and a drum.”⁵³ The issue of homosociality was given a twist by the cultural association of singing and musical performance with the female. A very young Lennon said to Pete Shotton: “They say you’re a cissy . . . But you’re not a cissy, all right? Singing’s all right.” The occasion was a trip to a secluded spot where the boys would sing out of sight and earshot of others.⁵⁴

Both the nature of the Quarrymen repertoire and its friendship group character underwent major changes during the group's career. From an early stage, its "manager," Nigel Whalley (another of John's gang), described its music on his business card as "Country. Western. Rock 'n' Roll. Skiffle."

The Quarrymen's career as a "pure" skiffle group was therefore brief, to the dissatisfaction of Rod Davis. Rock and roll songs soon came to dominate their repertoire. The first Elvis hit in the UK, "Heartbreak Hotel," came in May 1956, a few months after "Rock Island Line" became a hit, and before the foundation of the group, which probably took place in September or October.⁵⁵ John Lennon was an instant Elvis fan and he introduced "Heartbreak Hotel," "Jailhouse Rock," and "Don't Be Cruel."

In the early years, they found songs in various places. A school friend, Mike Hill, played a record by Little Richard to John sometime in 1956 and had to inform John that the singer was black. The following year, Paul and John "went across town" looking for a copy of "Searchin'" by the Coasters: "Colin Hanton knew some guy that had it, but we had to get on the bus, do two changes of bus routes . . . So we got the words, and I think we stole the record."⁵⁶

The critical point in the history of the Quarrymen was of course the day John met Paul in July 1957. Paul was already indirectly linked with Lennon's "gang" via his friendship with Ivan Vaughan, a childhood member of the gang who now attended the same school as Paul. Impressed with Paul's musicianship, Ivan now invited him to attend the Quarrymen's performance at the St. Peter's Church, Woolton, garden fete, an event whose musical range included brass band music from the Band of the Cheshire Yeomanry as well as skiffle and rock.

In her memoir of the day of the fete, Lennon's half-sister, Julia Baird, wrote: "We found the *gang*, the group, on the third or fourth lorry [of a procession]."⁵⁷ This was the day the Quarrymen began their gradual transformation from an activity of the Lennon gang into a group whose membership was determined mainly by musical skill.

Paul had not been in a skiffle group, though he admired Donegan. By the middle of 1957 he was already a rock and roll aficionado. He and his younger brother Michael listened to broadcasts from Radio Luxembourg in bed.⁵⁸ They performed an Everly Brothers song at a Butlins holiday camp talent contest in the summer of 1957, shortly after Paul met John.

At the Woolton fete, Paul was impressed by John's transgression – changing the words of the Dell-Vikings soft rock love song "Come Go with Me" by adding skiffle-type language about a "penitentiary."⁵⁹ John, in turn, was impressed by Paul's orthodox musical skills – he knew chords and the "correct" lyrics to Eddie Cochran's song "Twenty Flight Rock."

Paul joined the Quarrymen and played at their occasional gigs during the rest of 1957. The balance of the group changed irrevocably when Paul finally persuaded John to admit George Harrison in the early part of 1958. Still aged only fifteen, George had played occasionally with a local skiffle/rock band, the Les Stewart Quartet, and had auditioned for the Texans, a group led by Alan Caldwell, who, as Rory Storm, would hire Richard Starkey as drummer for the Hurricanes and change his name to the Western-sounding Ringo Starr.

By the end of 1958, the group had been reduced to the trio of John, Paul, and George, plus occasional drummers, a situation that would continue until Pete Best became the permanent drummer in mid-1960. The shift to a fully musician-oriented group was exemplified in the departure of Eric Griffiths. He was asked by the other members to become the bass guitarist, but he didn't want to take on the hire purchase loan needed to buy a guitar and amplifier.

The trio were seen dismissively as a "Bohemian clique" by Johnny Gustafson of the Big 3, a leading Liverpool band of the era. With few paid engagements, John, Paul, George and, occasionally, Len Garry on bass would do acoustic sets at lunchtimes at the art college, playing Buddy Holly and Everly Brothers numbers (often with new, ruder words improvised by John).⁶⁰

Perhaps the most important feature of the early Lennon-McCartney relationship was their determination to write songs as well as perform cover versions of other people's songs. British popular music had no tradition of singers writing their own songs, with the exception of certain comedy or novelty performers from the music hall to George Formby and the Goons. And the Beatles were unique among their Liverpool contemporaries in composing and performing their own material.

John and Paul started trying to co-write in the summer of 1957, soon after they met. They would play truant from art college and the Liverpool Institute to use Paul's house while Jim McCartney was at work. Paul had already composed his first song, "I Lost My Little Girl," which was written shortly after his mother's death. He also occasionally wrote with George; a McCartney-Harrison composition, "In Spite of All the Danger," was included on the group's first privately recorded acetate, with Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day."

As already noted, John had been improvising lyrics to existing songs, and this skill was brought to the co-writing sessions. The first successfully composed Lennon-McCartney songs included "One After 909," "Winston's Walk," "Like Dreamers Do," and "Love Me Do"; the last-mentioned was written in 1958 but not recorded and released as the first Beatles single produced by George Martin until four years later.⁶¹

The final performance of the Quarrymen took place in August 1959 at the opening of the Casbah, a club organized by Mona Best in the basement of her house. All vestiges of skiffle had been sloughed off, and John, Paul, and George were the nucleus of a group with no name.

The Beatles

There is no definite moment at which the Beatles emerged from the Quarrymen like a butterfly from a chrysalis. The group performed as Johnny and the Moondogs at a Manchester talent show in November 1959 (the winners were Ricky and Dave, the stage name of future Hollies members Graham Nash and Allan Clarke). They became the Silver Beetles for an audition for the London-based impresario Larry Parnes and for a subsequent tour of Scotland, backing Parnes's singer Johnny Gentle, in May 1960. Some of the Silver Beetles adopted individual stage names for the Scottish tour: Paul and George were Paul Ramon and Carl Harrison, while Stu Sutcliffe on bass was Stu de Stael, after a famous modern painter. Finally, in this avalanche of names, John and Paul had performed the previous month at Paul's cousin's pub in Caversham, Berkshire, as the Nerk (or Nurk) Twins.⁶² The name was taken from a character in John's beloved *Goon Show*.

However, by the time of the first trip to Hamburg in August 1960, "the Beatles" had been definitively adopted as the group name. Most early commentators believed that this name was a tribute to the Crickets, the name of Buddy Holly's group, both crickets and beetles being species of insect. However, anecdotal evidence from interviews and autobiographical sources has suggested that the name was inspired by the film *The Wild One*, where the girlfriends of the motorcycle gang were known as "beetles." Quoted by his authorized biographer, Paul explained how the making of the *Anthology* television series in 1994 led him to investigate the issue and to conclude that the latter explanation was probably correct: "We were actually named after chicks, which I think is fabulous."⁶³ This androgynous element of the homosocial group was interestingly echoed in the Beatles' fondness for girl group songs such as "Baby It's You" and "Boys" by the Shirelles and "Chains" by the Cookies.⁶⁴

The important period of less than a year between the Manchester talent show and the Hamburg booking saw a step-change in the types of performance given by the group. In place of the occasional paid booking and the art college shows, there were a competition, a tour, and a foreign residency. Each provided a new challenge and test for the nascent Beatles. For the competition and the Parnes audition, the task was to impress judges, not fans. For the tour, the group had to learn how to extend their range to

encompass another artist's style and to adjust to alien audiences; they had never before played outside Merseyside.

The Beatles only partly met those challenges, the greatest being the Hamburg residency, first because of the need to solidify the group's membership. While it had been possible to get through the Johnny Gentle tour with a temporary drummer (Tommy Moore), two or more months at a single venue demanded more permanent commitments. To complement the lead guitar of George and the twin rhythm guitars of John and Paul, a permanent drummer and electric bass player were needed.

Stu Sutcliffe had joined as a bass player at the end of 1959. However, his credentials for joining the group were closer to those of the original Quarrymen – personal friendship – than to the quality of musicianship that brought Paul and George into the band. Stu was John's closest art college friend. He was a talented painter but an untried musician. Nevertheless, John persuaded him to spend the money from the sale of a painting exhibited at a Walker Art Gallery event on a new bass guitar, and persuaded the others to accept Stu as a group member. As a potential drummer for Hamburg, the trio successfully approached Pete Best of the Blackjacks, who was already known to them because of the club run by his mother, Mona.

The group spent five months of 1960 playing in Hamburg clubs. The importance of this period for the evolution of the group was threefold: the band learned how to communicate with audiences, they became a wholly integrated unit, and they learned from playing alongside or near an international range of other musicians.

The Beatles were faced with a totally new performance context. They were expected to play, with brief intervals, for up to eight hours a night to foreign (mostly non-English-speaking) audiences, and to prevent the audiences from drifting off to other clubs in the Reeperbahn red light district. After an unsuccessful beginning, they responded to the club owner's instruction to *mach schon* (make a show) by devising dynamic and often comic stage moves, together with elongating three-minute songs using extended solos and repetitive choruses. John claimed with a little exaggeration that "Paul would do [Ray Charles's] 'What'd I Say' for an hour and a half."⁶⁵

The demands of the eight-hour show clarified the onstage relationships between group members, especially in vocal arrangements. According to Paul, they "sang close harmony on the little echo mikes and made a fairly good job of it. It used to sound pretty good, actually."⁶⁶ Finally, the group learned much about stagecraft and performance dynamics from other bands and singers on the Reeperbahn. The most notable of these in 1960 was the uninhibited English singer and guitarist Tony Sheridan, but the group was able to observe other leading Liverpool bands, including Rory Storm and

the Hurrricanes. The Dutch scholar Lutgard Mutsaers has argued that the Beatles were also influenced by “Indorock” groups formed by Indonesian immigrants to the Netherlands, who were prominent on the Hamburg scene in 1960.⁶⁷

The 1960 residency in Hamburg was the first and by far the longest of five stints in Germany.⁶⁸ Between and after those trips, the Beatles established themselves as virtually the resident band at the Cavern in Liverpool, playing there 292 times in thirty months between 1961 and 1963.

The sheer quantity of gigs in the two years before the first EMI recordings placed a strain on the Lennon-McCartney songwriting. As this chapter’s appendix listing the group’s repertoire shows, John and Paul had composed perhaps twenty or thirty songs before the end of 1962, but the Beatles regularly performed only a handful. Their performances were mainly taken up with cover versions. The appendix lists about 150 songs performed at least once by the group in the four years or so before their first hit record. While many of these were hits of the late 1950s and early 1960s by American pop artists and girl groups, about half were “classic” rock and roll numbers learned from the records of Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and others. Although rock and roll was regarded as outmoded by the mainstream pop industry at the end of the 1950s, it continued to form the backbone of Beatles’ performances. Of the sixteen tracks included on the *Rockin’ At the Star Club* album recorded in Hamburg in December 1962, ten were rock and roll songs from the mid-1950s.

So when the time came to begin recording for EMI, while every single contained only original songs, the first two albums, *Please Please Me* and *With the Beatles* (both 1963) each contained six cover versions and eight original songs. They had to fight to have their own songs as the A sides of their first and second singles (“Love Me Do” and “Please Please Me”). On both occasions, George Martin was insistent that they record “How Do You Do It?” by an old-school songwriter, Mitch Murray, but he eventually backed down and foisted the song on another Brian Epstein group, Gerry and the Pacemakers. That version reached number one in April 1963, shortly before the third Beatles single, “From Me to You,” topped the British charts.

The final phase of the prehistory of the band began with the arrival of Brian Epstein. Musically, the Beatles were already at their peak as composers and performers, but their reach was limited to their devoted audiences in Liverpool and Hamburg. Epstein was to be the catalyst for the process that took them to a national, then global, audience. In brief, he added the haircuts, the suits, and the recording contract.

Brian Epstein’s early life and his role in the Beatles’ career has been told in his own somewhat unreliable memoir *A Cellarful of Noise*, in numerous

Beatle biographies, and most effectively in *The Brian Epstein Story* by television directors Anthony Wall and the late Debbie Geller. Briefly, he had trained as an actor in London, but in 1961 he was running the record department of NEMS, a Liverpool store owned by his family, a pillar of the local Jewish community. He was taken by one of his staff to see a lunchtime Cavern show by the Beatles in November 1961.

In little more than a month, Epstein had signed a management contract with the Beatles. He determined to change their bohemian Teddy boy image by organizing matching suits and haircuts. Most significantly, he ignored their live career – which in any case was self-generating between the Hamburg and Liverpool residencies – in favor of seeking a recording deal with a London-based company.

Epstein did not scruple to use his status as a leading record retailer to seek auditions for the band. After an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Decca to sign the Beatles – where he was memorably told that “guitar groups are out” – he finally linked up with George Martin at EMI’s Parlophone label. The Parlophone audition was successful. The band made their first demo tape at Abbey Road Studios in June 1962. Martin was not overly impressed but decided to take a chance and record a single. This was, of course, “Love Me Do,” backed with “P.S. I Love You.”

George Martin also insisted that Pete Best’s drumming was not good enough, and encouraged Epstein to replace him. Pete’s sacking reverberated around the Cavern and other Liverpool venues, because for many fans he was the most popular Beatle. John and Paul determined that Ringo Starr of Rory Storm and the Hurricanes was the best replacement; they had known him in Hamburg. They drove to a holiday camp on the English east coast where the Storm group had a summer residency. Ringo accepted the job; but, having been sought out for his musicianship, he discovered he was joining something like a gang, finding the others to be a tight-knit friendship group with in-jokes.

Finale

On November 26 1962, the Beatles completed the recording of what would be their second single, “Please Please Me.” George Martin told them: “Gentlemen, you’ve just made your first number one record.”⁶⁹ The formative years were at an end.

Appendix: the repertoire, 1957–1962

The following list is the most comprehensive published to date of the songs performed live by the Quarrymen and the Beatles prior to 1963. I have identified over 150 songs covered by the band plus twenty-seven original compositions. The list is probably not definitive: for example, Ian MacDonald plausibly claimed that the group performed some thirty Elvis Presley numbers,⁷⁰ but I have found references to only eight. The sources for the list are both written and recorded.⁷¹ One important source of the group's pre-fame repertoire is the many sessions for the BBC between 1962 and 1965.⁷² Each of these sessions usually included some cover versions which would have been learned by the band prior to 1963, after which the Beatles did not add any songs by other acts to their live or recorded repertoire.

Pre-1963 recordings were made in Hamburg as backing tracks for Tony Sheridan and Wally (a member of the Hurricanes), plus the Christmas 1962 Star-Club session, later issued commercially by Columbia Records. Earlier in 1962, the Beatles had made audition tapes for Decca and EMI.

In percentage terms, almost half of the list (47 percent) are rock and roll songs, mostly from the 1950s; 14 percent are compositions by group members, although not all of these were performed live; 13 percent of the songs are US pop, mainly from the early 1960s; 10 percent rhythm and blues and early Motown; 6 percent pre-1945 pop songs; 5 percent songs by US girl groups; and the final 5 percent from miscellaneous sources.

Lennon-McCartney compositions

- "Ask Me Why"
- "Cat's Walk"
- "Do You Want to Know a Secret"
- "Hello Little Girl"
- "Hot as Sun"
- "I Call Your Name"
- "I Saw Her Standing There"
- "I'll Always be in Love with You"
- "I'll Follow the Sun"
- "Just Fun"
- "Keep Looking That Way"
- "Like Dreamers Do"
- "Looking Glass"
- "Love Me Do"
- "Love of the Loved"
- "Misery"
- "One After 909"
- "Please Please Me"
- "P.S. I Love You"

“Somedays”
“That’s My Woman”
“There’s a Place”
“Thinking of Linking”
“What Goes On”
“When I’m Sixty Four”
“Winston’s Walk”
“Years Roll Along”

US rock and roll

Chuck Berry (14 songs)

“Almost Grown”
“Carol”
“Got to Find My Baby”
“Johnny B. Goode”
“Little Queenie”
“Maybellene”
“Memphis, Tennessee”
“Reelin’ and Rockin’”
“Rock and Roll Music”
“Roll Over Beethoven”
“Sweet Little Sixteen”
“Talkin’ About You”
“Too Much Monkey Business”
“Vacation Time”

Eddie Cochran (2 songs)

“C’mon Everybody”
“Twenty Flight Rock”

Everly Brothers (6 songs)

“All I Have to Do is Dream”
“Bye Bye Love”
“Cathy’s Clown”
“So How Come (No One Loves Me)”
“So Sad”
“Wake Up Little Susie”

Buddy Holly (11 songs)

“Crying, Waiting, Hoping”
“Everyday”
“It’s So Easy”
“Mailman, Bring Me No More Blues”
“Maybe Baby”
“Peggy Sue”
“Raining In My Heart”
“Reminiscing”
“That’ll Be the Day”

“Think it Over”
“Words of Love”

Little Richard (12 songs)

“Good Golly Miss Molly”
“Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!”
“Kansas City”
“Long Tall Sally”
“Lucille”
“Miss Ann”
“Ooh! My Soul”
“Ready Teddy”
“Rip it Up”
“Send Me Some Lovin’”
“Slippin’ and Slidin’”
“Tutti Frutti”

Carl Perkins (11 songs)

“Blue Suede Shoes”
“Boppin’ the Blues”
“Everybody’s Trying to Be My Baby”
“Glad All Over”
“Gone, Gone, Gone”
“Honey Don’t”
“Lend Me Your Comb”
“Matchbox”
“Sure to Fall (in Love with You)”
“Tennessee”
“Your True Love”

Elvis Presley (8 songs)

“Blue Moon of Kentucky”
“I Don’t Care If the Sun Don’t Shine”
“I Forgot to Remember to Forget”
“Love Me Tender”
“Milk Cow Blues”
“That’s All Right (Mama)”
“That’s When Your Heartaches Begin”
“Wooden Heart”

Larry Williams (6 songs)

“Bad Boy”
“Bony Moronie”
“Dizzy Miss Lizzy”
“Peaches and Cream”
“Short Fat Fanny”
“Slow Down”

Other rock and roll (15 songs)

- “Be-Bop-A-Lula” (Gene Vincent)
- “Clarabella” (Jodimars)
- “Corrine, Corrina” (Ray Peterson and others)
- “Guitar Boogie Shuffle” (various, instrumental)
- “Mean Woman Blues” (Jerry Lee Lewis and various)
- “Move On Down the Line”
- “Move Over”
- “New Orleans”
- “Nothin’ Shakin’ (but the Leaves on the Trees)” (Eddie Fontaine)
- “Raunchy” (Bill Justis instrumental)
- “Red Hot” (Billy Riley)
- “Red Sails in the Sunset” (Fats Domino)
- “Rock-a-Chicka” (Frankie Vaughan)
- “Skinnie Minnie” (Bill Haley)
- “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On” (Jerry Lee Lewis)

Rhythm and blues and Motown (18 songs)

- “A Shot of Rhythm and Blues” (Arthur Alexander)
- “Anna (Go to Him)” (Arthur Alexander)
- “Hallelujah, I Love Her So” (Ray Charles)
- “I Got A Woman” (Ray Charles)
- “If You Gotta Make A Fool of Somebody” (James Ray)
- “Leave My Kitten Alone” (Little Willie John)
- “Money” (That’s What I Want) (Barrett Strong)
- “Mr. Moonlight” (Doctor Feelgood and the Interns of Love)
- “Searchin’” (Coasters)
- “September in the Rain” (Dinah Washington)
- “Soldier of Love” (Arthur Alexander)
- “Some Other Guy” (Richie Barrett)
- “The Hippy Hippy Shake” (Chan Romero)
- “Three Cool Cats” (Coasters)
- “Twist and Shout” (Isley Brothers)
- “What’d I Say” (Ray Charles)
- “You Really Got a Hold on Me” (Smokey Robinson)
- “Young Blood” (Coasters)

US pop (15 songs)

- “Be-Bop Baby” (Ricky Nelson)
- “But I Do” (Clarence Henry)
- “Don’t Ever Change” (Crickets, composed by Goffin and King)
- “Dream Baby” (Roy Orbison)
- “Dream Lover” (Bobby Darin)
- “He’ll Have To Go” (Jim Reeves)
- “I Got a Feeling” (Ricky Nelson)

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- “I Just Don’t Understand” (Ann Margret)
- “Lonesome Tears in My Eyes” (Johnny Burnette)
- “Peppermint Twist” (Joey Dee and the Starlites)
- “Sharing You” (Bobby Vee, composed by Goffin and King)
- “Sheila” (Tommy Roe)
- “Take Good Care of My Baby” (Bobby Vee)
- “To Know Her is to Love Her” (Teddy Bears)
- “Where Have You Been All My Life” (Mann and Weil)

US girl groups (9 songs)

- “Baby It’s You” (Shirelles)
- “Boys” (Shirelles)
- “Chains” (Cookies)
- “Devil in Her Heart” (Donays, as . . . ‘His Heart’)
- “Keep Your Hands Off My Baby” (Little Eva)
- “Mama Said” (Shirelles)
- “Please Mr. Postman” (Marvelettes)
- “Shimmy Shake” (Orlons)
- “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” (Shirelles)

Pre-1945 vaudeville and pop (10 songs)

- “Ain’t She Sweet”
- “Beautiful Dreamer” (Stephen Foster)
- “Bésame Mucho” (Coasters version)
- “Darktown” (probably Darktown Strutters Ball, US minstrel song)
- “Falling in Love Again” (Marlene Dietrich)
- “I Remember You” (as by Frank Ifield)
- “I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Cry (Over You)” (?)
- “The Sheik of Araby” (rock and roll version by Lou Monte)
- “Up a Lazy River” (probably the Bobby Darin version)
- “Your Feet’s Too Big” (Fats Waller)

Miscellaneous

Stage and film musicals (5 songs)

- “A Taste of Honey” (film theme recorded by Lenny Welch)
- “Honeymoon Song” (film theme by Mikis Theodorakis)
- “Over the Rainbow” (Judy Garland)
- “Till There Was You” (from *The Music Man* via Peggy Lee’s 1958 version)
- “True Love” (from *High Society*, duet by Bing Crosby and Grace Kelly)

UK pop (1 song)

- “A Picture of You” (Joe Brown)

Others (8 songs)

- “Better Luck Next Time” (provenance unknown)
- “Dance in the Streets” (provenance unknown)

- “Don’t Forbid Me” (provenance unknown)
- “My Bonnie” (traditional, sung by Tony Sheridan)
- “Nobody but You” (provenance unknown)
- “Somebody Help Me” (provenance unknown)
- “Swingin’ Thing” (provenance unknown)
- “You Don’t Understand Me” (provenance unknown)