

TDT'S COLLEGE OF USELESS KNOWLEDGE

FAB-4 101

Even though we're about to celebrate the 50th anniversary of The Beatles first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show in February of 1964. Another year is arguably the most important year in the evolution of what The Beatles would eventually become. That year is 1962, when after many false starts & lineups changes, all the pieces finally came together & they transitioned from little more than a glorified garage band & became poised, professional musicians with a laser like focus.

On January 1st, 1962, The Beatles unceremoniously flunked a long sought audition with a major British record label. Decca Records executive Dick Rowe's don't call us we'll call you brush-off line was, "Guitar groups are most assuredly on their way out, Mr. Epstein." Possibly the most egregious business mistake in history.

It was an inauspicious start for a band that would soon rule the world & a decidedly downbeat day 1 in a pivotal year that saw the scrappy, rag-tag skiffle group evolve into the highly polished Fab Four, who would go on to alter the course of the world's music, fashion & culture.

No other entertainers in history have been as popular, as influential, as important or as groundbreaking. The best-selling act ever has to date sold over 2.25 billion albums worldwide (& counting) & racked up 20 #1 US singles, both Billboard marks likely never to be surpassed. They are among the very few artists in human history, in any discipline, that were simultaneously the best at what they did & the most popular at it. The band hijacked the entertainment media & transcended pop music to write their own chapter in world history. Its members had political clout, spiritual authority, cultural sway & the ears of the entire world.

Fifty years later, the melodic, instantly recognizable tunes of The Beatles are inexorably ingrained in the DNA of modern civilization. On this golden anniversary, their golden oldies remain as vital & fresh as ever & they continue to bewitch their 3rd & 4th generations of Beatlemaniacs.

But why did The Beatles become so profoundly enormous & enduring? Even the players couldn't fathom such amazing longevity. Paul McCartney expected a brief joy ride when Beatlemania first struck, "Oh yeah, we thought a couple of years tops & that would be that." he told USA TODAY in 2009, when The Beatles' digitally remastered catalog reignited international excitement & sold another half million albums. "We never thought it would last at all. You've got to ask, why did it last? I think the music is very well structured, like a good house. It's going to stand for a long time. It's nice that I can sit back now & be proud of what we did."

The Beatles sprang from a perfect storm of timing, chemistry, luck, key support, & most critically, unparalleled talent. Many of those essential factors fell into place, almost 60 years

ago, quite by accident. John & Paul met at a church picnic in 1957. George joined in 1958, when they were playing for little more than tips & beers in seedy Liverpool bars.

That critically important year of 1962 saw a rapid coalescence of all the other participants. Brian Epstein became their indefatigable manager in January, just before their ill fated Decca audition. On May 9th he sent The Beatles, performing in Hamburg, a telegram, "Congratulations boys. EMI requests recording session. Please rehearse new material."

On June 4th, they signed a recording contract with Parlophone, a subsidiary of EMI. On June 6th, they entered the historic Abbey Road Studios with producer George Martin for the first of what would be many times, recording demos of cover tune Besame Mucho, along with original Lennon-McCartney compositions Love Me Do, PS I Love You & Ask Me Why. After the sessions Martin, mildly impressed, lectured the band about its lousy equipment, then he asked if they had any complaints about him. In the quick witted humor that America would soon fall in love with, George Harrison quipped, "We don't like your tie."

In August, drummer Pete Best was fired & replaced by Ringo who'd fluttered around the periphery of the band for several years, filling in occasionally for the dour Best. Later that magical year their first single, Love Me Do, was released in the UK on October 5th, lighting the fuse for a musical & cultural revolution.

They would have undoubtedly been successful in any era, but the speed & magnitude of their success owes in large part to their times. Britain was desperately poor after World War II (the big one). In Liverpool, which had been mercilessly bombed by the Nazi Blitz because of its ship building factories all along the Mersey River waterfront (you can take a ferry across it I hear). The atmosphere was oppressive poverty, gray sterility & gloom. The Beatles grew up in that bleak environment & their one glimmer of hope of a brighter future came from the distant sounds of early rock & roll in far away America. It was a place that had to seem light years removed from their situation in Liverpool but that would in slightly more than a year welcome the lads with adulation, fame & wealth beyond any of their imaginations.

Inspired by American rock pioneers Elvis, Chuck Berry & The Everly Brothers, The Beatles began to blaze their trail with yeah yeah yeahs, mop-tops & a cheeky irreverent attitude. The prevalent feeling among the ruling class was that young people had no say in their own lives. The Beatles made teenage rebellion constructive, articulating it with joyous, giddy exuberance. At a time when cigar-chomping moguls paid people in cubicles to write factory-farm pop songs for teens (not unlike today), The Beatles were completely original & authentic, & kids instinctively understood & embraced it.

Their camaraderie, self-deprecating wit, effervescence & non-conformist hair & fashions also appealed to the awakening youth culture in both Britain & the US. Radio, formerly large fixed appliances in homes, proliferated in inexpensive portable transistor form (the iPod of its day), & an improving economy gave teens a disposable income with which to buy records.

Substantial credit is also due to the immeasurable contributions of the "three wise men" guiding The Beatles. Producer George Martin, who nurtured & focused their raw talents rather than imposing his own vision; Publicist Derek Taylor, a perceptive propaganda minister to rival any of today's political strategists, shaped the band's narrative & Manager Brian Epstein, a relentless fan, advocate & promoter.

Talent, while abundant, was not enough to take The Beatles to the top-most of the popper-most, to borrow Lennon's phrase. Unlike legions of entertainers before & since, The Beatles' objective in forming a band was not to become famous or rich or impress the opposite sex. They were motivated by their sheer love of music. From 1957 to 1962, The Beatles played hundreds of live shows in front of very few people, making little money & often staying in disgusting hovels. They had no sense of entitlement, just drive & commitment to master their chosen craft.

"Only war-tattered Liverpool & its sociopolitical dynamics could have produced The Beatles", says David Bedford, author of *Liddypool: Birthplace of The Beatles*. Yet the miracle is that any single disruption to the numerous chance meetings & coincidences so critical to the band's formation could have just as easily foiled destiny, but at every turn circumstance & Lady Luck seemed to favor The Beatles.

Just as the UK charts were growing tired & predictable, the United States, which had taken the early lead with the great rock & roll innovators of the late '50s, was also in need of something fresh & new. The tragic events of Dallas in November 1963 sent the American public into shock & mourning for the loss of a young president with so much promise. How could the country possibly ever smile or laugh again? Four shaggy haired lads from Liverpool who were funny, charming & musical geniuses came over to try their luck & became the greatest get well card ever. "Will we ever see the stars align this way again? Unlikely," Bedford says. "In the end, it all comes back to one thing, the music. "Their songs are as good today as when they were written."

The bulk of those songs, arguably history's most influential, grew from the imagination & sometimes combustible chemistry of Lennon & McCartney, says Dennis Mitchell (no not the one that lives next door to Mr. Wilson) host for 21 years of the syndicated radio show, *Breakfast With The Beatles*.

"The odds are infinitesimal that two individuals, each with that kind of musical acumen would be born in the same time & place, much less meet & make all this glorious music together," he says. "What they created was totally original, a starting point for so many bands that followed. Millions & millions of fans & musicians were inspired & motivated to a degree we've never seen before or since."

An important key to The Beatles' longevity was the sheer eclecticism of the musical, cultural & literary influences they absorbed. Unlike most musicians then & now, who narrowcast what they listen to & perform, The Beatles had voracious appetites for an incredibly diverse range of music. Their initial heroes were the Everly Brothers & Little Richard, but they drew from the

entire American songbook. They listened to folk, Gershwin, Cole Porter, The Grand Ole Opry & vaudeville. They were insatiable sponges.

Had The Beatles not used their musical influences & curiosities to push boundaries, they might have had the shelf life of the poodle skirt or hula-hoop. What added depth to their credibility was a continuing thirst to break new ground. This was in an era when it was the norm to lay the same golden egg over & over. You were not expected to become more polished, the record companies didn't want that, just keep doing what was selling. But The Beatles set out on a magical mystery tour of discovery that never ended.

"The older generation scorned rock & roll at that time & for The Beatles to make it through on that level was a heck of an achievement," says Steve Marinucci, Beatles columnist & webmaster for the Abbey Roads Beatles Page. "The Fab Four were unstoppable. It's astonishing how everything musical revolved around them. That's all you heard between 1964 & 1970. Nobody can have that kind of impact again. It was a different world. We didn't have the Internet, & people weren't so jaded."

Analyzing Beatlemania, George Harrison once said, "The world used us as an excuse to go mad."

Perhaps the band's unprecedented exploits simply defy logic, says Matt Hurwitz, Beatles historian & Mix Magazine contributing editor.

"I've never figured it out, & I don't think anyone has ever been able to," he says. "Even their publicist Derek Taylor once said, "It's something I've never been able to put a finger on. They just had an inexplicable charisma."

There's never been an experience like Beatlemania before or since. No one can explain it. We all just love it. It's exciting, & it makes us happy, even 50 years later.

One aspect tends to be overlooked in theories of Beatle magnitude, undiminished since the band's acrimonious 1970 split, or the deaths of Lennon in 1980 & Harrison in 2001.

"They had the good sense to break up at the height of their creativity," Hurwitz says. "It wasn't planned, but it was the best move ever. The result is we never had to endure the embarrassment of The Beatles going disco or new wave, or punk."

"They left us seven years of brilliantly recorded music & a never aging image of them at their height & in their youth that will keep the mystique & beauty of The Beatles intact forever."