

Review: *The Beatles Anthology*

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For more than thirty-five years, the Beatles have credited their musical success to the long hours they spent playing in Hamburg, before they were discovered by Brian Epstein and then the rest of the world. Now it's the official story: *The Beatles Anthology* (367 pp. Chronicle Books \$60), the group's collective 'autobiography' published October 5th, describes how their musical apprenticeship served on the Reeperbahn produced the sound that defined the 1960s and, arguably, popular music ever since. Told through the words of surviving band members Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr, supplemented by extensive culling of old interviews with John Lennon, the history of the band is recounted from its beginnings as the Quarrymen in 1957 to the final acrimonious breakup in 1970. Like the television series and CD-sets to which it is a companion, *Anthology* is meant to be a picture of their life as a band from the inside—what it was like “in the eye of the hurricane,” as McCartney puts it. To hear the Beatles tell it, the seven-hour sets in Hamburg under pressure to “make a show” and bring in customers transformed their music, so much so that when they returned to England after their first stint in Hamburg, the world had its first taste of Beatlemania. Billed as “The Beatles—Direct from Hamburg!”, when they began playing in the Litherland Town Hall in Liverpool (27 December 1960), for the first time the crowd spontaneously rushed the stage in the frenzy that would become familiar in the succeeding years.

Hamburg in the early 1960s was an exciting place to be. The Beatles came of age in the freewheeling sexual carnival of the Reeperbahn, working around the shadowy underworld figures controlling the entertainment industry. To get through their grueling musical sets they began using amphetamines. It all made for a good story: sex and drugs and rock & roll, the primaevial myth of youth culture, enshrined in the movie *Backbeat* (1993). There's no doubt that the Beatles learned a lot playing in Hamburg, and that they were better musicians and performers afterwards.

However, the Myth of Hamburg as the cradle of “the Beatle sound” doesn't bear examination, despite the Beatles' own testimony. The conditions in Hamburg were, if anything, sharply antithetical to the tight arrangements and precision playing that was part of their distinctive sound. At the Indra, the Kaiserkeller, and the Top Ten Club they clowned around on stage, stopping songs partway through, using stunts like staging fights among band members to attract and amuse their audience, which consisted mostly of drunken sailors. They would see how long they could play a single song, or play only two songs all night, changing the tempo and making up nonsense words

on the spot. Lennon describes falling asleep on stage behind the piano, leaving the other Beatles to carry on without him. McCartney sometimes played guitar and sometimes piano. Their bassist, Stu Sutcliffe, was so bad that often they would simply not plug in his amplifier. This sort of behavior remained with the Beatles: Brian Epstein describes it as a “lack of professionalism” he saw a year later in the Cavern Club in Liverpool (9 November 1961). Moreover, the Beatles of that time were a typical bar band that played only cover versions of songs, so their originality and songwriting talents weren’t on display. Even the beginnings of Beatlemania back in Liverpool, after Hamburg, aren’t testimony to the musical quality of their performances. (Since Stu Sutcliffe had remained behind in Hamburg, the bassist with whom the Beatles performed that night, Chas Newby, was actually a guitar player who had joined them earlier that week.) It may have had as much to do with the tight black leather outfits the Beatles adopted in Hamburg as their music.

The obvious conclusion to draw is that the Beatles developed their distinctive sound only after their German apprenticeship. But then where, and how, did it develop? When the Beatles decided in late 1961 to have Brian Epstein manage them, they were already a popular act, and it was clear from the outset that Epstein would leave the music itself to the Beatles—indeed, that was the only question they asked of Epstein when he proposed being their manager. (McCartney asked the question and then Lennon made the decision.) When the Beatles secured their first recording contract in 1962, George Martin indisputably had an effect on the Beatles’ music, not least in having them replace Pete Best on drums, although it is said that he wasn’t entirely pleased with their choice of Ringo Starr. But the Beatles came to George Martin with songs like “I Saw Her Standing There” already written, so, important as he was in helping to shape the Beatles’ music, he was trying to improve on something already present. Their first several records included many songs taken from their stage performances, well-rehearsed before ever meeting George Martin, and they all have the signature characteristics of the Beatles’ distinctive sound. Neither Epstein nor Martin are plausible candidates for the role of musical catalyst.

If the Beatles didn’t develop their sound in Hamburg or afterwards, they must therefore have done so before heading off to Hamburg in August 1960. And, surprisingly, there is good evidence that they did, despite their own testimony. Their agent at the time was a 29-year-old Liverpool native named Allan Williams, one of the two people whose absence from *Anthology* is inexcusable—Pete Best is the other—and his 1975 autobiography *The Man Who Gave the Beatles Away* (written with William Marshall) provides direct confirmation.

Around the beginning of 1960, John Lennon invited Stu Sutcliffe, a friend from art school, to join himself and the other two Quarrymen, Paul McCartney and George Harrison, as the fourth guitarist of the group. When Sutcliffe sold one of his paintings a few months later, Lennon persuaded him to use the money to buy a bass. They lacked a drummer, though, and there was little call for them to play anywhere. They used to spend their free time in a coffeeshop known as the Jacaranda, owned and operated by Allan Williams. He allowed the group to rehearse in the basement, giving them occasional odd jobs to help out, such as painting the women's restroom. According to Williams, the group, soon to be known as the Beatles, was pretty rough when they began rehearsing; the other customers at the Jacaranda would ask who was getting murdered in the basement. Sam Leach, a Liverpool music promoter of the time, agrees with this assessment. But, Williams continues, "you could detect a day-to-day improvement" until the regulars no longer complained, and Williams himself "began to develop a definite gut reaction to the music," observing that "the powerful Beatles sound that was so soon to sweep the world was emerging, fast." This isn't mere hindsight. Williams owned several clubs and had connections to music promoters throughout Liverpool. He worked with the best bands in Liverpool: Cass and the Cassanovas, Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, Derry and the Seniors. The Beatles pestered Williams for jobs, but he told them to keep practicing at first. When he thought they had improved sufficiently, he began to book them around Liverpool. The Beatles continued rehearsing at the Jacaranda, and Williams became their unofficial manager.

In May 1960, Larry Parnes, a London music promoter, held auditions for Liverpool bands to back up a singer known as Billy Fury on a tour of Scotland. Working with a last-minute drummer—Johnny Hutchinson, drummer for Cass and the Cassanovas, who said that before this time the Beatles' music "wasn't worth a carrot"—they so impressed Billy Fury that Parnes offered them the job on the condition that they get rid of Sutcliffe. The Beatles loyally refused. Williams, who thought that even with Sutcliffe the Beatles' music was exceptional, got them on the Scotland tour backing a different singer called Johnny Gentle. Williams also arranged for a drummer named Tommy Moore to join the Beatles. Amid a series of misadventures, including an auto accident in which Moore lost his front teeth but Lennon dragged him out of the hospital to play, the Beatles had their first professional tour. By all accounts their musicianship was equal to the job. Williams says that they returned from Scotland "much better musicians," and "their group sound was beginning to bloom." After returning to Liverpool, Moore quit the group, and for a brief period the Beatles worked with Norman Chapman, a Liverpool drummer, which ended when he was drafted into the

army. Yet apart from the difficulties the Beatles had in recruiting and retaining a drummer, the testimony of Allan Williams, their strong showing against other bands in the Parnes audition, and Williams' getting them a spot on the Scotland tour all testify to their musical accomplishments by mid-1960.

Now Williams had made contact, through an improbable series of events, with a German club owner named Bruno Koschmider, and had sent his leading band, Derry and the Seniors, to play in Koschmider's Kaiserkeller in Hamburg. In July of 1960 Koschmider asked Williams to send another group to play at the Indra, a new club. Williams thought that the Beatles were now good enough to go to Hamburg. He sent a courtesy note to Howie Casey in Hamburg, who was looking after Derry and the Seniors there. He got an immediate reply from Casey, telling Williams not to send the Beatles, because they weren't any good and would spoil the nice setup in Hamburg. Williams disagreed: "they didn't realize how much the Beatles had progressed and developed since they'd heard them," and brought the Beatles to Hamburg anyway, in August 1960, after they hired Pete Best as drummer. On his next visit a few weeks later Howie Casey admitted his error, telling Williams that he hadn't known "how much they [the Beatles] had developed. They're the best. No doubt about that. The best ever." When Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, one of Liverpool's top groups, came over to Hamburg several weeks later, they immediately concurred in the judgment, and entered into a friendly rivalry with the Beatles, who by then were playing at Koschmider's Kaiserkeller. Rory Storm's drummer, Ringo Starr, also thought the Beatles were fine musicians. The distinctive Beatles sound may have come to light in Hamburg, but it was already forged by the time they arrived, and it is to Alan Williams's credit that he recognized it.

In the end, the ears tell the tale. There are two songs on the *Anthology 1* CD, "You'll Be Mine" and "Cayenne," that are home demo recordings from mid-1960, prior to the Beatles' stint in Hamburg. (The song "Hallelujah I Love Her So" may date from their 1960 time in Hamburg itself, or after their return in December 1960.) The other songs from the same tape are unfortunately available only on bootleg recordings. Putting aside the raw unfinished quality of these songs, and allowing for the low fidelity of such old tapes, the distinctive sound of the later Beatles is easily identifiable in these drummerless recordings: the tight vocal harmonies on originals like "One After 909" and "Hello Little Girl," the ability to create a tasteful mood heard in "Cayenne," the timing and phrasing on blues-derived songs like "Matchbox," and even the reworking of popular songs from an earlier day such as "I'll Always Be In Love With You." The Beatles had found their voice in Liverpool, far beyond the simple Buddy Holly imitations also on the *Anthology 1* CD, before

leaving for Hamburg.

The Beatles, then, have their own story wrong in *Anthology*. They weren't in the best position to understand and properly assess their own talents, abilities, and accomplishments at the beginning, and, as a result, credited Hamburg with more than its due. What they learned there was how to put that distinctive sound into a professional package: stage presence, line arrangements for different instruments, a strong emphasis on innovation, and a phenomenal sense of what worked musically and what didn't, combined with an instinctive understanding of one another's musical talents and abilities. Germany deserves a place of honor in the biography of the Beatles, but it's the second chapter of the story, not the first.

Peter King