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Beatles' first drummer happy with the way life turned out

By DAVID SEGAL
The Washington Post

LIVERPOOL, England - In the long history of near-fame experiences, is there any tale as wrenching as Pete Best's?

Really, who's even close? The guy is booted from the Beatles right before the band hippy-hippy shakes into history, a few months before "Love Me Do" sends a few million teens into shrieking fits. In 1968, while his former bandmates are recording "Back in the U.S.S.R.," Pete is slicing bread in a bakery.

So close.

For two years starting in 1960, Best drummed behind John, Paul and George in Liverpool, England, and Hamburg, Germany, where the Beatles played seven-hour shows to drunken Germans in the city's red-light district.

And then one day -- Aug. 16, 1962 -- he's out. Ringo Starr is in. Manager Brian Epstein delivered the bad news. The next year Brits alone would spend more than \$12 million on Fab Four vinyl. Best's cut was nil. None of the other Beatles, he says, ever spoke to him again.

"I suppose the frustration is the fact that this was very much a case of it had been done behind your back," Best says on a recent evening. "The lads weren't there at the actual dismissal. They'd left it up to Brian. If they were there, maybe we could have resolved the problem. You know, 'OK, what is wrong, what is your hang-up?' That never happened."

Now 61, with bushy gray hair and a mustache, Bush looks more like the kindly owner of a pizzeria than the heartthrob of the Beatles, a guy with such smoldering good looks that his fans claimed he was fired for distracting "birds" from the others.

"Yes, there was anger," he nearly whispers. "You've got to be honest about that. One minute you're in the top band in Liverpool, and the next you're not."

Rock the Casbah

Before they became local sensations at the downtown Cavern Club, John, Paul, George and Pete were regulars at the Casbah, a low-ceilinged room big enough for about 25 fans. For Pete, getting to the club meant simply walking down a flight of stairs. The Casbah was in the basement of the Best house.

In *The Beatles: The True Beginnings*, a coffee-table volume he co-authored with his half brothers Roag and Rory, the Bests add a missing chapter in the story of the Beatles' rise: the tale of the Casbah Coffee Club.

His mother, a free-spirited beauty named Mona, decided in 1959 that the neighborhood kids needed a place to listen to an American import called rock 'n' roll.

She cleaned the cellar, then interviewed a band then known as the Quarrymen in her search for a band to play opening night. Three bandmates were John, Paul and George. A year later Pete joined the group, by then known as the Silver Beatles.

After the Casbah closed in 1962, it reverted to musty storage space. Last November it was refurbished, and

the Bests are seeking city permits to turn it into a working club again. For now it's open only for special events.

Like tonight's. Best is here chatting with fans and old friends and celebrating the end of the latest tour of the Pete Best Band, a group started in 1988 as a lark for a Beatles fan convention.

It's filled with former regulars, many of whom can tell you about the nights they spent watching "the lads" back when.

"I thought it was a bit off, what the Beatles did to Pete," says an old friend, Peter Newton, who is drinking a pint. "I didn't think Ringo was quite as good a drummer." He pauses for a moment and then adds with a slight shrug, "But after Pete left, they really took off."

Different minds

If Best was in the band, say those who knew him then, he wasn't quite sure of it.

"He was a loner, and in a group you can't be a loner," says Tony Sheridan, on the phone from Germany. Sheridan, 63, was the biggest star in Hamburg during the Beatles' second visit there.

"He was a very quiet guy, too...But I think there was some jealousy about Pete in there as well, because half the gig in those days was to look the part, and the music was almost secondary.

"Lennon looked like a schoolteacher -- he couldn't see a thing without his glasses. Pete looked like a movie star."

Meanwhile Ringo was playing in Rory Storm & the Hurricanes. During the Hurricanes' tour of Hamburg and in clubs back home, he'd hang out with the Beatles and occasionally sit in on drums. John, Paul and George thought Ringo the superior talent -- but as important, they have said, is that he simply fit in better than Pete.

"The myth built up over the years that...Paul was jealous of (Best) because he was pretty and all that (crud)," Lennon testified in the Beatles' oral history, "Anthology."

"They didn't get on that much together, but it was partly because Pete was a bit slow. He was a harmless guy but was not quick. All of us had quick minds, but he never picked that up."

Was Best really a mediocre drummer? Sheridan, who played with Pete and Ringo, says Ringo seemed more ambitious. "He was more intent on becoming a good drummer," Sheridan explains. "Pete was less intent. He was a bit lazy."

Once the lineup was changed, it was hard to argue with the decision. Ringo became a highly influential if perennially underrated drummer, and his hangdog persona so complemented the Beatles that it's hard to imagine the group without him.

Money for something

Best says he bears no grudge against the band. "If you'd asked me 15 years ago would I ever meet up with the Beatles, I would have said no," he says at the Casbah. "But the door's open, and I have a strange and very strong feeling that we'll meet up again."

Best's feelings changed, in part, because of money. He finally received a pile of it in 1995, when the Beatles put together the first of their three-part "Anthology" series of albums, which includes 10 early songs with Best in the band.

After decades of silence, representatives of Apple Corps Ltd. came calling. A sum was negotiated, permission granted, royalties paid.

"I think the number needs to remain private," Best says, smiling. "It's security for my family and my grandchildren. I didn't move to a 35-story mansion with a swimming pool and three Ferraris. I'm very happy with the life I've got, so there's no need to change it."

Some people have all the luck. Others get a big chunk early on and, in their golden years, they feast on it to their hearts' content.

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