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Former Beatle brings new band to Columbus

By Adam Jardy

It wasn't always John, Paul, George and Ringo. Beatles purists might remember a band formerly called the Quarrymen, a bass player named Stuart Sutcliffe and a drummer named Pete Best.

Best now fronts the Pete Best Band, a group of six musicians that play mostly classic rock from the '50s and '60s. The band will perform tonight at The Basement, located inside Fat Eddie's next to Promowest Pavilion, as part of an American tour.

Best first met the Quarrymen when the band played at the Casbah Club in its hometown of Liverpool, England. He joined the band as its full-time drummer in 1960, shortly before it headed to Hamburg, Germany, where it played until 1961.

"I was fortunate to know them before I started playing with them," Best said in a telephone interview from his hotel room in Chicago yesterday. "They were in a band called the Quarrymen and that was in August 1959. Once I'd gotten the phone call from Paul (McCartney), I knew they'd gone off and done a tour in Scotland, which wasn't a success. They were going off to Germany and needed a drummer, and of course they'd seen me play - they knew what I was about."

Best said as he got to know the group members, he could tell they were competitive and determined.

"We were hungry and we wanted to conquer the Hamburg audiences, he said. "We did things in those two years that no other band from Liverpool had ever done. Everything was moving in the right direction."

Best pointed to the time in Hamburg as especially important to the development of both his relationship with the band and its popularity.

"It was a whirlwind of activity," he said. "Not knowing we were going to be playing the Hamburg ... area, which is the biggest entertainment Red Light District in the world. And we found out, and we enjoyed every moment of it."

The band was contracted to play 6 - 7 days a week for 6 - 7 hours a day. It was a "daunting task," Best said. We were getting more prolific, the sound was growing, the showmanship was growing," he said. "It was like practicing for like 42 hours a week, and when we came back to Liverpool the whole image had changed. The hair was long, the leather was in, the cowboy boots were in and we just took Liverpool by storm.

"But what happened in Hamburg - because Hamburg's a 24-hour city - there were long hours on stage, so when you came off stage you enjoyed yourself to the maximum before you went to bed. Sometimes you'd sleep for a long time, and sometimes you'd sleep for a pretty short time. It just depended on what enjoyment was going on around the corner. We were young, we were healthy and we were virile and we made the most of it."

But just as things were looking up, Best was handed bad news: After signing to record label

EMI in 1962, he was booted out of the band in favor of Ringo Starr.

"It's something that's over and done with as far as I'm concerned," he said. "I've lived my life since then, and I'm very proud of the lifestyle I've led. On that particular day I felt the bombshell had dropped because there was no forewarning about it. When I was called into (Beatles manager) Brian (Epstein's) office, we had just got the recording contract with EMI, and we were going to go back in a couple weeks' time to put the finishing touches on 'Love Me Do' and 'P.S. I Love You,' so the world was rosy. So I was called into Brian's office, and he said 'Pete, I don't know how to tell you this, but the boys want you out and it's already been arranged.' So that was the bombshell. It was cut and dried, and there was nothing I could do about it because (Ringo) was already joining the band. It was done behind closed doors, and did cause me a lot of pain, a lot of resentment."

After being fired, Best tried to form a couple of bands with little success. He tried to commit suicide in 1965, according to Wikipedia.com. Starr implied in an interview with Playboy magazine in October of that year that Best was fired because he was a drug user, a claim that prompted Best to sue for libel.

Flash-forward 40 years. The Beatles are arguably the most successful band of all-time. Each member became rich and a household name. And Best is left in the dust: a relic from a time before McCartney could not sell out clubs on his own, much less headline across America.

But rather instead of being bitter at what could have been, Best is thankful for the path his life has taken.

"There comes a time in life when you turn around and say 'oh, to hell with this,' he said. "You've got your own lifestyle to live. I feel after 40-odd years that I'm the lucky one, because things have gone well for me. I've lived a good life. I've got my health and happiness. I've got a great family: a great wife I've been married to for 40 years who has given me two beautiful daughters who have produced four wonderful grandchildren for me. I've got a great band which is touring the world. I can still get on, get drunk if I want to. I think things are going good."

Next Monday the Pete Best Band will return to Liverpool and play a gig in Spain, then return for more stateside gigs in late July.

"The tour's going absolutely excellently," he said. "We flew in the Monday before, and already the tour is hitting us. We've done five gigs from New York to Saginaw, and the response has been absolutely fantastic. The lads have been playing absolutely brilliantly, so everything's been going along in the right direction wonderfully."

He is quick to point out that the Pete Best Band is not a simple Beatles cover band. While the set list on this tour will feature music from the '50s and early Beatles numbers, the band will be releasing a disc of new, original material at the end of this year.

"It's not a Beatle copy band, it's not a Beatles tribute band," he said. "Let's get that straight. There's lots of them out there, and the Pete Best Band isn't. What we're doing is playing music that I was associated with when I was with the Beatles, so you've got music from the '50s, and there's some Beatles music in there because we like playing some of those numbers. But it's a big-sounding band: There's six members, double drums and we put our own stamp on it."

Best said he does not talk much with McCartney, but said "the door's always open," if

McCartney ever desired to do so.

"Now if you look at (the group) in comparison with today, Paul is very much the impresario now," Best said. "I saw almost 40 years ago what the world has seen: a mature Paul McCartney."

But at the end of the day, Best does not view himself as a superstar or a rock idol.

"If it's myself, I suppose you could say a family-minded musician," he said about what he hopes to be remembered for. "That encompasses both aspects of it. But I very much leave that up to the public, which platform you put me on. Some of them turn around and say 'OK, you are legendary.' It's wonderful to be called that, but at the end of the day I don't look at myself like that. I suppose to put it in a nutshell: I go to bed, hopefully I wake up in the morning and I'll lead another life."
