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The life and times of ex-Beatle Pete Best

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THE WASHINGTON POST

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 a few months before "Love Me Do" sends a few million teens into shrieking fits. While his former band mates are recording "Back in the U.S.S.R." in 1968, Best is slicing bread in a bakery.

So close. Best drummed behind John, Paul, and George for two years starting in 1960 in Liverpool and Hamburg. He was there when the Beatles played seven-hour shows to drunken Germans in Hamburg's red-light district. Best was behind the kit for an anxious audition that persuaded Parlophone Records to sign the quartet.

And then one day - Aug. 16, 1962 - he's out. Ringo Starr is in. Manager Brian Epstein delivered the bad news in a brief meeting in his office. 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 being done behind your back," Best says on a recent night in Liverpool. "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."

Best, 61, has bushy gray hair and a mustache. Wearing blue jeans and a sweater, he 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. He is shy and so soft-spoken it's hard to hear him.

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

And then everyone wants to know. Hey, what's it like to almost rule the world?

It's a question Best will surely answer again this week during a visit to America to promote "The Beatles: The True Beginnings," a coffee-table volume he co-authored with his half brothers, Roag and Rory. Best will appear at 1 p.m. Saturday at Bookends in Ridgewood.

In it, the Bests tell an underexalted chapter in the story of the Beatles' rise: the tale of the Casbah Coffee Club. Before they became local sensations at the downtown Cavern Club, John, Paul, George, and Pete were regulars at the Casbah, crammed into a low-ceilinged room big enough for about 25 fans.

For Best, getting to the club meant walking down a flight of stairs. The Casbah was in the basement of the Best house. 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-and-roll. She cleaned out the cellar, then



▲ Pete Best, right, was awarded long overdue royalties in 1995, when the remaining Beatles put together the first of their three-part "Anthology" series.

Pete Best

Pete Best and his half brothers, Roag and Rory, will appear 1 p.m. Saturday at Bookends, 232 E. Ridgewood Ave., Ridgewood, to autograph "The Beatles: The True Beginnings," a coffee-table volume they authored.

interviewed the Quarrymen in her search for a band to play opening night. Then she handed them paintbrushes. On the walls, John Lennon painted potbellied figures, Paul McCartney painted a rainbow, and George Harrison and a drummer named Ken Brown painted stars. Pete joined the group a year later, when it was known as the Silver Beatles.

"She loved music," Best says of his mother, who died in 1988. "She had the idea and the courage to follow through. She turned a humble coffee club into the catalyst for the Mersey sound" - a shorthand for Liverpool rock acts of the day - "and every band that played here still speaks rapturously about the place."

The Casbah was nothing but a musty storage space after it closed in 1962. 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. The group started in 1988 as a lark for a Beatles fan convention. Soon clubs were calling and Best began touring again, this time in oldies concerts or as a headliner in small venues around the world. The set list: Beatles tunes from the days before "Please Please Me" went global, the era of the Casbah Coffee Club.

Drummers were scarce in Liverpool circa 1959. By the time the Quarrymen had been renamed the Silver Beatles a year later, they needed a full-timer to join them in Hamburg, where a promoter had offered them a decent weekly salary. Best passed an impromptu audition and the four, plus Lennon pal Stu Sutcliffe, would play dozens of gigs together. For a time, Best handled bookings, too.

But if Best was in the band, say those who knew him, he was a solo act on the side.

"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. Never said a thing. But I think there was some jealousy about Best 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. Best 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 just as important, they have said, is that he simply fit in better than Best.

The final shove came from producer George Martin, who thought Best's performance so substandard during the Parlophone audition that he urged the band to ditch him. McCartney worried that the label might pass on them unless they changed the lineup.

It's 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. Faulting the way Best was dismissed is easier. Our lovable mop-tops waited until Best was a pen stroke from the big time. After he'd played hundreds of shows, managed the band's business, and welcomed them into the club that doubled as his basement.

"It was," writes Mark Lewisohn, author of "The Complete Beatles Chronicle," "the most underhand, unfortunate, and unforgivable chapter in the Beatles' rise to monumental power."

Best put together a band called the Pete Best Combo. But it felt, he wrote in his autobiography, "Beatle: The Pete Best Story," as if an invisible shield blocked him from winning acclaim beyond his hometown.

Surrounded by Beatlemania, increasingly depressed, he barricaded himself in a bedroom above the Casbah Club and attempted suicide one day in 1965. Rory kicked down the door and revived his brother, who was breathing the fumes of an old-fashioned gas fire.

Best put together another band, which fared poorly, and filed a libel suit against his former band mates after

Ringo implied in an interview that Best had been ejected because of drug abuse. (Four years later, the suit was settled without a trial for an undisclosed sum.) By then Best had a wife and child, and reluctantly put away his sticks.

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 with a smile. "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."

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