

"BEST" OF THE BEATLES FOR "PETE'S" SAKE

Nearly everyone has heard of the Beatles. In fact, it would be hard to find anyone over the age of about eight who hasn't heard of the Fab Four – Paul, John, George, and Ringo.

Considered one of the best rock/pop bands of all time, they went on to enormous success and made a lot of money in the process. At the time of his death in 1980, John Lennon was worth over \$200 million. Had he not been murdered, he probably would be worth as much as Paul McCartney, with a net worth of over a billion dollars. At the time of his death of lung cancer in 2001, George Harrison, who I personally thought made the best music, was worth \$400 million. It is said drummer Ringo Starr is worth \$350 million. The woman considered to have broken up the Beatles, Yoko Ono is worth a ridiculous \$700 million.

Did you know there was a fifth Beatle? This is the story of an original Beatle who missed out on all that success and money. In fact, his net worth today is about a million dollars, a far cry from his past bandmates. This story is about the odyssey of Randolph Peter Best, the original drummer for the Beatles.

Before going further, it should be addressed that there were a couple of other band members of the Beatles for short stints, playing bass. Chas Newby played four gigs and Stuart Sutcliffe played with them in Hamburg, Germany but did not return to England after McCartney, Best and Harrison were all booted out of Germany. Andrew White, a session drummer was used on a few occasions as well.

Best was invited to join the group in August of 1960, just before they were to start their marathon playing sessions in Hamburg Germany. Pete's mother had owned a coffee club, called the Casbah Coffee Club in her basement, where the Beatles had played seven consecutive Saturday nights, all without a drummer in 1959.

Just two short years later of Best being invited to the band, he was abruptly fired by Beatles manager, Brian Epstein, at the urging of the other three bandmates. A very fortunate Richard Starkey, known as Ringo Starr, replaced Best.

Now for some history on Pete Best:

Best is the son of Donald Scanland, a marine engineer who died in World War II. His mother, Mona, then married Johnny Best, and soon had Pete's brother, Rory.

Supposedly, in 1954, Mona, who evidently was a real firecracker, pawned all her jewelry and placed a bet on a horse race. The horse she bet on was a 33-1 longshot and won. She saved those winnings and later bought an enormous 15 bedroom house on Hayman's Green in Liverpool, England. It is this house that enabled her to start her coffee shop, and where the Beatles started playing. Pete's band, the Black Jacks, also played in his mother's cellar.

Originally known as the Quarrymen, the Beatles didn't have a full time drummer for their upcoming trip to Hamburg, so they asked Pete to come aboard. Pete jumped at the chance.

Pete's brother, Rory Best was friends with Neil Aspinall, who rented a room in the Best home. This led to an affair between Neil and Mona while Johnny Best was away on business. The affair produced another half-brother for Pete, a boy named Victor. To make things a wee bit weirder, Neil would then become the Beatles' road manager – meaning he would drive them to their shows.

A record producer at EMI, George Martin, later signed the Beatles. When they recorded the single, "Love Me Do," Martin was unimpressed with the drumming. He decided to use a session musician, which Best strangely agreed to. The other three Beatles were not happy that a session musician had to be used, demanding Martin to replace Best, against Brian Epstein's advice. Epstein felt Best was popular with audiences and should stay but fired him when Best did not show up for what was to be his last gig.

Ringo (Starkey) was a drummer in another band, Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, who played as the alternate band at the club the Beatles played while in Hamburg. Ringo often sat in on nights when Best could not. Paul and John liked Ringo, feeling Ringo to be the better drummer, and invited him into the band as soon as Best had been fired.

There was some controversy in the way and timing of the firing of Best. Biographer Hunter Davies claimed there was something murky and sneaky about it. Said another Beatles biographer, Mark Lewisohn, "the Beatles had had two years in which to dismiss him (Best) but hadn't done so, and now – as they were beginning to reap the rewards for their long, hard slog, with money rolling in and an EMI contract secured – he was out. It was the most underhanded, unfortunate and unforgivable chapter in the Beatles' rise to monumental power."

In a biography of Ringo Starr, John Lennon was quoted as saying "Best, was only in the group because The Beatles needed a drummer when they went to Hamburg — and they always planned on dumping him when a better drummer came along." In my research for this story, I got the impression that Best missed a lot of gig work for unspecified reasons, which had to rankle the other member of the Beatles who were working hard at becoming better musicians. I should state that is my opinion, not something specifically said of Best.

On a recent cruise, my wife and I went on a rock and roll black cab guided tour in London with our very knowledgeable driver, Stephen. (It was with my conversations with Stephen that prompted me to write this story.) He mentioned Best's firing might have had something to do with his mother, Mona, a story of which I had never heard. When I got back stateside (always wanted to use that word) I looked up Best on Wikipedia, and sure enough, they brought up Mona as a possible problem.

Mona served as the Beatles unofficial manager before the legendary Brian Epstein took over. Mona it was said could be rather overbearing and quite opinionated, especially toward matters involving her son, Pete. Epstein began to look at her as a loose cannon that needed to stop interfering in his work. It was also said that Pete was the best looking of the "lads" and had the largest following of smitten girls, which Mona was not shy about bragging about. Mona, who was very instrumental in the early years of the Beatles would pass away after a heart attack in 1988. It would be hard to find one avid Beatles fan who has ever heard of Mona Best.

As one can imagine, being sacked by the Beatles before their massive success, was particularly hard on Pete Best. So much so, he tried to commit suicide in the 60's. He is probably not crazy about being considered the fifth Beatle either, given that every bit of Beatle lore and merchandise shows the Fab Four, not the Fab Five.

In 1995 the Beatles released *Anthology 1*. There were ten tracks on that record that featured Best as drummer from both the Decca and Parlophone labels. There are even a couple tracks on this album that recorded when the Beatles were known as the Quarrymen. The royalties from that album produced for Best somewhere around 4 million pounds or \$5.1 million dollars.

Pete Best has been married to his wife, Kathy, for over 60 years, a feat the other Beatles never come close to attaining. Ironically, he met Kathy at a Beatles concert. They have two daughters. Today, Pete Best is 84 years old, but still occasionally plays in his own band, The Pete Best Band, with his brother, Victor (62) sharing some of the drumming duties. They released an album in 2008.

As Ian Stewart from the Rolling Stones, who I also wrote about, Pete Best has become somewhat of a footnote in music history, having been given the boot from the original band so early in their meteoric ride to success. It must be a hard pill to swallow given the success they all had without him. Perhaps Best and Stewart should have collaborated on a group together (call it the Rejects or Castoffs?). They could have even added Syd Barrett from Pink Floyd a few years later.

Who knows about how fortune will fall in someone's life. What forces were responsible for the luck (or perseverance) for Ringo Starr had as compared to the fate of Pete Best. From the outside looking in, it might appear Pete Best drew the short straw in a match with Ringo Starr to determine who the Beatle's ultimate drummer would be with all the fame and fortune that accompanied it. Surely, it's an enigma we'll never know in this lifetime, but one Pete must ponder frequently.