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Vibes: Feature

The Beatle goes on

Beatle batter and pop culture cymbal comes to town

BY [LEE VALENTINE SMITH](#)
 Published 07.26.06

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Never mind the Sex Pistols. Long before those iconic punks made their mark with a spitting image of reckless and drunken performances, another influential British punk band predated those blokes by, oh, about 17 or 18 years. They were called the Beatles.

No, no, no, not the suit-and-tie-wearing, "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah"-shouting Fab Four that took the world by storm in 1963. Before that, they were often referred to as the "savage, young Beatles," a hard-partying group that routinely played frenzied eight-hour sets and turned Liverpool, England, and Hamburg, Germany, into hot music scenes.

Back then, the drummer wasn't lovable, goofy Ringo Starr. The unrefined gang included Paul McCartney, John Lennon and George Harrison, with bassist Stu Sutcliffe (briefly) and a handsome drummer named Pete Best.

The package for the *Best of the Beatles* documentary DVD, to be released internationally in September, describes Best as "mean, moody and magnificent," and the soft-spoken musician certainly doesn't discount his beginnings. "Yeah," he says quietly, "We were the forerunners of punk."

The Beatles, before they unleashed the gently rocking "Love Me Do," was a whole different breed, scruffy rebels clad in black leather jackets. The dangerous image got the initial attention but what held the interest of their rabid fans was the music, which consisted mainly of cover tunes from late-'50s U.S. rockers. "We were playin' American music and puttin' the Liverpool sound to it, which was later captioned as 'Mersey beat.' It's often said that we took the music from America, put our own slant on it and sold it back to ya," Best laughs.

Before the Beatles, most of the Liverpool-based bands were lightweights. "They were playing what was current on the English charts: Cliff Richard, the Shadows. Very clean-cut. We came back from [a residency in] Hamburg with long hair, cowboy boots, leathers, all sweaty and playin' rock and roll which hit ya in the teeth. It just captivated the audiences. And as a result, a good 85 percent of the bands in Liverpool changed overnight. They wanted to be playin' that type of music, too."

Speaking by phone from the newly reopened Casbah Coffee Club (www.casbahcoffeeclub.com), the home of some of the Beatles' earliest gigs, Best says he literally grew up in the venue. The club, owned and operated by his mother, Mona, was located in the cellar of their Victorian house. "It's still in the family," he says proudly. "My brothers and myself, we've got the Casbah back on the tourist trail."

The club sold coffee, but it definitely wasn't an acoustic coffeehouse. "My mother wanted full-blooded rock and roll bands. Not just a person playin' an acoustic guitar, sittin' in the corner, tappin' bongos." The early Beatles featured Best slamming out his "atom beat," relying on heavy use of the bass drum and toms. "The kids loved it. We were in!"

But after a wild two-year ride, Best was out. In August of '62, just after the Beatles were signed to record for EMI/Parlophone and poised to become superstars, Best was fired and immediately replaced by Starr.

He didn't become an international sensation like his mates, but while real Beatlemania was raging, he had modest success with the Pete Best Four and a satisfying 25-year career as counselor with the British Civil Service. Since '88, the 64-year-old has toured the world with the Pete Best Band, revisiting the songs he played in his untamed youth.

Today, Best, one of only six people -- living or dead -- who can claim to have been a member of the Beatles, retells his tumultuous tale without a trace of regret. "I've had a great life," he says. "I've been all over the world, have a great family, grandchildren -- and I still play music. What else do I need, really?"

And just as they opened for the American debut of those snotty Sex Pistols on Jan. 5, 1978, and the Great Southeast Music Hall, Atlanta's Cruis-O-Matic will open Best's rollicking retro show at Smith's.

Not bad for a savage, mature punk, eh?

Listen to Lee Valentine Smith's [interview with Pete Best](#).

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