

THE BEATLES

& the Long, Winding Road to Success

Margot Morrell

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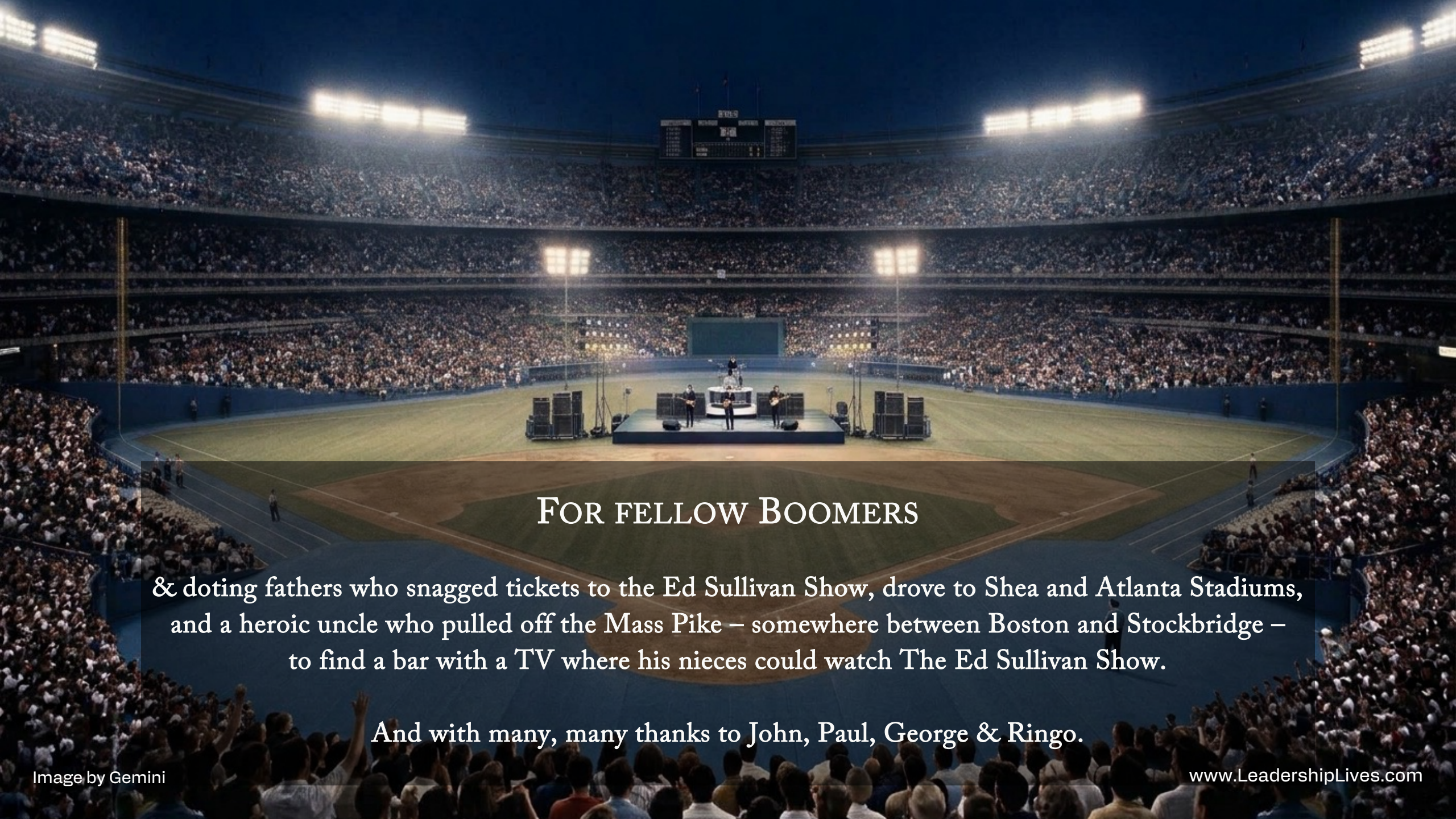


For fellow Boomers

& doting fathers who snagged tickets to the Ed Sullivan Show, drove to Shea and Atlanta Stadiums, and a heroic uncle who pulled off the Mass Pike – somewhere between Boston and Stockbridge – to find a bar with a TV where his nieces could watch The Ed Sullivan Show.

And with many, many thanks to John, Paul, George & Ringo.

Image by Gemini

Age of Austerity



In the years following the devastation of World War II, Britain fended off economic collapse with the “Age of Austerity” – strict rationing of food and consumer products from 1946–1954.

Image of Liverpool by Grok



Skiffle Takes Off

As the bleak post-war years finally began to fade, UK star Lonnie Donegan produced a succession of hits, most notably, *Rock Island Line*, that "flew up the English charts" and detonated a short-lived British craze for skiffle - a cocktail of jazz, blues, folk and country music - imported from America.

Skiffle, usually composed of three chords, was played on cheap or homemade instruments - guitar, banjo, washboard, and a tea-chest bass cobbled together from a wooden box and a broom.

Suddenly, British teenagers had a way to produce music by themselves, for themselves.

Haley & Elvis

In late 1955, Bill Haley & the Comets topped British music charts with *Rock Around the Clock* – the decade's top-selling record. A few months later, twenty-one-year-old Elvis Presley exploded into the lives of British teenagers with a string of hits beginning with *Heartbreak Hotel, Hound Dog,* and *Blue Suede Shoes*.





The Quarrymen

In late 1956, sixteen-year-old John Lennon formed a skiffle band, The Quarrymen, with classmates from Quarry Bank High School in the hard-working, port city of Liverpool in northwest England. John's free-spirited mother Julia taught him banjo and ukulele chords and bought John his first guitar.

At a church fair the following summer, John's friend, Ivan Vaughan, introduced him to Paul McCartney who dazzled John with his clever handling of a guitar and knowledge of rock 'n' roll lyrics. Paul was soon invited to join John's band. Years later, John said, "that was the day – the day that I met Paul, that it started moving."



Image by Grok

George Joins the Group



John originally played a Gallotone Champion, a cheap South African natural-finish flat-top (on left); Paul had a Framus Zenith 17, a German-made sunburst archtop with f-holes (center); and George played a cheap Dutch Egmond, another small natural flat-top, purchased from a classmate.

In early 1958, George Harrison, a younger, guitar-playing boy Paul knew from the school bus, joined the group at Paul's suggestion. As they moved toward rock 'n' roll, the original Quarrymen drifted away – Pete Shotton's washboard and Rod Davis's banjo were no longer useful, Eric Griffiths refused to switch to bass, Colin Hanton left after an argument. Other bandmates came and went. John, Paul and George continued to play together at Saturday-night socials, youth clubs, and the occasional talent contest.

Image by Grok

The Jacaranda

In 1958, jack-of-all-trades Allan Williams and his wife opened a coffee bar in the center of Liverpool. The Jacaranda featured live music and became a popular hangout for art students and young musicians, including John Lennon and Stuart Sutcliffe, who lingered for hours over cheap cups of coffee and toast.

John and Stu, who played bass in John's band, pleaded with Williams to give them opportunities to perform. Instead, he handed them paint brushes and put them to work.



Image by Grok

The Casbah Coffee Club

By mid-1959, John and George had left school. That summer, thanks to George, the group caught their first break.

George was playing with a band booked for opening night at Mona Best's Casbah Coffee Club. When that band fell apart, George suggested the Quarrymen.

In 1954 Mona Best pawned her jewelry to back "Never Say Die," at 33-1 in the Epsom Derby. The horse won and she invested her sizeable winnings in a 10-bedroom Victorian property at 8 Hayman's Green, West Derby, Liverpool.

Five years later, inspired by a television program, she converted the cellar, which held 200–300, into a space for teenagers to gather on weekends.



Image by Grok

Opening the Casbah



On August 29, 1959, the Quarrymen were the opening act for the Casbah Coffee Club. Over the next few years John's evolving band played there 37 times. Paul McCartney called it "our personal club" and "the place where all that started."

Image by Grok

Finding a Name



They outgrew the name, "The Quarrymen," with its reference to school, and tried out a string of names – Johnny and the Moondogs, The Nerk (or Nurk) Twins, The Beatals, among others.

Local bandleader Brian Cassar of Cass and the Cassanovas urged John to call his band Long John and the Silver Beetles. John shrugged off the idea but Cass's nod to *Treasure Island* led to a string of names like The Silver Beats, The Silver Beetles, The Silver Beatles. They finally settled on The Beatles shortly before taking off for their first residency in Hamburg in August 1960.

"The Beatles" was a tribute to Buddy Holly, who had died in a 1959 plane crash, and his band, the Crickets, and to John's passion for clever wordplay.

On the verge of leaving for Hamburg, Paul invited Pete Best, Mona's son, to come along as a desperately needed drummer.

Image by Grok

By May 1960, Allan Williams had allowed John's band to perform at the Jacaranda on Monday nights, when the house band was off.

The group showed some promise, so Williams arranged an audition with a London promoter and, when more seasoned bands were not available, hired them as the backup band for entertainer Johnny Gentle on a 7-day tour of Scotland. Williams then booked the teenagers at a Liverpool strip club.

Now, with the group somewhat battle-hardened, Williams arranged an extended residency with a contact, Bruno Koschmider, who owned two clubs in Hamburg's famed red-light district, the Reeperbahn.

In mid-August, Williams packed the Beatles, their instruments, his wife and two friends into his Morris J2 van and drove them from Liverpool to Hamburg.



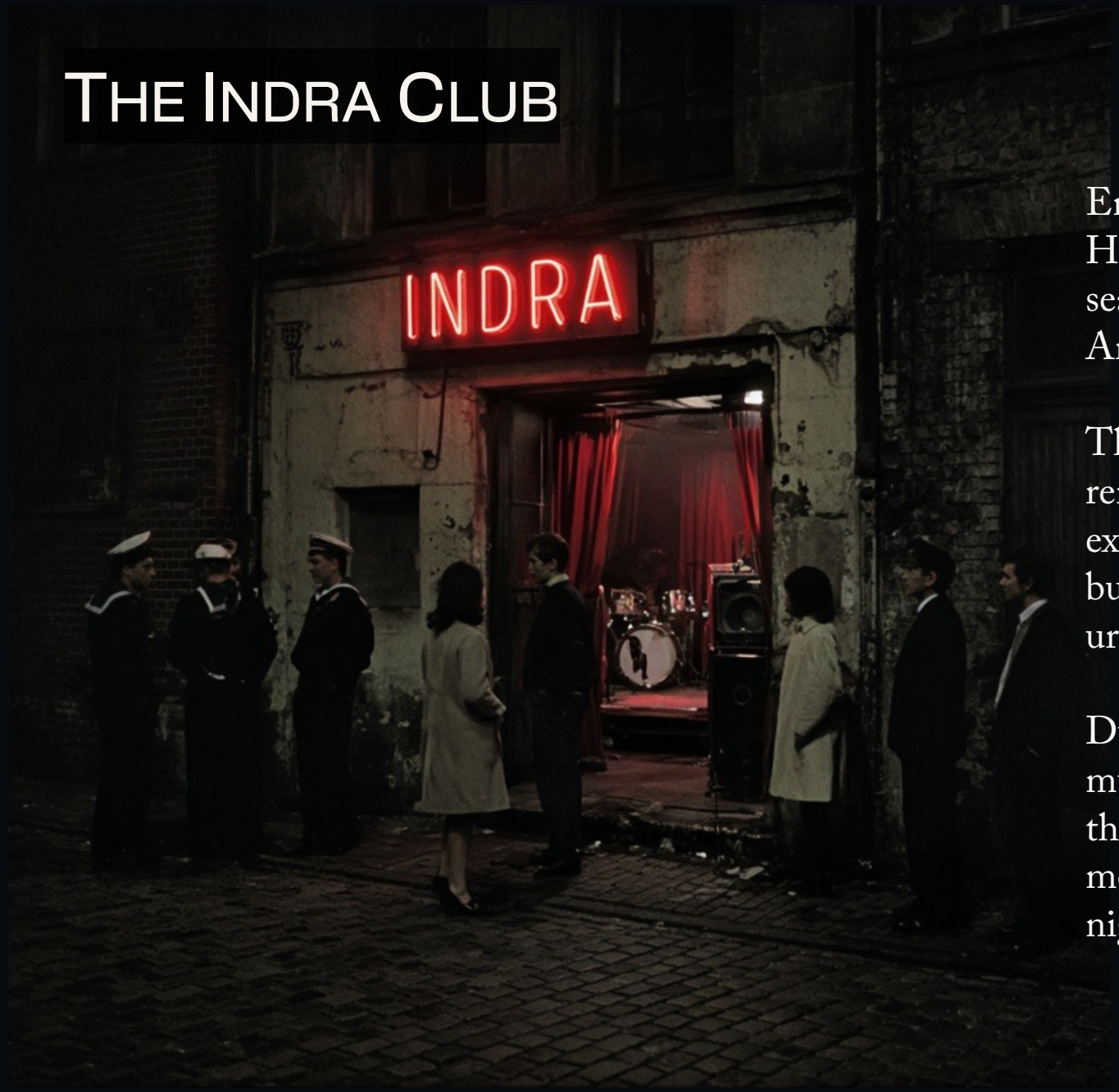
Image by Grok

Apprenticeship – Hamburg, Germany – 1960–1962

- 17 August – 30 November 1960: Indra Club (first 48 nights); due to noise complaints from nearby tenants, owner, Bruno Koschmider, moved the band to the Kaiserkeller where they played for 58 nights.
- 1 April – 1 July 1961: Top Ten Club. Longest continuous run (about 92 nights). The Beatles recorded “My Bonnie” with Tony Sheridan during this period, the record that brought them to Brian Epstein’s attention.
- 13 April – 31 May 1962: Star-Club (first engagement there). They learned of Stuart Sutcliffe’s death on arrival.
- 1 – 14 November 1962: Star-Club with Ringo Starr on drums, after he replaced Pete Best.
- 18 – 31 December 1962: Final Star-Club engagement. Their last Hamburg club dates before Beatlemania.

Image by Grok

The Indra Club



English bands were highly prized in the busy port city of Hamburg because the Germans and visiting merchant seamen and servicemen were all enthusiastic fans of American rock 'n' roll.

The Beatles were booked into the dingy Indra Club in a remote corner of the Reeperbahn, given grimy rooms and expected to play for 4 ½–6 hours per night. Intent on building his failing business, Bruno Koschmider famously urged them to "Mach Schau!" (Make a show!).

During their stint at the Indra Club, Pete Best said their music got "tighter" and stage presence "stronger." And, for the first time, they were making what they saw as real money – the 2026 equivalent of roughly $80 each per night. They began to invest in better instruments.

Image by Grok

To the Toppermost



When they got discouraged—trapped in grim rooms, worried they were going nowhere —
John would shout out a line he had picked up from a long-forgotten, low-budget movie:

"Where are we going, fellas?"
The others would answer in exaggerated American accents: "To the top, Johnny!"
John: *"Where's that, fellas?"*
Them: "To the toppermost of the poppermost!"
John: *"Right!"* — and they'd all cheer up.

Image by Grok

The Kaiserkeller



After the Indra Club was shut down due to noise complaints, Koschmider moved the Beatles to his more successful venue, the Kaiserkeller. There, they got to know Ringo Starr, drummer for Rory Storm and the Hurricanes; met art student Astrid Kirchherr, who trimmed Stuart's hair in the style of local art students; and befriended bouncer Horst Fascher who opened doors for them to better venues.

When they naively jumped at an offer of better pay and digs from another club, Koschmider had George deported for being underage and got Paul and Pete Best deported on a petty arson charge. Soon John was on his way back to Liverpool too. Stuart had fallen in love with Astrid and stayed in Hamburg.

Image by Grok

Home from Hamburg



They returned to Liverpool more polished performers but short of money and demoralized by the chaotic end of their first residency. They resumed playing at Pete's mother's club, the Casbah.

Image by Grok

Litherland Town Hall



A few weeks later, local DJ Bob Wooler booked the Beatles for what turned out to be their breakthrough performance at Litherland Town Hall before a crowd of 1,500. When Paul opened with Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally," the crowd stopped dancing and surged toward the stage. The clapping and cheering was unlike anything they had heard before.

Overnight the Beatles were transformed from a promising local group into Liverpool's top live draw. Paul said that was when they "really came out of our shell" and recognized their talent for the first time.

Image by Grok



The Cavern Club

In early February 1961, they played their first lunchtime gig at the Cavern Club – the first of about 292 performances – and were paid the 2026 equivalent of about $30–$40 each.

When George turned 18 on February 25th that removed the obstacle to returning to Germany. They began to plan an extended residency at the Top Ten Club – a huge step up from the Indra Club and Kaiserkeller in sound system, pay and status. There were no similar opportunities for rock 'n' roll groups in the UK.

Image by Grok



The Top Ten Club

From April 1–July 1, 1961, the Beatles played the longest continuous run of their careers – 3 months - at the Top Ten Club.

While they were there, German record producer Bert Kaempfert heard them playing back-up for Tony Sheridan's jazzed-up version of a Scottish folksong "My Bonnie" and arranged to record the song and a few others with Paul now playing bass. Stuart had left the group to focus on art studies.

When "My Bonnie" was released in Germany on October 23, 1961, the news buzzed through the Cavern Club.

Image by Grok

Mersey Beat



In the summer of 1961, Bill Harry, a friend of John's from Art College, founded *Mersey Beat,* a semi-monthly publication that reported on Liverpool's rock 'n' roll world.

When his concept was rejected by Britain's national press, Harry borrowed about $2,000 in 2026 dollars from a friend, printed 5,000 copies and sold every one.

Harry's newspaper was a publicity bonanza for the Beatles.

The first issue featured an article on the "Dubious Origins" of the Beatles by John Lennon.

Image by Grok

A Request at NEMS

On October 28, 1961, Liverpool teenager Raymond Jones walked into NEMS music store on Whitechapel and asked for a record called, “My Bonnie.” He added “it was made in Germany.”

Brian Epstein, the 27-year-old store director, asked, “‘Who is the record by?’ Jones said, ‘You won’t have heard of them. It’s a group called the Beatles.’” Brian recognized the name from *Mersey Beat*. He wrote reviews for the paper and stocked it in the store.

Over the next few days, there were two more requests for “My Bonnie.” Brian, who prided himself on fulfilling every customer’s request, ordered 200 copies and promptly sold over 100. The Epsteins' family business was the largest music store in northern England.

Intrigued, Brian learned from an employee that the Beatles were playing at the Cavern Club a few minutes away.



Epstein at the Cavern



Image by Grok

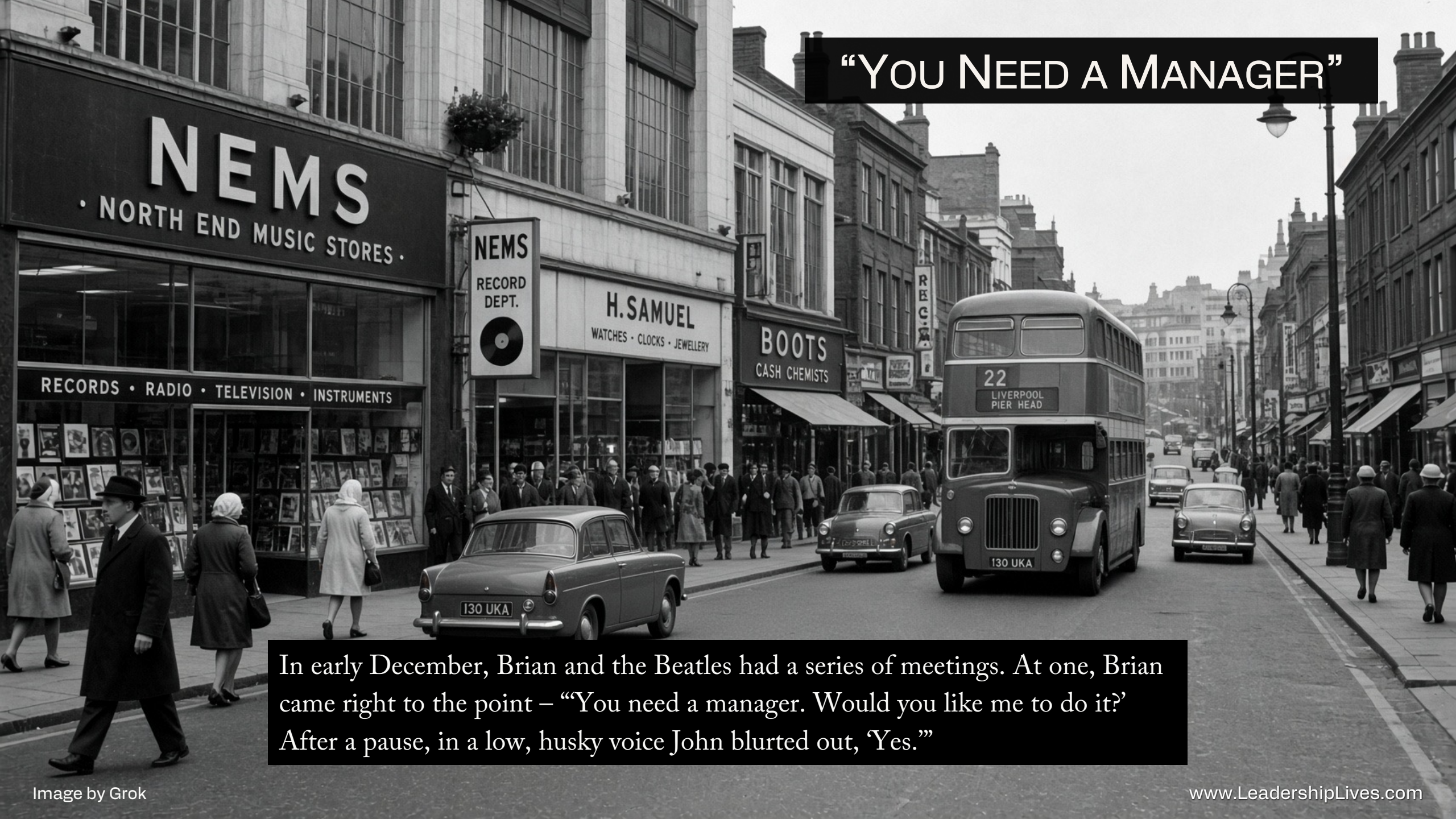
By the time Brian Epstein went to see the Beatles' lunchtime show, they were “the undisputed kings of the Cavern and *Mersey Beat*.” What they lacked was an effective promoter. They’d recently been booked to play an event where 18 people showed up.

During their sets, the Beatles smoked, they ate, they bantered, they shouted at the audience and laughed at private jokes, but somehow there was something appealing about them.

Brian introduced himself during their break. As they sized each other up, George broke the ice asking, “What brings Mr. Epstein here?”

Watching the second set, Brian decided the group had an “indefinable charm” and suggested they schedule a meeting “just to chat!”

“You Need a Manager”



In early December, Brian and the Beatles had a series of meetings. At one, Brian came right to the point – “‘You need a manager. Would you like me to do it?’ After a pause, in a low, husky voice John blurted out, ‘Yes.’”

Image by Grok



An Ear for Hits

Brian Epstein had an extraordinary track record of identifying soon-to-be-hits. Alistair Taylor, his assistant, described him as “uniquely gifted... he could smell a hit record from a million miles away.”

Brian sensed the Beatles could be bigger than Elvis. His flair for theater and design and his connections in the record industry could make that happen.

His first goal “was to persuade a recording executive to hear them sing and play.”

Rejected in London

In early December, Brian met with record companies in London.

EMI and Decca were the industry leaders - each with roughly 30–35 percent of the market.

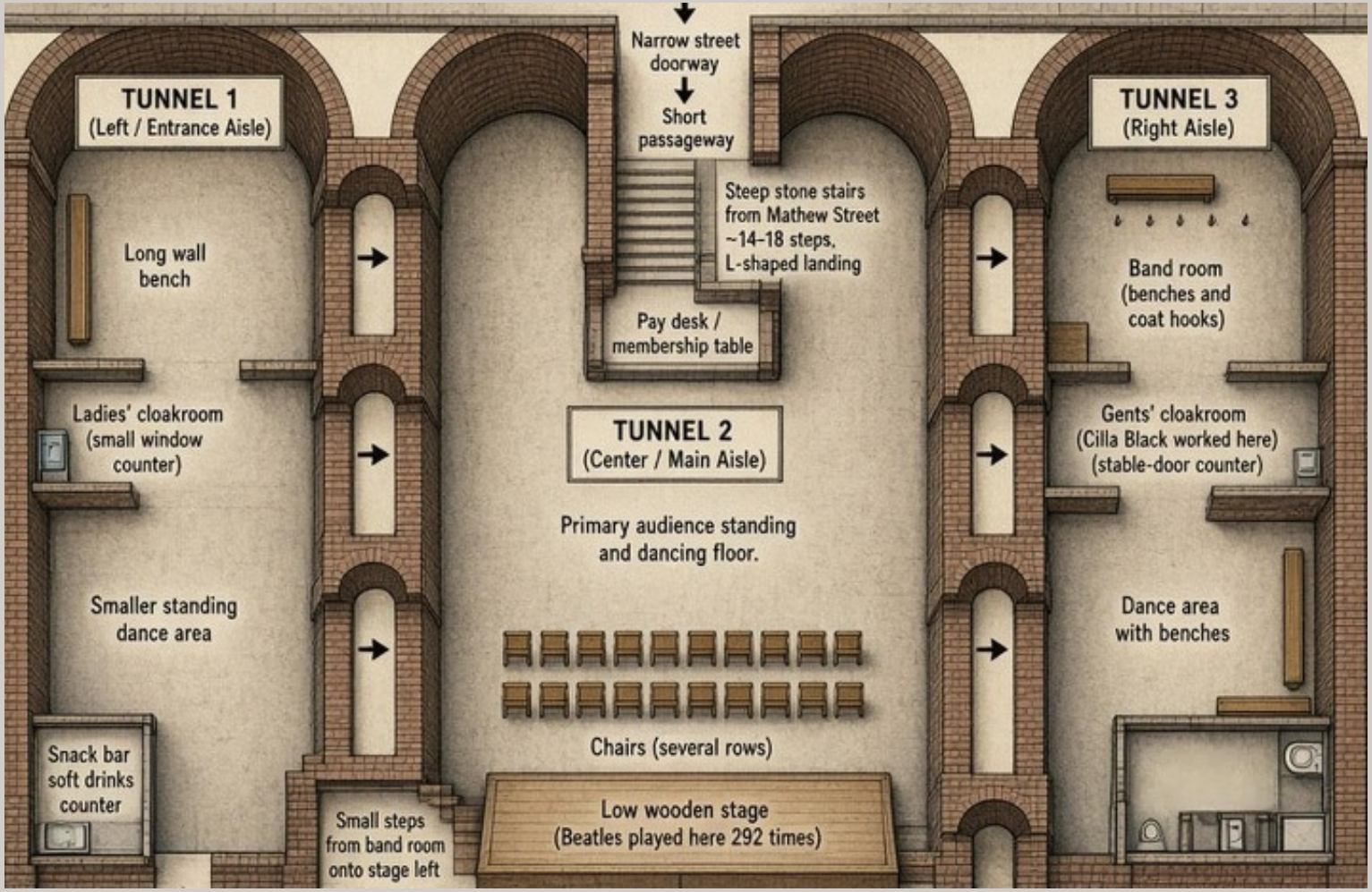
Unimpressed by “My Bonnie,” EMI’s premier labels, Columbia and His Master’s Voice (HMV), and smaller industry players, Pye Records, Philips and Oriole turned the Beatles down in rapid succession.

Brian held out hope for Decca - the UK's top pop recording company - where he had his strongest connections.



Image by Grok

Decca Sends a Scout



NEMS was Decca's largest customer in northern England and that deserved some respect.

In mid-December, Decca sent A&R (Artists & Repertoire) exec Mike Smith as their talent scout to see the Beatles perform at the Cavern.

The Cavern Club, circa 1962
Mathew Street Entrance at the top.

Image by Grok

The Decca Audition



According to Brian, Smith was “knocked out” by the Beatles’ Cavern performance.
1962 got off to a great start with a recorded audition of 15 songs at Decca’s West Hampstead studio.

Image by Grok

Decca Says No

A few weeks later, over lunch at Decca's headquarters on the banks of the Thames, Dick Rowe, head of A&R, turned down the Beatles saying, according to Brian, "Not to mince words, Mr. Epstein, we don't like your boys' sound. Groups of guitarists are on the way out." For the rest of his life, Rowe denied saying that.

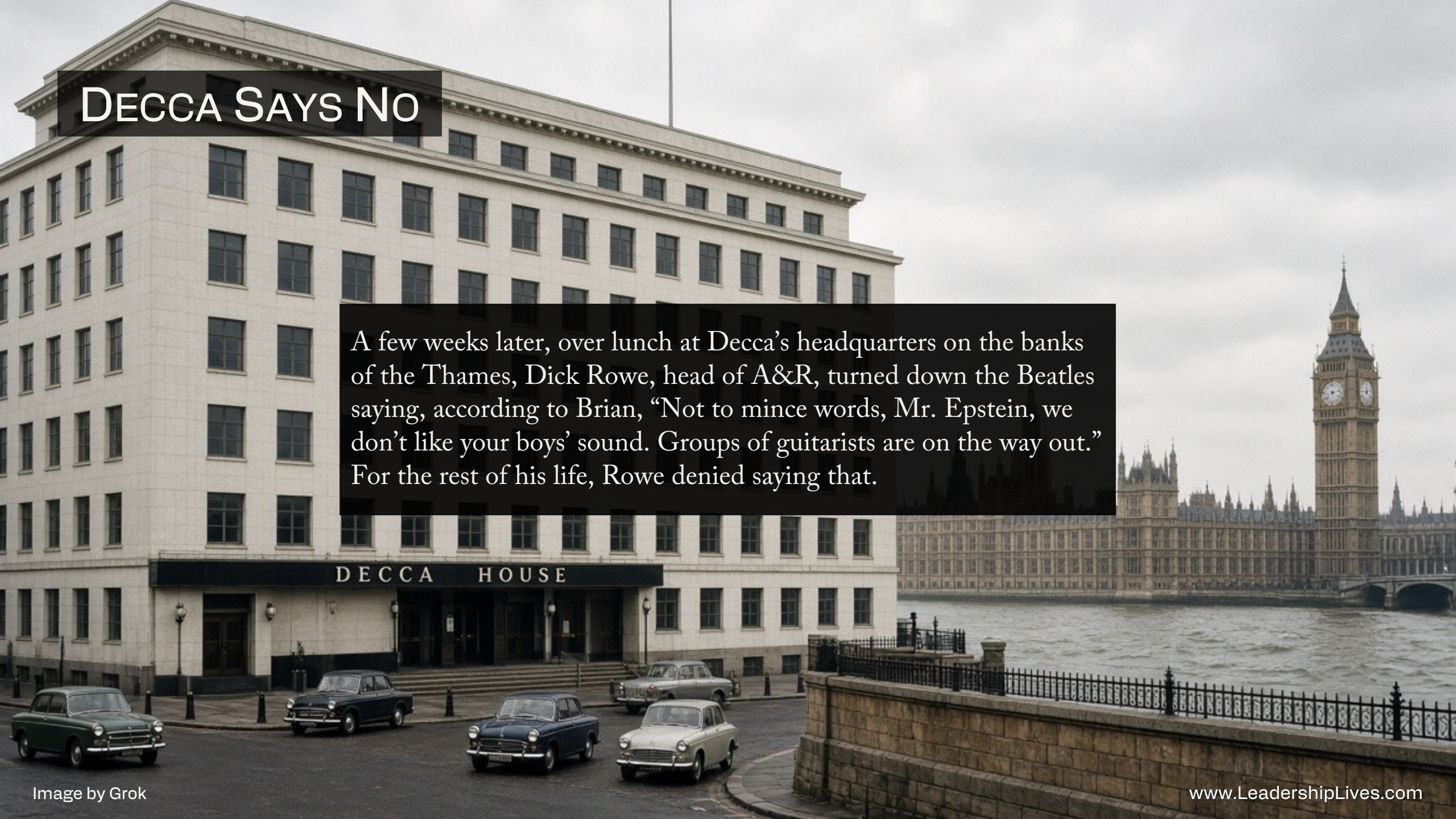


Image by Grok

The Rooftop Concert



In 1969, the Beatles performed their last live concert on the roof of their headquarters at 3 Savile Row, bringing traffic in central London to a standstill.

Forced to stop after 40 minutes, John Lennon joked, “I hope we’ve passed the audition.” Everyone laughed except, no doubt, the executives at Decca.

Image by Gemini

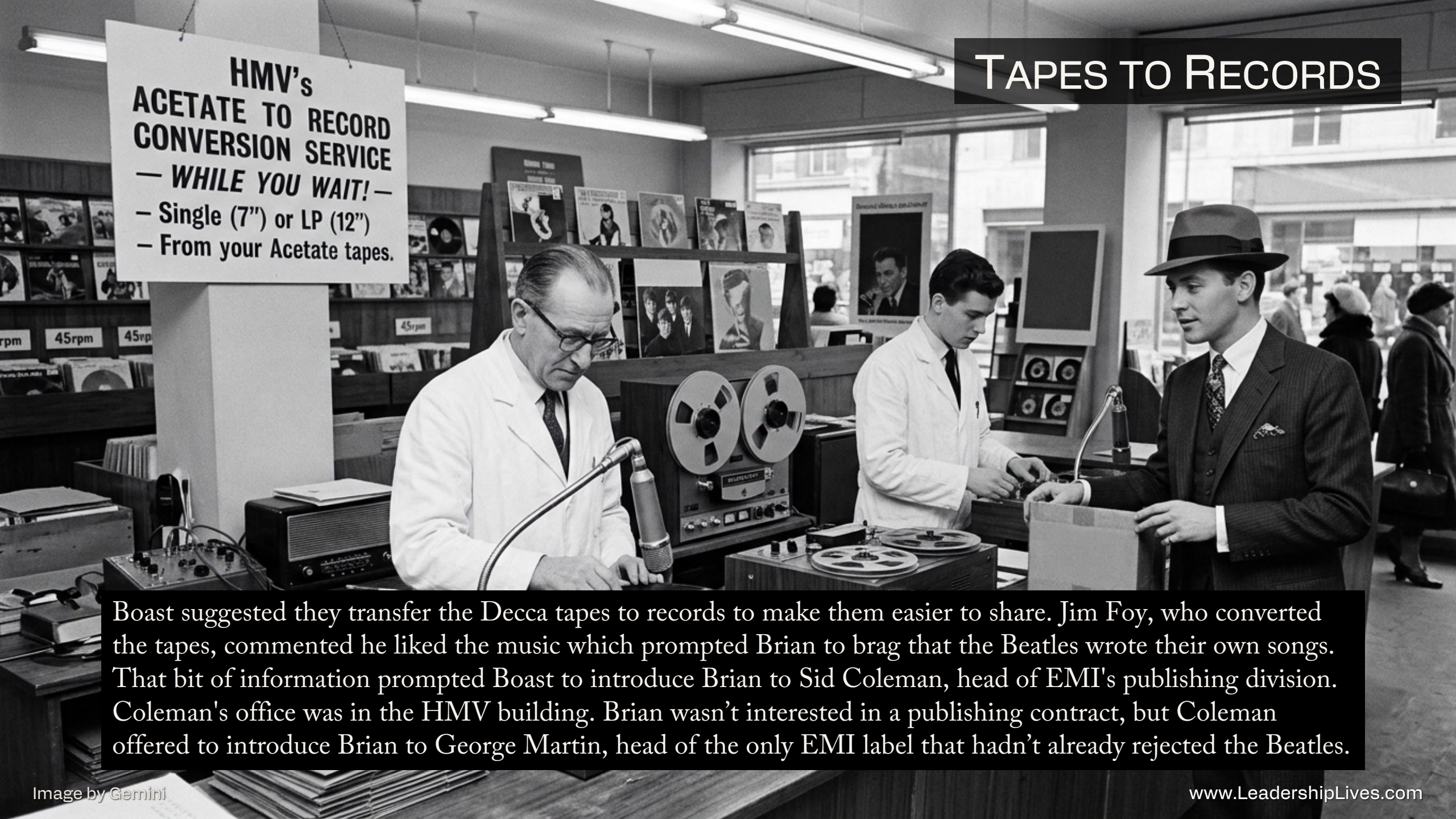
A Break at HMV



Despite the rejections, Brian refused to give up. He arranged a meeting with Bob Boast, manager of HMV's flagship store on Oxford Street in London. They had met a year earlier at a management course sponsored by Deutsche Grammophon in Hamburg. At HMV, Brian finally caught a break.

Image by Grok

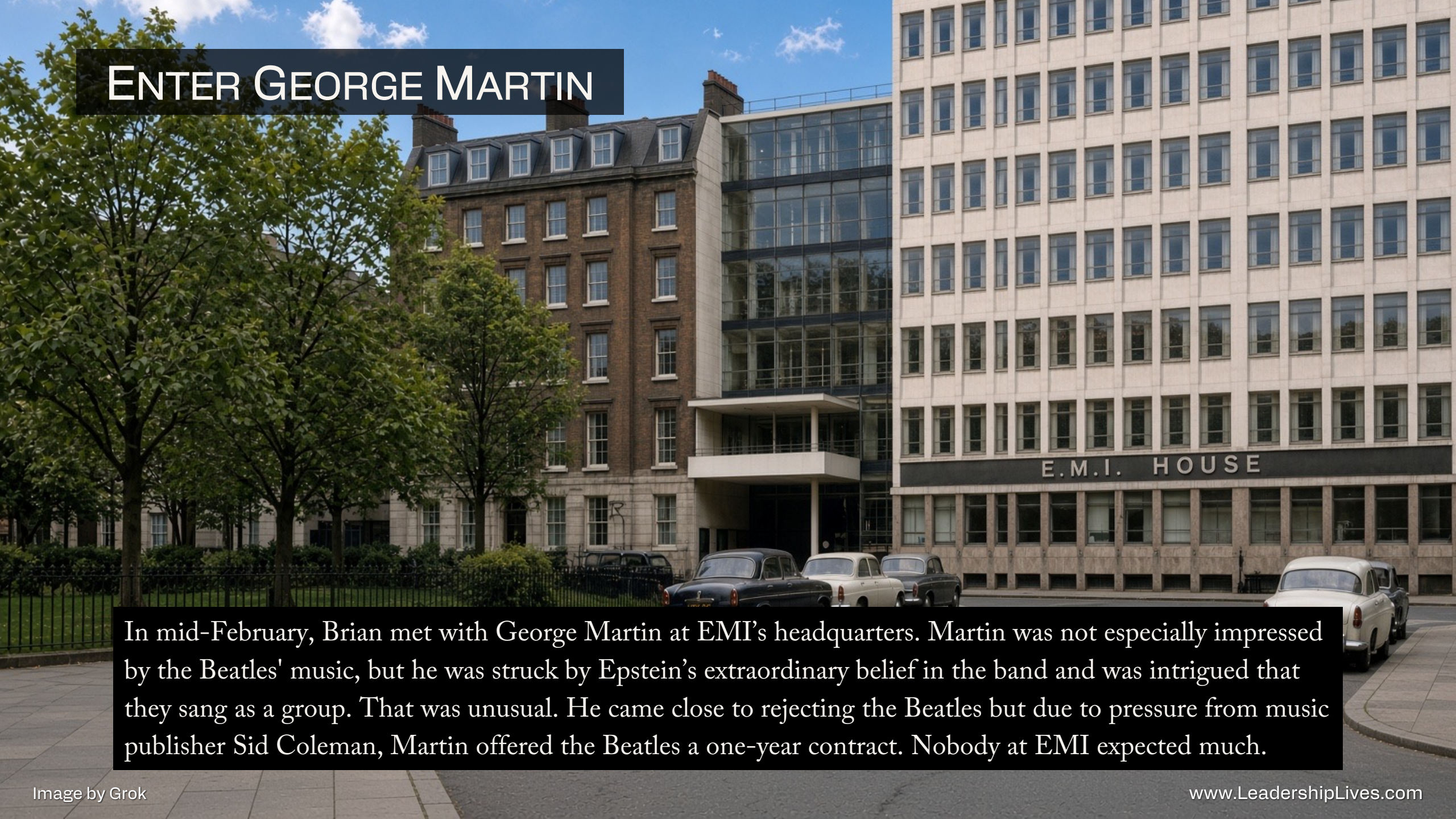
Tapes to Records



Boast suggested they transfer the Decca tapes to records to make them easier to share. Jim Foy, who converted the tapes, commented he liked the music which prompted Brian to brag that the Beatles wrote their own songs. That bit of information prompted Boast to introduce Brian to Sid Coleman, head of EMI's publishing division. Coleman's office was in the HMV building. Brian wasn't interested in a publishing contract, but Coleman offered to introduce Brian to George Martin, head of the only EMI label that hadn't already rejected the Beatles.

Image by Gemini

Enter George Martin



In mid-February, Brian met with George Martin at EMI's headquarters. Martin was not especially impressed by the Beatles' music, but he was struck by Epstein's extraordinary belief in the band and was intrigued that they sang as a group. That was unusual. He came close to rejecting the Beatles but due to pressure from music publisher Sid Coleman, Martin offered the Beatles a one-year contract. Nobody at EMI expected much.

Image by Grok

The Star-Club



The Beatles got the news of their recording contract with EMI by telegram in Hamburg. Horst Fascher, their friend from the Kaiserkeller, had hired them as the featured opening act for his new venue, the Star-Club. The Beatles were booked for three residencies that year, starting with a seven-week stay from April 13–May 31, 1962.

Image by Grok

Abbey Road



The Beatles' first recording session with EMI's Parlophone label was scheduled for June 6, 1962, at Abbey Road Studios.

Image by Grok

Pete Out, Ringo In



After the June session, George Martin told Brian he intended to use a studio drummer for the Beatles' next recording session. A long simmering issue finally had to be addressed. It fell to Brian to deliver the bad news to Pete Best.

While Pete never quite seemed in sync with the other Beatles, Ringo Starr slipped into place like a missing puzzle piece.

Image by Grok

Love Me Do



On September 4, 1962, the newly reconfigured Beatles recorded “Love Me Do” at Abbey Road. A few days later, John and George splurged on new guitars.

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The June 1962 EMI recording contract triggered an astonishing series of what Brian called "ultimates."

- Love Me Do (1st single) — October 1962; broke into Top Twenty, peaked at #17.
- Please Please Me (single) — January 1963; #2 on official UK chart, #1 on other charts.
- Please Please Me (album) — March 1963; #1 for 30 weeks, Top Ten for 62 weeks.
- From Me to You — April 1963; #1 on Record Retailer for 7 weeks.
- She Loves You — August 1963; UK #1 for 6 weeks, top-selling 1960s single in the UK.
- I Want to Hold Your Hand — November 1963; UK #1 for 5 weeks, #1 Christmas 1963.
- December 1963 — Washington, D.C. — "CJ the DJ" starts pushing the Beatles.

Drum City



In April 1963, Ringo Starr and Brian Epstein visited Ivor Arbiter's specialty drum store, Drum City, on London's Shaftesbury Avenue to replace Ringo's Premier drum set.

They settled on a Ludwig kit and Arbiter, London's agent for Ludwig, suggested the maker's name appear on the bass-drum head. Epstein wanted the band's name on the bass too.

In a stroke of genius, Arbiter sketched out the lettering - a large capital B and a large capital T, dropped below the baseline, so the word "Beat" stood out. Brian paid Drum City £5 for the artwork.

Arbiter's clever, spur-of-the-moment, drum-head design became the Beatles' trademark.

Image by Grok



One success after another piled up. In October, the Beatles appeared on Britain's premier variety show, *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. They sang "From Me to You," "I'll Get You," "She Loves You," and "Twist and Shout" to an audience of roughly 15 million viewers. Within days, newspapers that had stubbornly refused to acknowledge the Beatles started printing screaming headlines: "Beatlemania!"

Image by Grok

Beatlemania!



The *Daily Mirror* reported: “A police motorcade stood by as the four pop idols dashed for their car. Then the fans went wild, breaking through a cordon of more than 60 policemen.”

“With engines racing, the cavalcade roared down Argyll Street and turned into Oxford Circus…”

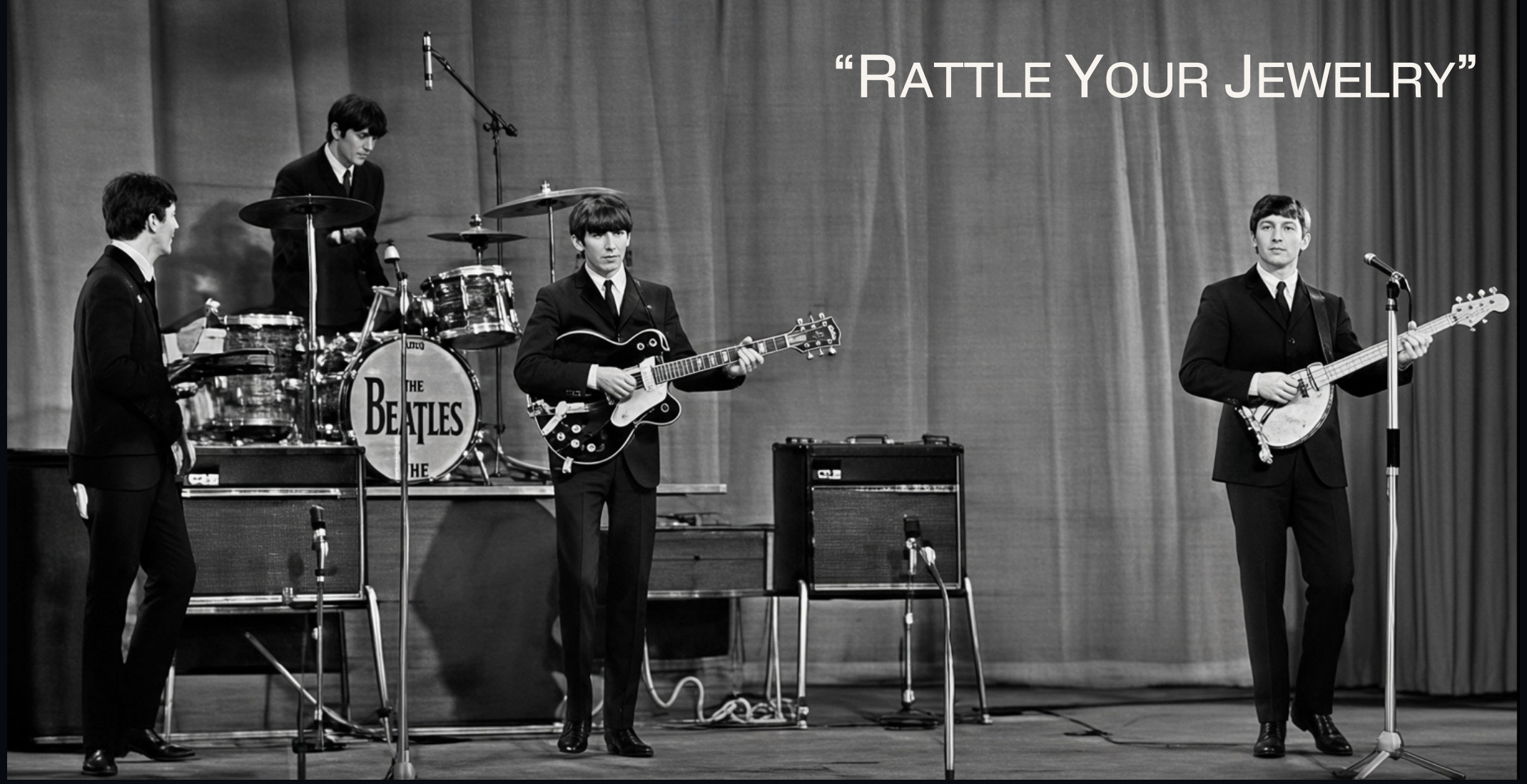
“a day-long siege…”

The *Daily Herald* vividly wrote: “Screaming girls launched themselves against the police—sending helmets flying and constables reeling.”

Several newspapers noted that an estimated crowd of 500 to over 1,000 teenage girls besieged the theatre for hours.

Image by Grok

“Rattle Your Jewelry”



On November 4, 1963, at the Royal Command Performance, John introduced their final song, “Twist and Shout,” to a well-heeled audience that included the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret. He joked, “For our last number, I’d like to ask your help. Will the people in the cheaper seats clap your hands. And the rest of you, if you’d just rattle your jewelry.”

Image edited by Grok

Operation U.S.A.



The next day, Brian flew to New York to put his “Operation U.S.A.” plan into action.

He met with America’s star-maker Ed Sullivan at Sullivan’s suite at the Delmonico Hotel on Park Avenue. By the time Brian left, they had agreed to two live shows and a third taped appearance. The Beatles were paid about $10,000 (over $100,000 in 2026) plus travel and accommodations and received top billing on the show.

Their appearances on February 9th, 16th, and 23rd launched the Beatles’ unparalleled global success.

Image by Grok

Arrival in New York



The Beatles and their entourage, Cynthia Lennon, Brian Epstein, road manager, bodyguard, and press officer, landed at New York's Kennedy Airport on February 7, 1964, to an overwhelming welcome from fans and press. Paul described their arrival as "like a dream. The greatest fantasy ever."

Masterminded by Brian Epstein, the Beatles had arrived at the "toppermost of the poppermost." New York was the center of the rock 'n' roll world. Two days later, 73 million Americans tuned in to watch *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Years in the Making



By the time the Beatles reached Ed Sullivan's stage, John, Paul and George had been playing together for over six years. During countless hours before live audiences, they had honed their stagecraft, public personas, and music to perfection. At the right moment, Brian Epstein came along to add the polish that transformed the Beatles into superstars who shaped a generation.


The End
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