The Beatles inspired many groups to embrace rock’n’roll – and they all wanted to play the Cavern,
CLOSURE OF THE CAVERN

The bubble was about to burst. Five years into Ray McFall's ownership in 1964, unpaid debt would lead to the club's demise. The ex-accountant had run up huge bills in his wish to accompany The Beatles on their mega US tour. As a result, DJ Bob Wooler wryly related, “we were always number one in the writ parade.”

By February, the Cavern was forced to close. McFall's last all-nighter turned into a lock-in with 150 kids barricading the entrance in awe. “Cavern sounds” filled various EPs worldwide would come, and often weep. “Not only was it Liverpool’s most popular rock act called Queen. Mashed, however, could occur. Bill Haley and his Comets didn’t turn up due to “contractual misinterpretation”, but provided a barstoolmer the second time round. As late as 1968, rock ‘n’ roll remained in high demand. That year, Chuck Berry played the Cavern – “a wonderful performer but not a particularly nice man,” says Debbie. She recalls him remaining in his chauffeur-driven limo in the rain until receiving payment upfront. DJ Bob Wooler, still in awe of Berry, said at the time: “A mighty influence on The Beatles… and didn’t John Lennon once say, ‘If they hadn’t called it rock ‘n’ roll, they’d have called it ‘Chuck Berry’?”

Paul McCartney also acknowledged rock ‘n’ roll’s enduring impact. In 1973, in Liverpool to play with Wings, he told the Liverpool Echo: “It’s footsteps that really turn them on is the old rock and roll… funny really, it means that we are back home. We sang and played at the Cavern where we started, for it was the hard beat rock we sang and played at the Cavern in the early days that used to get the fans away. Ten years later it still works.”

As the late ‘60s set in, the club’s clientele became more 18+. All-nighters were introduced, as was alcohol. Debbie’s father Alf also designed souvenirs merchandise, guest judged on BBC TV’s Juke Box Jury, managed groups, and supported The Ivyes – later top band Badfinger, as produced by Paul McCartney. The latter’s surprise reappearance at the Cavern years later – in which he burst into “Honey Jude” on an old piano – remains another Cavern highlight of Debbie’s.

From 1967, she was helping manage the club full-time, and it could be a rollercoaster, with attempted extortion by a bent copper from the Vice Squad on a protection racket followed by the harassment of staged drug raids and the ensuing court case marking a low point. Top tourist attraction though the Cavern was, funds proved tight, and by 1970 Debbie’s father felt ready to sell. Shockingly, just three years later, the legendary Cavern would be demolished due to the new owners ignoring an invitation to counter a British Rail’s compulsory purchase of the site in connection with the construction of Liverpool’s new railway network.

Happily, via its present owners, the resurrected Cavern is, Debbie thinks, the closest thing to the original in both location and feel. “Pacing the entrance, a full wall of bricks displays the names of every group that ever played there. A second panel is inscribed with every owner. This summer marked 50 years since Debbie’s family reopened the club on 23 July 1966. Today, this historic venue is alive with music once more. Having seen it all, from teenybopper fan to manager, Debbie agrees with the words of DJ Bob Wooler: “The Cavern was the greatest finishing school pop music had ever known.” And most importantly, “The Beatles didn’t make the Cavern… the kids did!”

The Merseybeats at the Cavern Club in 1964, from left to right: Tony Wilson, John Garstang, John Banks and Tony Crane.