



A leather-clad Beatles on stage at the Cavern in February 1961

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“My love affair with the club actually began in December 1960, over five years before my Dad bought it. I was 15 and immediately hooked. The music penetrated every cell in your body, and we couldn’t get enough of it. It made the Cavern the most magical place on the planet.” So recalls Debbie Greenberg on finding her musical mecca circa 1960, as a starry-eyed teen. Six years on, her family would own the legendary site.

It all started in 1957, with young jazz fan Alan Sytner’s visit to a Left Bank club in Paris called Le Caveau. Much inspired by the atmospheric, brick-arched cellar, he aimed to recreate the same back in Liverpool. In the city centre’s Mathew Street, he found a dingy, disused fruit warehouse ripe for converting into a jazz cellar. The Cavern was born – but it would not stay a jazz haunt for long. As Debbie writes in her fascinating new memoir, *Cavern Club, The Inside Story*,

“The Cavern’s identity began to change at the start of the new decade. Rock’n’roll slowly replaced jazz and the Cavern became the heart that gave Mersey its beat... a magnet for teenagers hungry for their fix of the incomparable sounds and a mecca for the hundreds of groups that came to belt out their rock’n’roll.”

American musical influence was fast taking hold in the UK. With no major pop radio stations yet in existence it reached a ready audience via muffled Radio Luxembourg, and vinyl arriving from America. Liverpool, as a major port, found itself in pole position. “Records brought home from America by Scousers working on ships were always high in demand,” explains Debbie.

The Cavern was fairly nondescript-looking on the outside, but what was it like inside? Debbie knows: “It would have been like a descent into the bowels of the earth. Literally a dank and stinky cellar, with dated drainage, ventilation and public access, there was never the luxury of a fire escape. Young, carefree

and reckless, we never stopped to think of it as a potential deathtrap for hundreds.

“It was like a sauna when the club was full, with rivers of condensation running down the walls and the odour of cigarette smoke permanently in the air. There was also a strong smell of perspiration from an overheated crowd of hundreds, too cool to take off their coats. Mix into this the tantalising smell of hot dogs and soup from the café, and you had the odorous cocktail that helped to make the Cavern what it was – a wondrous place where teenagers could escape.”

Like Debbie, many of the city’s youth – up to 900 at a time – would flock to this Shangri-La day and night. Inbetween an unlikely combination of modelling and managing her father’s butcher’s business, Debbie would be there every lunchtime session from Tuesday to Friday. “There were two sessions, from 12pm to 1pm, and 1.15 to 2.15pm. The later one was always the best – then I would go back again at night for more.” Such was her fixation that her concerned parents lay in wait one

night to make sure she wasn’t involved in any ‘den of iniquity’. “It was all very innocent,” assures Debbie. “No alcohol was served, just Coca-Cola.”

There was always a rush for seats. “Either side of the central aisle were arched tunnels where, if you were lucky and early enough to grab a centre row seat, you could get a fabulous close-up view of the group on-stage,” Debbie recalls. “You could practically touch them and talk to them and make requests, with every performance like a private party.”

To one side, the tiny 8ft x 10ft dressing room space was a scrawled record of rock history, daubed in signatures and quips from all the acts, while to the right of the stage lay the cloakroom where future star Cilla Black would work. Comper extraordinaire Bob Wooler, resident between 1961-’66, would play the latest records on his single turntable in the breaks between groups setting up. His oft-repeated introduction: “Hi there, all you cave dwellers. We’ve got the hi-fi high and the lights down low.”

Wooler was a supreme talent-spotter: after their initial Cavern foray in ’57 as The Quarrymen, he was the one to book a raw new rock’n’roll band, The Beatles. Debbie witnessed their lunchtime debut at the Cavern, on 9 February 1961.

“We were blown away. The Beatles were different, their music incredible, their appearance raunchy, their energy infectious. They just oozed excitement. Then they disappeared for four months, off to Hamburg for the second time.”

Other acts – Gerry and the Pacemakers, The Swinging Blue Jeans, The Remo Four, The Big Three, Kingsize Taylor and the Dominoes – stood in. “All fabulous groups, but they weren’t The Beatles,” insists Debbie. “They were already by far the best group around – and in 1961, there were some 300 groups playing on Merseyside... and not a bad one amongst them.”

By the time of their ‘welcome home’ Cavern appearance on 14 July 1961, relentless Hamburg sets had honed the pre-pop Fab Four into a top-class act. Debbie considers that playing with Tony Sheridan influenced how The Beatles dressed and moved, even to their trademark ‘high held’ guitar-playing. “The transformation was unbelievable,” she confirms. “The gyrating hips, humorous banter and sexy outfits, the tight black leather. Their repertoire was now wide-ranging, the sound was unique.

Liverpool had never seen or heard anything like them.”

The Beatles performed an amazing total of 292 times at the Cavern – and every Wednesday night, and thrice-weekly lunchtimes, Debbie was out front. “Overnight The Beatles had a following of devoted fans, and I was one of them. The amazing thing about the Cavern was that The Beatles and all the groups were so accessible. We were literally inches away as they played.”

She especially recalls their ‘throbbing’ rendition of *My Bonnie* (which inspired local record store manager Brian Epstein to check them out at the Cavern on 9 November 1961 – and the rest is history). In 1962, Debbie was especially thrilled to see The Beatles twice on the same day: first at the Cavern, then again at the vast Tower Ballroom in nearby New Brighton, on a 12-band bill headlined by every rocking band’s inspiration, Little Richard. Debbie heard the quartet’s Cavern debut of single *Love Me Do*, and she also attended The Beatles’ last appearance playing the chart-topping hit *Please Please Me*, an occasion on which the Cavern queue stretched all the way down Mathew Street.

“The Beatles inspired many groups to embrace rock’n’roll – and they all wanted to play the Cavern,” points out Debbie. Despite The Beatles leaving Liverpool, the Cavern continued to thrive as a live music venue, where youngsters

NORTHERN SOUNDS TOP TWENTY

In 1962, the *Liverpool Echo* famously published its ‘Mersey Beats Popularity Poll’ as voted for by readers:

01. The Beatles
02. Gerry and the Pacemakers
03. The Remo Four
04. Rory Storm & The Hurricanes
05. Johnny Sandon & The Searchers
06. Kingsize Taylor & The Dominoes
07. The Big Three
08. The Strangers
09. Faron’s Flamingos
10. The Four Jays (later The Fourmost)
11. Ian and the Zodiacs
12. The Undertakers
13. Earl Preston & the TT’s
14. Mark Peters & The Cyclones
15. Karl Terry & The Cruisers
16. Derry and the Seniors
17. Steve and the Syndicate
18. Dave Fenton and the Silhouettes
19. Billy Kramer and the Coasters
20. Dale Roberts and the Jay Walkers



A sweaty Cavern Club dancefloor in 1964

The Merseybeats at the Cavern Club in 1964. From left to right: Aaron Williams, John Gustafson, John Banks and Tony Crane.



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COVER TO COVER: THE CAVERN



Cavern Club: The Inside Story by Debbie Greenberg (Jorvik Press) is a unique, illustrated personal account of the legendary musical venue.



Let's Go Down The Cavern (1984) by Spencer Leigh and Pete Frame, offers more general insight plus interviews with key staff.

Both are available on Amazon

worldwide would come, and often weep in awe. 'Cavern sounds' filled various EPs and LPs, featured on seminal TV shows such as *Ready, Steady, Go* and, on film, *Liverpool A Go Go*.

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 themselves in against the officials. A sit-down strike by thousands of fans took place on Mathew Street, while a protest

march took it to the council. Two years on, to Debbie's astonishment and delight, she found her family, the Geoghegans, at the club's helm – theirs for the sum of £5,500. "To actually own the Cavern was both magical and breathtaking," she says. "Not only was it Liverpool's most popular music club, but the most famous club in the world. Hallowed ground indeed."

The purchase lease included 8, 10 and 12 Mathew Street. No. 8 was home to Cavern Sounds Ltd – Liverpool's first professional recording studio. No. 12, bricked up on the far-left Cavern wall, was later expanded into restaurant premises by Debbie's family. The ambitious Cavern overhaul took a solid three months to complete. In a headline-making coup, from one famous No. 10 to another, PM Harold Wilson agreed to officiate at their grand reopening

ceremony. On 23 July 1966, he paid tribute to the "wonderful foreign earning power of the Mersey Beat".

A music marathon of Cavern-related artists ensued: Marty Wilde, Georgie Fame, Billy J Kramer, The Fourmost, The Merseys, plus special US guests Solomon Burke and Rufus Thomas. Ironically, in lieu of The Beatles – sending congrats telegrams in their absence – their ex-drummer's outfit, the Pete Best Combo, nobly stood in instead. Recalls Debbie: "The joint was jumping...the Cavern was jolted back to life."

It was 'star-magnet' business as usual: Ben E King with The Three Tons Of Joy, Edwin Starr, The Coasters, The Zombies, The Yardbirds and The Who all appeared... not to mention Status Quo, and the debut of an unknown theatrical rock act called Queen. Mishaps, however, could occur. Bill Haley and his Comets didn't turn up due to "contractual misinterpretation", but provided a barnstormer 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*, "...the stuff that really turns them on is the old rock and roll... funny really, it means that we are back 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 cult club's clientele became more 18+. All-nighters were introduced, as was alcohol. Debbie's father Alf also designed souvenir merchandise, guest judged on BBC TV's *Juke Box Jury*, managed groups, and supported The Iveys – later top band Badfinger, as produced by Paul McCartney. The latter's surprise reappearance at the Cavern years later – in which he burst into *Hey 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 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. Facing 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." ★

STILL SHAKIN' AT THE CAVERN

Today, The Shakers are the Cavern's sole resident Merseybeat group. Formed 11 years ago by Tony O'Keefe as a four-piece, they are now a tight-knit trio with Tony on drums, Eddie Harrison on guitar/lead vocals, and Martin Davies on bass/vocals. "I felt there were many Beatles tribute acts and modern-sounding '60s bands but nobody local really captured the vibe of the original genre," says Tony. "I also wanted to encompass other greats, so Rory Storm, The Big Three and all the era's other local hit-makers are on our setlist." The Shakers have worked with many original '60s acts, and have played a huge Beatles festival in the United States. Their LP *A Whole Lotta Shakers!* is out on Germany's Soundflat Records, with a CD on Majestic Sound Records in Japan.

Regulars on the UK's '60s scene, you can catch the Hofner-toting Shakers at the Cavern Club most weekends. They're not called "the best Merseybeat group out of Liverpool since the '60s" for nothing. See www.cavernclub.org/whats-on for special anniversary events; Facebook – The Shakers, and live streaming of the band from the Cavern at facebook.com/beatstreamlive.



Today, resident Cavern trio The Shakers aim to keep the vibe alive

