



# Brian Epstein

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

The Beatles' visionary manager took the Fab Four to "the toppermost of the poppermost."

AS TIME GOES BY, SUCCESSES OF THE PAST, PARTICULARLY groundbreaking ones, often come to seem inevitable. The more comprehensively a band reshapes the world, the more difficult it is to imagine what the world looked like before it was so dramatically remade. So the question arises from our contemporary perspective: Who could not have foreseen the earth-shattering potential of the early Beatles? It was all right there, after all: their obvious musical genius; those harmonies, original songs, and impeccable taste in covers; their raw rock & roll energy combined with irresistible pop charm. Not to mention their good looks, intelligence, youth, ambition, and a fierce work ethic. Who couldn't have known that the Beatles were destined to conquer and transform the world? ✿ The answer to that question, of course, is just about everybody, with one notable exception: Brian Epstein. As the Beatles' manager and tireless promoter, Epstein displayed much more than an eye for talent, though that was certainly one aspect of his gift. Indeed, he was motivated by something much more rare and ineffable: an unshakeable belief in them as artists and as people. ✿ Yes, the Beatles already had garnered fans before Epstein experienced his Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment, while watching them perform during one of their frenzied lunch-hour sets at the Cavern Club in Liverpool. They had incited passion in their hometown, as well as at raucous club residencies in Hamburg, Germany. They were beginning to attract an audience beyond Liverpool in other areas in northern England. But in London, the English seat of cultural power and the center of the country's music industry, the Beatles were unknown.

Worse still, no one wanted to know. They were provincials and, in any event, as one record company head memorably put it, "Guitar groups are on their way out, Mr. Epstein." His efforts to secure the Beatles a record contract seemed doomed to fail. Every label turned them down, until EMI proved willing, however tentatively, to take a risk.

So what exactly did Epstein hear and see that no one else was able to? What would possibly motivate him to declare – before the Beatles had even released a single – that the band would be bigger than Elvis? It's difficult to describe how absurd such a notion would seem before the Beatles made it a reality. It's a claim that at the time would have been considered certifiable. We now take it for granted – once again, because of the Beatles – that, every few years, important bands emerge from the U.K. and make a tremendous impact. In 1961, that was unthinkable. In America, the home of rock & roll, the notion that anyone could eclipse the King had been abandoned, even as the King himself had begun to slip. That a band from England could achieve anything beyond success in their own country – and, perhaps, at best, some novelty attention in the U.S. – was beyond ridiculous.

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born, in part, of his frustration; as if the more rejection he and the band faced, the more completely he needed to inflate their significance and justify his devotion. To not believe in them was not an option, so shoring up that belief required unquestioning faith. "Every other word out of his mouth was that they are too important even when they were nothing," said Nat Weiss, the music industry lawyer who would become Epstein's American partner. "He used those phrases and he always stared up at the sky when he said these things."

But the possibilities that Epstein intuited when he saw the Beatles had as much to do with himself as with them. "If anyone was the fifth Beatle, it was Brian," Paul McCartney famously declared, and that statement gets at the degree of Epstein's identification with the band. It was an emotional connection, far more profound than anything felt by the many music industry figures – who claimed such stature not by any real connection, but simply by virtue of *wanting* to bask in the Beatles' reflected glory. Most importantly, Epstein never would have claimed that title for himself. Nor did he have to: The band conferred it on him. Moreover, in the external world, Epstein was well aware of the crucial difference between artists and their managers, and he had far too much respect for the Beatles to encroach upon the standing they had attained and that, in his view above all others, they entirely deserved.

But inside himself, Epstein understood that taking the Beatles to "the toppermost of the poppermost," as the band would put it – in order to encourage themselves in their darkest moments – would enable him to realize his own destiny, to achieve his own dreams of greatness. Brian was 27 when he first saw the Beatles at the Cavern Club, and he was managing his family's

Liverpool record store. He was doing very well, but nothing remotely like the dreams he had entertained of being an actor (he had studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), a fashion designer, or a theatrical producer. Despite his relative youth and the prominence he had attained as a retail force in the English music industry, he felt like a failure. "I must surely be one of the latest developers of all time, for not until my mid-twenties did any pattern or purpose emerge in my life," he stated in his 1964 autobiography, *A Cellarful of Noise*. "My parents despaired many times over the years, and I don't blame them, for throughout my school days I was one of those out-of-sorts boys who never quite fit. Who are ragged, nagged and bullied and beloved of neither boys nor masters.

"At the age of ten, I had already been to three schools and had liked none of them," he continued. "I am an elder son – a hallowed position in a Jewish family – and much was to be expected of me."





Epstein with Ringo, George, Paul, and John, 1963

It did not take Epstein long to determine that the Beatles were the means to rise to those expectations, which by that time were as much his own as his family's. "It took about half an hour after Brian saw the Beatles to decide to manage them," said Alistair Taylor, who worked as Epstein's assistant at the time, and accompanied him to the fateful Cavern show. He and Epstein had gone to lunch afterward, and Epstein asked, "What do you think about me managing them?"

"And it was as quick as that," Taylor later said. "It was just overwhelming."

Epstein came from an affluent background, carried himself with an air of authority, spoke extremely well, and dressed meticulously, all of which impressed the Beatles, who were themselves ready to take the next step along the road to their destiny. If Brian envisioned his own future when he saw the Beatles, the band felt similarly when he suggested managing them. "We had been playing together a little while

and we were starting to feel that we were getting good," McCartney recalled. "But there comes a point in everybody's career when you think you need a little bit more than just being good. We needed someone to manage that goodness and push and give us a few clues as to how we might go a bit further. It became obvious that Brian was that person."

"Thinking big. This is what bound Brian and the boys together," said Derek Taylor, who became the Beatles' spokesperson and who ghostwrote *A Cellarful of Noise*. "They all did think big. Very high notions of themselves and very high expectations."

Epstein's unwavering devotion to the Beatles did not render him uncritical of them. In making the band ready for the world, he brought all of his talents to bear – a savvy awareness of theater and fashion, and a keen sense of marketing and promotion from his work at the record store. As Beatles scholar and Liverpool native Paul du Noyer wrote, "Paul McCartney



**FROM TOP**

Epstein with Ed Sullivan, John, Ringo, and Paul (from left), 1964; with Cilla Black, 1964; going formal with the Fabs.



has often observed that Brian was not so much the Beatles' manager as their director. He conceived of them as a visual and stage phenomenon – he wisely left all questions of music up to the boys – and nurtured their look. He . . . gave them a crisp, modern image for the 1960s. The notion of Epstein 'neutering' the group by forcing them out of leathers is erroneous. That greasy 1950s look was by now obsolete. And the Beatles favoured suits long after Brian was around to nag them."

**A**FTER LANDING THE BAND THEIR RECORD deal, Epstein set his sights on America, yet another preposterous gambit. "The thing is, in America, it just seemed ridiculous – I mean, the idea of having a hit record over there," John Lennon said. "It was just something you could never do. That's what I thought, anyhow."

Epstein thought differently. He convinced Ed Sullivan, whose Sunday night variety show was the most important outlet in the world of entertainment at the time, that the Beatles should enjoy top billing for three consecutive weeks. (Presley, too, had made three momentous, though not consecutive, appearances on Sullivan's show in 1956 and early 1957. The parallel was significant, another measure of Epstein's staunch conviction that the Beatles must be perceived in the same grandiose terms as Elvis. That Elvis' manager, Col. Tom Parker, sent the Beatles a congratulatory note, which Sullivan read on the air, demonstrates that the message got through to at least one key player. The note was both a gracious gesture and a reminder to the world that, from the as-yet-unrivaled height of his throne, the King easily could afford to be generous to these English upstarts.)

Epstein had harangued Capitol Records, the Beatles' American label, into spending forty thousand dollars to promote the band's launch in the States, an investment that more than paid off. After a Washington, D.C., radio station leaked the band's single, "I Want to Hold Your Hand," it shot to Number One around the country. Seventy-three million viewers watched the band's first Sullivan appearance on February 9, 1964, shattering all previous records at the time. Beatlemania had fully taken hold in America,

and the British Invasion was under way.

The Beatles, of course, went on to many other triumphs in the ensuing years, many coming even after their breakup in 1970 and the subsequent deaths of John Lennon and George Harrison. But as the sixties progressed, the band's relationship with Epstein grew more complex. Along with Bob Dylan, the Beatles introduced and began to embody the notion that pop stars were artists, and they insisted on all the freedom and independence that stature implied. They became counterculture insurgents, while Epstein remained wed to far more traditional ideas about show-business decorum. The Beatles were growing up. They were no longer "the boys," Epstein's affectionate term for them, gamely taking direction from their far more sophisticated manager. They no longer wanted to tour, and they insisted on a greater degree of control in every aspect of their lives. They had embarked on their own journey of discovery, and Epstein became just one of many guides along the way.

Both gay and Jewish in a country where homosexuality was a crime and anti-Semitism was common, Epstein struggled with his identity. He remained closeted, and his taste for rough trade seemed (to some) a psychological means of punishing himself for his own forbidden desires. He grew isolated, increasingly rely-

ing on pills and alcohol – old-fashioned drugs that were themselves an emblem of how out of step he was with the (ultimately no-less-destructive) freewheeling psychedelic explorations of the times. He died in August 1967, during the so-called Summer of Love, of what was ruled to be an accidental overdose of barbiturates. He was 32.

In recent years, much has been made of Epstein's "mistakes" in handling the business affairs of the Beatles – vastly undervaluing the worth of their merchandising, to cite one example. It must be remembered, however, that Epstein and the Beatles had very few, if any, models for making all the right moves in a new world that they were, in large part, inventing. Each step required decisions that would have been impossible to conceive of just a short time before. Sometimes, it seems, it is easier to work miracles than to get every point exactly right in a deal memo.

Epstein's importance, then, cannot be evaluated strictly in business terms. He was a visionary. In providing a vision for the Beatles, he provided a vision for the world to come – one in which, at their best, artists and their representatives embody a set of values and a desire to uplift all the lives they touch. Epstein did not merely manage the Beatles: He loved them. And, as John Lennon said shortly after his dear friend's death, "We loved him, and he was one of us." 🍌

On the set of U.K. TV show 'Late Scene Extra,' 1963

