

# Craig Brown book review for the Spectator Magazine

'When the Beatles first authorised biographer Hunter Davies clinched the deal in 1967 his publisher remarked that "we know everything we could possibly know about the Beatles and they'll disappear soon." In that same year the philosopher Bryan Magee adopted an incredulous tone in the Listener;

"Does anyone seriously believe," he asked "that Beatles music will be ...part of daily life all over the world in the 2000's?"

But here in the recently released statistics for the Top Ten global recording artists of 2019, amongst the Taylor Swift's and the Ed Sheeran's, fifty years after they broke up - let me introduce to you the band you've known for all these years.

As for Hunter's publisher, the seven pages of 'Sources' at the back of this book lists around a hundred books about the Fab Four written since 1967 - and they're just the good ones.

Craig Brown isn't trying to emulate those biographers. He's not attempting to compete with Mark Lewisohn who is doing for the Beatles biographically what Robert Caro has done for President Lyndon B. Johnson. Neither is he seeking to rival the encyclopaedic wealth of musical detail contained in Ian Macdonald's superlative 'Revolution in the Head'.

Instead we're taken on a magical mystery tour that ends where it began - with Brian Epstein making his way down the eighteen steps that led into the Cavern to hear John, Paul, George and - er Pete (yet to be replaced by Ringo) for the first time.

Just as in his previous book, 'Ma'am Darling' about Princess Margaret the aim isn't to provide a traditional biography; indeed Brown seems to have invented a wholly new biographical form.

In a polychromatic cavalcade of chapters of varying length, the man with kaleidoscope eyes conveys what it was like to live through those extraordinary Beatles years with the odd glance at what came before and after.

Taking as it's link the sister of Brown's previous subject here's a daisy-chain of extracts that I enjoyed making.

In 1953 a child in Liverpool enters the City's Coronation essay competition.

"On the Coronation Day of William the Conqueror," writes ten-year-old James Paul McCartney, "senseless Saxon folk gathered round

Westminster Abbey to cheer their Norman king as he walked down the aisle. The Normans thinking this was an insult turned upon the Saxons killing nearly all of them. But on the Coronation of our lovely young queen, Queen Elizabeth II, no rioting or killing will take place because present day royalty rule with affection rather than force.”

Sixteen years later the other half of what was by now the most successful song writing partnership in history, writes to Queen Elizabeth II;

“Your Majesty,

I am returning this MBE in protest against Britain’s involvement in the Nigeria - Biafra thing, against our support of America in Vietnam and against Cold Turkey slipping down the charts.

with love,

John Lennon”

Twenty years after receiving that letter, at a celebration of her golden wedding anniversary, the Queen says;

“What a remarkable fifty years they have been for the world.....think what we would have missed if we had never heard of the Beatles.”

Encapsulated here is Paul’s conformity, John’s rebelliousness and Her Majesty’s astuteness (as well as her surprising ability to presage future Richard Curtis film projects).

For we who lived through those years it is entirely possible to understate the effect the Beatles had on music, fashion, culture, the universe!

The British music scene in the 50’s/early 60’s was a world in which Pinky and Perky were serious recording artists, George Martin produced records like ‘Nellie the Elephant’ and professional song-writers in Denmark Street provided material for our home-grown pop stars all of whom were Elvis Presley tribute acts.

Chief amongst them was Cliff who had been trying to crack the American market for years with no success whatsoever. The US charts were immune to our cheap imitations. ‘Stranger on the Shore’ and ‘Telstar’ were the only British records ever to have enjoyed any success on the Billboard Hot 100 and they were very much niche recordings.

Chapter 44 of this book simply records the Billboard chart for the week 4th of April 1964. Not only are the Beatles at No.1 but they occupy the top five positions and in total 12% of it’s entirety.

As Brown relates, poor Cliff, born just five days after John Lennon went from being Britain’s rock’n’roll superstar to family entertainer almost overnight in the slipstream of the Beatles rocket.

One of the many delicious footnotes in this book describes how much nine-year-old Craig Brown enjoyed watching Cliff as Buttons in Cinderella at the Palladium and mentions that it was about the same

time as the Beatles were recording Strawberry Fields Forever and Penny Lane.

It was the American invasion (following the steady conquest of Liverpool, Britain, Europe and the Commonwealth) that turned the extraordinary into the legendary.

Curiously in a book so plump with quirky details, Brown doesn't mention that 'With the Beatles' was released on the very day President Kennedy was assassinated. But he does give a vivid account of the band's effect just over two months later when "looking as if he's about to announce a fatal car accident", Ed Sullivan introduces the Beatles to 73 million viewers of his Sunday night show. By then they were already at Number One in the US charts. Epstein's brilliant strategy was only to take them to America when they were.

"In Britain," Craig Brown points out, "the success of the Beatles was comparatively gradual: they hoveled into view. But in America they arrived with the sudden impact of a tidal wave."

Brian Wilson heard them and never wrote another surfing song.

Fourteen-year-old Bruce Springsteen heard them and worked through the summer to raise enough money to buy a guitar. Tom Petty, Billy Joel and Chrissie Hynde were amongst the other young Americans inspired by that appearance.

Leonard Bernstein was older (aged 41) but said that he too "immediately fell in love with the Beatles music."

On the day after the assassination of President Kennedy, Bernstein had conducted the New York Philharmonic playing Mahler's Resurrection Symphony for a televised memorial.

Brown mentions this and puts his finger on a more profound Beatles affect beyond the music and the screaming girls

"In many people's minds," he says, "the assassination of JFK was winter; the Beatles are spring." To put it another way, as the American writer Joe Queenan said, "the Beatles helped to heal America".

On the other side of the iron curtain, years later Gorbachev told Paul McCartney "I do believe the music of the Beatles taught the young people of the Soviet Union that there is another life."

These are huge responsibilities to place upon the slim shoulders of those four young, working-class men from Liverpool but it's undeniable that they went well beyond being simple pop stars.

In Britain they were already helping to restore the balance of payments.

"If any country is in deficit with us," said Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home, "I only have to say the Beatles are coming."

Apart from the phenomenal record sales there was the merchandise.

In New York alone 20,000 Beatles wigs were being sold (for \$2.98 each) every day.

Harold Wilson as Leader of the Opposition used the Beatles in his successful portrayal of Douglas-Home and the Tories as “aristocratic apostles of a bygone age.”

Ted Heath bizarrely called them “the saviours of the corduroy industry.” Years later Mrs Thatcher did a photo-call on the famous Abbey Road zebra crossing.

But Craig Brown also gives voice to the detractors.

On the right William F. Buckley said they would be regarded as “crowned heads of anti-music, even as the imposter popes went down in history as anti-popes.”

Whilst on the left (sort of) Paul Johnson, the editor of the *New Statesman* wrote a furious condemnation. Its heading was ‘The Menace of Beatlism’ and it attracted more letters of complaint, Brown tells us, than any NS article before or since.

But the fact that such commentators mentioned the Beatles (as did an entire gallery of unlikely figures from President Sukarno of Indonesia to the Duchess of Windsor) is proof of their impact.

Craig Brown is obviously a fan. I say that because in his last book it’s not obvious that he has any sympathy for his subject.

As a child he receives a Beatles wig for Christmas, cherishes the *White Album* (bought for £3.12s.6d) and in a very personal chapter describes being at a Catholic prep school as a ten-year-old grappling with a Benediction hymn called *Tantum Ergo*.

‘Lady Madonna’ is released in the spring term and little Craig can feel that “pop music was moving away from meaning and closer to the language of *Tantum Ergo* forcing sense to make way for something more mysterious.”

In the end any analysis of the Beatles phenomenon always comes back to their songs and the incredible contribution they made to the evolution of pop/rock music. From the sheer joyfulness of ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ to the dark autobiography of ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ in just four years.

The entire Beatles journey was a short one and Brian Epstein didn’t make it to the end. In an interview with the *Observer* quoted here he describes what he found at the bottom of those eighteen steps into the Cavern.

“Everything about the Beatles was right for me. Their kind of attitude to life, the attitude that comes out in their music and their rhythm and their lyrics, and their humour, and their personal way of behaving - it was just what I wanted.”

Epstein loved them. So did Craig Brown. So did I.

Hunter Davies and Mark Lewisohn remain their great biographers but if you want to know what it was like to live those extraordinary Beatles years in real time, read this book.'