

## **46 years late but I made it**

Back in 1961 a damp cellar, converted into a club, in Liverpool was becoming a Mecca for young teenagers. However it wasn't until a rather suave, certainly for Liverpool, gentleman descended down the winding stairs on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1961 that it's status in the annals of popular music were about to change.

That man was Brian Epstein and he had been drawn to the club out of I am sure part business acumen and part curiosity, to see for himself a rather scruffy group who he had heard of through the fact that requests for records of theirs had been made at his music and record shop, even though technically they had not made any in their own right.

The group was of course The Beatles and within 18 months this club would go on to achieve legendary status.

Many groups who swept to fame on the crest of what became known as the Merseybeat boom did of course play at the Cavern and The Searchers were no exception, making their Cavern debut fronted by Johnny Sandon on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1961 or 18<sup>th</sup> April dependant on one's source of reference. Pop historians would later claim that The Searchers were really better known for playing another venue called the Iron Door club.

However fact remains The Searchers did play at the Cavern numerous times on three occasions with The Beatles and that perhaps the most fateful gig they played there was one night when the aforementioned Brian Epstein, decided to take a look at their performance with a view to perhaps adding them to his growing roster of Liverpool groups and singers, after all, why not, they were perceived to be one of the big groups within the Liverpool scene.

John McNally has recalled however that that night was a disaster in some ways, whilst waiting for their spot the 5 lads of Sandon, Curtis, Pender, McNally and Jackson decided to partake of some liquid refreshment, at the Grapes a pub opposite the Cavern, some would perhaps cynically say to give them some Dutch courage.

Tony Jackson apparently enjoyed a pint or 6 and so did Johnny Sandon who's stage name was derived from a pub in Liverpool, by the time they came to do their spot Jackson and Sandon were somewhat inebriated or p----- to use the vernacular.



Consequently their lack of professionalism did not sit well with the on-looking Mr Epstein who decided that perhaps they would go down as just another group from Liverpool, who whilst popular in that city would never be heard of nationally. In the wider concept of things that really happened to Johnny Sardon who decided that he would be better off joining The Remo Four if he was to achieve fame and perhaps fortune, he made the wrong move but perhaps whilst wrong move for him it possibly was a stroke of luck for the other four.

Whilst I would not be so bold or indeed foolish to question Mr McNally's recollection I do wonder about the time line because JS's last appearance with Searchers certainly at the Cavern was in February 62 so at this stage Epstein had not secured a recording contract for Beatles, so did he intend to make Searchers his second signing, we'll never know.

The Cavern of course faded from the public's imagination once the initial euphoria of Merseybeat came to an end sooner than some imagined.

Indeed the Cavern closed in February 1966 and the guy who had owned the club Ray McFall was declared bankrupt sadly.

It did reopen in July 66 and actually started to serve alcohol in 67 but it shut its doors for the last time in 1973.

Years later Liverpool council failed to see the importance of the venue and it was demolished.

A replica venue did however appear some years later a few yards away from the original site and this new venue did indeed once again become a haven for local groups to hone their skills, however there was to be no second coming of the Liverpool sound

Paul McCartney played this venue in 1999 to an audience of 300 who obtained tickets by means of a lottery or probably more to the point that they knew somebody.

Whilst I am not 100% certain I suspect that a new part was added to accommodate a stage etc for the homecoming of the great one, this would become known as the back room.

And so a brief history though anyone interested in its history can find facts etc on the net and in books, by far more well informed people than I.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 The Searchers were booked into the Cavern to do two shows one in the afternoon and one in the evening, as can be seen by poster both were sell out's and they were to play in the back room same stage as McCartney had played in 1999. Additionally in the main area a different group was playing every hour from midday to midnight all for the princely sum of £3.



**I decided not to pass up this opportunity to see Searchers in this, unique to me, venue and duly bought tickets for afternoon show and evening show.**

**I arranged to meet up with Ian Beattie and Ian Smith both of these along with Tim Viney started the Searchers Appreciation Society back in 85 but it was soon left to Tim and he has continued to keep the magazine going ever since, though credit also due to Frank Allen who has always been supportive of the venture.**

**I went into the Grapes pub initially and sat in a corner was Sam Leach a name synonymous with Merseybeat, he was plugging a new book and DVD.**

**I was soon joined by my friends and we made our way to the Cavern entrance a few yards up the street. We descended the winding stairs and I then got my first glimpse of the Cavern and could only visualise what it might have looked like in the 60s.**



**For some reason the entrance to the back room was still closed so a queue started to form by the bar, even at this early stage I realised that perhaps was not going to be the most comfortable of venues I had seen the Searchers perform in. Whilst queuing a band were playing Beatle numbers on the stage of the main Cavern and at this stage I could only hear them, they sounded pretty good, so I left the queue to take a look and was surprised to find they were an all female group calling themselves the Beatlettes.**

**Eventually we were allowed into the back room area very dimly light and VERY HOT even early on, the room soon filled up and really this is a standing room only venue.**

**My friends thought that only Searchers would be on but I quickly sussed that there must be at least one support act on judging by the guitars on stage, none of which I recognised as belong to Searchers.**

Very quickly within ten minutes about a guy called Hal Bruce took to the stage, with just a semi – acoustic guitar, he had on one those leather caps that Lennon wore in Hard Day's Night and I have since discovered he is a massive Lennon and Beatles performer. He performed 5 tracks, Oh Yoko (not my favourite Lennon number) I've Just Seen a Face, one other Beatle track I can't recall and oddly Losing my Religion (REM) he finished off with a great version of California Dreaming. I enjoyed his set.



There was a very quick turnaround and a group from Sweden took to the stage called The Repeatles, lead vocalist reminded me of a young Billy Kinsley (Merseybeats). They did a far longer set and were good if not a little too loud but then again I was virtually next to the speakers.



They played a number of Beatle numbers obviously , Kinks and Who tracks. They were joined on stage by Hal Bruce for their last number and did a great version of Pinball Wizard.

There was then a good 40 minute wait for our heroes to take to the stage and I decided to try and get a drink from the bar in the corner as it was becoming for me very uncomfortable, I approached the bar but did not notice some steps and went flying, no one came to my aid I noticed probably used to it in Liverpool or thought I was drunk.

Eventually the Searchers took to the stage and I was surprised that they did not resort to more casual attire especially for the afternoon show, but they wore the usual suits and tie etc though 3.4 numbers in they had to ditch the jackets at least.

It would have made a change to see them in casual gear, something back in 70s and early 80s they appeared in a lot at various venues, a time when finding another person who shared my enthusiasm for the band was akin to getting 8 score-draws. Who can forget the Lumberjack shirt John used to wear or Frank doing his Range Rider look in the buckskin jacket complete with frills.

Mike Pender sometimes wore a shirt with Mike emblazoned above the shirt pocket ,whether this was to distinguish himself from Frank and John, in light of events that followed or in case he got lost on way to dressing room, I am not sure.

They played a very upbeat set only What Have They Done To the Rain could be classed as a slow number, all the rest was the usual Young Girl, Seven Nights though due to someone shouting for it a few times they decided to do Goodbye My Love, can never understand why this one of their biggest hits is not a permanent fixture.

Frank was able to relate the tale of how Bran Epstein had lost £200 by betting it would make number one but stated it had only made number three, officially it made number four, but all academic, it was a big hit no matter which source of reference one uses, indeed John McNally has at times claimed it made number one – in Liverpool Echo!!

They went down extremely well as is the norm and stood up well to the heat, indeed when Frank made some reference to John's age and then tempered it by saying he was as fit as a butcher's dog, John came back with "You have to be fit to play here". I was begging to think you had to be bl--- fit to watch them too, my knees were beginning to go at this stage and to be honest I was

relieved to get out and go back to an hotel I had booked, to have a shower and change my shirt.

I wish I had had the forethought of another friend I met and gone to Primark to buy a cheap T Shirt.

Had a meal in the Hard Day's Night Hotel which was not bad and not too pricey though spent some time looking for a place called Raffles, as Ian Beattie had told me to meet them there, place was actually called Blakes not Raffles could have done without the walking and the blank looks I got from people when I asked them where Raffles was I can tell you.

The evening show in my view was not as full as the afternoon show for some reason but same line-up though to their credit both Hal Bruce and Repeatles did play a number of different songs to vary it a bit.

Searchers once again came on in the suits though now wore white shirts instead of the dark ones they had worn in the afternoon. Again very soon they ditched the jackets.



Set was more or less the same only this time they dropped Goodbye and did Farmer John again as a result of someone shouting out for it.

During the chat Frank paid homage to Chris Curtis and Tony Jackson and mentioned Johnny Sandon even, there was naturally no mention of a Mr Pender. He was I am sure cognisant of the fact that here we were at the Cavern and no Liverpool voice was emanating from this group forever associated with the city, he asked John if he would like to say a few words, those few words were "sod off"





**He also mentioned that the last time they had played the Cavern was 65 but this has to be clearly incorrect Frank never played the Cavern with the Searchers, indeed I believe they never played the Cavern after July 63.**

**Frank Allen did play the Cavern on the night of 10/12/63 with Cliff Bennett however.**



**Mr James also seemed to take umbrage that Frank had not introduced him when doing introductions which was quite amusing and certainly not intentional, indeed he had given SJ the usual big build up in the “125 years ago we needed to look for another singer” intro before launching into Beach Baby.**

**They finished the set with You’ll Never Walk Alone which they had not done in the afternoon a number I personally don’t really like them doing but just my own view.**



They left the stage to usual standing ovation though not much choice in this venue, Eddie looked absolutely soaked through, but I am sure Jane has washed the shirt since!

They did not do the usual meet and greet but were more than happy, as they always are to sign things, take the photos etc for people who made their way to dressing room and I use that term loosely.

Glad I went though in retrospect possibly would have been more comfortable going to just one show.

However I can now say I saw The Searchers at the Cavern.