

Fab faux

Harrison's sister manages tribute band

By Dan Craft
dcraft@pantagraph.com

My sweet lord!

Who could have predicted this scenario 41 years ago this month, when the Beatles first invaded America by way of Ed Sullivan?

It goes like this:

Next weekend, at a bar in downtown Bloomington, the 73-year-old sister of late Beatles legend George Harrison will be standing next to a 38-year-old Chicagoan who has dedicated his life to imitating her brother.

They'll probably exchange some Liverpudlian patter.

And maybe, if the audience is willing, they'll haul out a ukelele and perform a few bars of George's "Devil in the Deep Blue Sea."

The band -- dubbed Liverpool Legends -- will dominate the rest of the musical evening, recreating every phase of the Beatles' career, from the "Ed Sullivan Show" era, straight into the Fab Four's respective solo periods.

Trust George's sister: nobody does it better.

In fact, Louise Harrison has become so utterly taken with her imitation sibling -- Marty Scott from Chicago -- that she is the manager of the world's only Beatles tribute band with a direct blood link to the Beatles themselves.

And that band, fresh out of the oven, will be making what is only its second public appearance when it takes to the stage in Daddios at 9:30 p.m. Feb. 19 (\$8 at the door).

Say what?

Is this a lost episode from "The Twilight Zone," the one in which a famous rock star dies, then is reincarnated in the form of another musician, who is then accepted as the real thing by his next of kin?

Doo-doo-doo-doo, doo-doo-doo-doo?

Not quite.

But the signpost up ahead is close enough that even Louise Harrison is aware of the surreal nature of her current situation -- one that she thinks George is aware of, wherever he may be, and likely views with his own special sense of humor.

Louise, the most famous resident of Benton, Ill., a tiny coal-mining burg in Southern Illinois, figures she's seen or heard anywhere from 300 to 400 Beatles imitation bands over the years. And of that number, "Let's say probably only about four of them are pretty darned good."

But she was never tempted to take one under her wing until she crossed paths with the faux-George named Marty.

"It was a few months after my brother died" in November 2001, says Harrison, who was in Chicago attending a fan convention called Flashback Weekend.

On the bill was the Beatles tribute band American English, which Scott was a member of at the time (and which has performed a string of wildly popular club dates in Bloomington-Normal over the past four years).

"She was a guest speaker," recalls Scott of the same event. "And she made me a little nervous -- George had just passed, and I was thinking 'God, this is his sister ... I hope I'm OK.'"

As part of the set, Scott performed Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." Later, someone told Scott they had seen Louise Harrison exiting through a door doing just that, in tears.

Was he that bad?

No, he was that uncannily for real.

"After the show, we met and hit it off so well that, yes, it was a little weird at first because this was George's sister and stuff," Scott recalls. "But she was really normal and cool and we had a great time hanging out together after that for the rest of the weekend. She even ended up staying at my house for a whole week."

Louise agrees that it was rapport at first sight.

"When I met Marty, it was just three months after George died, and there were so many facets of Marty's personality that reminded me of him -- his caring, compassion and kindness," she says. "We immediately recognized each other and I said 'I've got a new adopted baby brother.' And it's been like that ever since."

The Beatles connection took a further surreal turn when American English went through its own acrimonious breakup late last year, "just like the Beatles," notes Scott with due irony. "It was one of those bad band break-ups where all four go their separate ways."

And, yes, he agrees, art can, and will, imitate life. In spades.

Currently tied up in litigation, the breakup is something Scott says he prefers not to go into deeply, other than to note that he and the band's John Lennon, Kevin Mantegna, eventually reconnected as a "George and John duo."

American English replaced them and premiered the new lineup locally in a date at downtown Bloomington's JuJu's last November.

Eventually the George and John duo expanded its horizons by adding a Paul, via McCartney impersonator Davey Justice, a part of the popular Legends in Concert show at Las Vegas' Imperial Palace. They also added a Ringo, via Michigan native Joe Bologna, a former "Beatlemania" cast member.

"Louise knew there was some baloney going on for awhile," he says, regarding the American English crisis. After hearing Scott and Mantegna's George-and-John act, she told Ross, "I'm going to manage you guys."

That pronouncement earned itself a notice in no less than Rolling Stone magazine -- a testament to Louise's ability to generate instant press.

Then Justice and Bologna came aboard, and Harrison became even more enthusiastic.

"I'm just the big sister who wants her 'kid brother' to do well," Harrison says of her managerial role. She will also be the first to admit that role can open doors to the point Liverpool Legends will soon be going national, then international.

"I used to have conversations with George about this subject," Harrison says. "The Beatles couldn't see the point of it."

One day, "I actually wrote a letter to George and talked about it, saying, 'You guys have started such a wonderful thing in the world -- the good music, the message of love and peace. And now that you're not performing anymore, nobody can go see you. Isn't it great that people out there are doing their best to replicate what you did, so that little kids 5 years old can still go and see what the Beatles were like?'"

The way Scott sees it is this: "Louise has been doing nothing but the Beatles stuff for her entire life, and I know I can completely trust her. She loves the band and we love her and I don't have to worry about a thing."

In fact, he adds, "I'm as close to her as I am anyone in the world. She's as much family as manager."

...

Louise Harrison shares bit of Beatles with us

By Dan Craft
dcraft@pantagraph.com

Anyone who dares call him- or herself a Beatles buff knows full well the role that Louise Harrison has played in fans' lives through the years -- especially fans in Illinois, the state she has called home twice in her lifetime.

Here is a brief timeline of that role:

- 1963: Louise and her husband Gordon move from northeast Canada to the tiny Southern Illinois town of Benton, where Gordon gets a job with a local mining firm. Their only possessions: a \$2 bill and a 5-pound note. A bank loan and friendly neighbors allow them to buy a house.

- Sept. 16, 1963: Louise's brothers George and Pete Harrison arrive in Benton for a two-week stay, several months before America even knows that "beatle" is more than just a misspelling of a garden-variety insect. "He was here to visit his sister, whom he hadn't seen in a number of years," says his sister.

The family goes camping in the Shawnee Forest and George serenades the wife of the local coal company head with a birthday song at Benton's bocci ball club -- the first public musical performance by a Beatle in the United States. And George submits to his first U.S. radio interview, via Benton's country-oriented WFRX. The station also engineers what is believed to be the first U.S. radio broadcast of a Beatles record, "She Loves You."

In a 1998 Pantagraph interview, Louise says that if it wasn't the first, "it's safe to say that it was the second or third."

- February-March 1964: Beatlemania busts wide open stateside. Louise becomes the craze's chief correspondent, phoning in daily progress reports from Benton to St. Louis' KXOK-AM radio, which plays the taped segments up to 10 times a day.

- 1970: Louise and her family leave Benton for Sarasota, Fla., ending her first Illinois association.

- 1998: Louise, now widowed, moves back to Benton after Springfield-based Beatles scholar Bob Bartel begins a campaign to save Harrison's Benton house -- the one where George stayed -- from a planned demolition. The house is saved and turned into a Beatles-themed bed-and-breakfast, run by others. Louise moves into another home and gives the B&B her blessing.

- Nov. 29, 2001: George Harrison dies. Press reports suggest brother and sister are estranged and that Louise is not included in her brother's will. Louise says, "of course I wasn't included in the will, I never expected to be -- I'm way older than him." As far as any estrangement, "I have no idea how that rumor got started. It's not true."

- March 2002: At a Chicago fan convention, Louise meets Marty Scott, the spitting musical image of brother George.

- January 2005: Louise becomes manager of Scott's Beatles tribute band, Liverpool Legends.

- Feb. 19, 2005: Liverpool Legends to make its B-N debut, with Louise in attendance.



For The Pantagraph

Above: From left, Davey Justice (as Paul McCartney), Joe Bologna (as Ringo Star), Marty Scott (as George Harrison) and Kevin Mantegna (as John Lennon) have joined together as the Liverpool Legends, a Beatles tribute band.



Above: Louise Harrison, center, hooked up with Marty Scott right, and Kevin Mantegna, as manager of their new Beatles tribute band Liverpool Legends. Ross and Mantegna were formerly members of another tribute band, American English.

Below: The real Beatles performed on the "Ed Sullivan Show" in 1964. (Associated Press photo)