

All those years ago



With the help of Roger Reynolds, Louise Harrison takes questions on the LTC stage. (Tom Compton photo)

George's sister recalls the dawn of Beatlemania

By **TOM COMPTON**
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In 1963, the Beach Boys, Skeeter Davis and the Chiffons were at the top of the charts, and Louise Caldwell was living in Benton, deep in southern Illinois coal country, with her husband, a mining equipment design engineer. Her younger brother had a band, and in her spare time Louise visited local radio stations to promote it. But she was often rejected by the "male chauvinist pigs" and told to "Go home and take care of your husband and forget about your kid brother's band."

In February 1964, though, her "kid brother's band" appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. The Beatles had come to America. And the charts would never look the same.

Known now as Louise Harrison, she travels the country talking to fans, giving out "Harrison hugs" and promoting a new Beatles tribute band, the Liverpool Legends. "This is my first venture into management," she said. Harrison was in Robinson Thursday night to promote her new band, talk with local Beatles fans and answer their questions on the stage of the Zwermann Arts Center at Lincoln Trail College.

George Harrison was born in 1943, and Louise was 11 years old at the time. "He was three weeks late, but he finally popped out naturally," she said. He was the youngest of four, with two older brothers, Peter and Harry.

Eldorado. "As they played I noticed that people were talking and dancing occasionally, but generally ignoring the band. I thought, 'What has my brother gotten himself into?'" Louise said. "The lead guitarist for the Four Vests asked Peter if George would be willing to play a few songs with them. Peter said probably not, but said 'If you put the guitar in his hands he would play.'

"A little while later between songs the guitarist handed the guitar to George and said, 'Take over for me' and ran off. When George started to play the crowd went silent and everyone was paying attention to him," Louise recalled. "Afterwards one old man came up and said, 'You know, son, you could go places,' and another told Gabe 'he should hire that fellow who was trying out for the band tonight.'"

"I thought, 'What must the others be like if George is the youngest?'" Louise said.

When Louise was going to radio stations with demos trying to promote the band, she went to KXOK in St. Louis. DJ Johnny Rabbitt didn't ignore her, but did later send a letter saying he was "Sorry, but they only played established American bands."

rumor that George was sneaking around record stores to see if anyone was buying the Beatles' albums.

"Just a tale," Louise said. "He did buy several albums at the furniture store downtown on his visit."

Reynolds asked, "Your old house in Benton has been restored and is now a bed-and-breakfast called Hard Day's Night Bed and Breakfast. Do you have anything to do with that?"

"No. I was living in Florida at the time and got several calls wanting to know what was going on with my old house. I said 'Which old house? I've lived all over the world.' They meant the one in Benton. I did help raise support for its restoration but have no connection with it," she said.

"After George's death, a sleazy television show reported I had opened the B and B to capitalize on their fame because I had been cut out of George's will," Louise said. "I was never in his will because I was older and we thought I would go first."

Louise said she was at the Sullivan show, but, often had trouble getting into places the Fab Four stayed and played. She recalled meeting up with George before the show.

"He called me the day before show and said he probably could not meet me at the airport because they were going to a separate area. He said I should come directly to the hotel where he had reserved a room. After checking in I went up to the 14th floor and

**WHEN GEORGE
SAT IN with the Four**

"My father named him George because 'It was good enough for the King,'" she said. "We were fortunate to be brought up in a functional family."

George started music at an early age. "We had no television, only the radio, and we listened to the comedian George Formby and recited several of his 'naughty songs' like 'Window Cleaner,'" Louise said. "We often sat around and sang songs of an evening. Dad would read books to mom while she knitted. It was a comforting feeling to hear the click of her knitting needles and my father's radio-like voice."

She said their father played guitar and taught George some chords, but mostly he learned on his own.

The big question of the evening was about the event that's become a part of southern Illinois folklore — George's visit in September 1963, just a few months before the Beatles became a household name.

"Peter and George came to visit in September," Louise said. "We did many things, including camping in Shawnee National Forest...George loved the people here in the Midwest, and always wanted to return."

"Before they arrived mother had sent me the band's latest record and while playing it one day the dry-cleaning delivery boy, Gabe, showed up and commented that he had never heard music like that before," Louise recalled. "Gabe was in a band called the Four Vests, and came over one evening to jam with George."

Gabe invited George and his sister to come hear his band play in nearby

Vests, someone told Gabe "he should hire that fellow who was trying out for the band tonight."

On a trip to West Frankfort, Louise recalled walking a mile and a half to the radio station.

"The owner said he was not interested, but gave the records to his daughter, Marsha Shafer, who had an afternoon show," Louise said. "Later when George and Peter came to visit, George wanted to thank Marsha for playing their music in America. They had to call her back to the station, but got to visit with her and gave her an autographed copy of 'She Loves You.'"

An audience member asked about George going to Red Fenton's music store in Mt. Vernon to buy a guitar.

"George went with Gabe to Mt. Vernon to the store to buy a Rickenbacker guitar. John Lennon had one at the time and George wanted one, too," Louise said. "It had to be black, so a local body shop man agreed to paint it on a hurry-up basis. George even paid cash, which was very unusual at the time," she said.

Another question was about the

saw a big crowd in the hallway. I tried to sneak by when a security guard grabbed me and asked, 'Where are you going, sister?' I said, 'I am going to see my brother.' The crowd laughed and he said, 'Do you know how many times I have heard that today?' George did not think to put me on the list of people to be admitted.

"I had no ID, but did have a Polaroid picture of George, Peter my daughter and myself. The guard said, 'Well, that looks like one of them.' and let me pass. George came out and gave me a big 'Harrison hug' and the crowd cheered."

"I Want to Hold Your Hand" sold 9 million copies in 11 days. "I called George in Paris and said, 'You are number one.'"

What were they like when by themselves?

"Normal," Louise said, "though they seemed larger than life to me they were my kid brother and his buddies."

Was he jealous or upset that very few of his songs made the early albums?

"No. He was just happy to be in the band," she said. "Later when people pointed out that he had been held back, he admitted that may have been true."

What about the breakup — and was Yoko a big part?

"It was time. They were all married, and wanting to do other things," Louise said. "They had expressed their message of 'give peace a chance and love one another,' and it is still going today. I believe they were messengers."

Louise thinks most books about the Beatles are "trash."

"There are so many how can it all be true?" she said.

"Tony Bramwell, who spent a lot of time with the band in the early days, does have a book out that I have read. A lot of things he says in it are similar to things George had told me about what was happening.

"Most people know more about the band than me," she said. "I was not a fan, only a sister."

Though her brother died in 2001, Louise believes his

"energy" influenced the formation of the new tribute band she promotes.

"I had known Kevin Mantegna, who plays John, and Marty Scott, George, for some time," she said, "each of whom have performed nationally as a Beatle or in a tribute band. By coincidence they had left their former bands at the same time. Davey Justice, who plays Paul, Joe Bologna, Ringo, were also between bands and I felt it was meant to be," she said.

The band started playing together in January and cut a demo in March. "I equate their playing of small places now to the Beatles' Hamburg days of playing small clubs," Louise said. "All of the guys are really nice people and dedicated to doing the best they can."

"We are doing our best to make it something he (George) would like to have played in," she said. "If I am involved it can't be just 1 of 500 other tribute bands. It is music for all ages to enjoy."