

MOVIES ABOUT THE BEATLES

Early Beatles History: 1940-1964

Birth of The Beatles

In 1978, *Elvis – The Movie* premiered on American television. The production was a dramatization of Elvis Presley's life, featuring Kurt Russell as Elvis. His unexpected death the year before had revived the public interest in 'The King,' and countless biographies invaded the market. The movie spawned several fictional and/or biographical films about popular culture icons, such as Buddy Holly (*The Buddy Holly Story*, 1978) and The Beatles (*Birth of The Beatles*, 1979). In the 1980s and 1990s, only a handful of pop biographies were successful at the box office, i. e. Luis Valdez' *La Bamba* (1987) about Richie Valens, Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991) and Iain Softley's *Backbeat* (1993). More recently, Hollywood has produced a string of highly successful TV and cinema biographies of musical heroes. The most notable films and series are *The Rat Pack* (1998) about the lives and times of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr., *Ray* (2004) about Ray Charles, *Stoned* (2005) about The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones, and – again – *Elvis* (2005). Starting with *Birth of The Beatles*, The Beatles' history has been dramatized in various forms for television as well as for the cinema. While The Beatles' early group history has been dealt with in *Birth of The Beatles* (1979), *Backbeat* (1993), and *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* (2000), John Lennon's private life was explored in *John and Yoko: A Love Story* (1985) and *The Hours and Times* (1991). *The Linda McCartney Story* (2000) focused on Paul and Linda McCartney, while *Two of Us* (2000) dramatized an encounter between John Lennon and Paul McCartney in 1976, six years after The Beatles had broken up.

Birth of The Beatles was produced by Dick Clark, an influential producer in the field of musical television shows and films in the United States. For this project, Clark teamed up with director Richard Marquand, who was going to direct George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* in 1983. The Beatles' story from 1961 to 1964 was turned into a screenplay by Jacob Eskendar and John Kurland, while Ringo Starr's predecessor Pete Best was consulted as 'technical advisor'.

Although it is pointed out that the movie contained fictional elements, Pete Best's involvement was used as a way to sell the movie as an 'authentic' biographical picture. At the very beginning, the viewer learns that "[t]he following is a dramatization, using actors, of the early career of the Beatles. It is based on factual accounts including the recollections of former Beatle Pete Best, as well as other sources" (*Birth of the Beatles* 1979). Although *Birth of The Beatles* depicts many crucial events in The Beatles' early history, the movie fails to represent the group's way to success in an authentic way. Despite Pete Best's involvement, *Birth of The Beatles* is full of factual errors and clumsy editing decisions. In addition, the The Beatles' personalities are stereotyped in a way that is partly reminiscent of the portrayal of The Beatles in the American cartoon series.

The very first sequence already establishes a set of poorly researched details. The characters of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison are walking down a Liverpool street in 1961. They wear leather jackets, and George Harrison is playing a (naturally) un-plugged electric guitar while chatting to his mates. First of all, The Beatles did not own any leather outfits before their first trip to Hamburg later that year. This is an important fact, because the leather outfits contributed to the group's unique stage appearance after their return from Hamburg. Second, George Harrison – who is unlikely to have practiced guitar riffs while walking through the streets of Liverpool – did certainly not remotely talk the way actor John Altman imagined him to talk. The character's voice and intonation actually resemble the way the cartoon Harrison talked in *Yellow Submarine* rather than the real George Harrison. In addition, the character of John Lennon looks much older than Lennon at the age of 21, which diminishes the character's credibility throughout the movie.

As Pete Best worked as a consultant for the *Birth of The Beatles*, the Pete Best character in the movie is clearly designed to contradict the myth of Best being only a modest drummer and a loser type. In the movie, Pete Best is introduced in a scene portraying his audition to become The Beatles' drummer. He recalls the audition in his autobiography.

"First I had to audition at Allan Williams' Wyvern Club (later to become his popular Blue Angel Club). John was the only one there when I arrived. He played a couple of bars of Ramrod while I beat the skins, until George and Stu turned up and we had a further session. Paul was last, as usual, but once there they all joined in such numbers as Shakin' All Over. We played for about 20 minutes in all and at the end they all reached the same conclusion: 'Yeh! You're in, Pete!'" (Best/Doncaster 2001: 29).

Birth of The Beatles does not show a session as described by Best. Instead, the handsome Pete Best character performs an impressive drum solo, which the real Pete Best would probably not have been capable of performing at the time. While it has been suggested that The Beatles desperately needed a drummer and would have welcomed any half-decent rock drummer in their band, the movie makes it clear that Best was accepted in the group because of his outstanding drumming ability.

Many accounts of Pete Best's role in The Beatles early history point out that his good looks and moody manners made him very popular with The Beatles' female audience (vgl. *A Long and Winding Road* 2003: DVD 2). This is also the stance taken by *Birth of The Beatles*. When Best is replaced with Ringo Starr in the movie, the group is confronted with a crowd of girls chanting "Ringo never, Pete for Ever" at their first performance featuring Starr on drums. This particular incident was first described by manager Brian Epstein in Hunter Davies' book about The Beatles (vgl. Davies 1969: 150). Epstein also confirms Best's popularity at the time: "I knew how popular Pete was. He was incredibly good looking with a big following. [...] So I was very upset when the three of them came to me one night and said they didn't want him. They wanted Ringo" (Davies 1969: 151). Instead of marginalizing Pete Best's audience appeal, *Birth of The Beatles* quite accurately depicts Best as an important part of their stage presence from 1960 to 1962.

As *Birth of The Beatles* deals with The Beatles' history from 1961 to 1964, it contains their first engagement in Hamburg, their triumphant return to Liverpool, their meeting with Brian Epstein, their initial success in Great Britain, and their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in February 1964. In order to include all the important events of this period, the producers were forced to simplify several chapters in The Beatles' history. For example, instead of the group's five trips to Germany, the film only shows them return once. In addition, the portrayal of The Beatles' friends in Germany is rather superficial and flawed. The character of Astrid Kirchherr is never shown without her camera, and she is constantly taking pictures of the group at their live performances. In fact, Astrid Kirchherr's famous photographs of The Beatles in Hamburg were not performance pictures. She actually took many of her pictures of the band at the Hamburg fairground. Although performance photos from this period exist, they were taken by photographers Jürgen Vollmer, and Peter Brüchmann, among others. In addition, Kirchherr's influence on The Beatles' style is portrayed in an inaccurate way. Although it is true that Kirchherr practically invented The Beatles haircut, she initially only cut Stuart Sutcliffe and George Harrison's hair. Paul McCartney and John

Lennon's hair was cut this way months later when they visited their friend Jürgen Vollmer in Paris.

There are quite a few factual errors in the representation of The Beatles' Hamburg period. For example, the way The Beatles learn about the death of their former bassist Stuart Sutcliffe, who had also invented the group's name, does not correspond to the facts. In *Birth of The Beatles*, the group is getting ready for a performance at the Star Club, when Astrid suddenly appears to tell them that Stuart has died. The actual circumstances were, however, rather different to what is shown in the movie. In an interview, Pete Best talks about the way Sutcliffe's death was portrayed in *Birth of The Beatles*: "They've taken artistic liberties. What actually happened was we were met by Astrid at the airport and we were expecting to see Stu. This is when we went over to open the Star Club. When Stu wasn't there we asked where he was, and we were told he had died. It had only been a day or two before" (Giuliano/Devi 1999: 200). While the other films dealing with this period, *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* and *Backbeat*, portrayed the sad event as described by Pete Best, the producers of *Birth of The Beatles* opted for an alternative version, which is, interestingly, less dramatic than what really happened.

Bill Harry, Stuart Sutcliffe and John Lennon's friend from art college explains his disappointment with *Birth of The Beatles*.

"Apart from scores of trifling errors (the art college sequence was nothing like the real place and the fat model was like no model who ever posed there), the entire 'feel' was wrong. It was like watching fantasy which had bare association to what I had personally lived through. I understood the need to make the film dramatic, but the real events had seemed far more dramatic than the ones of the film, which seemed to 'lessen' the Beatles story" (Harry 1985: 145).

The movie was not a big success when it was first shown on American television in 1979. The audience, Beatles fans, and critics were quite disappointed by the movie, which did not manage to capture The Beatles' excitement and failed to represent their early career in an accurate way.

***Backbeat*: "I Didn't Want to Do a Bio-Pic"**

Iain Softley's movie *Backbeat* provides a detailed depiction of The Beatles' time in Hamburg. The movie mainly concentrates on the relationships between John Lennon, Stuart Sutcliffe, and Astrid Kirchherr. Softley sets out to explore the intense friendship of Lennon and Sutcliffe, and how the appearance of Astrid Kirchherr and her 'existentialist'

friends influenced the group's structure and image at a crucial point in their career.

In a recent interview, Iain Softley explains that he did not intend to make a strictly biographical movie: "The last thing I was trying to do is to tell a story about The Beatles in Hamburg from a sort of biographical point of view. [...] In fact, at one stage, I considered not mentioning the band as The Beatles, and not mentioning anybody's surname – to really make it like an everyman group" (*Backbeat* 2003). Despite Softley's focus on Lennon, Sutcliffe, and Kirchherr, the background story is quite well-researched and represents The Beatles' early history in Hamburg more adequately than *Birth of The Beatles*. In contrast to former movies about The Beatles, Softley spotlights the group's friends in Germany and manages not to over-simplify some of the facts that were quite misrepresented in *Birth of The Beatles* and *In His Life*. However, criticism of the movie has been targeted at the rather romantic representation of Hamburg's notorious Reeperbahn and the nostalgic and idealistic view of the 'existentialist' scene in Hamburg. For example, Horst Fascher, the group's friend and bodyguard from Hamburg, identified the movie's main deficiency being the reliance on only Astrid Kirchherr's memory and perspective.

"Astrid Kirchherr hat diesen Film so beraten, dass er so gedreht wurde, wie sie die Vergangenheit gern gehabt hätte. Das war's nicht. [...] Die Realität war eine andere. Wir waren damals rough, wir haben unsere Biere getrunken – die Beatles waren morgens genauso angetrunken wie die Gäste, und wir haben zusammen gegessen und haben irgendwo Hähnchen gegessen – wo's billig war, in so kleinen Restaurants-Ecken. [Dann sind wir wie] tot ins Bett gefallen, haben geschlafen, sind manchmal morgens ungewaschen und ungekämmt zur Arbeit gelaufen – nur die Mütze auf und dann zur Arbeit. Und manchmal sind die Beatles auch so auf der Reeperbahn rumgelaufen – dass ich gesagt habe: „You look like Penner!“ Und dann haben sie gesagt: „But tonight, on stage, you will see the difference.“ Und das war so" (Fascher 2003).

However, Astrid Kirchherr has pointed out that the film would have looked different if she had had more influence on the project. She explains that a production of this kind demands certain compromises, in order to increase its potential at the box office, and that the producers always had the final say: "Ich hab' sehr viel gelernt bei dieser Filmproduktion – dass man ganz viele Kompromisse machen muss. Dass die Menschen, die das Geld haben, viel mehr zu sagen haben als die Künstler. Und dementsprechend war es für mich natürlich eine harte Sache. [...] Man hätte es, wenn man sehr, sehr viel Geld gehabt hätte, sehr viel besser machen können. Ich fand die Musik toll" (Kirchherr 2003).

The music was produced by Don Was, who assembled a ‘super-group’ consisting of some of the most prominent names in rock music in the 1990s. The group featuring Dave Grohl (Nirvana, Foo Fighters), David Pirner (Soul Asylum), and Mike Mills (R.E.M.) perform several songs from The Beatles’ early repertoire, such as “Long Tall Sally,” “Oh Carol,” and “Money”. Instead of reproducing the well-known sound of The Beatles’ early records, producer Don Was and director Iain Softley decided to evoke the excitement of the early Beatles performances for the cinema audience with a more contemporary rock sound. Softley explains, “When we were thinking about the music for the film, I always wanted it to be – again – not a counterfeit band trying to imitate the exact voices of the different Beatles, or the exact sound, because I thought that that would kill what made them special, which is an attitude, and an energy, and an attack” (*Backbeat* 2003). The timing was right for the soundtrack, as rock music was celebrating a revival in the early 1990s, when the rock group Nirvana popularized the ‘Grunge’ sound.

The selection of the actors portraying The Beatles and their German friends was done more carefully than in the case of *Birth of The Beatles*, and although none of the actors would pass as a Beatles-lookalike, each of the characters manages to capture some essential quality of the real Beatles. Liverpool actor Ian Hart received very positive feedback for his portrayal of John Lennon. In fact, Hart had previously played John Lennon in a low-budget production by director Christopher Münch. Softley recalls the casting of the Lennon character: “I went to see a film that he’d done – where he’d also played John Lennon – called *The Hours and Times*. And I was sceptical after that, because, even though he’s fantastic in the role, it’s a very, very different Lennon to the Lennon that we had in *Backbeat*” (*Backbeat* 2003). The John Lennon in *Backbeat* is a witty, arrogant, and aggressive person, trying to hide his fear of losing his best friend to Astrid Kirchherr behind an angry macho attitude. His remarks and behavior are characterized by a violence, which cover up his inner sadness. At one point the character of Astrid Kirchherr says to him, “Why are you so angry? You are the angriest person I have ever met” (*Backbeat* 2003). Later, she manages to bring out his gentler and vulnerable side during a conversation in a lighthouse, when they talk about their relationships and John admits that he is not just jealous of Astrid but also of Stuart, because he has fallen in love with a girl that embodies John’s ideal.

The characters of Astrid Kirchherr and Stuart Sutcliffe were played by American actors Sheryl Lee and Stephen Dorff. Both prepared their roles for a very long time, consulting several of the people originally involved with The Beatles as well as voice coaches, in order to increase the

level of authenticity of the performance. Sheryl Lee's voice and the German accent she developed for the role strikingly resemble Astrid Kirchherr's, although the few German sentences she says in the movie sound quite awkward to native speakers. Stephen Dorff, who worked very hard to substitute his American slang with an authentic Liverpoolian 'Scouse' accent – which he manages very well, may have been quite disappointed when Stuart Sutcliffe's sister pointed out to him that her brother did actually not talk the way the other Beatles talked: "When Stephen Dorff came to see me he told me he was working with a voice coach – he had to be taught how to talk Liverpool. I said, 'Why bother?' If anything, Stuart had more of a soft Edinburgh accent. But for the movies they all had to be Scousers, didn't they?" (Sutcliffe/Thompson 2002: 220). Stuart and Pauline's parents had both grown up in Scotland. Although it was not the director's intention to recreate every detail in an authentic way, this minor inaccuracy may have a quite lasting effect as to how Stuart Sutcliffe will be remembered. In fact, the movie may have been an important factor why Sutcliffe's role in The Beatles has not been 'air-brushed' out of the band's official history the way, for instance, Alistair Taylor or Alf Bicknell have been. Liverpool journalist and editor Paul Du Noyer has pointed out that Stuart Sutcliffe "was somewhat rescued from obscurity by the film *Backbeat* [...]" (Du Noyer 2004: 34). While Stephen Dorff's portrayal of Stuart Sutcliffe emphasizes the character's intelligence, artistic talent, and 'coolness,' the movie's overall air of nostalgia and idealization tint this particular account of The Beatles' early history, despite its high standard of factual accuracy.

Although they do not play central roles in *Backbeat*, the characters of Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Pete Best, and Ringo Starr are portrayed in a considerably more credible way than in *Birth of The Beatles* and other dramatizations of the group's history. For example, the Paul McCartney in the movie, played by Gary Bakewell, is much more convincing in *Backbeat* than the one in *Birth of The Beatles*. On the one hand, his criticism of Stuart Sutcliffe's musicianship expresses his musical professionalism as well as his jealousy of Sutcliffe's role in John Lennon's life. On the other hand, he is also shown as a sensible and caring person who manages to calm down a drunk and raging Lennon, and takes him home.

Reality vs. Movie Myths: How Stuart Sutcliffe Died

Backbeat, *Birth of The Beatles*, and the television production *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* all include a sequence showing a violent confron-

tation of Stuart Sutcliffe and some jealous Teddy Boys in Liverpool. After flirting with some girls in the audience during an early Beatles performance, Sutcliffe was beaten up by a group of young men. Sutcliffe's sister Pauline describes the incident in her biography *The Beatles' Shadow*.

“George and Paul were beaten up at Hambleton Hall in Huyton, and Stuart received a severe beating at Lathom Hall, Seaforth, Liverpool, on 30 January, 1961. The group were helping Neil Aspinall load equipment through a fire door at the back of the stage and into their van. Stuart was on his own when he looked up and there were a crowd of toughs. They had waited until John and the others had gone back inside the hall. Stuart said he was punched in the stomach so hard he rolled on to the ground and his glasses fell from his face. He had one hand on his head and the other between his legs as he was kicked and punched. John was alerted by a couple of girls and rushed out to help. He ran into the thugs and the punching and kicking went on. John sprained his wrist and broke his finger and it might have been much worse but Pete Best, the true hard man of the group, arrived and the odds became too intimidating for the hooligans, who ran off. ‘John and I doubled back and charged into the fray, freeing Stu and collecting our fair share of knocks along the way. Lennon broke a finger belting a Ted and had to play guitar for a while wearing a splint.’ Stuart’s face was smothered in blood” (Sutcliffe/Thompson 2002: 117).

In *Birth of The Beatles*, the scene is based upon Pete Best's account of the incident. The Pete Best character defeats the Teddy Boys only with the help of John Lennon, while *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* has John Lennon and Paul McCartney turn up and rescue Stuart Sutcliffe, while the producers of *Backbeat* decided to create a new version of the story, where Sutcliffe and Lennon insult a group of dock workers in a bar and are chased and beaten up by them. Here it is again Lennon who rescues his friend. The decision to re-invent the story in *Backbeat* and to focus it on John Lennon and Stuart Sutcliffe alone makes sense from a dramatic point of view, as the movie revolves around the relationships between John Lennon, Stuart Sutcliffe, and Astrid Kirchherr. By making John Lennon Stuart's rescuer in the first narrative scene of the movie, their close friendship is established for the audience. To have the character of Paul McCartney help rescue Sutcliffe, however, does neither reflect the historical account of the event, nor does it work very well in the way of characterizing the McCartney character, who later heavily criticizes Sutcliffe's musical abilities. Paul McCartney's critical view of Sutcliffe's limited musicality has been quoted in numerous accounts, including The Beatles' autobiography *Anthology*. While McCartney now prefers to describe his disagreements with Sutcliffe as quite harmless, Hun-

ter Davies' authorized Beatles biography makes it quite clear that Sutcliffe and McCartney did not get along very well at all.

"The relationship between Paul and Stu, the petty jealousies and rows, is not too difficult to explain. In a way, they were both competing for John's attention. Paul had had it for a couple of years, until Stu came along. Stu was obviously very talented, more mature, more in touch. Even Michael McCartney, Paul's younger brother, remembers how in Liverpool Paul had been a bit jealous of Stu" (Davies 1969: 97).

The injuries Sutcliffe received when he was beaten up by a gang of Teddy Boys were later believed to have contributed to his early death. After enduring several months of severe headaches and collapses, Stuart Sutcliffe died of a brain haemorrhage in Hamburg, Germany on 10 April 1962 (cf. Lewisohn 2000: 56). While all the movies dealing with The Beatles' early history include Sutcliffe's death, it is certainly staged as the dramatic climax in *Backbeat*. In one of the movie's last sequences, the characters of Stuart Sutcliffe and Astrid Kirchherr are excited about The Beatles returning to Hamburg. Stuart looks exhausted and ill, but he is enthusiastic about The Beatles' progress, and he is convinced that they will be famous. Astrid wants to 'surprise' Stuart and undresses in another room, when Stuart suddenly screams and collapses in the attic of Kirchherr's house, which had been his studio.

In the TV production *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* (2000), Sutcliffe collapses after reading a letter from John, telling him about their recent progress in Liverpool, where they had just topped a poll in Bill Harry's magazine *Mersey Beat*. In both movies, the juxtaposition of The Beatles' success and Stuart's death expresses the tragic irony of the fact that Stuart Sutcliffe, one of The Beatles' original members and the inventor of their name, would never know that his friends were about to become the biggest attraction in show business since Elvis Presley.

In *Birth of The Beatles*, the producers opted for a different portrayal of Sutcliffe's death. Here, Stuart Sutcliffe breaks down while dancing with his girlfriend Astrid Kirchherr. However, none of these depictions come even close to the actual circumstances of Stuart Sutcliffe's death. Pauline Sutcliffe reconstructs the dramatic events in her biography of her brother.

"He was alone in the attic at Astrid's where he painted. Astrid's mother Nielsa was startled by a shout-scream. Stuart was writhing on the floor and Nielsa could not get his emergency medication into his mouth as his teeth were shut. She called the emergency services [...]. Nielsa telephoned Astrid but when she got home Stuart was in a coma. Astrid sent a telegram to my mother warning

that her son was desperately ill. The paramedics got Stuart from the downstairs bedroom and into the ambulance, but getting him to Heidbert Hospital became academic.

Astrid had his head in her hands. She said he had a smile on his face, which was nice of her. At 4.45 p.m. Stuart died on his way to hospital. His body was taken to the forensic department of the University Hospital, Eppendorf, for autopsy, which concluded that the cause of death had been cerebral haemorrhage in the right ventricle of the brain” (Sutcliffe/Thompson 2002: 166-167).

Since John Lennon’s death in December 1980, several authors have suggested that John Lennon had severely injured Sutcliffe in a fist-fight and was therefore partly responsible for his death (cf. Goldman 2001: 117-120). Although Lennon was known to be aggressive at times and made headlines in 1963 when he beat up Liverpool DJ Bob Wooler at Paul McCartney’s 21st birthday party, clear evidence of this confrontation ever taking place is missing, as neither Sutcliffe nor Lennon ever mentioned the incident in their letters, and McCartney, who reportedly witnessed Lennon’s violent outburst has also never suggested that this incident ever took place.

Lennon’s reaction to learning of Stuart Sutcliffe’s death has been described differently in several accounts. While some authors claim that Lennon laughed hysterically when he learned that his best friend had died, others maintain that he became apathic, in a state of shock. It is not clear how these stories came about, since The Beatles themselves, including Pete Best, remember the incident quite well. Pete Best has said that “[f]or the first time I actually saw him physically break down and shed tears. The rest of us, too, had tears in our eyes. John respected Stu as an artist. I think it hurt him a lot more than us” (Giuliano/Devi 1999: 200). *Birth of The Beatles* and *Backbeat* show the character of John Lennon shocked by the news, embracing Astrid Kirchherr. Here Lennon’s reaction is probably portrayed in a more accurate way than in *In His Life: The John Lennon Story*, where Lennon almost aggressively tells Kirchherr to stop crying and to carry on with her life; then he orders some whiskey in a bar at the airport.

Historical Accuracy in Biographical Movies

John Lennon's First Guitar(s)

In His Life: The John Lennon Story is a NBC television production focusing on John Lennon's life in Liverpool from 1956 to 1963. Although the movie does not offer a new perspective on The Beatles' rise to fame, it is the only film dramatizing Lennon's first attempts as a musician with The Quarry Men. It also depicts Lennon's first encounter with Paul McCartney at the Woolton Garden Fete. Even though the events leading up to The Beatles' breakthrough had to be simplified, in order to function in the context of a semi-fictional movie, the producers tried to keep to the facts, drawing a rather accurate picture of John Lennon as a young man. The drama was shot entirely on location in Liverpool, which adds to its air of authenticity.

The film starts with a scene depicting an auction in London on 14 September 1999, where "the first guitar ever owned by John Lennon" (*In His Life* 2000) is auctioned. This auction actually took place at Sotheby's in 1999, although the guitar, which was finally sold to a Beatles fan in New York City, was, in fact, John Lennon's second guitar. Although the auction sequence makes a very effective opening for the movie, establishing and explaining the historical importance of its protagonist, the confusion surrounding Lennon's first instrument has become a common source of errors in many Beatles biographies. It may seem to be only a minor inaccuracy in John Lennon's biography, but it is of great significance when considered in the context of The Beatles' history, which has become subject of many history books and exhibitions, claiming to inform the public with academic accuracy. Instead of scrutinizing and verifying the data found in many biographies of The Beatles, scholars and contemporary historians often seem to simply copy and quote the information provided by some authors who have gained the reputation of being experts on The Beatles. For example, Hunter Davies' biography *The Beatles* (1968) was long considered to be the most reliable source of information on the group. However, the book contains various factual errors, and – despite its merits – has certainly contributed significantly to the confusion of many dates and events in The Beatles' history. For instance, Davies provided a wrong date for the first encounter of John Lennon and Paul McCartney: "I have to admit, with a shamed face, that in my so-called authorised biography of 1968, I gave the date of this momentous event as June 15, 1956. A whole year and three weeks out. Shows the quality of my research [...]" (Davies 2001: 55). Although many errors have been corrected in more recent editions of the book, it

would be quite interesting to know how many scholars and students have quoted the wrong date in their books and papers.

The confusion surrounding John Lennon's first guitar serves as a rather good example of how history is distorted and partly invented in history books and biographies. In *The Beatles*, Hunter Davies briefly describes how Lennon acquired his first guitar:

"He took a guitar off a boy at school one day but found he couldn't play it so he gave it back to him. But he knew that his mother, Julia, could play the banjo, so he went to see her. She bought him a second-hand guitar for £10. It had on it – ,guaranteed not to split'. He did go for a couple of lessons, but never learned. Instead Julia taught him some banjo chords. The first tune he learned was 'That'll Be the Day'" (Davies 1969: 27).

Davies' account is consistent with what Lennon recalled in 1963: "Anfangs lieb ich mir eine Gitarre. Ich konnte nicht spielen, aber meine Mutter kaufte mir eine von einem dieser Versandhäuser. [...] Meine erste Gitarre kostete zehn Pfund" (Beatles 2000: 11). Lennon's half sister Julia Baird also remembers that "we never saw John without his guitar, the one our mother had bought him for £10 which was now well battered from use" (Baird/Giuliano 1988: 29).

Ray Coleman, whose biography *Lennon* is one of the bestsellers in the genre, reconstructs the story in a rather similar way: "John [...] decided to send away for his first [guitar] himself. From a mail order advertisement in the *Daily Mail* he ordered a £5 10s (\$9) model, 'guaranteed not to split,' and was canny enough, at this stage, to have the guitar posted to Julia's address where he would run less risk of a scolding" (Coleman 1992: 137). While most authors agree with the fact that John Lennon's aunt Mimi Smith was initially against Lennon's aspirations to become a guitarist, some Beatles historians claim that it was Smith who bought Lennon's first guitar. Mark Lewisohn, who is now regarded the leading Beatles historian, writes that "In March 1957, having finally persuaded his guardian, Aunt Mimi, to buy him a £17 guitar, he decided to form a skiffle group" (Lewisohn 2000: 12). Bill Harry, another leading authority on The Beatles, writes that "Mimi did not entirely approve of his interest in rock'n'roll music and attempted to dissuade him, but on realising that he was so determined, she bought him a guitar at Frank Hussy's music store for £18 when he was seventeen" (Harry 2000: 1008). Barry Miles, who has also published several accounts of The Beatles' history, finally offers a combination of the two basic versions: "John's Aunt Mimi lent him the money to buy a £17 Gallotone Champion guitar, complete with a sticker promising that the instrument was 'Guaranteed not to split'" (Miles 1997: 9). Although it seems natural to

trust John Lennon's own memory in this respect, the question remains how all this confusion came into existence, and whose version we can completely trust. While all the great Beatles experts fail to provide a complete history of Lennon's first guitar, his former bandmate Rod Davis recently pointed out that Lennon owned two guitars in 1957: "I was in the USA in August 1999 with The Quarrymen and phoning home. I was astounded to learn that John's guitar was coming up for sale at Sotheby's. The guitar was the one he was playing in Geoff Rhind's famous photo; a Gallotone Champion, actually the second guitar he had ever owned, the first one being an Egmond [...]" (Davis 2001: 260).

The stories of how Lennon acquired the two guitars were simply mixed up in various ways over the years. Mimi Smith's claim that she was the person buying Lennon's first guitar probably contributed to this confusion. With the help of Rod Davis, one can now reconstruct Lennon's situation in 1957: As his aunt Mimi did not support his ambition of becoming a guitarist, he asked his mother Julia for a guitar. Julia, who was an amateur musician herself, agreed, and bought him a cheap Egmond guitar by mail order. When Mimi Smith realized that Lennon was a talented guitarist and that he would need a better instrument in order to improve, she agreed to buy him a second hand Gallotone Champion guitar at Frank Hessay's music store in Liverpool.

Auditioning for Larry Parnes

An important step in the history of The Beatles was their audition for Larry Parnes in 1960. Parnes was one of the most successful managers in the entertainment business at the time. According to Paul Du Noyer, Parnes "would sign up young boys wherever he went and launch them into showbusiness with thrusting new names – Tommy Steele, Vince Eager, Marty Wilde, Duffy Power [...]" (Du Noyer 2004: 12). One of Parnes' singers was Billy Fury, one of the few successful pop stars from Liverpool prior to The Beatles. Allan Williams, The Beatles' first manager, remembers how this audition came about: "Larry told me [...] that he was looking for a backing group for Billy [Fury]. He wanted me to round up as many of the Liverpool groups as I could muster and arrange an audition which he and Billy could attend" (Williams/Marshall 1977: 30). Williams held the auditions at his own new club, the Blue Angel, and invited several of Liverpool's top groups, including Rory Storm and the Hurricanes (featuring Ringo Starr on drums) and Derry and the Seniors. When it was The Beatles' turn to play, Parnes was quite impressed with the group, although their drummer, Tommy Moore, arrived late for the audition. However, Parnes was not impressed with Stuart Sutcliffe's bass

playing and requested The Beatles to perform a song without him (vgl. Williams/Marshall 1977: 35). When The Beatles refused to perform without Sutcliffe, they lost their chance of backing Billy Fury on a national tour. Instead, they were hired to back another young singer from Liverpool called Johnny Gentle on a tour through Scotland. It was The Beatles' first engagement outside the Liverpool area, and they all remembered the experience with fondness, despite the modest payment they received for the tour (vgl. Beatles 2000: 44).

As the audition for Parnes marked a turning point in The Beatles' career, it is shown in *Birth of The Beatles* as well as in *In His Life: The John Lennon Story*. In *Birth of The Beatles*, the group already calls themselves The Beatles, while they are still called Johnny and the Moondogs in *In His Life*. In actual fact, however, the group was called The Silver Beetles at that particular time (vgl. Lewisohn 2000: 19). In both movies, Larry Parnes' rejection of Stuart Sutcliffe bass playing is described. The particulars of this event were first described in detail in Allan Williams' first book *The Man Who Gave The Beatles Away* (vgl. Williams/Marshall 1977: 29-37). Although both movies apparently gained their information about the audition from Williams' book, neither features Williams as a movie character. In fact, *Birth of The Beatles* shows Larry Parnes offering The Beatles an engagement in Hamburg, although the real Larry Parnes did not have anything to do with The Beatles' move to Germany. In *In His Life*, Parnes suggests to Johnny and the Moondogs that they "find a new name" (vgl. *In His Life* 2000), although, in reality, The Beatles had already found their new name. It is rather interesting that all the dramatizations of The Beatles' history neglected and erased Allan Williams' vital contributions to the group's early career, although Williams' own biography would make a rather entertaining movie.¹

Brian Epstein, Alistair Taylor, and Raymond Jones

The way Brian Epstein's interest in The Beatles was initially evoked has become one of the many mysteries in The Beatles' history. *Birth of The Beatles* and *In His Life: The John Lennon Story* provide slightly different versions of this chapter in The Beatles' story. In *In His Life*, Epstein tries his best to help a customer looking for the record "My Bonnie" by The

1 In fact, Allan Williams' life has recently been the subject of a play, *The Man Who Gave the Beatles Away* (2002), written by Irish playwright Ronan Wilmot. In addition, journalist Lew Baxter published a delightful account of Williams' anecdotes in 2003. Lew Baxter. *Allan Williams is...The Fool On The Hill...how the beat went on after his BIG BEATLES blunder*. Wirral: Praxis, 2003.

Beat Brothers. Epstein has not heard about the group and asks his shop assistant Linda if she knows them. Linda points out that he must be talking about The Beatles, who regularly perform at the Cavern, which is located right around the corner from NEMS, Epstein's store. Epstein decides to go there at a lunch-time session and is welcomed by the DJ. He meets up with Linda and expresses his enthusiasm for the group.

In *Birth of The Beatles*, a similar scene has a young man asking for the single "My Bonnie" by The Beatles in Epstein's music store. When two girls turn up talking about the "fab" and "gear" Beatles, Epstein decides to go and see the group at the Cavern. He goes to an evening session with his personal assistant, who is annoyed by the loud music and leaves again soon.

Both movies basically reconstruct the official version of the story as provided by Brian Epstein in his autobiography.

"On Saturday, October 28, [1961], I had just come back from a long holiday in Spain during which I had wondered how I could expand my interests. And then, suddenly, though quite undramatically, a few words from Raymond Jones brought the solution. The words, of course, were "Have you got a disc by the Beatles?" [...] The name "Beatle" meant nothing to me though I vaguely recalled seeing it on a poster advertising a university dance at New Brighton Tower, and I remembered thinking it was an odd and purposeless spelling" (Epstein 1998: 94-95).

More recently, several other versions of how Epstein became aware of The Beatles have appeared. Bill Harry, whose magazine *Mersey Beat* was on sale at Epstein's store NEMS, says that he was surprised when he read Epstein's account in his book *A Cellarful of Noise*, as he was discussing The Beatles and his paper *Mersey Beat*, which often featured The Beatles on the cover, with Epstein as soon as July, 1961: "It was obvious in *Mersey Beat* that they were the number one group" (*A Long and Winding Road 2003*: DVD 2).

Other people claiming to have made Epstein aware of The Beatles include Liverpool promoter Sam Leach, who says that he put up a poster announcing a Beatles show at the Tower Ballroom in Epstein's music store (vgl. Leach 1999: 125-127), and Epstein's personal assistant Alistair Taylor, who came up with one of the most fantastic stories in recent Beatles mythology: "I got so fed up with people asking if we had a record of 'My Bonnie' by the Beatles and having to say No that I put through an order for it myself under a name I simply dreamed up. [...] The famous story is that a guy called Raymond Jones came into the shop and asked for a record by the Beatles. I know that I invented the name and put it into the order book" (Taylor 2003: 16). However, Taylor's ver-

sion of the story is highly improbable. In the 1990s, when he started claiming that he made up the name Raymond Jones at Beatles conventions around the world, Beatles experts doubted his claim, and Spencer Leigh, a renowned Beatles biographer and Merseyside radio presenter, finally managed to find the real Raymond Jones, who was now living in Spain. He quotes Jones in his book on Liverpool DJ Bob Wooler.

“I used to go to NEMS every Saturday and I would be buying records by Carl Perkins and Fats Domino because I heard the Beatles playing their songs. My sister’s ex-husband, Kenny Johnson, who played with Mark Peters and the Cyclones, told me that the Beatles had made a record and so I went to NEMS to get it. Brian Epstein said to me, ‘Who are they?’ and I said, ‘They are the most fantastic group you will ever hear.’ No one will take that away from me that it was me who spoke to Brian Epstein and then he went to the Cavern to see them for himself” (Leigh 2002: 155).

Although the producers of *Birth of The Beatles* and *In His Life* realized Epstein’s initial encounter with The Beatles in a way that resembled the manager’s recollection of the event, the alternative versions have been presented in various unauthorized documentaries, such as Brian Epstein. *Inside the Fifth Beatle*, and *A Long and Winding Road*.

The Hours and Times: Was John Lennon Gay?

Albert Goldman’s biography *The Lives of John Lennon* introduced the rumor of John Lennon’s bisexuality in the world of Beatle-myths (Goldman 2001: 140). Since the book was first published in 1988, the topic has been exploited in various poorly researched and highly speculative biographies and documentaries. Most of these accounts focus on the particular relationship between John Lennon and The Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein. Much has been made of the fact that Lennon went on a short vacation with Epstein in April, 1963, only weeks before Beatlemania would sweep Great Britain. Only days after the birth of his son Julian, Lennon left Cynthia and their new born baby for four days, to enjoy a short vacation in Barcelona, Spain. Despite Paul McCartney’s insistence that Lennon was not a homosexual, and that Lennon probably went on a holiday with Epstein because he wanted to confirm his position as the leader of the group, this particular trip became one of the most mystified chapters in The Beatles’ history, although it was probably one of the less spectacular events. Lennon recalled the trip in the famous interview he granted Jann S. Wenner for the *Rolling Stone*.

“And I just went on holiday. I watched Brian picking up the boys. I like playing a big faggy, all that. [...] It was enjoyable, but there [were] big rumors in Liverpool. It was terrible. Very embarrassing. [...] I was pretty close to Brian because if somebody’s going to manage me, I want to know them inside out. And there was a period when he told me he was a fag and all that. I introduced him to pills [...] to make him talk – to find out what he’s like. And I remember him saying, “Don’t ever throw it back in me face, that I’m a fag.” Which I didn’t” (Wenner 2000: 63).

Rumors about a secret homosexual relationship between Lennon and Epstein were circulating in Liverpool as soon as they departed for Barcelona. Having just established his own family with Cynthia and Julian, Lennon was particularly enraged by these rumors. When Liverpool DJ Bob Wooler made a remark about Lennon and Epstein’s vacation at Paul McCartney’s 21st birthday party in June, 1963, a drunk Lennon lost control of himself and beat up Wooler, who had been one of the group’s fervent supporters on the Liverpool music scene. The fight caused the first mention of The Beatles in the national press (cf. Harry 2000: 1169). Even though Lennon later reconciled with Wooler, the whole incident further fuelled the rumors surrounding Lennon and Epstein’s trip to Spain. The violent confrontation between Lennon and Wooler is reconstructed in *In His Life*, where Lennon almost kills Wooler. The scene evokes what actually took place at McCartney’s party in an authentic way. Years later, Lennon recalled the incident: “The first national coverage was me beating up Bob Wooler at Paul’s 21st party because he intimated I was homosexual. I must have had a fear that maybe I was homosexual to attack him like that and it’s very complicated reasoning. But I was very drunk and I hit him and I could have really killed somebody then. And that scared me” (Badman 2001: 98).

In 1991, *The Hours and Times*, an hour-long movie by Los Angeles filmmaker Christopher Münch premiered in the United States. *The Hours and Times* explores the possibilities of what might have happened during Lennon and Epstein’s vacation together. It depicts the complex homoerotic relationship between the characters of John Lennon and his manager Brian Epstein. Münch, who wrote, produced, and directed *The Hours and Times*, shot the black-and-white movie in 1988 and spent two years on the post-production, because of financial reasons.

The Hours and Times is a very different kind of movie than all the other dramatizations of The Beatles’ history, as it is not restricted by the conventions of commercial cinema, nor was it made to cash in by sensationalizing a controversial chapter in the group’s history. Christopher Münch was able to exercise complete freedom and independence in the way the film was shot and edited. Münch had full control over every as-

pect of the movie, which, he claims, he initially made only for himself (vgl. *The Hours and Times* 2002). In contrast to most of the other films about The Beatles, Münch and his actors succeed in the creation of full-rounded characters, who, however, do not necessarily resemble the real Lennon and Epstein in every detail. Similar to Iain Softley, Münch explains that he had considered making a movie without The Beatles connection. In contrast to *Backbeat*, which is much more tied to The Beatles' history than Iain Softley would want to admit, *The Hours and Times*, with its three-dimensional characters and the simple but strong story, would also work if the characters were not associated with The Beatles. However, had the characters been named differently, the film would probably not have reached a more general audience. On the other hand, the choice of making a fictional movie about Lennon, which portrays him as a man with bisexual interests, poses the problem of reinforcing a set of myths about Lennon.

John Lennon is played by Liverpool actor Ian Hart, who manages to capture and interpret some of the real Lennon's most notorious features, such as his restlessness, his mercurial temper, as well as his ability to entertain and charm the people around him. Lennon is also presented as a rather relentless playboy, who proves to be rather insensitive when he talks to his wife Cynthia on the telephone. He also flirts with an attractive flight attendant, with whom he subsequently has an affair in Barcelona. While Lennon is known to have had numerous affairs in the early years of The Beatles' success, this particular incident is completely fictitious. In *The Hours and Times*, the affair serves as some sort of reassurance after Lennon's first homo-erotic encounter with Brian Epstein in the bathroom. He apparently feels uncomfortable after having kissed Epstein and needs to be with a woman to convince himself that he is not really gay.

The character of Brian Epstein, played by David Angus, also captures many of the real Epstein's traits. He is portrayed as a flamboyant gentleman of excellent manners, who has got a secret crush on John Lennon. Epstein's feelings for Lennon cause some tense situations and encourage Lennon to direct some cynical comments toward his sensitive manager. Finally, however, Lennon surrenders to his curiosity and his own latent feelings for 'Eppy', and he sleeps with his manager. While David Angus manages to convey the real Epstein's elegance and sophistication, his interpretation of Epstein's personality appears to be much less self-assured and complex than in real life.

Ian Hart's convincing portrayal of Lennon and David Angus' reinterpretation of Epstein's sensitive features seem to justify the choice of having the story revolve around historic characters instead of completely

fictional characters. Despite the fictional dimension of the movie, Münch apparently researched Epstein's background quite thoroughly, and includes a few personal details about Epstein, such as his obsession with bull-fighting and his overwhelming personal concern for The Beatles.

Although the topic of homo-eroticism would lead itself to a sensationalist approach in the context of Lennon and Epstein's biographies, Münch describes the relationship between the characters in a sensitive and tasteful way and avoids the danger of stereotyping the characterization of the two friends.

Beatlemania and Beyond: 1964 to the Present

Back to Beatlemania: Robert Zemeckis' *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*

In 1978, Steven Spielberg co-produced a movie called *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. The film was directed by Robert Zemeckis, who would later direct the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989, 1990), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), and *Forrest Gump* (1994). The story, written by Zemeckis with his long-time collaborator Bob Gale, revolves around the adventures of a handful of Beatles fans, who are going to New York to see The Beatles' performance at the *Ed Sullivan Show*. While most of the movies about The Beatles fail to convey a convincing impression of The Beatles because of poorly selected actors, Zemeckis avoids the danger of disappointing the audience with Beatles impersonators by never showing their faces. Instead, The Beatles themselves rarely appear throughout the movie. At one point, however, the camera takes in the subjective point of view of a fan hidden underneath one of The Beatles' bed in the hotel room, and The Beatles' feet are shown. Another fan witnesses them as they leave the building, but she – and the audience – only gets to see their backs. Instead of actually showing The Beatles, the group is in one scene only represented by their iconic instruments which make one of the fans faint in the hotel room when she finds them.

I Wanna Hold Your Hand is less a celebration of The Beatles' music or their history than a subjective view of their initial, overwhelming impact on the American youth at the time of their first arrival in the United States. The film works very well without The Beatles being embodied by actors. Instead, the hype surrounding the group's 'invasion' of the United States is re-created, and the fans' reaction is shown from their own perspective. By taking in the subjective position of the fans, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* breaks with the tradition of juxtaposing footage of The Beat-

les with footage of the fans' reactions, which characterizes most of the concert footage featuring The Beatles. The only notable previous instance where a camera is placed in the audience had been Richard Lester's portrayal of the concert scene in *A Hard Day's Night*. Because of its closeness to the fans, who are the film's protagonists, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* evokes the excitement The Beatles generated at the height of Beatlemania. Zemeckis provides a very accurate portrayal of the circumstances surrounding the group's arrival in the United States and includes many details, which contribute to the authentic overall impression of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. For example, the film shows the fan crowd outside the Plaza Hotel singing "We love you Beatles", the actual fan club song at the time, and refers to the almost surreal craze for Beatles memorabilia and merchandise – a Beatles fan wants to sell pieces of the bed-sheets used by The Beatles to other fans. In actual fact, a similar occurrence took place in 1964, when a business man dreamed up the idea of selling small pieces of The Beatles' used bed-sheets. Capitol Records' advertising strategies are also shown in the movie, where a record sales manager wears a Beatle-wig at a store in New Jersey. Zemeckis' movie also includes a tribute to the radio stations' effort to promote The Beatles, as radio DJ Murray the K, who called himself 'the fifth Beatle', appears as himself in the movie.

The authentic sets also feature an exact replica of the stage at The Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In addition, an Ed Sullivan look-alike introduces The Beatles with the exact same wording as in 1964, which has become a popular quotation in many documentaries and reports on The Beatles. The camera then focuses on the audience, with archive footage of The Beatles' actual performance of 1964 visible on a few camera screens. This is actually a subtle reference to the concert sequence in *A Hard Day's Night*, where Richard Lester partly shows them on the director's control monitors.

I Wanna Hold Your Hand depicts The Beatles' arrival in the United States from the point of view of the American public. The movie expresses a generation's recollection of The Beatles' first U.S. visit and evokes their initial impact on the American youth by taking in a perspective close to a gang of five Beatles fans. The way of representation and the selection of events included in the narrative correlate to the common perception of this particular episode in The Beatles' career, which is often considered as their peak concerning commerciality and popularity. The Beatles' first arrival in the United States was already mythologized at the time of its occurrence, because of the enormous, immediate impact the group had on the American public and popular culture. *I Wanna Hold*

Your Hand recalls the circumstances surrounding their break-through in the United States and supports the mythic character of the event.

“You and Me. And Everything Between Us”: Paul and John in 1976

In 1999, VH-1, one of MTV’s adult-oriented TV channels, produced the telefilm *Two of Us*, a fictional movie depicting an encounter of John Lennon and Paul McCartney in New York in 1976. *Two of Us* was directed by Michael-Lindsay Hogg, who had previously directed The Beatles’ promotional films from 1968, their documentary *Let It Be*, as well as a video for Paul McCartney’s 1978 single “London Town”. Aidan Quinn (*Looking for Richard, Legends of the Fall*) plays the character of Paul McCartney, and Jared Harris, who had portrayed Lennon’s friend Andy Warhol in *I Shot Andy Warhol*, embodies John Lennon in VH-1’s third movie production.

Two of Us begins with a statement saying “Legend has it that in 1976 – six years after the bitter break-up of The Beatles – Paul McCartney paid a surprise visit to John Lennon at his apartment in New York City” (*Two of Us* 2002). The film basically displays screenwriter Mark Stanfield’s fantasy of what a mid-Seventies meeting of the two former Beatles may have looked like. Although the movie was carefully researched and included a lot of authentic information and locations, the movie’s basic theme of two estranged friends recovering their friendship did probably not mirror reality at all. May Pang, who was John Lennon’s personal assistant from 1970 to 1974, explains that John Lennon and Paul McCartney were still close friends when they met in the mid-Seventies.

“I thought the premise for this movie was odd, considering the fact that John, Paul, Linda and I spent quite a bit of time together, both in Los Angeles and at our apartment in New York. I was amazed that they picked up their friendship as if nothing had happened between them. They were instantly comfortable. Just before John returned to the Dakota, we had planned on joining Paul and Linda in New Orleans at the recording sessions for Paul’s *Venus and Mars* album. John was excited about possibly writing with Paul again. Sadly, it was never to be. I think the movie would’ve been better had it explored what actually did happen” (Pang 2003).

While John Lennon and Paul McCartney may have been much closer than depicted in *Two of Us*, the movie works against the popular belief that the former songwriting team were bitter enemies throughout the

1970s. After they had overcome their initial conflicts concerning The Beatles' break-up, Lennon and McCartney revived their friendship around 1973-74. In 1974, they even recorded some songs together with Harry Nilsson and Stevie Wonder. However, this rather rough recording of rock standards, such as "Stand By Me" and "Midnight Special" was never intended for release. The tapes featuring this secret recording session surfaced in the 1990s and have since been bootlegged.

After a surprise visit around Christmas, 1975, Paul and Linda McCartney again visited John Lennon and Yoko Ono in their apartment in New York City in April, 1976. It is this meeting that inspired the movie *Two of Us*. Even though there is no way of knowing what exactly occurred at Lennon and McCartney's private get-togethers, both, Lennon and McCartney later talked to the press about a particular episode which took place at Lennon's apartment on 24 April, 1976. Lennon and McCartney were watching the show *Saturday Night Live*, when Lorne Michaels, the show's creator, suddenly made the following announcement:

"Lately there have been a lot of rumours to the effect that the four of you might be getting back together, that would be great. In my book, The Beatles are the best thing that ever happened to music. It goes deeper than that, you're not just a musical group, you're a part of us, we grew up with you. It's for this reason that I'm inviting you to come on our show. Now we've heard and read a lot about personality and legal conflicts that might prevent you guys from reuniting, that's none of my business. You guys will have to handle that. But it's also been said that no one has yet come up with enough money to satisfy you. Well, if it's money that you want, there's no problem here. The National Broadcasting Company authorises me to authorise you a cheque for \$3,000. [...] The Beatles for \$3,000" (Badman 2001: 181-182).

When this announcement was made on the popular comedy show, Lennon and McCartney considered surprising not only the team of *Saturday Night Live* but the whole world by actually accepting the offer and going to the studios, where the show was broadcast live. The studio was only a few blocks away from John Lennon's apartment. In 1980, John Lennon recalled this episode in an interview: "Paul was visiting us at our place in the Dakota with Linda. He and I were watching it and we went ha-ha, wouldn't it be funny if we went down and we almost went down to the studio, just as a gag. We nearly got into the cab, but we were actually too tired" (Badman 2001: 182). The incident inspired the climax of *Two of Us*, when the characters of Lennon and McCartney decide to go there and perform. The McCartney character briefly goes downstairs to his limousine to get his guitar. When he returns, Lennon is engaged in a telephone conversation with Yoko Ono, and McCartney realizes that they will not

do their surprise performance on *Saturday Night Live*. The two friends wave at each other, and the movie ends with McCartney calling his wife Linda to tell her about his exciting day with John.

The portrayal of the two protagonists is surprisingly stereotypical, considering the fact that director Michael Lindsay-Hogg had previously worked with the real Beatles. The character of Paul McCartney is considerate, reasonable, and sentimental, while John Lennon is portrayed as a rather aggressive and unpredictable cynic. The character of John Lennon's appearance is modelled upon Lennon's outfit during his *Imagine* period (1971), while the McCartney character's looks resemble the real McCartney's appearance in the early 1990s rather than his 1970s outfits, haircuts, and manners. In addition, the McCartney character's mannerisms, such as scratching the side of his nose during interviews, are inspired by the way McCartney presented himself to the media in the 1990s. The behavior of Lennon's character oddly resembles rock singer Liam Gallagher's mannerisms, which are, in turn, modelled upon the way he imagines John Lennon.²

One of the movie's main functions is the explanation of John Lennon and Paul McCartney's friendship on the grounds of their traumatic childhood experiences and their difficult relationships with their parents. John Lennon is described as a tortured man, hurt by the fact that his parents abandoned him when he was a little child and by his mother Julia's untimely death when he had just begun to re-establish his relationship with her in 1958. The character of Paul McCartney contrasts Lennon's inability to lay the past to rest. While Lennon uses his pain as an excuse for his eccentric behavior, McCartney has managed to overcome his equally unpleasant past by establishing a family, raising his children, and by resuming his career as rock musician. He does not see a point in sharing his pain with the world. Instead, he has opted to provide pleasure to his fans through his music. Throughout the day they spend together, they discuss their problematic relationships with their respective parents and the pain of losing their mothers at a young age. In actual fact, both, Lennon and McCartney, have pointed out that the fact that they had both lost their mothers when they were teenagers had cemented their friendship and established a bond between them that was never broken (vgl. Miles 1997: 49).

The movie contains a sentimental scene, pointing out another connection between them, which revives their emotional understanding of

2 Liam Gallagher is the singer in Oasis, a rock'n'roll group from Manchester, celebrating their greatest success in the mid-1990s. They are known for being great Beatles fans and imitating The Beatles' sound, manners, and styles.

each other and serves as a defining scene for the resurrection of their friendship in the movie. In this particular sequence, they tell each other that their fathers had recently died. Again, this correlates to reality, as both, James McCartney and Alfred Lennon, died in 1976. By discussing and contrasting their different relationships with their fathers and the way they deal with their loss they re-discover the faith in each other and admit an emotionality which makes their friendship so special. While the death of Paul McCartney's mother Mary is mentioned in connections with a dream McCartney has had of her – an idea inspired by the fact that the real McCartney wrote The Beatles' last UK single "Let It Be" after his mother had appeared in a dream –, the death of John Lennon's mother Julia is recalled in a more detailed way, as he is still haunted by the tragedy. When Lennon and McCartney are stopped by two policemen in Central Park, Lennon cannot help but to provoke them because he has hated policemen ever since the death of his mother, who was run over by a car driven by a drunk policeman.

The movie also introduces quite common misconceptions and stereotypes connected with the personalities of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. In *Two of Us*, Lennon is a recluse, living a boring life in his New York apartment, which he apparently never leaves. When the McCartney character suggests going for a walk, Lennon replies, "A walk? Out there?" In actual fact, the assumption that Lennon lived his final years in seclusion and boredom is another myth that has evolved since Albert Goldman published his Lennon biography in 1988. While it is true that Lennon and Ono spent the years from 1976 to 1980 away from the eyes of the public, they were far from inactive. They went on several trips around the world, visiting Japan, Egypt, and the Caribbean, they attended a few official occasions, such as Jimmy Carter's Presidential Inauguration Ball in 1977, and they recorded many demo tapes of songs for their comeback album *Double Fantasy* (1980).

Despite these factual errors, *Two of Us* sets out to explore the foundation of the close friendship between two of the driving forces in 20th century popular culture, and their different kinds of motivation for their creative endeavor. While the idea of a psychological exploration of Lennon and McCartney may be appealing, the sentimental way it is dealt with in this particular production diminishes the movie's credibility.

The Beatles and Women

Brian Epstein's Regulations

When Brian Epstein took on the management of The Beatles, he insisted that The Beatles were not to be seen with their girlfriends in public, in order to convey the impression that they were single and available. He was convinced that this would contribute to increasing their popularity, as the largely female fanbase would not have to face a 'real' rival. As this PR-tactic had previously worked for other male pop singers, such as Cliff Richard and Elvis Presley, The Beatles's strength was that their fans were able to choose their favorite Beatle out of four. Therefore, The Beatles' appeal and their potential impact on their fans was theoretically much higher than only one singer's. Although the principle seems easy, Brian Epstein and George Martin's decision to allow The Beatles to represent themselves as a group of four equal members revolutionized the pop business and has become the standard way of designing 'boygroups' in popular music.

The illusion of The Beatles being singles – although they were dating girlfriends – worked well for quite some time. When John Lennon's girlfriend Cynthia Powell, whom he had dated since his time at the Liverpool Art College, became pregnant in the summer of 1962, they decided to marry. The wedding took place in secrecy and was paid for by manager Brian Epstein. As The Beatles were now on the brink of nationwide success, Epstein insisted that Lennon's marriage be kept a secret. However, soon after Cynthia and John's son Julian was born, the press found out about their marriage and publicized pictures of Cynthia Lennon and her child. While the Lennons' marriage became headline news in several tabloids and teen magazines, it did surprisingly not diminish the groups or Lennon's popularity. Epstein arranged that the press stayed away from Lennon's private life and that his marriage was not highly publicized in the following year. For example, when the Maysles brothers filmed their documentary of The Beatles' first U.S. visit, they were asked to keep Cynthia Lennon and any girlfriends out of the movie (vgl. Stark 2005: 160). Marriage was also not talked about at press conferences. In his autobiography *A Cellarful of Noise*, Epstein points out what the public expects of The Beatles: "A Beatle must not marry. It is very well if one is married before one is a fully grown Beatle, but a fully grown Beatle must stay single" (Epstein 1998: 188).

Fans simply got used to the fact that Lennon was married and had a child. Although the other Beatles still pretended to be available for a while, the media soon reported that Paul McCartney was dating actress Jane Asher. McCartney's decision to make the relationship known to the press

caused an argument with manager Brian Epstein, who feared that the fans would be offended (vgl. Stark 2005: 164). George Harrison had fallen in love with model Pattie Boyd, who had been an extra in *A Hard Day's Night*. He married her in January, 1966, while Ringo Starr married his long-time girlfriend Maureen Cox in February, 1965. Geoffrey Ellis, one of Brian Epstein's employees, remembers the way Epstein tried to keep their marriage a secret: "When the date for their wedding was decided on, [...] Brian helped to plan the affair like a military operation. I was particularly intrigued by the detail that even the name of the London Hotel where Maureen's parents, Mr and Mrs Cox, were to stay when they came from Liverpool for the wedding, was kept a secret: the press were not to know even this" (Ellis 2004: 48).

Initially, the female fans were jealous of The Beatles' wives and girlfriends and assaulted them quite fiercely. For instance, Pattie Boyd was attacked when she attended The Beatles' Christmas Show in 1964 (vgl. Harry 2000: 199). After a while, however, the fans accepted The Beatles' partners. While Cynthia Lennon and Maureen Starkey decided to stay out of the limelight, Jane Asher and Pattie Boyd became popular public figures. Pattie Boyd, in particular, became very interested in spiritual matters around 1966 and was the first in The Beatles inner circle who attended a lecture by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who became The Beatles' spiritual guide from 1967 to 1968. Cultural critic Steven D. Stark points out that an "increased public focus on the Beatles' fashionable girlfriends also helped cement their appeal at this time" (Stark 2005: 164).

Despite occasional press reports about The Beatles and their partners, manager Brian Epstein wanted The Beatles to be portrayed as available young men in their movies. Both, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* shows The Beatles flirting with young ladies, but it is clear that they are not romantically involved. In contrast, Elvis Presley's movies always feature a female protagonist, who falls in love with the King, in order to provide an opportunity of identification for the female audience. This approach, though effective, was out of the question for Epstein and The Beatles, because it was thought that it would not work well with four lead characters.

The Ballad of John and Yoko: A Love Story

John Lennon left his wife Cynthia when he became involved with Yoko Ono, a Japanese artist, who had acquired quite a reputation in the New York art scene, where she had been instrumental in the Fluxus movement. Lennon and Ono made use of the media to stage what has now become one of the great love stories of the 20th century. In films, songs,

exhibitions, newspapers, as well as at press conferences and in TV shows they exposed and discussed mainly their relationship and, therefore, controlled much of the information about them in the press. They became very much a “public couple,” (Pang 2003) as pointed out by May Pang, their former personal assistant, and established the myth of an apparently perfect relationship. They promoted their relationship in this way until 1973, when Lennon left Ono for a period of 18 months to live with May Pang in Los Angeles and New York. Soon after Lennon and Ono had reconciled, their son Sean was born. Lennon retreated from public attention for more than four years to be a house-husband. When he returned to the music business in 1980, the comeback album *Double Fantasy*, a collaborative effort of Lennon and Ono, projected the myth of marital bliss to the world in rather personal love songs. The publicity campaign surrounding Lennon’s comeback was dominated by Lennon and Ono’s views of their own relationship and their family life.

It is not surprising that a movie was made about one of the 20th century’s most famous couples. In 1985, *John & Yoko: A Love Story*, a television production written and directed by Sandor Stern premiered on American television. The movie concentrates on the couple’s relationship, beginning in 1966, when they first met at the Indica Art Gallery, and ending with Lennon’s violent death in 1980.

The movie is rather well-researched and depicts all the famous incidents in the lives of the eccentric couple in an authentic way. What distinguishes the movie from many other accounts is the fact that it includes Yoko Ono’s side of the story as well. For example, the movie contains scenes portraying her involvement with John Cage, Ornette Coleman, and the Fluxus movement in New York City. Yoko Ono, who was never a popular figure with many Beatles fans, is depicted as a talented, intellectual, and sensitive artist. *John & Yoko: A Love Story* also contains some less publicized chapters in the couple’s history, such as Ono’s two miscarriages, and aims at a rather factual portrayal of their love story.

Despite the production’s merits, some unfortunate decisions in the way the side characters are presented drastically reduce the movie’s credibility. For example, the other Beatles do not resemble Lennon’s real band mates in any way. In fact the misplaced artificial moustaches and hair make them look rather ridiculous. In addition, Lennon’s first wife Cynthia is portrayed in a way that is hardly realistic. She is depicted as a housewife, knitting while Lennon is reading Ono’s book *Grapefruit*. Considering the fact that Cynthia Lennon was a graduate from the Liverpool College of Art, it seems rather odd to portray her as a knitting housewife.

While *John & Yoko: A Love Story* marginalizes and stereotypes many of the side characters, the portrayal of Lennon and Ono is rather three-dimensional and much less idealizing than the couple's own PR or the documentaries endorsed by Yoko Ono after Lennon's death.

Whereas Lennon is often portrayed either as a saint or as an aggressive cynic in other movies and documentaries, *John & Yoko* manages to present John Lennon in a more balanced way, including his sincere commitment for humanity as well as his sometimes frantic behavior. For instance, the film includes a rarely publicized episode, depicting John Lennon's despair when Richard Nixon is re-elected president of the United States in 1972. Angry because his campaign against the Nixon legislation had failed – Nixon had become Lennon's personal enemy and wanted to see him deported –, he gets terribly drunk and has sex with a young woman, while Yoko is waiting for her husband in a room next door. While this dark chapter in the couple's history is hardly ever mentioned in official biographies, it was a defining moment in their marriage, as it marked the point when this reportedly 'ideal couple' started to drift apart, resulting in an 18-months long separation from 1973 to 1975.

John & Yoko: A Love Story was not designed as a sensationalist exploitation of Lennon's life. Instead it is a rather accurate portrayal of Lennon and Ono's personal and artistic history from 1966 to 1980 in the form of a television dramatization. Unfortunately, the production has not stood the test of time, and its overtly 1980s TV aesthetics, the rather unfortunate props, and the superficial and sometimes ridiculous portrayal of the side characters look quite dated in 2008.

The Linda McCartney Story

1966 was not only the year John Lennon met Yoko Ono; it was also when Paul McCartney first met Linda Eastman, a photographer from New York City, whose pictures had been published in various magazines such as *Rolling Stone*. She had taken pictures of rock groups like The Rolling Stones and The Doors and was looking for an opportunity to photograph The Beatles in London, where she happened to meet Paul McCartney at a nightclub in Soho. They stayed in touch, and Linda Eastman was one of the few photographers invited to the press launch of The Beatles' landmark album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967. McCartney and Eastman started dating in August 1968, and they eventually got married on 12 March, 1969. Although Linda McCartney was initially despised by many female Beatles fans, their marriage became known as one of the most stable relationships in showbusiness, and it lasted until Linda McCartney's early death in 1998. Soon after her

death, Linda's long-time friend Danny Fields published her biography, which provided a personal and accurate view of Linda's life. In 2000, CBS produced a television dramatization of Linda's life, which was titled *The Linda McCartney Story*. The CBS Sunday Night Movie was based upon Danny Fields' recollections and depicted the love story of Paul and Linda McCartney from 1966 to 1998, highlighting some of the better known episodes in the couple's life together.

The production was aimed not exclusively at a target group of Beatles fans but at a more general audience, who had followed the dramatic circumstances surrounding Linda McCartney's death in the media. The story had generated great interest, as Paul and Linda McCartney had spent most of the time from 1994 to 1998 away from public attention, except for Paul McCartney's occasional public appearances to promote The Beatles' *Anthology* (1995) and his own album *Flaming Pie* (1997).

Although Linda McCartney had not been very popular with the press and with many fans of her husband Paul, the news of her death stunned the public in April 1998. Paul and Linda McCartney's love story had become a legend, and press reports emphasized their rare love for each other. McCartney's press officer Geoff Baker intentionally misinformed the media about the location where Linda McCartney had died, in order to enable the McCartneys to mourn in private. Unfortunately, Baker's PR strategy did not work out, because it only increased the tabloids' interest in the circumstances surrounding Linda McCartney's death. For example, Reuters published the following article: "Linda McCartney's Death Probed. Mystery surrounds the death of Paul McCartney's wife Linda, with police saying that no death certificate was filed in California and reports she may have died in California instead" ("Latest News" 2005). In addition, rumors of suicide and euthanasia were distributed by the yellow press. After a private ceremony, the McCartneys issued a statement saying that Linda McCartney had died in Arizona, and that none of the rumors were true.

While the media exploited the sad event, the public felt compassion for the McCartney family. Paul McCartney himself retreated from public life for more than a year. As a tribute to his wife, he finished and released a Linda McCartney solo album called *Wide Prairie* (1998), which she had been preparing for several years. Together with his daughter Mary, Paul McCartney also produced *Wingspan*, a television documentary exploring the couple's career with their pop group Wings in the 1970s. Amidst this wave of interest surrounding Linda McCartney, CBS produced the movie *The Linda McCartney Story*, which set out to describe the life of one of the most prominent women in the rock'n'roll business.

Linda McCartney was played by Elizabeth Mitchell, while the role of Paul McCartney was embodied by Gary Bakewell, who had already portrayed the younger McCartney in Iain Softley's *Backbeat* almost a decade before. In addition, the character of John Lennon was performed by Mark McGann, who had first played Lennon in *John & Yoko: A Love Story* in 1985. While Bakewell's performance is quite credible and enables him to re-interpret some of McCartney's facets that he had not had the chance to portray in *Backbeat*, McGann looks too old for a 25-year-old Lennon and does not have the chance to develop the character. The Lennon in *The Linda McCartney Story* is characterized by aggression and violence and is not allowed to display his more sensitive side. The portrayal of George Harrison and Ringo Starr oddly parallels the way they were depicted in *John & Yoko: A Love Story*, as they are again characterized by pointless one-liners and fake moustaches.

By taking Danny Field's well-researched biography as the basis for the film, the producers avoided factual errors in their adaptation. Linda McCartney is described as a successful photographer and a strong person, who rescues her husband from depression and alcoholism after the break-up of The Beatles in 1970. Although the story of the McCartneys' 1970s pop band Wings is also included, the film does not focus on Linda's musical contributions to the band. Instead, her talents as a photographer and as a loving mother of four children are her central characteristics. Her contribution to animal activism and her very successful business career as the owner of a food company devoted to the production of vegetarian meals are also not explored in detail. However, the main focus is on her tremendous optimism and courage during her battle with cancer.

The Linda McCartney Story works in the tradition of tele-dramatizations of 'real-life stories', combining elements of melodrama, biography, and soap opera. In order to achieve the desired effect of emotional appeal, the dramatic chapters in Linda McCartney's life were selected and dramatized to ensure a most moving effect. However, despite the idealization of Paul and Linda McCartney's relationship and the extremely sentimental portrayal of Linda McCartney's last years, the movie contains a bulk of accurate information and completely excludes the sensationalist stories that flooded the press after her untimely death.