

UNDERSTANDING JOHN LENNON

*'Lennon is clearly on the road to failure'
Quarry Bank High School report*

FRANCIS KENNY

with a Foreword by BILL HARRY



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Foreword by Bill Harry

JOHNN LENNON could only have been born in Liverpool and Francis Kenny certainly provides an answer ‘why’ in this book, analysing John’s life and what made John Lennon become John Lennon.

It was due not only to the times John lived through and was born into, but the thread that wound throughout the city’s history, including its Celtic heritage, due to its existence as one of the greatest ports in the world.

Capturing history before it fades and disappears forever is difficult because even recent history has its many different aspects, seen from different points of view, which often distort the reality of events. However, dedicated research often continues to uncover facts which have been contrary to events that really happened, such as the fact that John was never born during a heavy air raid, which so many previous books have contended.

This isn’t a roller-coaster ride, skipping through John’s life, but a carefully prepared examination of his early years, slowly examining the general picture that surrounded John’s life, rather than focusing on one specific aspect, wrapping the surroundings of the city, the family, the friends, the music and the events which forged the young man who became a 20th-century icon into a whole.

Some of the conclusions in John’s personal story might prove controversial because time and the passing of many of the main characters, including John himself, leave us with no option but to analyse what has previously been said and documented, taking into consideration the different viewpoints made at the time.

Early in 1960 John Lennon, Stuart Sutcliffe, Rod Murray and I formed The Dissenters, whose aim was to make Liverpool famous! We figured that Liverpool had more than its fair share of musicians, writers, comedians, artists and sculptors. We four would attempt to do this

in our various ways – John with his music, Stuart and Rod with their painting and me with my writing. (A plaque, made by my art school friend Fred O’Brien, dedicated to the place where we made our vow is to be found in Ye Cracke, Rice Street.)

Francis Kenny is another example of what we were aiming to achieve – to put the light on creative people from the city. He was born in the Toxteth area of the city and left school with no qualifications, worked for 15 years in the construction industry and then entered a vacuum of unemployment before attending Coleg Harlech, an adult residential college in North Wales, where he achieved a Diploma in Political Philosophy and Economics. This was followed by a period at Liverpool University where he completed a BA Honours in Economics and Politics and Sociology. He also qualified as a teacher after completing a Postgraduate Course in Education at Bolton University. He then completed MAs in Urban Regeneration at Hope University and Screen Writing at Liverpool John Moores University.

Francis began writing 15 years ago and has penned a dozen screenplays, a novel, *Waiting For the Beatles* and a crime novel, *All I Ever Wanted*, among other works, including a stage play.

Francis was to tell me that his book ‘aims to present a “below the surface” alternative view of John’s creative and emotional make-up’.

This work is now endorsed by a former Dissenter. Read, enjoy and learn.

Regards,
Bill Harry, Founder of *Mersey Beat*¹

¹ Bill Harry was born in Liverpool and attended Liverpool Art College where he met and became good friends with John Lennon and Stuart Sutcliffe. While at college, Bill developed an interest in journalism which led to his founding of *Mersey Beat* magazine, whose first print run of 5,000 copies came out on 9 November 1961 and was an instant sellout. The magazine included articles and band dates, and became a treasure trove of information to all those interested in the rock ‘n’ roll scene on Merseyside.

Bill’s role in the ‘birth of The Beatles’ was crucial, not only in his support in *Mersey Beat* but also through his relationship with Brian Epstein via the selling of his magazine in Brian’s family music store NEMS, and later encouraging Brian to attend a Beatles gig.

As the success of The Beatles took on global proportions, Bill partnered up with Brian to produce a national music paper, *The Disc & Music Echo*. As the 1960s drew to a close, Bill moved into PR and came to represent some of the biggest music artists around, including David Bowie, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd.

Bill is the author of over two dozen books, most of these publications dealing with John and The Beatles.

Milestones in the life of John Lennon

- 1940 John born on 9 October to Julia and Freddie Lennon in war-torn Liverpool.
- 1941 John lives in Newcastle Road, Liverpool with his mother and maternal grandparents.
- 1942 John's seafaring father Freddie is still away at sea.
- 1943 Julia begins a relationship with a Welsh soldier stationed in Liverpool, Taffy Williams.
- 1944 Julia gives birth to a girl (Victoria) with Williams the father; the child was given up for adoption.
- 1945 Julia and John move in with Bobby Dykins.
- 1946 Due to the intervention by Social Services over the common-law living arrangements of Julia and Bobby, John goes to live with Julia's sister Mimi and her husband George at Mendips in the Liverpool suburb of Woolton.
- 1947 Mimi changes John's school, which meant he became further away from his mother's home.
- 1948 At school John becomes ill-disciplined and aggressive.
- 1949 John immerses himself in books, poetry and story writing, which became a refuge from his emotional turmoil.
- 1950 Mimi takes in lodgers from the local university, meaning she and George sleep downstairs while John's upstairs box room is flanked by rooms containing students.

- 1951 John passes Eleven Plus exam, which gains him entrance into Quarry Bank, the local grammar school.
- 1952 John forms a gang: he is influenced by his story book hero *Just William*. John is the leader.
- 1953 John's poor discipline, shoddy class work and bullying behaviour continue at Quarry Bank.
- 1954 John discovers his mother lives only a mile away from Mendips.
- 1955 A skiffle craze hits the UK and John is one of the 10,000s of youngsters who form skiffle groups.
- 1956 John discovers rock 'n' roll and Elvis, and while playing at a local fête with his band The Quarrymen, he meets up with Paul McCartney.
- 1957 John starts at Liverpool Art College. John's Quarrymen now includes Paul's friend, George Harrison.
- 1958 In the summer John, Paul and George 'cut a disc' at a local recording studio. The next day his mother is involved in a fatal car accident.
- 1959 The group change their name from The Quarrymen to The Silver Beetles and conduct a short tour of Scotland.
- 1960 The name of John's band changes again to The Beatles. Pete Best joins on drums as they embark on a 12-week engagement at the Indra club in Hamburg.
- 1961 Brian Epstein visits The Cavern Club where The Beatles had become the club's resident band and offers to be their manager.
- 1962 Brian secures a recording contract with Parlophone Records for the band. John marries Cynthia. Ringo Starr joins The Beatles as Pete Best is sacked weeks before the release of the group's first single 'Love Me Do'.
- 1963 The second and third release of The Beatles' singles, 'Please Please Me' and 'She Loves You', ignites the beginning of Beatlemania. John's son Julian is born.
- 1964 The Beatles arrive in New York for *The Ed Sullivan Show* and a TV

audience of 73 million. The same year sees the cinema release of the group's film *A Hard Day's Night*.

- 1965 John's confessional song 'Help!' becomes the title for the band's next feature film of the same name. The Beatles become heavy users of marijuana and begin to experiment with LSD.
- 1966 The band stop touring and The Beatles' music takes on a major sea change with their album *Revolver*, its direction being foreshadowed by its precursor, *Rubber Soul*, the previous year.
- 1967 The Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is released against the backdrop of the counterculture hippy movement and general alternative lifestyles of young people.
- 1968 The Beatles immerse themselves in Indian culture and meditation. In July of this year Brian Epstein dies due to an overdose of barbiturates. John takes a strong interest in the avant-garde and meets Yoko Ono. The band produce a double album commonly known as the *White Album*.
- 1969 The personal and musical differences in the band along with complex financial issues means that the last two Beatles albums come out in reverse order, the last album *Abbey Road* appearing before the previously recorded *Let it Be*. John marries Yoko and uses his honeymoon as a vehicle to promote his new-found support for world peace.
- 1970 John continues to go his separate way from The Beatles socially and musically, committing himself more to Yoko and his solo efforts. On 31 December, Paul applies to the High Court for the dissolution of The Beatles.
- 1980 John shot dead outside the Dakota building in New York.

Introduction

JOHN LENNON was one of the most radical and controversial musical icons of the 1960s. Even forty years after his death, he still remains celebrated around the world as a figure of musical genius, and one of deep contradictions. Despite his global fame, John's 'real identity' has been notoriously difficult to pin down. His famously challenging and confrontational attitude can be readily linked, however, to his formative years in his hometown of Liverpool. John's life began, and tragically ended, in two different port cities – Liverpool and New York – each facing each other across the Atlantic Ocean, each on the edge of their own countries, ports whose histories were defined by the contradictory cultural norms of their home country – edgy cities, sister cities, bonded together by a transatlantic trade route and an Irish diaspora.

As a child, John's mind seems to have been a fog of confusion, 'rejected' by both parents and forced to accept life under an aunt who was, by all accounts, a dictatorial head of household. This left him isolated and constrained. For the young John, the restrictive and critical atmosphere during his time being brought up at his aunt's home, Mendips, fashioned emotional scars that never fully healed. From almost the time of his separation from his mother Julia, John began to develop defensive, hostile and aggressive behaviours. Even with the long-awaited success of The Beatles, he still couldn't shake off the dread of being unloved that he had carried with him since his early years. Although he was known to wear his emotions on his sleeve, shown with brutal transparency in songs such as 'Help!' and 'Nowhere Man', to a large extent his childhood memories were so painful that most of the bruises remained on the inside. He may have remained forever hostage to his childhood, but it was during this time that the young John learned to use his talent as a barrier against the intermittent periods of despondency.

It was at Mendips that the apprenticeship of his creativity was to be found in the self-defence mechanism of isolation, of story writing, books and poetry. This insular but creative lifestyle was to nurture his art, and later, the studio would make this creativity available to a wider audience. In many ways, John fits neatly into the stereotype of the tortured artist. As John himself declared:

All art is pain expressing itself. I think all life is, everything we do, but particularly artists – that's why they're always vilified. They're always persecuted because they show pain, they can't help it. They express it in art and the way they live, and people don't like to see that reality that they're suffering.¹

As a musician and artist, he displayed a fierce independence and marched to the beat of his own drum, but at the same time he was dogged by insecurity, pessimism and depression. For all his musical and artistic success, John was forever haunted by fears, living most of his life shadowed by doubt. On meeting John, Stuart Sutcliffe's sister Pauline was to comment that 'John's whole history speaks to a desperate kind of nurturing'.²

As a teenager, John's character and musical creativity were strongly influenced by his attempts to gain access to and acceptance in a culture of rock 'n' roll. For John, this culture was to be found in a largely blue-collar teenage population in Liverpool's inner city. He was determined to shed a background in the leafy boulevards and manicured parks of Woolton by adopting a smokescreen of rebelliousness, sarcastic wit and belligerence. He desperately needed to have a grounding to support his vulnerable self-esteem. It was in rock 'n' roll that he found an identity which was to be crucial and life-saving. John's life support of music and writing was also to be supplemented by the cultural impact of the city and port of Liverpool. John desperately needed and wanted the raucousness, spontaneous humour and vibrancy that could be found in Liverpool's blue-collar life.

As a teenager, his early trips into inner-city Liverpool found John intrigued and in awe of the locals with their sharpness, wit and streetwise dialogue. He adopted a Scouse accent, which came into conflict with John's surrogate mother from the age of five, Aunt Mimi, and the conditioning of John towards King, Country, Empire and the linguistic fabric

of these in the shape of 'BBC English'. John's conservative upbringing by his aunt left him ill-equipped for validation within the local rock 'n' roll community, and to win acceptance by his peers he proceeded to adopt an exaggerated toughness that he never fully abandoned.

Liverpool has always had a deep-seated historical Celtic connection – the city sits with its back to mainland Britain, looking out instead to the Atlantic Ocean, so much so that the Mersey was viewed as an inland river of the Irish Sea. This, combined with its sense of otherness and the outlook of defiance that existed in Liverpool's inner-city population's irreverence to status, bolshiness and verbal gymnastics, fitted John like a glove. His search for rebellion was nurtured by his embrace of Liverpool's Irish influence and the dynamic effect of the city's seafarer culture via the movement of ideas across oceans. 'We came from Liverpool,' John declared, 'and reflected our past.'³

As The Beatles were catapulted into worldwide fame, John increasingly found himself battling a deep-rooted range of emotional and psychological issues. The greater The Beatles grew into a global phenomenon, the greater John's uncertainties about his own talent and the greater his abrasiveness and volatility. Perhaps it was just a coincidence on the part of the film's screenwriter, or insight into John's belligerence, that while in *Yellow Submarine* the character of Ringo is presented as a typical local Liverpool lad, George as an Indian mystic aficionado and Paul as a self-assured music hall performer, John is introduced as Frankenstein's monster! *Understanding John Lennon* traces the restrictive conformity of John's Aunt Mimi's narrow-mindedness and its clashes with John's pathological aversion to authority. It examines his inner turmoil and salvation through art, as well as the complexity of values found in his childhood that would aggravate him and hurl him towards inhabiting a self-contradictory persona. John's life is too often airbrushed. Some accounts have been distorted with a view to making the Lennon 'story' acceptable to the reader, presenting a saintly, refined version of John at which he would have balked.

Understanding John Lennon challenges the 'Beatle version' of John that has become mainstream.

An obvious example of these contradictory, standard versions of the John Lennon Story is in John's place of birth: Liverpool. Outside The Cavern Club in Mathew Street, where The Beatles played 292 times,

is a life-size bronze statue of John, resplendent in his heavy leather boots, standing with one foot hooked behind the other, leather trousers, leather jacket and ... a Beatle haircut. Fine, except that the Beatle haircut is normally associated with the Pierre Cardin 'bum freezer', 'Beatle suits' and tens of thousands of screaming fans: not leather, definitely not leather. But when this statue was first unveiled, it had a DA Teddy Boy slicked-back hairstyle – just like The Beatles had when they played Hamburg, when they wore leather suits. Those responsible for the statue's commission, upon viewing this accurate depiction of Lennon at a particular time in his development, decided that this wasn't what they wanted. History was rewritten, and, despite the statue being modelled on a photograph taken in Hamburg, which was later to become the cover for John's 1974 *Rock 'n' Roll* album, the 'greaser' look head was removed and replaced by the more familiar 'mop top' image.

This book is a challenge to such obvious historical rewrites. As the only writer on John Lennon to have spent all his life in Liverpool, I am uniquely placed to challenge orthodox versions of the 'Lennon Story'. *Understanding John Lennon* presents a journey into the confusion and pain that lay behind one of popular music's most researched – yet most misunderstood – geniuses. What follows is how John Lennon came to be *John Lennon, musical genius*. And it all starts in Liverpool.

chapter I

1800s

City of Outsiders

JOHN LENNON was born in 1940 in wartime Liverpool. His music, his persona and his beliefs were formed through the varying influences of his home city and its port, people and culture. The city represents the single most powerful influence on John's life. Indeed, after the break-up of The Beatles, having moved to New York's Dakota building, John still kept a sea trunk inscribed with 'Liverpool', which was full of mementos from his city of birth. His feelings for Liverpool were often ambiguous and, at certain periods of his career, the city's deep-seated blue-collar ethos became an obstacle and a source of friction to his later musical success. Nevertheless, Liverpool was passionately championed by its favourite son.

It is only by coming to understand the impact of his home city on John, the place in which his (paternal) Lennon and (maternal) Stanley families were born and nurtured, that it becomes possible to gain a valuable appreciation of one of the 20th century's greatest musical talents. The thread of passion for Liverpool's culture, music and people would run throughout John's life. He came to love the edginess of a seaport with a workforce more comfortable in Barranquilla, Boston and Buenos Aires than Bolton, Bury or Blackburn. In some ways, though, the influence of the city could be a double-edged sword. Much of his personality and strength came from his affinity with Liverpool's Irish culture. The most obvious characteristics of this culture that John