

Wednesday, 7 August 1957 The Cavern Club Mathew Street Liverpool

The Cavern Club had only been open since 16 January, but it didn't feel new or look new. It looked like a dungeon.

Down a dark flight of eighteen concrete stairs into a sweltering, brick catacomb beneath the street, the club waited, musty and oppressive. The atmosphere was part water, part air, part ammonia, and part perspiration. John struggled to breathe beneath the low barrel vault ceilings; humidity conspired with pre-performance "jitters" to make respiration a chore.

Although he managed an unruffled façade, John was ill at ease with the posh clientele, the jazz crowd. He knew what they expected: smooth Ken Colyer or Chris Barber tunes. They expected a band like The Coney Island Skiffle Group who dipped into skiffle for a lark, but were schooled musicians. They expected a combo whose kits contained sheet music and a variety of specialty plectrums.

John snorted derisively; he was lucky to even *own a guitar!*

Braceleted princesses smiled at him as he helped drag Colin's inexpensive drums into the place; John glared in return, hoping to set the record straight before the set ever began. He had no business being here, and he knew it.

Damn Nigel to fuggin'ell! He swore. Nigel had forced him into a corner; he'd *made* him do this. Rarely, almost never, did John ever do anything he didn't want to do. Now his face burned with paranoia.

"So, this's The Cavern Club, then." Pete Shotton set his washboard and the tea chest bass in place and tried to put John at ease.

"Yeah, what's a nice group like us doin' in a place like this?" John hitched his guitar strap up over his head and around his neck. He frowned.

"Y'know, that McCartney's really missin' it all." Pete scanned the room, fascinated with the City Centre atmosphere. "Scout camp's nothin' like this, I'm thinkin'."

"I'm thinkin' we've finally gone legit!" Rod Davis smiled as he tuned his banjo. "I mean, *The Cavern Club*, lads! Look at it...The Cavern Club! Just take it all in – the atmosphere, the number of people in this room!"

John's stomach did flip-flops. He looked away from the crowd and strummed a few strings, hoping Rod's tuning job had held during the bus ride into town.

The long and narrow center vault room was packed with chairs, shoulder-to-shoulder and front-to-back, with rows upon rows of patrons waiting for the show to begin. The painted, black brick walls – wet and dripping – compressed towards one focal point: the low, primitive, wooden stage front and center.

Onto this platform, Sytner now stepped. He issued the usual greeting, made some announcements of upcoming events, and then cleared his throat for the big moment.

"In keeping with our tradition of Wednesday Evening Skiffle here at The Cavern, we have with us tonight several talented area groups. They are The Demon Five, the Deltones, Ron McKay...and the gentlemen you see on stage with me right now. So first off, I'd like to introduce to you this combo from Woolton, as it were, who's performed locally with the George Edwards Band at the Woolton Garden Fête, with the Merseysippi Jazz Band at the Roseberry Street Carnival, and most recently, at the Allerton Golf Club. Without further ado, I give you Liverpool's own, Quarry Men."

Polite applause rose in the cloud of expensive cigarette smoke.

This'll be one dead audience, John sulked, hurling Nigel a dagger of a look. Awkwardly, he chewed his gum, tapped his foot, and then began the intro to "Come Go with Me."

When a high-pitched, feminine laugh punctuated the first chorus, John actually blushed. He glared at Nigel again and sang less confidently.

But the laughter wasn't directed at the band. In fact, no one really noticed The Quarry Men. The borderline skiffle-rock'n'roll tune filtered through the room without opposition. Many in the crowd had lapsed into their own conversations, concentrating on ventures and deals rather than the evening's performance. The Cavern clientele were relaxing, talking, and making connections. They were preoccupied.

But when John began "Hound Dog," faces turned. Babble trailed off into silence. Alan Sytner straightened to attention.

And when John followed the initial insult with "Blue Suede Shoes," Sytner stared incredulously at the tiny platform stage. Waitresses paused with soft drink trays still elevated; coat check clerks stood slack-jawed. Everyone froze.

What was happening now was strictly taboo. It was rock'n'roll. Up on stage, in the heart of straight-laced Liverpool, some upstart boy with a rakish drake was belting out Elvis Presley. It couldn't have been more inappropriate.

Sytner grabbed a scrap of paper from behind the bar and scribbled out a terse but demonstrative note. "Cut out the bloody rock!" it read, and he sent it to the stage by the closest available lackey. At the song's end, he watched the lead singer receive and read the mandate, throw him a look, and then fold the note, placing it slowly into his pants pocket.

Sytner relaxed and breathed a bit easier now, feeling sure he had allayed disaster. He could just imagine what the National Jazz Union would have to say to him if they heard about the incident. Although Sytner was, on paper, the owner and manager of the club, the purist Jazz Union presided over its operation. It was a union that tolerated no nonsense and sanctioned no rock'n'roll.

But no matter, Alan sighed, no harm's been done. It was obviously just an honest mistake. We're all in accord now.

On stage, Rod Davis wasn't as optimistic. He saw, close-up, the way John looked at Sytner, and it worried him. Rod scanned the faces in the audience, and that worried him, too.

"We shouldn't be playin' rock'n'roll," Rod mumbled, just loud enough for John to hear. "Not here. We agreed."

John ignored him and popped a fresh piece of chewing gum into his mouth. Rod took a step closer, forcing himself to say it one more time. "We shouldn't be playin' rock'n'roll on The Cavern stage. It's *skiffle* they're after and...well...we're here to entertain *them* not ourselves, as it were."

John raised his head inch-by-inch the way dragons or hydras do in epic movies. If he could have breathed fire or turned bodies into stone, he would've done so at that very moment; he would've worked his worst. Instead, he focused on Rod with a lethal glare, daring his opponent to meet his eyes.

But Rod was far too savvy to glance John's way; he'd seen enough adventure films to know the score. He knew he stood unguarded and alone – without a talisman or magic potion to protect him, facing a terrible danger. Rod stared intently at the floor.

"Rock Around the Clock," John imagined himself announcing, in a raspy, unnatural voice. And his band, without further hesitation, would follow him into "Rock Around the Clock."

But John was seventeen, not twenty-seven. He was only a boy enrolled at Quarry Bank Grammar who rode a Raleigh Lenton wherever he wanted to go. He was too young and too inexperienced to stage a revolution in City Centre, a mere eighteen steps below the heart of the business district.

"Red fuggin' River Boogie," John spat out hoarsely, with invective. And much against his will, the unhappy song began.

But although John had acquiesced, he swore that The Cavern Club in Mathew had seen the last of him and his. John vowed that he and The Quarry Men would never return this awful place...not until jazz was shelved and rock'n'roll was all they played.

Notes:

Was Rod Davis really present at the gig or not? And who, exactly, performed with The Quarry Men? No one has "the answer."

Some sources state that Rod Davis was not at the Cavern on this particular evening, but was on holiday with his parents in France. Alan Porter states, "John was itching to play rock 'n' roll. Something, according to [Rod] Davis that he'd tried to do on previous occasions and been prevented by arguments from the banjo player [Rod]. However, on this occasion The Quarry Men were without Rod as he was on a family vacation in France."

However, Mark Lewisohn's highly-respected, The Complete Beatles Chronicle and Hunter Davies's The Beatles accounts in this chapter do not exclude Rod from the evening. And in Hunter Davies' book, Rod Davis is quoted as saying that the groups who appeared with them that evening were: The Deltones, Ron McKay's skiffle group, and The Demon Five. If Rod were not present at this gig, then how would he be qualified to state who performed? (Barry Miles, however, says that the other groups in The Cavern on that evening were The Deltones, Ron McKay's skiffle group, and The Dark Town Skiffle Group.)

My interview with Cavern Compère, Bob Wooler, (March 1996) was a great source for this chapter and for all others involving The Cavern Club. Bob was not only a Cavern compère and expert, but a true gentleman, beloved by everyone in Liverpool.

Pete Frame's Rock Trees was also invaluable. It is out of print now, but if you're interested in the history of the Mersey Beat groups, it is well worth locating and adding to your library.

Sources:

Lewisohn, Mark, The Complete Beatles Chronicles, 15.

Coleman, Ray, Lennon, 59-60.

Salewicz, Chris, McCartney, 45.

Shotton, Pete, John Lennon: In My Life, 55-56.

Harry, The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia, 139, 539-540, 184, 276, and 606-607.

Davies, Hunter, The Quarrymen, 60, 68.

Miles, Barry, The Beatles' Dairy, Vol. 1, 11.

Robertson, Lennon, 8.

Porter, Alan, Before They Were The Beatles: The Early Years, 57-58.

At the time that Shoulda Been There went to press, Mark Lewisohn's Tune In had not yet been released, nor had Philip Norman's John Lennon: The Life, Tim Riley's Lennon, or Ray Connolly's Being John Lennon: A Restless Life. That is why these respected works are not cited. My plan is to rework Shoulda Been There and correct any inaccuracies/shortcomings that have been revealed by later research from my colleagues.