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Meet the Quarrymen

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By **Peter Jones**

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The outskirts of rock and roll history are a strange place to live. Just ask Rod Davis, a founding member of the Quarrymen, an amateur high school combo that evolved into a little band called the Beatles.

"The funny thing is people know more about us than we know about us," Davis said of the fans who have often challenged him with their arcane queries and nuggets of Beatles-related trivia.

The banjo player is quick to remind inquisitors that the 1950s Quarrymen were a mildly competent schoolboy skiffle and rock 'n' roll group. Documenting or even endeavoring to remember its history would have made as much sense at the time as taking notes on what happened in Sunday school.

Later during the height of Beatlemania — as apocryphal stories of the early group began to spread — Davis realized he had effectively become a bit player in a legend, or a sort of witness to rock music history.

"I was absolutely delighted that my old band mates had made a big success of it against incredible odds." Davis said of the Beatles' widespread popularity. "But I wasn't floored by it."

Founded by John Lennon in 1956, the Quarrymen's membership would eventually include Paul McCartney and George Harrison, among a revolving door of other Liverpool teens who worked the local quarry of parties and high school dances.

The band's surviving membership — minus its most famous alumni — reunited as a quintet in the 1990s. Now a trio, the Quarrymen are still entertaining audiences and reminding Beatles fans that their days with the group were as fleeting as most of their other schoolboy memories.

"Some years ago, we did a Beatles convention in Holland," Davis said. "They said, we have a big surprise for you. We have a Quarrymen quiz and you're the judges. We had to joke and laugh our way out of it. I don't think the hosts appreciated it."

In honor of what would have been Lennon's 70th birthday, the Quarrymen are embarking on a tour that will stop Sept. 28 at the Boulder Theater in Boulder. The band will also conduct a question-and-answer session after a preview screening of the highly anticipated "Nowhere Boy," a new film portraying Lennon's teenage years.

"It's a great picture of Liverpool," Davis, 68, said of the movie. "No one was there taking notes so inevitably it's an artistic interpretation. I think it's very well done. But the people who are playing the Quarrymen are far too good. They play much better than we did."



The Quarrymen, from left, Colin Hanton, Rod Davis and Len Garry, play the Boulder Theater on Sept 28. Courtesy photo Frank Rooney

The Quarrymen's "Happy Birthday, John" tour will culminate in Lennon's adopted hometown of New York City on Oct. 9, the anniversary of Lennon's birth. The band will headline an all-star tribute to their former leader.

The gala will be a long way from the Quarrymen's working-class roots playing washboards and a homemade tea-chest bass in a backyard air-raid shelter. In 1956, the group specialized in skiffle, a British reinterpretation of American folk music that preceded rock and roll.

"What skiffle did was get youngsters playing guitars, instead of standing behind a bandstand reading dots," Davis said. "All you had to do was play three chords. When rock and roll came out, the same three chords worked. Let's face it — rock and roll was a lot sexier than skiffle."

The Quarrymen — a sardonic reference to Quarry Bank High School, the band's alma mater — abruptly switched to rock once Lennon heard the likes of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Although skiffle was tolerated in the local jazz clubs, rock 'n' roll's anti-intellectual sex drive was not. To pass muster at the Cavern, which was still a jazz venue in 1957, the Quarrymen slowly, but not-so-subtly integrated rock 'n' roll into their accepted skiffle repertoire.

Lennon slyly promoted the controversial new rock songs as blues numbers — or for example, introduced Little Richard's raucous "Long Tall Sally" as a traditional song from the legendary black folk singer Leadbelly.

"Skiffle was considered to be part of jazz, whereas rock and roll was a totally alien monster," Davis said. "The management aren't going to be terribly happy if you drive a double-decker bus sideways through their music policy."

Davis was not thrilled with the raucous bus ride, either. The 15-year-old banjo player found himself to be the band's third wheel as the Quarrymen quickly moved from "Rock Island Line" to "Rock and Roll Music."

The Quarrymen's fate was sealed when a mutual friend introduced Lennon to McCartney during a break in a gig at a church fete on July 6, 1957. Within days, McCartney was in the band and moving it even more solidly in a rock and roll direction.

McCartney's audition for the Quarrymen was brief and unofficial. As legend has it, Lennon was impressed that McCartney could play guitar and sing all of the lyrics to Eddie Cochran's "Twenty Flight Rock."

"We always had problems finding the words of songs so John was delighted to find somebody who knew lots of words," Davis recalled.

The band's newest arrival inevitably meant a diminished role for Davis. He gradually quit the Quarrymen and began fine-tuning his folk credentials. Davis spent much of the next decade playing in bluegrass groups.

Ironically, the banjoist has no recollection of seeing McCartney at all on the fateful day the Lennon-McCartney songwriting team was born. Davis's best guess is that he had run home to his parents' house for dinner during the historic meeting.

"It's a bit embarrassing," Davis laughed. "People have been asking us for years what really happened and I can't contribute anything. For a laugh, I say I must have gone to the bathroom during the most important moment in rock and roll history."

Harrison would become a Quarryman in 1958. Ringo Starr became the last official Beatle to join the group in 1962 on the eve of its international success.

The rest, of course, is history — and Davis says he has not spent a moment wondering about the "what ifs" of having stayed in the band.

"I wasn't jealous. I was having fun in my own little way," he said.

Davis last saw Lennon in Liverpool 1961. The frequent windsurfer briefly ran into McCartney on a Brighton, England beach in 2005.

The only known recordings of the 1950s-era Quarrymen were discovered in a former member's house more than a quarter century after they were made. The two songs were released in 1995 on "The Beatles Anthology" collection.

Since regrouping in the mid-1990s, the new Quarrymen have released several CDs of new and old material, including songs that the original band performed in the 1950s.

"We play largely like we did in those days," Davis said. "Until last year or so, we played no guitar solos at all, whereas now I play a few primitive solos to please myself. We invite fans of the British invasion to come out and see our show, but I don't think three guys going on 70 years of age are going to be much of an invasion."

If you go

The Quarrymen will perform Sept. 28 at the Boulder Theater in conjunction with a preview screening of "Nowhere Boy." Band members will also conduct a Q-and-A after the film.

General admission tickets are \$30. VIP tickets including a meet-and-greet with band are \$75. Visit denverfilm.org or call 303-595-3456.

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