

# BLAME IT ON THE BEATLES

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...and Bill Shankly

John Winter



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# One

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## LIVERPOOL – 1960

I suppose you could just blame it on The Beatles. But, to be fair, Bill Shankly probably had quite a lot to answer for as well.

The thing is, we all thought it was normal. We were young. In our mid-teens when it all started. And when you're that age you don't think too much about what's happening around you. In the places where you hang out. You don't know any different. What happens is what happens. And it's normal. You think that's just the way things are.

Only it wasn't normal. It wasn't anywhere near normal. For a fairly ordinary city like Liverpool it was about as far from normal as it could possibly be.

But, as I say, at the time we all thought it was normal.

And we thought they were normal as well.

Well, no, we didn't actually. In fact, we thought at first they were from Germany. It wasn't that long after the war, but for us teenagers the war was like ancient history even though there were still loads of derelict bomb sites all over the city. In Liverpool we didn't get to see many people from Germany. So that made them a bit unusual.

But the sound they made, and the way they looked. All dressed in well-worn, black leather. That was something else. It's difficult now to describe the way it felt, watching them, listening to them. That first time.

It was Litherland Town Hall in 1960. A few miles north of Liverpool city centre. The day after Christmas. There were three well-known Liverpool bands on the bill that night. The German band were a last minute booking and we'd never heard of them. On the poster outside the hall, advertising The Del

Renas, The Deltones, and The Searchers, someone had added, in a big, black, hand-written scrawl, *'Direct from Hamburg – The Beatles'*.



The opening line of *'Long Tall Sally'* hit us like a thunderbolt as one of the guitarists screamed the words into his microphone and hurled them out across the dance floor. It was electric. The hairs on the back of our necks stood on end. We'd gone out for some fun and a bit of a dance and then, all of a sudden, nobody was dancing. We stood there, heads turned towards the stage, mesmerised by the sound, and by the look, of the leather-clad figures. This was different. This was exciting. It was just a shame that they were from Germany so we'd almost certainly never see them again. Don't get me wrong. Some of our local bands were good, but these lads from Germany were like some sort of primeval force coming at you.

There was a loud roar as the song came to an end. The singer waved to the cheering crowd.

"Thanks for that. It's great to be playing fer yer all tonight."

One of the girls I was with turned to me.

"Jesus Christ. You'd almost think 'e was from round 'ere the way 'e speaks."

Before I could reply she was gone, heading towards the stage.

Just under an hour later, as they ended their set, the whole place erupted. I was cheering along with everyone else and most of the girls were, by now, packed together in a tight, little scrum, pushing to get as close as possible to their new idols.

Over the noise I could just about hear one of the guitarists, shouting into his mike.

"Ta very much. You've bin great. We'll be back 'ere soon. See yer then."

With that they started packing up their gear, and we all settled down to enjoy the rest of the evening. We never guessed for one moment that we had just witnessed something very special. Something that was going to change almost everything.

All we knew was that after hearing that German band we were on a real high.

And to make it even better, Liverpool Football Club had beaten Rotherham United at Anfield that same afternoon.

We'd not long got a new manager, you see. Bill Shankly his name was. A dour, but canny, Scotsman who'd previously been in charge of a team called Huddersfield Town over in West Yorkshire. There was something special about him. Everyone was saying he was a bit of a renegade. Once he'd got the job he refused to take a blind bit of notice of the directors at the club, who'd been picking the team each week, saying they didn't know the first thing about football. And he was right. They didn't. With a bit of luck, he'd shake the place up a bit.

It definitely needed shaking up. Seven years it was since we'd been relegated from Division One. Seven years. You probably can't understand what that felt like. The thing is football really matters in Liverpool. It's sort of like a religion. And Everton, the other football club in the city, were riding high. That really hurt, I can tell you.

We'd been close to promotion a couple of times, only for our hopes to be dashed. Sometimes it felt like we'd be down there, trapped in the misery of Division Two, forever.

But not that evening. As we left Litherland Town Hall, what with the music and the football, we were buzzing. It didn't last long though. Next day Liverpool went to Rotherham, the team they'd just beaten at Anfield, and lost. Down to third place. Out of the promotion race again.

So there we were. Living in a city that had been half-destroyed by German bombs. Supporting a football team that seemed to be going nowhere. And listening to a band who'd

come over from the country which, not that long ago, had been doing its best to beat the hell out of us.

Was that normal? I've no idea. I'm just telling you what happened.

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