

## LIVERPOOL - 1961

### A Gretsch Duo Jet

The young lad who stood outside the front door couldn't have been any more than seventeen or eighteen. He was slim with a slightly pale face. The leather jacket which he was wearing over a black T-shirt had seen plenty of use. His pale-blue jeans were faded and well-worn, like his black boots.

The man who'd just answered the door bell was a little older. But no more than twenty-four or twenty-five. As he looked his visitor up and down he couldn't help noticing his eyes. They were a strikingly deep brown. Almost hypnotic. They suggested an underlying seriousness which didn't quite fit in with his otherwise youthful appearance.

The visitor spoke. And his voice was unusual too. His accent could only be Liverpool. And yet at the same time it wasn't. It was slower. More reserved. Peaceable. Confident. It was the voice of a thinker. Someone who was a little different. Special even.

But he possibly didn't quite know it yet.

"Sorry for disturbin' you," he said. "I've been told there's a taxi-driver called Ivan lives here. And a lad I know who plays with a group called the Delcardoes says this Ivan's got an electric guitar from America."

Ivan nodded his head. "That's me."

The young man held out a hand in greeting. "I'm George. George Harrison. From Speke. Upton Green." He hesitated for a moment. "The lad I spoke to from the Delcardoes said you might be thinking of sellin' it."

"I might," said Ivan. "But only at the right price." He gave George a smile as he shook his outstretched hand. "I'm in need of a bit of cash. So if you're interested you'd best come in and take a look at it."

George followed Ivan into the front living room. It was sparsely furnished with a couple of prints of the Liverpool waterfront hanging on the walls. But George didn't notice them. All he saw was the guitar. Propped up against the back of a small settee, it was beautiful. Beyond his wildest dreams. Unlike the settee it looked almost brand new. Brightly-polished and deep-black, with a pair of silver pick-ups and a solid-looking, Bigsby tremolo unit, the body was neatly edged in white. Etched on the small, white scratch-guard he could see the magical name '*GRETSCH*'.

Thanks to post-war import restrictions American guitars were almost impossible to find in Britain, especially outside London. It was exactly what he'd been looking for. George knew at once. He had to have it.

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Before leaving home he had stuffed seventy grubby and well-used pound notes into the inside pocket of his jacket. He'd been saving them up for this moment from the increasing amount of cash which he and his group had been making in Liverpool. Until they went over to Hamburg they'd been struggling to get bookings but countless hours of performing for noisy and demanding audiences of sailors and students, hookers and drug-dealers at seedy clubs in the red-light district of the German port city had transformed them. It had changed them from relatively immature and inexperienced teenagers, whose musical skills were little better than average, into the tightest rock 'n' roll outfit on Merseyside. Since their return from Germany the gigs at various clubs and dance-halls around the city had been coming in much more regularly.

But would seventy pounds be enough? It was a Gretsch Duo Jet. There certainly wouldn't be another in Liverpool. Maybe not even in the whole of England.

Ivan picked the guitar up from the settee.

“You can give it a try if you like. But you might want to give your hands a quick wash first.”

George looked down. His palms and fingernails were indeed somewhat grimy.

“Sorry. I’ve been sortin’ out a few plants. In our front garden. It’s one of the things I enjoy. Being outside on my own. It helps me relax. Gives me time to think.”

“The kitchen’s next door,” said Ivan. “There should be a bar of Lifebuoy in the saucer by the window. And a little scrubbing brush. Make yourself at home.”

George returned a few moments later. His hands and nails were clean and dry.

Ivan handed him the Gretsch. “You play the guitar, then, do you?”

George nodded. “Yeah. A bit.”

Slipping the strap over his head he let his shoulder take the weight of the instrument while he ran his left hand up and down the neck, pressing the individual strings with his fingers to see how easy it would be to play. The electric guitar he’d taken with him to Hamburg, and which he was still using, was similar to a U.S. Fender Stratocaster. Made by a British company based in Kent it wasn’t bad. But George knew straightaway that if he could get hold of the Gretsch it would transform his playing. The action, the ease with which the strings could be pressed down against the metal frets on the neck, was in a different league.

Ivan watched him.

“What have you got at the moment?”

“A Futurama,” replied George without much enthusiasm. “It’s okay. But it’s time I got myself something better.”

“Well,” said Ivan, “I’ve really enjoyed playing this Gretsch. It’s a bit special. I’ll be sad to see it go.”

George took his hands off the strings for a moment and looked at Ivan.

"How long have you had it? You don't see many American guitars here in England."

"I used to know Tommy Steele," said Ivan, matter-of-factly. "Before he started making records and hit the big time. Tommy Hicks he was back then. We were shipmates on the Mauretania and it was him that gave me the idea of buying it. He'd got himself a guitar from Manny's Music Store on 48<sup>th</sup> Street when we were ashore in New York. Can't remember what sort it was but it wasn't that expensive."

Ivan stopped for a moment to think. Then he shook his head.

"No. It's gone. Tommy told me he'd have quite liked a Gretsch. But he didn't have much in the way of spare cash back then. It's a Hofner President he plays now. Very smart. Good mates we were but I've lost touch with him since he hit the big time. It was Tommy getting his guitar that got me thinking about buying one for myself. Back in the fifties you couldn't get hold of top-quality American guitars like this one in England. You still can't really."

As Ivan was speaking George had started once again to run his fingers up and down the strings and gaze at the highly-polished, dark-black body of the guitar. It looked and felt so good.

"If you've got a plec with you," said Ivan, "I'll go get my amp and we can plug it in. If you're going to buy it you'll want to know how it sounds."

George slowly nodded his head a few times and pulled a mottled-brown plectrum from the side pocket of his jeans.

"That'd be good," he said quietly.

His mind was elsewhere. He could already see himself on stage with the Gretsch. It would be another small step on the road to success. The long nights in Hamburg, high on Prellies and alcohol, had been wild. But it was exactly what they had needed. The perfect apprenticeship. And the reaction they'd been getting since they got home, particularly from the girls, told them they were now good.

But being the best on Merseyside wasn't enough. They wanted more. They needed better gear. And someone with contacts. Someone who could take them to the next level.

George was still lost in his thoughts when Ivan returned with the amplifier and took the guitar from him.

"I'll play you a quick tune to warm it up," he said. "Then you can have a go."

George watched as Ivan plugged the Gretsch into the amplifier. Then, after adjusting the volume and tone controls on the guitar, he ran through a slightly-shortened version of Duane Eddy's recent hit '*Because They're Young*'.

George smiled to himself as the familiar, twanging melody filled the small room. Ivan was good. His fingers moved easily and quickly over the strings.

The Gretsch looked amazing. And the way it sounded was brilliant.

When it came to George's turn he sat on the arm of the settee and began to play an instrumental number he'd written a few months earlier.

"Nice," said Ivan as the tune came to an end. "I don't know that one."

"It's one of ours," said George. "'*Cry For A Shadow*'. I wrote it with one of the other lads in the group. John Lennon. He's on rhythm guitar mostly. We did a demo of it in a small studio run by a chap called Percy Phillips on Kensington a little while back."

"And this group of yours. What do you call yourselves?"

"We've had a few names since we started. When John first got together with a some of his pals from school they called themselves the Quarrymen. After the name of their school. Quarry Bank over in Woolton. The lads who went there were called Quarrymen in the school song. Then John asked a lad I already knew called Paul to join them. It was Paul who told John I was quite good on the guitar and got me into the group. Up 'til then I'd been playing on and off with various different people. After that, when a couple of John's schoolmates got fed up and said they were leaving, we changed our name to 'The Silver Beetles'."

George smiled to himself.

“John says he got the name from a man who came up to him with a flaming pie. But that’s just him. Playin’ around with words and being daft. I reckon he got it from Buddy Holly’s group, ‘The Crickets’. But I don’t think he’d ever admit it. Then after a while it got changed to ‘Beatles’. Spelt with an ‘A’. Like in ‘beat music’. I can’t remember exactly who came up with that idea. It might’ve been one of the beatniks from the Art College John was livin’ with at the time. In Gambier Terrace.”

Ivan nodded his head.

“The Beatles. That’s neat. Easy to remember. The kids won’t forget it. And how long’ve you been writing music?”

“A year or two, I suppose. But John does most of the song-writing. Along with Paul. They’re both older than me so they reckon they’re better at it.”

George shrugged his shoulders and gave Ivan a slightly lop-sided grin.

“When we first got together they were both bigger than me too. They still think they are. So I don’t get much of a look-in.”

“The Gretsch might impress them.”

George smiled and held the guitar up by the neck, turning it round a couple of times and taking a good look at it as he did so.

He nodded his head in approval.

“It probably would,” he said. “I really like it. It’s dead easy to play. And it sounds great. But I’m not sure I can afford it.” He paused for a moment. “What did you mean when you said the right price?”

Ivan stopped to think.

“Well. As I say, I got it in New York. A couple of years after Tommy bought his. So that’d be about five or six years ago. We’d both left the Mauretania by then. Tommy to make his fortune as a pop singer and me back onto the regular sailings out of Liverpool. I was a Bar Steward on a Cunard ship called the Media and the tips were good. Especially from the Americans. Some of the Brits were a bit tight but the Yanks always tipped big. So I blew the lot on a guitar. That was before

all the big jets came in and started killing the Cunard ships off. People wanted to get to New York quicker.”

Ivan shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. Almost as soon as he started talking he was back on board one of the iconic, transatlantic liners.

“It's sad. I really miss that life. Over to New York and back every couple of weeks. It was brilliant. We were living the dream. We'd sail off down the Mersey leaving Liverpool behind us, all grey and grimy with its bomb sites and broken buildings. Then, just a week or so later, we'd be sailing into New York harbour and up the Hudson River to the Cunard Piers. The bright lights and the skyscrapers were right next to us. Sparkling clean and brand new. You could almost reach out and touch them. It was like 'The Wizard of Oz'. You know. At the start of the film. When Dorothy's black and white world suddenly goes all technicolour.”

George laid the Gretsch back down on the settee. He was listening, but also wondering if his seventy pounds would be enough. Ivan was lost in his memories. He still hadn't mentioned money.

“Cunard Yanks people used to call us. Everything was still rationed back here in England and we'd be swanning round Liverpool in our smart, New York suits. Turning up at places like The Grafton and The Locarno with pockets full of cash. The girls used to love us. And our families did too. We'd bring back all sorts of stuff. Things people back here had only seen in the movies. Hoovers, fridges, washing machines, spin-dryers, record players. There was plenty of room in the cargo hold, especially on the trip back to England, so we brought home as much as we could afford. And American records from jukeboxes. They got sold off cheap as soon as they dropped out of the charts over there. A lot of them never made it into the hit parade in England so everyone wanted to hear them. They were a bit special.”

George nodded his head.

“A lad I know from Southport called Ted Taylor’s got a group called the Dominoes,” he said. “‘Kingsize’ Taylor people call him because he’s such a big guy. He got hold of a few American records from a mate who was a chippie on one of the Cunard ships. Ted told me he and his group would be playing these American songs and John Lennon used to sneak in an’ write the words down.” George laughed. “Ted wasn’t happy. Up ‘til then the Dominoes were pretty much the only group in Liverpool who knew them.”

“You’d be amazed at some of the stuff which found its way here on those ships,” said Ivan. “But I was the only one who came home with a Gretsch. My mates all said I was daft spending crazy money on a guitar. But I didn’t have a wife to worry about back then. And she’s been worth every penny.” He gave George a smile. “The Gretsch, I mean. Not the wife.”

He leaned down to pick up the guitar and cradled it in his arms.

“Only joking,” he said. “The wife’s great. I’d keep both her and the guitar if I could. But, as I said, I need the cash. I left Cunard when we got married. And after all the tales I’ve told her about how much better life is over there she fancies the idea of the two of us giving it a go in America.”

He paused for a moment to think.

“It was just under three hundred I paid for it. Dollars that is. With the Bigsby and a fitted carrying case. So I wouldn’t want to let it go for less than two fifty. That’s about ninety pounds.”

George started to do some mental arithmetic. If ninety pounds was two hundred and fifty dollars, how many would his seventy pounds be? Then, after a few seconds, he realised he was wasting his time. He didn’t need to know. He had seventy pounds and that was it. Seventy was all he could afford. It was as simple as that.

He decided to be cheeky.

“How about sixty?”

Ivan shook his head.



"Sorry." He stroked the guitar affectionately. "I've looked after her well. You'd be hard pressed to find another one. No. Even if I'd like to help you out I can't give her away for sixty."

He waited to see what George would say. He liked the lad. But sixty was out of the question. The two of them sat in silence for perhaps half a minute, both thinking.

Then, quite suddenly, George decided to come clean. He pulled a tight wad of crumpled notes out of his jacket pocket and placed them on the settee beside him.

"There's seventy quid there. It's all I've got. I'd really love to have your Gretsch. But that's it. I can't give you any more."

Ivan looked at him. Then he picked up the notes and began to straighten them out. A few were torn in places and had corners missing but he'd still be able to make use of them.

Once he'd assembled them into a reasonably tidy pile he began to count. As he put the last note down he turned to George.

"Exactly as you said. Seventy pounds."

Ivan looked at the collection of notes. He'd already decided he liked the lad. There was something about him. He had a feeling that having a really good guitar might be the making of him. He wondered what the other Beatles were like. If they were anything like young George they could be a bit special.

He looked again at the notes. Then back at George.

"I'm afraid I'm sticking at ninety. I really can't go any lower."

George looked crestfallen. But Ivan had more to say.

"Having said that, though, I think you could be someone who'll make the best possible use of such a fine guitar. You know. Take care of her the way I have. So I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take the seventy. And you can sign me an I.O.U. for the other twenty. Give it me when you can. How does that sound?"

George couldn't believe his luck.

"Are you sure?"

"No," said Ivan, laughing. "I'm definitely not sure. In fact I must be daft. I only met you ten minutes ago and now I'm trusting you to turn up one day with twenty quid. That's a week and a half's wages. But I've said it now. So let's get it

sorted before I change my mind.”

On a blank scrap of paper Ivan scribbled out a receipt for seventy pounds. Then he added an I.O.U. for the balance of twenty at the bottom.

After they'd both signed it Ivan folded the paper up and put it in his pocket. As he was doing so George placed the Gretsch carefully in its custom-built, carrying case. Then, clutching his precious cargo, he headed off down the road.

They say it took a bit of time for the debt to be settled. But if Ivan still has that signed scrap of paper it must be worth many times its weight in gold.

And the Gretsch Duo Jet guitar?

George played it on many of the most iconic, early Beatles' recordings. Then he gave it away to a German friend from the early Hamburg days, Klaus Voormann, who created the cover of the group's 1966 album, 'Revolver'.

The guitar has now been returned to George's family.

And its value?

Priceless.

