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A WOMEN'S HISTORY OF THE BEATLES

Christine Feldman-Barrett

B L O O M S B U R Y

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For Marianna and Richard

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Introducing *A Women's History of the Beatles*

There is a strong female presence throughout the history of the Beatles. Even before this band from the British port city of Liverpool became THE BEATLES, it is a narrative bolstered by influential mothers, aunts, cousins, and a local contingent of devout female fans. It is the history of a musical and cultural phenomenon that still cannot be untethered from the ecstatic and joyful screams that shaped Beatlemania's soundscape. Populated by glamorous girlfriends, "controversial" wives, and the ideals and disappointments of love, it is also a story filled with songs often addressing and featuring women as distinct individuals, a diverse gallery of agentive subjects. Not least, this is a history of influence and self-actualization, with the Beatles' music and story inspiring creative and professional pursuits among their female fans. Through this narrative we see how girls and women have been active participants in one of rock music's most enduring stories—one that they have inhabited even long after the Beatles ceased to be a band. One might say this is an epic tale that is host to many *herstories*—narratives that "insist on female agency in the 'making of history.'"¹

The Beatles' emergence as a cultural phenomenon in the early 1960s also intersects with an important aspect of women's history: the move toward second-wave feminism. As a social movement that began to take shape in the band's native Britain, the Anglosphere, and much of Western Europe during this decade—becoming more pronounced by the early 1970s²—girls and young women began questioning what choices were available to them. What were the limits to their dreams, whether personal or professional? Who were their role models? What identities were available to them beyond wife and mother? While the "modern girl"—emancipated by an increasing amount of independence as both a social actor and a consumer—had been visible in many industrialized nations for most of the twentieth century,³ the 1960s seemed to offer young women new possibilities and pathways in education, leisure, relationships, creative pursuits, and professional life. Reflecting on this decade, British writer Sara Maitland once surmised that "the fifties are perceived from where we are now as the decade of femininity, the seventies as the decade of women." In considering this difference, she further pondered: "What happened in the ten years in between that changed that?"⁴

I contend that the Beatles was one of the important "things that happened" for girls and young women during the 1960s. As a cultural presence, the Liverpool band somehow managed to make this cohort more aware of themselves as individuals and

as distinct members of society. The intensity often associated with being a “Beatlemaniac” was indicative of an equally intense desire for different ways to express oneself as a girl or young woman.⁵ Initially on the vanguard of “pop music” (later “rock”), the Beatles’ sound was melodically catchy, upbeat, and lyrically inviting. The four young men who comprised the band—John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—not only appeared to be friendly and fun, but they also had their own compelling story of “making it to the top” from a “marginal” social position.⁶ As a success story, the Beatles became cross-gender role models not just for so-called Beatlemaniacs, but for any female fan who found meaning in their story. Importantly, while this is a narrative that begins at the dawn of the 1960s, it does not end with the Beatles’ breakup in 1970. The band’s impact upon women’s lives continues well into the twenty-first century.⁷ This book, therefore, aims to better understand these experiences across three generations. And, though not all women included in this history subscribe to any particular “wave” of feminism per se, continuing reverberations of the social changes affecting women and gender relations during the 1960s and 1970s cannot help but inform this account.

The Beatles’ impact on female audiences is still evident today as younger generations have continued to engage with the band’s music and story. American singer-songwriter Billie Eilish, born in 2001, remains proud that the Beatles’ “Happiness Is a Warm Gun” (1968) was the first song she ever performed in a talent show. In Liverpool, two young female journalists help keep Merseybeat history alive via interviews with Paul McCartney, Pete Best, and other notable figures on the *Beatles City* podcast. In the context of feminisms past and present, Millennial and Generation Z writers have penned articles that consider how young women today make sense of an all-male band that wrote their songs over fifty years ago.⁸ Such discoveries were confirmation not only that this women’s history project was tapping into the Zeitgeist, but that the intergenerational facet of this narrative was integral to its telling. Overall, this fresh look at a well-known story highlights the multifaceted “relationships” women have had with the Beatles and how those connections have left imprints on their lives in countless ways. For most, this relationship has been a parasocial one conducted at a distance and through mediated popular culture. However, this history also includes the Beatles’ earliest fans who met or were acquainted with the band members, alongside the family members, friends, girlfriends, and wives who knew them best.

Given this aspect of the Beatles story, it always surprised me that a dedicated women’s history of the band did not exist. Moreover, and with few exceptions, the canon of Beatles literature—indeed the band’s entire historiography—has been structured through male voices and sensibilities. Historian Erin Torkelson Weber, who exposes this point in *The Beatles and the Historians: An Analysis of Writings about the Fab Four* (2016), correctly observes that most all texts comprising the Beatles’ historiography have been written by male Baby Boomer rock journalists from Britain and the United States. She suggests that new authors and voices are needed to provide a fuller picture: “Authoritative appreciation for the Beatles’ music and their story is not and should not be restricted to male writers of a certain generation or particular profession. A diversity of authors, providing varying perspectives, is a strength that

Beatles historiography sorely lacks.”⁹ Indeed, starting with Hunter Davies’s authorized biography in 1968, the Beatles narrative has been predominantly shaped by men. This should not be surprising to anyone who has delved into the many books written about the group.¹⁰ However, this fact is reflective of a wider pattern affecting the writing of rock music history.

Musician and scholar Helen Reddington noticed the same issue of authorship and focus when examining seventies-era British punk. Her book on women musicians of that genre and scene helped to demonstrate that “history is not complete without attempts to fill in the missing parts.” And, just as her goal was to “right the misconceptions about what punk could mean to women (or, at the time, often girl) instrumentalists who were involved at its revolutionary core,” my intention is similar.¹¹ Though this history is not solely focused on women musicians who either influenced or were inspired by the Beatles, it provides a more expansive view of how the Beatles have resonated with women. Like Reddington’s, this account moves beyond stereotypical images and tropes. In the Beatles story, the “hysterical” fans and “intrusive” girlfriends or wives are just as limited and limiting as those of “the young punk women in fishnet stockings with panda-eyes, stilettos and spiky blonde hair” that Reddington repeatedly observed in punk histories.¹²

In locating the diverse, individual stories that constitute this collective narrative, the natural starting point will always be the birthplace of the Beatles, Liverpool. Imagining this time and place, we can observe the first blush of teenage freedom, as local girls independently and joyfully travel across the sweep of Merseyside to see the Beatles play. A few years later, in 1963, we meet a young Australian living in Fiji—her newfound, near-solitary Beatlemania suddenly interrupted by a greeting from Ringo Starr. In the late 1960s, we witness a Brazilian Beatles fan¹³ waiting outside London’s EMI Studios or Apple Corps headquarters almost every day. She repeatedly encounters Yoko Ono and John Lennon as they make their way to the buildings’ entrances. Despite an initial pang of jealousy, the fan’s feelings toward Ono change; their interactions are always friendly and Lennon’s romantic partner proves courteous and cordial. With new generations, the stories continue. In the mid-1980s, we witness an American girl captivated by a favorite aunt’s enthusiasm for the Beatles. Soon, she is an ardent fan herself. Behind the Iron Curtain, a nine-year-old East German randomly hears “She Loves You” and feels forever changed. When she is an adult, her profession becomes intricately enmeshed with the band’s Hamburg history. As this virtual tour through time and space circles back to Liverpool, arriving in 2014, we catch a glimpse of twin sisters from Vienna, guitar cases in hand, descending stairs into the rebuilt Cavern Club. Soon they will impress its audience with original songs and some by the band that made the venue’s name. These two musicians may have been born in 1994, thirty years after full-tilt Beatlemania, but love for and knowledge of the Beatles’ songbook, alongside their considerable talent, led them to the Cavern.

And so too has both a lifelong fascination with the Beatles and my professional identity as a youth culture historian led me to writing this book. Born in 1971, my history with the band starts with a box of sixties-era 45 rpm records given to me and my sister in the mid-seventies. Several Beatles singles—distinguished by a yellow and

orange swirl label, the design of Capitol Records—were included in this collection. Immediately enchanted by their songs, I especially loved the handclaps and chorus in “Eight Days a Week” and the hypnotic feel of “Rain.” From childhood onward, the more I learned about the Beatles, the more I still wanted to know. What would it have been like to see the Beatles perform at the Cavern? Why was Yoko blamed for breaking up the band? Had any girls become musicians because they were Beatles fans? As I immersed myself in Beatles culture, I also wanted to hear more from the female protagonists who populated their story—whether fans, friends, fellow musicians, or lovers.

A pivotal question arose in 2002 while I was spending the summer with relatives in Berlin. It was then and there that I first heard about a band called the Liverbirds. Watching a TV documentary about the history of rock music in Germany, I learned that the Beatles had inspired four Liverpool girls to form a band. Soon, the group had a musical residency in Hamburg and found success across West Germany and Europe. Despite having been well-versed in both the Beatles and 1960s culture by then—and having played in an all-girl rock band myself—I had never heard this story. It was a revelation, but I also wondered why their story was largely unknown. Though the writing of this book was inspired by a composite of various events from my own Beatles timeline, discovering the Liverbirds made me question how many more female protagonists had been either left out or underexplored within the Beatles' historiography.

In sharing this snapshot of my own Beatles history, I clearly position myself as what media scholar Henry Jenkins has described as an “aca-fan,” or an academic who researches and writes about a favorite cultural phenomenon. This identity has also been referred to as the “scholar-fan” by Simon Frith, Alexander Doty, and Matt Hills among others.¹⁴ Either moniker suggests a symbiotic relationship between personal interest and intellectual inquiry. This group of academics has spoken of potential benefits and pitfalls when inhabiting such an identity, whether embracing the “autobiographical turn” for greater insights or worrying about power imbalances between scholars and the fan communities they identify with when conducting research.¹⁵ This positionality can also prove especially problematic for the woman aca-fan. As Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis have articulated, female fans “are portrayed as the most overinvested” and, therefore, “those who come in for the most ridicule.”¹⁶ When researching and writing about the Beatles in particular, female aca-fans must challenge lingering stereotypes that a woman's interest in the band is *always already* synonymous with “feminized ‘hysterical’ affect” rather than the “intellectually mature, artistic appreciation”¹⁷ commonly (and usually unreflexively) attributed to men's engagement with the band. It is, in fact, this false binary that makes me resolute in claiming the aca-fan position—especially since a still-narrow reading of female Beatles fans is part of what this book seeks to overturn. This history also questions why women's emotional responses to the band would be perceived as “problematic” in the first place—or why such feelings supposedly negate intellectual engagement with the Beatles.

Upending such biases is what women's history has sought to do since this area of research was first developed. Its goal was to “make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative.”¹⁸ In tandem with second-wave feminism,

women's history began gaining ground in many Western countries between the late 1960s and early 1970s. The historians involved looked to uncover hidden or lost narratives that emphasized women's contributions to both domestic and public life. This area of research, now typically conflated with women's studies or gender studies and often interdisciplinary in nature, is one of recovery, reclamation, and, often, reinterpretation.¹⁹ The overarching feeling among these scholarly pioneers was that a male framing of history could never fully represent women's experiences. More often than not, women found it difficult to identify with how female actors were portrayed in the historical record.²⁰ Given such observations, and in the words of historian Gisela Bock, "the pursuit of 'restoring women to history' would also be a project about 'restoring history to women.'"²¹

That a women's history of the Beatles is *still* a novel idea today reflects the notion that rock music has long been codified as mostly a male domain. Despite their participation as rock performers, consumers, and documentarians, girls and women have not easily located forebears or narratives which mirror their own experiences. In 1978, former rock critic and sociomusicologist Simon Frith and cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie published the essay "Rock and Sexuality," which was the first well-known academic assessment of rock to identify teenage boys and men as its key producers. Girls and women had been relegated to peripheral roles or were presumed to be "pop" versus "rock" fans. While this essay has since been critiqued for not considering more nuanced positions regarding gender, it nonetheless speaks to how males and females have been historically situated within this genre and its culture.²² Similarly, in another essay that McRobbie co-authored in the 1970s, this time written with Jenny Garber, the scholars discussed how most youth subcultures were also male-centric.²³ Fundamentally, both essays depict women's supposed marginality in cultural spaces created by rock music.

Considering the Beatles' appearance on the rock music timeline, however, it is significant that this process of "masculinization" is thought to have accelerated *in the years following* the band's dissolution. While the Beatles ostensibly moved from having a "feminized" pop audience in the early 1960s to a more mixed or "masculine" rock-oriented one later that decade, the band modeled a less overtly hegemonic style of masculinity.²⁴ And, unlike many contemporaries—with the Rolling Stones a notable example—the Beatles tended to write songs that were girl- and woman-positive.²⁵ Nonetheless, lingering aspects of a masculinist ethos have influenced the position of women within rock music past and present—whether as producers, consumers, or observers. Within this discourse, and as related to the Beatles, women still sometimes confront this sensibility. In the words of one young writer, "The Beatles remain one of my favorite bands, but it is disheartening that in 2017 female interest in, and even contribution to their music is still something to be *proved* rather than assumed."²⁶

The presumed peripherality of women in rock has prompted both critique and historical reassessment. Some female popular music scholars have actively resisted this tendency to male hegemony—one which has maintained that boys' and men's involvement is earnest, authentic, and worthy of documentation, while girls' and women's engagement is frivolous, fleeting, and forgettable.²⁷ Such readings falsely

separate the experience of rock music into production and critical appreciation (male) on one hand and consumption and emotional response (female) on the other. That said, male audiences have still dominated many musical fandoms with their supposed intellectual appreciation and connoisseurship. Moreover, young men's intense allegiances to specific bands and performers—*affect* as an important part of their enjoyment—are not usually presented as problematic. While boys and men may be emotionally invested in favorite performers, it is the female audience's affective response that remains more heavily critiqued.²⁸

Given this long-standing and contested construction of rock music, it is little wonder that some scholars have sought to question the genre's history and some of its key narratives. In her essay on Elvis Presley, sociologist Sue Wise opined that feminists are likely familiar with the common occurrence of “men interpreting and encoding knowledge, in their own interests and after their own image, and then calling this an objective account of the world as it truly is.” Moreover, she contends that “what women thought then and now [about Elvis] is largely unknown because, quite simply, no one bothered to ask or even thought that our views were worth anything.”²⁹ As a corrective to this historical omission, actively including women's perspectives and experiences has been the project of texts like Gillian G. Gaar's *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll* (1992), Lucy O'Brien's *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (1996)—and its revised 2002 edition, *She Bop II*—as well as Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw's *Girls Rock!: Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (2004).³⁰ These books reflect the original objections women historians had to male-penned accounts that either marginalized or ignored women in narratives concerning public life. Mary Celeste Kearney recognizes that scholars working in this area see rock music as “another influential and historically male-dominant site where women should be treated equally—as musicians, consumers, critics, and businesspeople.”³¹ Including women's voices has also led to the inclusion of oral testimony when researching the more recent past.³² By incorporating personal accounts, “feminist scholars and their research participants are actively collaborating to achieve epistemic empowerment.”³³ Considering the ethos behind such scholarship, this approach lends itself well to re-examining the Beatles story.

So where are women's voices found within the Beatles' historiography so far? Interestingly, some of the earliest accounts of the band were written by British journalists like Maureen Cleave, June Harris, Nancy Lewis, and Dawn James.³⁴ After the Beatles' breakup, memoirs by former Beatle wives and girlfriends Cynthia Lennon (1978, 2005), May Pang (1983), and Pattie Boyd (2007), sisters Julia Baird (1988, 2007) and Pauline Sutcliffe (2001), as well as by sixties-era fans—starting with Carol Bedford's *Waiting for the Beatles: An Apple Scruffs Story* (1984)—allowed for some female perspectives to filter through an otherwise male-dominated discourse.³⁵ Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of women have written academic texts about the Beatles. Most, however, have not focused on the gendered dimensions of the group's history and legacy.³⁶ The Beatles scholarship that does foreground women's experiences often focuses on the 1960s as a period of sociocultural change. The late musicologist Sheila Whiteley (1941–2015) used gender to analyze the Beatles' music within the context

of sixties Britain. Sociologist Barbara Bradby, music scholar Jacqueline Warwick, and popular culture scholar Katie Kapurch have also focused on this era. Bradby looks at the influence of American girl groups on the Beatles, Warwick observes how women populate the lyrical narrative of the 1966 album *Revolver*, and Kapurch examines the Beatles' music and the band's female fan base through "girl culture." Notably, Kapurch extends this fandom beyond Beatlemania.³⁷

Indeed, much attention has been paid to Beatlemania per se. An oft-cited essay by Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, published in 1992, presents the girl-led fan phenomenon as an emancipatory practice foreshadowing the Women's Liberation Movement. Since Beatlemania (1963–66) was sometimes disparaged by male journalists and cultural observers, another feminist reading of it was taken up by communication scholar Susan J. Douglas in her 1994 book *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. More recently, articles by historians Julia Sneeringer (2013) and Nicolette Rohr (2017) have championed Beatlemania as a liberatory practice in the context of West Germany and the United States, respectively.³⁸ Media scholar Georgina Gregory has also written about the phenomenon, but has focused on how it established a new kind of female audience: one that coalesced around music groups later branded as "boy bands." Another perspective of the Beatles' initial popularity with young women is provided by literary scholar Jane Tompkins. In an autobiographical essay, she recounts hearing the Beatles in 1963 and considers why the band's songs allowed her to connect with popular music for the first time. Tompkins describes songs like "I Want to Hold Your Hand" as friendly, inclusive, and welcoming. In her estimation, earlier rock 'n' roll, as embodied by Elvis Presley, had been too sexual (and, therefore, intimidating), while the Beatles were instead sensual and fun-loving.³⁹

Also keeping a focus on the sixties, sociologist Candy Leonard's engaging book *Beatleness: How the Beatles and Their Fans Remade Their World* (2014) examines the differences between male and female fan experiences as she chronicles the band's career and impact. Informed by C. Wright Mills's concept of the sociological imagination, where individuals and society reflect and inform each other, her popular publication was the first widely circulated book to interview the band's fans and analyze their testimony. Moreover, she asks why Beatles writing is dominated by male voices, a question raised again in her 2014 online article "Why Are All Beatle 'Experts' Male?" Writer Kit O'Toole also broaches this topic in her 2016 essay entitled "She Said She Said: How Women Have Transformed from Fans to Authors in Beatles History." She considers how women fans have helped sustain and perpetuate Beatles culture. Both women's observations are astute and worthy of further exploration. We will revisit them in Chapter 5.⁴⁰

Interestingly, most male-authored publications produced from 2000 onward that actively include women or discuss gender have been popular publications rather than academic ones. A notable exception is Richard Mills's *The Beatles and Fandom: Sex, Death and Progressive Nostalgia* (2019). He dedicates a chapter to the female-dominated fan community found within the pages of the *Beatles Book* (1963–69), better-known and referred to hereafter as the *Beatles Monthly*—the band's official fan magazine.

Mills further supports and features female voices by including them via ethnographic extracts and interview testimony throughout the book. Significantly, his study includes commentary from younger-generation fans. These cohorts are also perceived as contributors to and creators of “progressive nostalgia”—whereby a mélange of “old” Beatles texts is combined and reworked into something new and future-oriented.⁴¹

Among popular texts, Steven D. Stark's *Meet the Beatles: A Cultural History of the Band That Shook Youth, Gender, and the World* (2005) was the first male-authored book to more overtly address the gendered dimension of the Beatles story. He dedicates a chapter to situating the Beatles within the proto-feminist milieu of the early to mid-1960s and includes interview excerpts from the era's female fans. Another chapter focuses on Beatle wives Yoko Ono and Linda McCartney.⁴² Mark Lewisohn, meanwhile, foregrounds the voices of some of the Beatles' earliest female friends, girlfriends, and fans throughout *Tune In* (2013), his detailed account of the band's pre-fame history.⁴³ Rob Sheffield brings a feminist sensibility to *Dreaming the Beatles: The Love Story of One Band and the Whole World* (2017) by not only paying more attention to women within the Beatles story, but also deftly interweaving meaningful, personal narratives with cultural history and thoughtful analysis. He utilizes his lifelong Beatles fandom to reflexively reappraise a band that, in his words, has become “the world's favorite thing.”⁴⁴ Given the many male-authored books that examine Beatles history, these authors' thoughtful recognition of women as integral players within it is noteworthy.

As this cultural history is meant to highlight women's dynamic participation within the Beatles story and legacy, it is a narrative born from an interpretation and synthesis of primary and secondary sources that foregrounds their experiences over time. Those which shape this history include the following: over sixty interviews I conducted with women who identify as Beatles fans and/or have been creatively or professionally connected to the band; further testimony from musicians, fans, and Beatles “insiders” (girlfriends, wives, sisters, and friends) via memoirs, documentaries, and published, podcast, or broadcast interviews; articles from newspapers, general readership magazines, and academic journals; and content from teen and music magazines as well as the fan-specific *Beatles Monthly*. Where relevant, autoethnographic accounts from my experience as a Beatles fan are also referenced. Finally, popular and academic books about the Beatles also inform this history. Ultimately, the narrative composed from these materials is grounded in sociohistorical scholarship that considers the changing fortunes of women as reflected in leisure practices, fandom, romantic relationships, the performance of popular music, education, and careers from 1960 onward.

For my own set of interviews, participants were found through calls circulated through both professional and personal networks, direct invitation by email, and further recommendation by initial interviewees (“snowball sampling”).⁴⁵ The women I spoke to represented three generations of engagement with the Beatles and were born between the mid-1940s and mid-1990s. Synchronous interviews were carried out in-person or by Skype, while asynchronous “e-interviews” were conducted through a questionnaire sent by email.⁴⁶ The questions were designed to prompt women to think about the history of the Beatles in their personal, professional, and creative lives. Once interview extracts were selected, I contacted all participants and asked them to review chapter

excerpts that featured their testimony. This dialogic approach, or “member checking,” helps improve the accuracy of the content while allowing researchers “to assess ... [if] findings resonate with and/or are considered reasonable by research participants.”⁴⁷ Cultural histories, as opposed to sociological studies, often refer to individuals by name. However, interview partners were able to choose how they would be identified in the text or if they preferred complete anonymity. Ongoing communication with all participants was important to me. I believe such interactions maintained the natural, friendly rapport established during the synchronous interviews or through the emails required for asynchronous ones. Throughout this process, and given our common ground as Beatles fans, I felt a genuine connection with every woman I interviewed.

It is also important to remember that historical projects focused on well-known cultural phenomena are produced as the result of both individual and collective memory. In the 1998 film *Sliding Doors*, a character named James—the love interest of protagonist Helen—jokingly refers to the familiarity of the Beatles and their music: “Everybody’s born knowing all the Beatles lyrics instinctively. They’re passed into the fetus subconsciously along with all the amniotic stuff. Fact, they should be called ‘The Fetals.’”⁴⁸ Being a Beatles fan only heightens this awareness of the band’s integration into the cultural landscape. When interviewing women about a topic as popular as the Beatles and one in which they were invested, it became clear that individual experiences and memories combine with and reflect public representations of the group. As historian Lynn Abrams contends: “Memory—both individual and collective—exists in a symbiotic relationship with the public memorialisation of the past, so we must always be aware that memory expressed in an interview exists within a field of memory work that is going on at many levels in our society.”⁴⁹ Considering the amount of media attention the Beatles and their music have received since 1963, I recognize that interviewees can never fully disentangle their private histories from those established through the Beatles’ historiography and a continued memorialization of the band. Individual memories of the Beatles are always in conversation with the collective memory of them.⁵⁰

Overall, this women’s history is written in response to a Beatles historiography produced primarily by male biographers and scholars within the English-speaking world.⁵¹ It is one which has positioned the Beatles as both a “phenomenon of the twentieth-century capitalist West” and one emanating from and reflective of the “Anglophone cultural ‘core.’”⁵² As Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis have observed of the group, “in the decades since their disbandment, [the Beatles] have continued to exert a substantial impact on the direction of Western culture.”⁵³ This history also builds upon the discourse concerning women, gender, and rock music as informed by sensibilities born of second-wave feminism, which, like the Beatles themselves, originated during the mid-twentieth century in the industrialized West.⁵⁴ In fact, two popular books that questioned gender roles and spoke openly about the challenges women faced—Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (USA, 1963) and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (UK/Australia, 1970)—bookend the Beatles’ career from the first year of Beatlemania to their breakup.⁵⁵ Thus, while this is an international account, the female voices featured here come primarily from

three English-speaking countries: Britain, the United States, and Australia. Age and generation are the other visible markers of identity throughout this women's history, though I also consider intersectionality through discussions of class, race, and sexuality.

A Women's History of the Beatles is organized topically and based on key themes within the Beatles story. In Chapter 1, "I Remember You': Stories from Merseyside," the reader is introduced to the group's Liverpool roots in order to understand how women—whether family members, friends, or fans—were influential during the band's early career. Examining the community where the Beatles soon became its biggest "stars," the agency of young women is brought into focus. We not only encounter the everyday sociality and familial feelings integral to the Merseybeat music scene but witness how the band's circle of "fan-friends" sets a precedent for how the Beatles would win over generations of female audiences. Delving into the genesis of the group's career demonstrates how the Beatles became a vehicle for young women to more fully inhabit public leisure spaces while aspiring to new adventures of their own. The chapter closes by looking at how this history has resonated with latter-day fans who have sought a connection to this time and place.

Chapter 2, "With the Beatles: A Fan History," opens in 1963 at the start of Beatlemania. This ebullient, international fandom, led by adolescent and teenage girls, is likely the most familiar association for readers turning to a "women's history" of the Beatles. In unpacking what Beatlemania meant to those involved, it becomes clear that part of the attraction was how the fandom inspired new notions of identity and community among its participants. While some studies have focused on emergent sexuality as a key factor behind the phenomenon, romanticism was also integral to it. During Beatlemania's zenith, media promoted the Beatles' success as a Cinderella story, while the band members themselves were presented as modern-day Prince Charmings. However, this chapter does not begin and end with Beatlemania or with the band's breakup in 1970. It emphasizes instead the longevity of the band's appeal across three generations and considers how the initial gendering of Beatles fandom has affected later engagements with the group. Importantly, while fan experiences have been historicized as both White and heteronormative, Black women and lesbian fans also comprise this history. Spanning more than fifty years, this chapter provides a cross-generational account of how and why the Beatles have mattered to their female audiences.

The third chapter, "Don't Blame It on Yoko': Wives and Girlfriends in the Beatles Fairy Tale," examines the romantic relationships the Beatles developed before and during the height of their fame. As such, this discussion focuses on the women who married or dated a Beatle between 1962 and 1969. Given the band's collective public image as "princes of pop," fans were ever-watchful and interested in the women who partnered with a Beatle. Viewed and interpreted through feminist scholarship examining the impact of fairy tales on heterosexual relationships, notions of beauty, and female socialization more broadly, I consider how Cynthia Lennon, Maureen Cox, Jane Asher, Pattie Boyd, Linda McCartney, and Yoko Ono were initially written into the Beatles story. Astrid Kirchherr, fiancée to original Beatle Stuart Sutcliffe, is also included here. Her influential role in the band's early history speaks to a different

dimension of the Beatles "fairy tale." As this book is dedicated to the reclamation of women's experiences, I explore this fairy-tale casting by also including fan testimony which both confirms and counters how the Beatles' wives and girlfriends have been perceived through the band's historiography. The chapter's title refers to the extraordinary amount of criticism Yoko Ono has faced since partnering with John Lennon. The ongoing trope of Ono as destroyer of the Beatles—the supposed "witch" in the Beatles fairy tale—is another aspect of the band's story that this history seeks to interrogate and overturn.

Chapter 4, "Free as a Bird': Music-Making and the Liberatory Beatlesque," documents how women musicians and performers have influenced or been influenced by the group—from the band's earliest days as a Merseybeat combo to their post-career status as rock music icons. From the 1960s onward, it has been commonplace for young men to form bands inspired by the Beatles. Little attention has been paid to young women who have done the same or found other forms of creative purchase through the Beatles' music. We begin with a look at 1960s all-female rock bands like the Nursery Rhymes (Sweden) and the Pleasure Seekers (USA). Vocalists are also discussed, including singers who translated Beatles songs into other musical genres and languages. In the 1970s and 1980s, we discover the Beatles' impact on some female punk performers as well as on rock groups like the Go-Go's and the Bangles. From the 1990s onward, the Beatles' continuing influence is mapped onto the changing sensibilities of rock and pop, while noting the emergence of all-female Beatles tribute bands. The chapter concludes with a look at *Lady Beatle*, a one-woman show featuring the band's songs. I highlight how the Beatles complicated the rock/pop gender-divide that positioned women primarily as singers and "pop entertainers" and men as instrumentalists and "rock musicians." It is a history demonstrating how women have situated themselves within music created and originally performed by an all-male band.

Chapter 5, "'Think for Yourself': Entrepreneurs and Intellectuals," identifies how the Beatles' cultural presence has influenced various career pathways. This topic is contextualized within an historical view of women's professional challenges and opportunities from the 1960s to the present. The women featured in this chapter experienced a "fateful moment" with the Beatles—to use sociologist Anthony Giddens's term—which inspired a specific professional trajectory.⁵⁶ We begin with a closer look at sixties-era fans whose part-time "Beatle work" as teenagers, whether running fan clubs or writing for a local newspaper, paved the way for future careers. Also featured in this chapter are women who have chosen occupations which allow them to engage in Beatles culture, whether as a tour guide, radio DJ, or a fan-convention co-organizer. For several second- and third-generation fans, interest in the band has led to or influenced academic work. Inspired by Candy Leonard's initial questioning of "Beatles expertise" as a traditionally male endeavor, I uncover the sociohistorical barriers that delayed women's participation in this pursuit. In the chapter's final section, second- and third-generation fans demonstrate how a merging of hobbyist and professional pursuits has created a new and inviting way to showcase Beatles knowledge. While this narrative is embedded within a larger history concerning educational and professional

opportunities and challenges, it also reflects the Beatles' own yearning for vocational self-actualization, which saw them turn what was originally a hobby into a career.

In the pages that follow, a new vision of Beatles history emerges: one that demonstrates women's vital engagement with the band over the course of almost sixty years. Marcus Collins has suggested that cultural histories of the group "seek to understand why people perceived and presented the Beatles as they did."⁵⁷ As a women's history, this project shares that goal by seeking to better understand the Beatles through voices and experiences which help recast the historical record. It is a story of women's dreams, desires, and ambitions set amid the changing cultural landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It is a history that moves far beyond the screams of Beatlemania and dances to a beat of its own.

“I Remember You”: Stories from Merseyside

Only a few people ever have a front row to history. Carol Johnson is one of them. In 1961, she was fifteen years old and newly employed with a company in Liverpool's city center. With her office in nearby Lord Street, she and her girlfriends would race to the Cavern Club at lunchtime to ensure the best seats possible to see the Beatles. Carol sat in front of John Lennon—her favorite member of the band—while her friend Margaret, “who was mad on George,” arranged a similarly desirable vantage point. Likewise, other friends sat near their preferred Beatle. While Carol liked other Merseybeat bands that played there, she became a regular at the Cavern because of the Beatles. In her words, “for about two years they were my life.”¹ That teenage girls like Carol flocked to this damp, underground venue to hear one of the city's most popular rock 'n' roll bands has long been both the stuff of legend and wonder among anyone interested in the Beatles story. For the young women who were there, being part of this exciting music scene not only offered exposure to charismatic performers and a new soundscape, but it also allowed them to be full participants and co-creators of it.

The Beatles' early years are closely associated with the Cavern, the grotto-like club in Mathew Street where the band played nearly three hundred times between 1961 and 1963. However, this history encompasses other locations around greater Liverpool that also helped establish the band's local fan base. Second only to the Cavern in its significance was the Casbah Coffee Club, located in the suburb of West Derby. Though the group was still missing a permanent drummer, an early lineup of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison became the Casbah's house band after performing there for its opening night on August 29, 1959. This appearance was so early in the group's formation that they were still known as the Quarrymen.² Soon, other venues across the city like the Aintree Institute and Litherland Town Hall proved important spaces for growing their audience.³ In August 1960, with drummer Pete Best joining the group, the Beatles traveled overseas to Hamburg to begin the first of what, by late 1962, would amount to five musical residencies in the German port city. Nonetheless, most accounts of the Beatles' early years remain entwined with the Cavern Club and its young patrons. It was where the group played more than anywhere else starting in February 1961. It was also an increasingly popular venue with teenagers, those who helped the Beatles become stars of the local music scene. Fans who followed the Beatles between 1961 and 1963 also witnessed important changes to the group's membership. Bassist Stuart Sutcliffe left the band in July 1961 and drummer Pete

Best was replaced by Ringo Starr in August 1962. Sutcliffe's departure permanently transformed the Beatles' into a foursome, with Paul McCartney becoming the group's bassist, while Starr's recruitment paralleled the Beatles' shift from a popular Liverpool band to a national phenomenon.⁴

Throughout these formative years, Carol Johnson was one of a growing number of female fans who became central to the Beatles' success. While it would be wholly inaccurate to say the Beatles' male followers had nothing to do with the band's rise to local acclaim, the girl fans' dedicated exuberance was absolutely essential to it. In recalling the many hours spent at the Cavern watching the Beatles, Carol said with a laugh, "I think there were blokes interested in their music, but we never saw them."⁵ Her comment speaks to the way in which the band's most devoted female fans were totally focused on the Beatles while at the Cavern and how young women, as a fully participatory audience, commanded that social and musical space.⁶ Noted Merseybeat and Beatles authority Spencer Leigh recounts how "the seats at the front of the stage were invariably filled by girls" and that boys were not necessarily welcome there. He shares that "a brave lad" attending the Beatles' last Cavern performance on August 3, 1963, "got a seat on the front row" only to be met by withering glances from the girls seated there.⁷

Both Leigh's account and Johnson's testimony are matched visually by numerous images which document the Beatles' Cavern concerts. On August 22, 1962, Granada TV captured the Beatles performing their cover of Lieber, Stoller, and Barrett's "Some Other Guy" at the club.⁸ Footage of the audience shows how their female fans were always *right there*—tapping their feet, swaying to the music, and staring up at the band—whether crowded under the arches at either side of the stage or taking up the first several rows of seats. Girls often waited outside the Cavern long before it opened or outside other venues where the Beatles performed (Figure 1.1). Another telling set of images were shot by photographer Michael Ward on February 1, 1963. Taken in conjunction with a promotional event at one of Brian Epstein's North End Music Stores (NEMS), they include two of Paul McCartney and George Harrison happily interacting with fans and another of McCartney chatting with three girls as they walk down a Liverpool street—likely after leaving the store. Whether at the Cavern or out and about in the city, getting as close as possible to the band was an essential fan experience. It was this first group of local devotees that established how well the Beatles—both as musicians and as a group of individuals—could relate to young women.⁹

The Beatles' Liverpool history not only is distinctive in how close the band members and their female fans would come to feel with each other, but also demonstrates the down-to-earth normalcy of their interactions. Tony Barrow, the Beatles' first press officer, observed: "There was a very intimate relationship in Liverpool between the Beatles and their fans. And the Beatles' fans could actually ring the Beatles. I mean, you just had to look under 'Mc' in the phonebook and ring Paul McCartney and say, 'Please will you play "Some Other Guy" for us at the Cavern on Friday."¹⁰ Just as Beatlemania, due to its sheer global scale, would necessitate more detachment and depersonalization between the group and its fans, this early period in Liverpool instead emphasized closeness, community, and sociality. Being part of Liverpool's local music scene was



Figure 1.1 Beatles fans sit in a Liverpool alley waiting for their heroes, 1963. Photo by John Pratt. Reprinted with permission from Keystone Features/Getty Images—Hulton Archive.

the only time in the Beatles' career when this feeling of connection was grounded in a tight-knit community. From familiarity to a touch of the familial, it was on more than one occasion that girl fans decided to stop by band members' family homes. Though the Beatle in question was often not there, it was not unusual for George Harrison's mother Louise or Paul McCartney's father Jim to kindly welcome the girls inside for tea and conversation.¹¹ Being part of this growing community around the Beatles also inspired young women to think about how they could further contribute to it. A few decided they wanted to pursue music. This includes the Liverbirds—one of the very first all-female rock bands—and Cavern coat check girl and aspiring singer Priscilla White, who was friendly with the Beatles and eventually shared in Brian Epstein's management. She would go on to have a string of pop hits starting in October 1963 as Cilla Black.¹² While these female pioneers will be discussed again in Chapter 4, it is necessary to introduce them here as dynamic members of Liverpool's music scene.

In examining this specific social context, which predates and differs from the Beatlemania era (1963–66), it is important to consider what it was about the Beatles at this time—as both musicians and local personalities—that inspired such energy, interest, and creativity among the teenage girls who first dominated their audiences. Barbara Bradby suggests that the Beatles' cover versions of romantic pop and soul ballads alongside girl group hits positioned them lyrically as male performers who were more self-aware in how they hailed and included young, female listeners. Jacqueline Warwick, meanwhile, contends that girl group covers helped the Beatles “create versions of masculinity centered around transgressive earthiness or adorable approachability.”¹³ These are convincing claims. However, they also raise further questions about how these sensibilities came to be. The Beatles' earliest experiences with women help to provide some answers. While many journalists and scholars have tried to understand how the relationship each Beatle had with their mother influenced their musical journey, little if anything has been said about how this may have played a role in how they interacted with their earliest female fans. Arguably, the rapport they established with these Liverpool girls set a precedent for how well the Beatles would reverberate with females around the world. It is also worth examining how the group, as the main attraction within Liverpool's Merseybeat music scene, helped motivate young women to more confidently navigate, traverse, and inhabit urban, public spaces than Liverpoolian girls of generations past.

Finally, this exploration of the Beatles' early history as a local, Liverpool band that greatly appealed to women also benefits from one significant addition. For the many Beatles fans who could not be part of this community—those from the advent of British Beatlemania onward—traveling to Liverpool has become a way to engage with the city as a veritable “Fifth Beatle.”¹⁴ Merseyside has come to serve as a proxy for the Beatles themselves. Studying the band's Liverpool origins, fan pilgrimages there since as early as autumn 1963 have created a new afterword to this story. Though the intimacy that local audiences had with the Beatles in the early 1960s can never be recreated, visiting the group's hometown has allowed latter-day fans to feel a closer connection to a band that, paradoxically, has been absent from Liverpool for close to sixty years. It is their opportunity for a “front-row seat at the Cavern.”

“Stand by Me”: The Beatles' Fan-Friends

Mark Lewisohn's *Tune In* (2013) is a lavish account of the Beatles and its band members' early lives. The book ends on December 31, 1962—just as the group is about to ring in the year that will lead them to fortune and fame. As a youth culture historian especially interested in girls' experiences within subcultures and music scenes, what immediately struck me upon first reading the book was Lewisohn's attention to the acquaintanceships and friendships that developed between the Beatles and their local, female fans. It is the first such historic account to substantially document young women who knew the Beatles and were active members of the Merseybeat scene.¹⁵ The testimony Lewisohn includes speaks to the diversity of these relationships. Though it is

true that band members dated some of these fans—and drummers Pete Best and Ringo Starr even met their wives at the Cavern—such experiences did not define band-fan relations during this time.¹⁶ As John Lennon stated in a mid-sixties interview, “The Cavern girls weren’t fans, not to us, they were friends.”¹⁷ In this sense, the girls who enjoyed the Beatles as a local band, and got to know them as people, might be better described as “fan-friends.”

This type of fan was possible in Liverpool because the Beatles performed at venues that lent themselves well to this level of intimacy. And, certainly, they were not yet celebrities. Until the national release of their first single, “Love Me Do” in October 1962, they were simply local personalities. Studies of fandom—today’s online connectivity notwithstanding—discuss the social distance that exists between celebrities and their audiences. Within such asymmetrical, parasocial relationships, the ultimate desire among many fans is meeting their heroes and, potentially, developing actual relationships with them. In the context of Beatlemania, the lengths that some fans would go to in order to meet the Beatles included everything from storming police barricades to sneaking into multistory hotels—sometimes even scaling these buildings to try reaching them. This behavior, closely followed by the media, would inform many people’s perceptions of Beatlemania and led to the stereotyping of these mostly female fans.¹⁸

While international renown usually dictates a clear separation between celebrity and fan—with mediated content serving as a poor and partial substitute for face-to-face encounters—local music scenes are predicated upon community and interpersonal communication. The nature of such scenes means that a band’s earliest supporters are usually acquaintances, friends, or, at the very least, familiar faces in the crowd.¹⁹ Even throughout most of 1962, the Beatles’ name recognition was (apart from Hamburg) primarily regional. As one early fan would recall, “[The Beatles] weren’t famous in Liverpool for being ‘famous.’”²⁰ Instead, they were liked and respected as a popular Liverpool band comprised of approachable local “lads.” Access to the group was facilitated by the venues where they performed. These clubs and halls did not have well-defined “backstage” areas, which helped blur the division between band and audience. In the case of the Casbah, the club was owned and operated by drummer Pete Best’s mother, so it was also a hang-out space for the Beatles when not performing. The Cavern, meanwhile, had a “band room” for musicians to prepare for their shows, but it was very small and due to the club’s layout, patrons often walked past it. This made it easy for fans to speak with the Beatles before, in between, or after their sets.²¹

By frequenting the Beatles’ Cavern gigs or regularly attending other shows around the city, female fans established connections with the Beatles that manifested in a number of ways. It could be a chat with a band member either at the Cavern’s snack bar or in the tiny band room. Some more personal meetups took place at various venues around the city—whether at the hip Jacaranda coffee bar, the Blue Angel nightclub, or at the Grapes, the pub just across from the unlicensed Cavern. As recounted in Mark Lewisohn’s *Tune In*, when the Beatles traveled back to Hamburg for a series of shows in 1962, several girls corresponded with band members—something the Beatles themselves had requested and encouraged. The group feared the momentum (and fan base) they had built up