



## Epstein, Brian (1934-1967)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Perhaps few individuals were less likely to create the public image and oversee the career of the world's most famous rock group than Brian Epstein. Born on September 19, 1934 into a family of affluent Liverpool Jewish furniture merchants, Epstein seemed destined for a career in their business. He was attracted, however, to such "unmanly" pursuits as fashion design and the stage, which, along with his closeted homosexuality, put him at odds with his family's aspirations.

Epstein left school at sixteen to work at one of his family's stores until he was called up for military service in 1952. After only a year of active duty, he was discharged for unspecified psychiatric reasons. Epstein subsequently enrolled at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but before completing his studies he returned to his family's business, where he became the manager of the store's record department.

It was in this capacity that, in October 1961, he first heard of the Beatles, a Liverpool band whose fans were seeking their recordings. Epstein was unable to locate these records and, intrigued by the mystery, ventured into the Cavern Club, where he encountered John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and then-drummer Pete Best.

Within two months, although he had no entertainment or managerial background, Epstein had signed the group to a contract. Over the next year, he transformed the group's image from that of leather-clad ruffians to "Mods" attired in fashionable suits with longish hairstyles, creating, in effect, an androgynous look for his protégés.

Epstein also successfully negotiated the Beatles' first recording contract with EMI Parlophone, replaced Best with Ringo Starr, and became the manager of various other successful Liverpool acts, including Gerry and the Pacemakers, Cilla Black, and Billy J. Kramer with the Dakotas.

By 1964, when the Beatles and his other acts took America by storm, Epstein seemed to personify worldly success. He was, however, living in an almost constant state of anxiety lest his homosexuality--and his attraction to rough and often abusive young men--become public knowledge, as male homosexual acts were still illegal in Britain at the time and any scandal might negatively affect the Beatles' career.

It has often been suggested that Epstein's devotion to the Beatles was based on an unrequited love for John Lennon. Speculation about a possible affair between them has existed since the two vacationed together in Spain in 1963; Christopher Münch's film *The Hours and the Times* (1991) suggests that the two men did share a sexual liaison on this vacation.

In 1966, the Beatles decided to stop performing live and concentrate solely on studio recording. Although this decision resulted in such breakthrough recordings as *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), Epstein felt that he had effectively lost control over the band and suffered from acute depression, exacerbated by drug and alcohol abuse.

On August 27, 1967, Epstein was found dead in his London home from a barbiturate overdose. Although his death was ruled accidental, many have presumed it was a suicide. Ironically, he died a month to the day after legislation decriminalizing homosexual acts between adult men went into effect in Britain.

For three decades following his death, Epstein was vilified by the popular music world as a controlling figure who tried to suppress the Beatles' creativity--and who was accused, falsely, of having cheated the group out of millions in income. All the while, the fact that the world would not have heard of the Beatles had it not been for Epstein's relentless efforts on the group's behalf was blithely overlooked.

In recent years, however, his reputation has been reconsidered and perhaps he will at last receive the honor due to the creator and manager of the group who permanently changed perceptions of popular culture.

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