

THE BEATLE WHO VANISHED

BY JIM BERKENSTADT

foreword by former Beatle Chas Newby



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THE BEATLE WHO VANISHED

Jim Berkenstadt



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DEDICATION

To Holly, Becca and Brad

THE BEATLE WHO VANISHED

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FOREWORD BY FORMER BEATLE

Chas Newby

Jimmie Nicol and I are both members of a relatively small group of people who have played live with The Beatles on stage. Our appearances with the greatest band in the history of popular music were for the same reason; we were substituting for a member of The Beatles on a short term basis. However, the timing and consequences of being part of the band were very different.

In December 1960, The Beatles had just completed their first visit to Hamburg. At that time the band comprised John, Paul and George, plus Pete Best on drums and bass player Stuart Sutcliffe. During their stay, Stuart met Astrid Kirchherr and was invited to spend the Christmas break with the Kirchherr family while the rest of the band returned home to Liverpool. Once back on home soil, the band were looking for gigs to play and a bass player to fill in for Stuart until he returned in the New Year. I had no aspirations to be a professional musician; I was studying chemistry at college and was back home for the Christmas vacation. I had known Pete Best from school and we had played together in the Blackjacks before Pete joined The Beatles for their trip to Hamburg. I was familiar with the repertoire they played at that time and so for four nights at the end of 1960, I played bass with The Beatles. I went back to college early January and Stuart came home to resume his role with the band.

In 1964, the situation was very different. The Beatles were famous on both sides of the Atlantic. They had played in Paris during January. In February, they had made their first tour of America, and a world tour to The Netherlands, Far East, and Down Under during June had been confirmed. Ringo became ill with tonsillitis and was rushed to a hospital the day before the tour was due to start. *Jimmie Nicol* took the seat behind the skins with The Beatles up until the time that Ringo was well enough to rejoin the band. *Jimmie*, an experienced professional drummer, joined the Beatles on 4 June for gigs in Denmark, Holland, Hong Kong and then Australia. Ringo recovered to meet up with the Beatles in Melbourne, Australia on 15 June and *Jimmie* flew back to England on his own.

After graduation, I got married and my wife and I moved away from Liverpool to run a business in Warwickshire. I am now retired and spend my days playing golf and spoiling my four beautiful grandchildren. I play bass with a local oldies band called the Racketts. At the end of August each year I go “back home” to the Casbah Club in Liverpool for the annual Beatles weekend and meet up with Pete Best and his two brothers, Rory and Roag, play a few tunes and relive old times.

And what happened to *Jimmie* after his brief and exciting time with The Beatles? To find out you have to read this remarkable book. *Jim Berkenstadt* has used his renowned literary and investigative skills to piece together the story of *The Beatle Who Vanished*. This is a significant addition to the bibliography of that most exciting period of music and social history. Read and enjoy.

Chas. Newby

Alcester, May 2012

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INTRODUCTION

*Jimmie Nicol** died alone and nearly penniless in 1988, or that is what the world has been led to believe. But did he die? Only one outsider played with The Beatles onstage at the height of their Beatlemania fame. Jimmie Nicol had this good fortune. But was this brief episode of fame a stroke of good fortune or a curse that would haunt him the rest of his life?

The life and career of Jimmie Nicol is like an incomplete puzzle with pieces missing - not easily explained or understood. For a brief 13 days in June of 1964, Jimmie Nicol was asked to do the impossible - fill in as a substitute drummer for the hospitalized Ringo Starr. The Beatles - perhaps at the height of their global notoriety - were just 24 hours away from launching their first ever world tour. Suddenly, a session player - known to fellow musicians in London at the time, but otherwise completely invisible to the public - became the most desired understudy in the history of music. How he came to be chosen, and why he was the only possible candidate destined for the job, and his life after The Beatles is an extraordinary story of fleeting fame and creative tenacity.

When Ringo Starr returned to the band two weeks after his hospitalization, Nicol was flying high with The Beatles in Melbourne, Australia; and he very graciously stepped out of The Beatles' limelight. This soft-spoken "Everyman" - teased with having the world at his feet for a short, sweet time - now sat alone in an airport bound for London with a few souvenirs - a gold watch, a Beatles flight bag, and a week's wages - pondering where he had been and where his life was now headed.

Jimmie Nicol eventually recorded and toured the world again with other bands. In the 1970s, he walked away from the music business and the world stage forever. It was almost as if he had stepped out the door of his home for a stroll and never returned, as if he had vanished from the face of the earth. After this, however, the trail goes cold. Over the years, there have been rumors about Jimmie living in different countries around the world - playing jazz in Australia, Bossa nova in Brazil, opening a nightclub in Mexico, or working a construction job in London. A more recent rumor, believed by many of the musicians who played with him in the 1950s and 1960s, is that Nicol died at age 49 in 1988.

If he had been a bigger star in his own right, we would know more about this Everyman. If he had written a book about his adventures, we would know what became of his life. Sadly, more than forty years after his brief brush with fame, most have stopped wondering about Jimmie Nicol - except as a point of Beatles-related trivia. This is unfortunate, for in the words of Gary Schumacher, noted Beatles aficionado, "Jimmie Nicol is perhaps the classiest footnote in Beatles' history"; a footnote that until now only yielded a one or two sentence mention in Beatles books.

Nicol may be a classy footnote, but he is also an *obscure* footnote in music history. He recorded anonymously on radio shows, on records, and he composed film soundtracks that most of the world never heard. There is little-to-no mention of him in general music histories and no mention of a career playing behind many well-known, popular bands. His life is a study of his public persona and musical output, and little has been known of the private life of Jimmie Nicol *until now*.

Thousands of books on The Beatles have been written by every ex-maid, former assistant, Apple scruff, horoscope reader, and limo driver. Unlike countless Beatle "wannabes" who weren't in the band or part of the lads' inner circle, Jimmie Nicol actually played onstage and on TV with The Beatles. He was also an extremely talented composer, band leader, arranger, producer, and versatile drummer. This is a sideman's journey of 50 years ago.

He is truly an enigma. None of Jimmie's fellow band mates have seen or spoken to him in over 40 years. Countless questions have been asked about him. Why has Jimmie Nicol always intrigued fans of The Beatles? How did The Beatles choose him? Did Jimmie almost permanently replace Ringo Starr in the group? Was Nicol's moment of musical immortality a blessing or a curse? And most importantly, whatever became of *The Beatle Who Vanished*? Jimmie Nicol catapulted from respected session musician and band member in several popular groups, to the "Toppermost of the Poppermost". This book investigates and reveals much about the man that is...or was... Jimmie Nicol, *The Beatle Who Vanished*.

Jim Berkenstadt

June, 2012



Chapter One

The Call

The call, it took only the routine ring of the telephone to turn Jimmie Nicol's world upside down. It came out of the blue, born of immense urgency. It was neither a fluke nor a "lucky break" as some have described that fateful day of Wednesday, June 3, 1964. The call had meaning on many levels. It came out of desperation, yet it was also a reward, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that sprang from years of hard work, determination, fate, and musical dues-paying. For Jimmie Nicol, becoming one of the "go-to" drummers in London meant moving up from one band to the next, one recording session to another. He had mastered different musical styles from Rock and Big Band, Ska and Trad Jazz. He had played every ballroom gig, radio show, and recording session offered to him since the late 1950s. Even Jimmie's hair played a role, as he had recently started growing it in the famous "mop top" style. Nicol even had the right "look" to sit behind the most famous drum kit in the world.

"Hello, is Jimmie Nicol in please? This is George Martin calling." At first, it did not seem these introductory words would have much impact on his life or everyday routine. Martin, The Beatles' producer, had found Nicol hanging around his Barnes, West London home in the late morning with a friend. But why was he calling Nicol today? Certainly it couldn't be about The Beatles, since Nicol was well aware of their permanent drummer, Ringo Starr. Aside from The Beatles, George Martin had begun to produce some of the other bands in manager Brian Epstein's stable of artists at the time. These included: Gerry and the Pacemakers, Cilla Black, and Billy J. Kramer. Nicol likely assumed Martin wanted to hire him to play drums on one of Epstein's other artists' recording sessions. Nicol's work as a session drummer on Pye and Decca recordings was well known in London music circles at the time. Perhaps Martin wanted Jimmie to join one of Epstein's groups? Nicol recalled seeing music impresario and Beatles' manager Brian Epstein at the last Tommy Quick recording session at Pye in March of that year. Perhaps he had impressed him with his drumming? Or maybe Epstein had signed a new band that needed a good rock and roll drummer?

Meanwhile, nearby in Nicol's own neighborhood, Beatles manager Brian Epstein was facing the most serious crisis of The Beatles' exploding career. He had a problem so monumental that it threatened to economically devastate the band, dilute its fan base, and destroy his master plan to take The Beatles worldwide. The schedule for June 3, 1964 originally called for the group to pose for photos in the morning, followed by an afternoon and evening recording session at EMI Studios. The following day, June 4, the group would fly off on their first ever world tour, one that would feature them playing live in Denmark, The Netherlands, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand.

This was not just any tour, but one that had been carefully planned for months, planned with the preparation and detail of a military campaign. Epstein believed that touring was the most difficult

part of his job, and it occupied most of his time and concern. “I think traveling around and going around the world, making the arrangements for moving around, is the most difficult thing in managing the group, because you don’t know what’s going to happen,”¹ said Epstein in an interview that seemed to foreshadow the looming problem. The Beatles had already conquered the United Kingdom and the eastern seaboard of the United States by June of 1964. They had the top five chart positions simultaneously on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 Singles Chart with their songs, *I Want To Hold Your Hand*; *She Loves You*; *Please Please Me*; *Can’t Buy Me Love*; and *Twist and Shout*. Despite their success, Epstein was driven more by his fear of failure than his will to succeed. This apprehension of The Beatles’ climb to fame was weighing heavily as the clock ticked down to the world tour launch the next day. “I hold myself responsible. It isn’t the money that worries me,” he recalled. “It is the failure; partly because of my youth; partly because of my background; and partly because of my provincial origin.”² Their ambitious manager wanted to prove to himself he could be the first to have his pop group conquer no less than the entire world.



Ringo Starr in the Hospital with George Harrison, 1964.
Topham/© The Image Works.

The contracts for the shows were all signed; hotels, security and transportation were served; records, concert programs and merchandise were stocked; and the tickets were already selling out. There was no turning back. The media was ready to cover their every move, and now it seemed as if all of Epstein’s plans were about to implode like the demolition of a large sky scraper.

The Beatles were posing for photographs at Prospect Studios in Barnes for a *Saturday Evening Post* session with photographer John Launois, when suddenly Ringo Starr collapsed to the floor.³ Beatles’ road manager Neil Aspinall witnessed the event and recalls, “Ringo has never been particularly strong. He collapsed during the photo session... I was with them when it happened and got quite a fright when I saw Ringo sink to his knees.”⁴ This event instantly threw The Beatles’ world tour into serious doubt and panic, and their recording schedule that day into turmoil. Ringo was discreetly deposited into the private patients’ wing of Middlesex University College Hospital. The diagnosis was tonsillitis and pharyngitis. Starr recalls that day, “I was desperately ill. (laughs).”⁵

Thinking quickly on his feet, Epstein knew he needed to find a replacement for Ringo Starr. He also knew he had to convince the other three Beatles to go along with the plan; and he needed to fulfill the multiple media, legal, and financial obligations of the world tour. Faced with the great emergency crisis of his career thus far, Epstein had only a few hours to find a suitable replacement, or risk losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in concert fees, merchandise, publishing, and record revenues for his remarkable group. His challenge was daunting. Epstein had to find a drummer who “looked like a Beatle”; knew Ringo’s parts to all the songs; fit into Ringo’s stage suits (no time for a tailor); and could comport himself in a way that would not start rumors of a new Beatles’ drummer. This was

tall order on such short notice!

— In 1964, concert contracts were usually no more than one or two pages in length, containing the mere skeletal deal points of artist, price, location, and performance. They did not include cancellation or “out clauses” due to illness of a band member (standard in today’s entertainment agreements). In other words, “the show must go on!” Furthermore, Epstein realized the risk to the band’s reputation, image, and future popularity, due to cancellation. This was a time when pop stars had a very brief and unstable shelf life.

Aside from the job of replacing Ringo with another drummer who could play the arrangements and *looked* the part of a Beatle, Epstein faced a more daunting task, one in which a greater showdown emerged. He knew his decision would affect the other members of the band. The Beatles, more than any of his other artists, were like four very close brothers. This was an issue of business vs. loyalty, and success vs. friendship.

Within The Beatles’ camp, there was a deep emotional split over Epstein’s insistence on finding a substitute for Starr. Lead guitarist George Harrison had drawn a line in the sand; he flat out told Epstein that without Ringo, there would be no Beatles’ tour. He would not participate. Harrison was The Beatle who, more often than not, took on the role as the group’s “moral compass”. George Martin recalls the showdown and comments, “George is a very loyal person. And he said, ‘If Ringo is not part of the group, it’s not The Beatles. And I don’t see why we should do it. I’m not going to go’.” Paul McCartney remembers, “For some reason, we couldn’t really cancel it. So, the idea came up we’ll get a stand-in drummer.”⁷

In the end, it took all of Brian Epstein’s and George Martin’s powers of persuasion to convince Harrison that if he didn’t go along with the idea, he would be letting everybody down. George finally relented and the show down was averted, but not without some lingering bad feelings. “Well of course we shouldn’t have done it,” said Harrison in an interview decades later. “I mean, with all respect to Jimmie who came with us. It was silly. I couldn’t understand it. But its ‘How many Beatles does it take to change a light bulb?’ See? Four!”⁸ “Jimmie was actually quite a lovely guy. But imagine The Beatles without Ringo!” said George.”⁹

With the argument resolved, Epstein began his search for a drummer to deputize for Ringo. Many fans have wondered if The Beatles might have looked back to their previous drummer Pete Best. However, the wounds of that parting two years prior were likely still fresh, for years later when asked if Epstein had offered him the substitute job, Best’s reply was an emphatic, “No!”¹⁰

At the time of *The Call*, Jimmie Nicol – a drummer known within the London music community, but unknown to the public – was relaxing on the couch of his flat with a friend. A few weeks earlier, Georgie Fame had hired Jimmie to join his rhythm and blues combo. Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames were packing people in during an extended residency at the Flamingo club in London. Everybody who was anybody was checking out the band at The Flamingo. It was *the* prime live gig in London, and Jimmie filled the back seat of the band with his flashy, but controlled, rhythm and blues style drumming.

Landing the gig with Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames was yet another big step up the ladder for drummer Jimmie Nicol. His professional career began with jams at the 2 I’s Coffee Bar. Nicol continued his upward rise, serving successful stints first generation rock bands and later generation big bands. He had climbed even further by doing frequent session work for Pye and Decca Records and the Top Six label. However, no amount of experience could completely prepare Jimmie for his next gig.

Jimmie Nicol’s life was about to change forever. Before he received *The Call*, his phone rang in the flat. It was his bandleader Georgie Fame. “Hey Jimmie,” said Fame. “Have you got

passport?” Jimmie was still tired from the previous night and was confused by the question. “No,” replied Nicol. “Well,” said Fame with a big smile as he spoke, “Get yourself down to the Post Office tomorrow morning.”¹¹

Singer and good friend, John Hodkinson, was staying with Jimmie and his wife Patricia and son Howie when the telephone started ringing on that momentous day. They had been partying when Georgie Fame called earlier. “The phone rang,” says Hodkinson. “We had been drinking and listening to music and stuff. Someone had first phoned Georgie Fame asking about Jimmie’s availability. Georgie called and asked Jimmie about it. He was on the phone maybe ten minutes.”¹²

Later that morning, another call interrupted the two friends’ reverie. *The Call*. This time it was George Martin on the phone, calling to change Jimmie Nicol’s life forever. However history recalls this moment, it was anything but routine. Decades later, Nicol remembered *The Call* coming from Martin. “I was playing around in a small band and in the studio wherever I was needed,” he says. “I was actually making money as a drummer, some thing not many were doing... It was George Martin... He asked, ‘What are you doing for the next four days? Ringo is ill, and we want you take his place on The Beatles’ tour. Would you mind going to Australia?’” A ridiculous question, thought the amazed Mr. Nicol. “Be at Abbey Road Studios at 3:00 pm,” Martin continued. “The Beatles want to run through some numbers with you.”¹³

After hanging up the phone, Jimmie turned the radio back on and resumed his drinking with Hodkinson without a word about *The Call*. Jimmie was deep in thought processing the shock of what had just taken place. Some time passed before the initial surprise of *The Call* finally sank in. Jimmie turned to his pal and said, “Do you want to guess what that phone call was about?” Hodkinson recalled, “I didn’t know who it was.” Jimmie said, “Guess what? The Beatles want me to play drums with them. Ringo is sick and I’m leaving to go on tour with them.”¹⁴

Interestingly, Nicol was already thinking past the audition of that day. He knew why he had been chosen. He was perhaps the only drummer at that time who knew the drum arrangements for practically every Beatles hit song. He had the musical knowledge, experience, maturity, and even the haircut to fill the bill. To Jimmie Nicol, the biggest gig of his life was already a done deal.

Hodkinson’s reaction was one of shock. “I just couldn’t believe it.” Jimmie, smiling from ear to ear, asked John, “Do you think I should do it?” “I just sort of jumped through the ceiling,” says Hodkinson laughing. “Jimmie didn’t even own a suitcase, so he had to borrow my red suitcase for the trip.”¹⁵

Prior to heading over to the studio, Jimmie called his good friend, producer/arranger Johnny Harris, excitedly exclaiming, “Guess what John, they’ve asked me to go audition for... The Beatles.” Harris replied, “Yeah? I heard the news that Ringo is in the hospital with tonsillitis.” Jimmie was confident in his ability to pass the audition. “You know, the thing is John, I think I’m going to get it,” he said. Harris congratulated Jimmie on his good fortune and told him, “Let me know what happens. This is great!”¹⁶

Jimmie Nicol could not help thinking about what this gig would mean to his musical career in terms of the boost in fame and the financial rewards for his family. Surely, he could quit his part-time work at Boosey & Hawkes music store and his occasional carpentry work. Perhaps, he even wondered to himself, he could possibly take over permanently for Ringo Starr! After all, Ringo had replaced Pete Best less than two years earlier. Was destiny going to make Nicol a Beatle? Or should he start his own band? The wheels were turning and fate was dealing the cards. He was philosophically reflecting, “I happened to be the right person, in the right place at the right time, with the right tools.”¹⁷

As he set down the telephone with Johnny Harris and prepared to head over to Abbey Road

studios, he would surely have reflected on the progress he had made since the late 1950s and the musical path that had led him from music classes as a school boy, to jamming as a teen at the 2 I Coffee Club, to the very top of the musical entertainment world. But how had it all started?



Chapter Two

The Early Years - Battersea

Little is known about the formative years of James George Nicol who was born on August 3, 1939 at the St. James' Hospital, Battersea, in the borough of Wandsworth, England. Perhaps this is by design of Jimmie Nicol himself. In the few interviews he conducted in his career, none even seemed to touch on his youth and upbringing. As such, only documents and the occasional comment have given us any clues into his early life.

His mother Edith Louise Isabel Nicol was a homemaker and his father, George Ford Nicol, worked for the government at the Messenger Inland Revenue Service after serving in the British army. He was a "Taxman". Their home was a simple red brick two-story walk-up, one of many identical row houses along Silverthorne Road.

The Battersea district is part of south London's inner-city on the south bank of the River Thames. As Jimmie Nicol came into the world at the end of the 1930s, Battersea was clearing slums and starting to build modern homes equipped with gas and electricity. This made housework and cooking for homemakers easier, and many families, including the Nicols, had bathrooms inside the home.

In the 1940's, the Nicol family found their entertainment by attending the cinema, dancing in the public halls, and trips to the seaside. No doubt Jimmie got his first exposure to music from being taken to the dance halls. Life was not easy in the early 1940's as World War II had been declared in September, 1939, just one month after Nicol's birth. The local Battersea council spent many months preparing for air raids. Volunteer rescue teams were formed, and stockpiles of gas masks and other supplies were readied, as were the iron fallout shelters. Those Brits who did not go off to fight were enlisted to help with munitions, fire-fighting, fundraising, and volunteering other assistance. Women played a vital role at home in Battersea. They helped with first aid and rationing of food, clothing, and other essential needs. Iron railings, paper and other materials were collected for recycling during the war to help the effort.



Jimmie Nicol's birth certificate.
Photo Credit: Courtesy of Author.

Enduring an infancy of Nazi air raids, rationing, and hiding in shelters, Nicol was only five years old when World War II came to an end in May of 1945. Things were still difficult for the Nicol family and their Battersea neighbors at the end of the war. Daily life was affected for years afterward with shortages of food and other essential supplies, not to mention the necessary repair of buildings destroyed by the War. However, the dawn of the 1950s envisioned a new landscape in Battersea, as new rebuilding schemes of homes and high rises began to change the look of their local district.

In 1946 Jimmie Nicol was enrolled at Honeywell Junior School in Battersea. This was a school with a mission and vision. Their policy statement reads, “Our expectations are that all pupils achieve the highest personal standards of excellence in learning, behaviour and understanding of themselves and others, through a caring, supportive and secure environment, where every child is valued as important as the next.”¹ This school would be a perfect place for Nicol’s early years, for it emphasized and valued creativity and imagination. The arts, especially music, played an important role in Nicol’s curriculum.

Jimmie was unconventional from the start. He did not conform to the norm. According to one report, he began tying his shoes backward from the top down. He would make the knot and bow at the bottom instead of the top. It was his protest against conformity, a theme that would continue throughout his life.² He was known as a sincere lad, but one happy to be a contrarian. It was his way of protesting against conventional society. He did not shy away from giving his opinions, regardless of the consequence.³



Jimmie Nicol's birthplace home.
Photo Credit: © 2011 Jim Berkenstadt

At home, Nicol began playing the piano, which was his first instrument.⁴ While Honeywell, Nicol's first real exposure to music outside the home came as a member of the Boy choir group.⁵ He started to form casual musical associations with other students at his school. One report has Jimmie playing drums in a school band with one saxophone player and two trumpets.⁶

It appears that Jimmie Nicol would not be the only famous musician to develop from the Battersea area. The district was also home to other young men and women of Nicol's generation who would achieve fame in popular music beginning in the 1950's and beyond. These included Sir Bob Geldof (Boom Town Rats and Live Aid founder); Danni Minogue; Rick Parfitt (Status Quo); and Simon LeBon (Duran Duran). One other interesting rock reference to Nicol's birthplace is the Battersea Power Station. Construction began in 1929 and was completed the year of Jimmie's birth. This mammoth structure would later provide the ominous background to the cover of Pink Floyd's famous *Animals* album.

In the early 1950s, Jimmie Nicol signed up for The Army Cadet Force (ACF), Britain's oldest youth organization, having been founded in 1860. The ACF is somewhat similar in mission to the Boy Scouts of America. They help young boys aged 12 to 18 develop confidence, discipline, initiative, loyalty, and a sense of service to other people. These character building traits would serve Nicol well in the challenging future he would face as a professional musician. The ACF was famous for its military marching and concert band. As a drummer/percussionist in the ACF band, Jimmie learned musical theory, how to read music, and diverse drumming and performance skills. Perhaps most importantly, he learned the skill of playing in an ensemble with other players of different and varied abilities. He also learned to play under many different conditions – at parade grounds, churches, concert venues, and everywhere else bands are called upon to perform.

Nicol thrived as a drummer and enjoyed the enthusiastic response of the audiences to the band's live performances. The rigorous training included rehearsals twice during weekdays, plus each weekend and a two week summer stint all while balancing his school work, chores, and other activities.

At the age of 14, Jimmie Nicol obtained his first drum at a pawn shop. This allowed him to practice at home, much to the chagrin of nearby neighbors attached to the Nicol building on both sides. He began to listen to jazz music on the radio and loved it. He was initially inspired by jazz



Battersea Power Station.

drummer Gene Krupa. “I like Brubeck,” said Nicol, “but I think my own particular favorites are Cannonball Adderley, Duke Ellington and (Count) Basie of course.”⁷

But the moment that changed his life forever as a teenager was when he heard a Chuck Berry Rock and Roll song. Nicol recalls, “Chuck let the drummer cut loose on a particular song.” The drummer took off on his own carrying the song with his own style of rocking beats. The impact on Jimmie Nicol was powerful and immediate. “Man that was it for me, I loved it.”⁸ That was all it took for Jimmie Nicol to decide what he wanted to do for the rest of his life: play the drums and make music for a living!

At the age of sixteen, Nicol took his O-level exams and passed them, which conferred upon him Britain’s General Certificate of Education. It also meant that he was no longer required to attend school when he reached his seventeenth birthday. He decided he wanted to

explore the city of London with the hope of somehow getting into music as a career. His dad apparently had other plans for his son. Jimmie’s mom, however, did not protest when he told her, “I’m thinking about quitting my job and becoming a professional drummer.”⁹

Little did he know the road to success would take a route of many hills, peaks, ruts and curves. Life for young Mr. Nicol would soon be traveling at a rapid steady beat in the Soho coffee clubs of London.



Chapter Three

Post-War London and the 2 I's Coffee Bar

Culture, politics, and economics often play a powerful role in the development of artists, musicians, and their audiences. Post-World War II Great Britain faced a complex series of problems that lasted well into the 1950s. There was the task of rebuilding homes, businesses, factories, schools, and hospitals that had been bombed by Nazi Germany. Additionally, Britain faced high unemployment, rationing, long-term debt, and the related problem of inflation. Much of Britain's infrastructure that had survived the war needed updating. Factors such as high unemployment, the national debt, and the collapse of the British Empire in the post-war years left a new generation of young people unemployed and directionless. Typically many of these young men would have been conscripted into the Army or employed in factories, but now they were seemingly adrift, left to find their own direction to adulthood.

What lay ahead was a rebellious and creative course. This new social order gave rise to a unique identity created by these youths labeled "Teddy Boys."¹ Teddy Boys were really the first group of teenagers in England to identify and differentiate themselves by their actions and dress. Some groups of Teddy Boys or "Teds" gained infamy by forming gangs that often clashed with rival gangs. The British media tended to exaggerate this "social problem" among the youth. Laughable by today's standards, these "wild youth" were terrifying to the proper English adult mind set.

The heyday of the Teddy Boy occurred during the mid 1950s, and "Ted" was followed closely by the American-born "rocker". James Dean and Marlon Brando provided the "look" (tight-legged blue jeans, tee shirts, and leather jackets) and Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and others provided the soundtrack in the form of early Rock and Roll. British Baby Boomers were quick to model themselves after these new American icons. The mantra of this new working class youth was to "live fast and die young."

Central to this new era of youth culture in Britain was live music and the pursuit of late-night wild abandon. There were no "mums" around, and these new rockers were drawn to coffee bars in the West End Soho area of London to live the Rock and Roll dream all night long and forget the daily drudgery. "Enter the cosmopolitan mix of Soho and you've tapped into a defining spirit of tolerance; a den of artists, writers and worldly souls. There's an openness and acceptance of different ways and no pressure to conform."² It was the perfect environment for a free-spirited, nonconformist drummer to begin his career.

The 2 I's Coffee Bar

The Soho section of London exploded with the music of Jazz, Skiffle, New Orleans “Dixieland”, and Britain’s own version of Rock and Roll in the 1950s. Teens from around the city were drawn to the many coffee bars lining Soho’s Old Compton Street like moths to a flame. The invention of the espresso machine by Achille Gaggia in Milan in 1946 gave rise to the mania of coffee bars that hit London with enormous impact in the 1950s.³ The chrome, art-deco coffeemaker was often the dominant visual element in many coffee houses. As the number of coffee bars increased, competition among bar owners helped create new novelties such as jukeboxes, expanded menus, and eventually live music. Lunch time music sessions, as well as evening coffee sets, were packed to the rafters with teens seeking their daily fix of this fiery new music scene. However, no coffee bar was more packed, hotter, and more jiving than the 2 I’s Coffee Bar located at 59 Old Compton Street.



The 2 I’s Coffee Bar 1950s.

The 2 I’s Coffee Bar opened in the spring of 1956. Paul Lincoln, a former world middleweight wrestler – nicknamed “The President” standing behind the Formica bar serving frothy coffees – owned the 2 I’s. His partner was an Australian named Ray Hunter. One could easily credit these two men with the birth of the modern British music scene, for without their supplying teens with gallons of caffeine and a hassle-free home to play and listen to new music, the scene might well have blossomed in another city or even another country. Lincoln and Hunter quickly expanded the business from serving coffee to music promotion and management, as talented young musicians flocked to play at their club.

In April 1956, the 2 I’s business had not yet begun to thrive. However, within a short time the new owners began to feature guitarists and singers. The early clientele consisted of Soho artists, unemployed layabouts, and Rock and Roll dreamers. With live music, word-of-mouth began to spread as more bohemians floated in for their all-night espresso fix and music. The musical melting pot of Country, Ska, Jazz, Skiffle, and Rock was an irresistible minestrone of new sounds.

Standing outside 59 Old Compton Street in the mid-to-late 1950s, one would have heard the muffled sounds of Rock and Roll escaping from its basement. On the outside, it looked quite innocent with its rectangular sign that simply read “2 I’s Coffee Bar, Home to the Stars.” Hundreds of people would pass the coffee house each day, without a clue that a cultural revolution was going on inside. But behind its doors, the 2 I’s served as a breeding ground for Britain’s first generation of Rock stars including Tommy Steele; Joe Brown; Johnny Gentle; Billy Fury; Marty Wilde; Georgie Fame; Vince Eager; Colin Hicks; and ultimately, a young drummer named Jimmie Nicol.

Upon entering the 2 I's, you initially passed the American jukebox straight ahead between ~~the service counter with its coffee machine, juice dispenser, and sandwich selection on the left.~~ The Formica shelf to the right was built to rest your coffee cup and saucer. At the end of the room was the narrow "stairway to heaven" that led down (rather than up) to the world-famous basement where the coffee bar's music was performed. If you were lucky enough to get to the bottom of the stairs, you would run into a wall of humanity. Musician Ian Samwell described the scene aptly, "Rock and Roll sardines all packed in neatly and all facing the same direction; about fifty or sixty of them, the crème de la crème of London teendom."⁴

Singer Vince Eager fondly recalls the basement of the 2 I's. "It was an amazing place. You wouldn't believe how small it was. In width, it was about twice the width of my arms extended and half again. The length of the 2 I's would be only about 25-30 feet."⁵ The sound system was quite primitive even by 1950's standards. "It was awful and very archaic," recalls Eager. "You really didn't need a sound system because it was such a small place people could hear you. The stage was at the opposite end of the stairs, in which you came down. So, when the place was packed and a band had to get onstage, they'd have to carry and pack all of their equipment over the heads of the audience. It was a bit manic. The 2 I's was a fascinating place. It was around long before the Cavern in Liverpool and it really was the birthplace of British Rock and Roll!"⁶ The 2 I's was the place to be discovered.

In 1957, Bill Haley & His Comets took America and England by storm with their hit *Rock Around The Clock*. Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Hotel* was another non-stop jukebox staple in all of the coffee bars. New bands and combinations of artists started to drift down to the 2 I's, as the coffee bar's reputation began to spread throughout England.

Not far from the 2 I's, Jimmie Nicol found a job repairing and maintaining drums at the Boosey & Hawkes musical equipment store. His days were full and he was making a decent wage. At the time, Boosey & Hawkes was one of the leading music publishers and manufacturers of musical instruments. Picking up more valuable techniques at Boosey & Hawkes, Nicol came to realize it was easier to play melodies in several ways on the drums than to jump on the piano at home.⁷ His job was not very glamorous, but at least it was related to his instrument, and it taught him how to be his own drum tech. Working at Boosey & Hawkes, also provided networking opportunities with other bands and musicians via word-of-mouth. Jimmie often heard about band tryouts and jam sessions needing drummers before any of the competition, thanks to his position at Boosey & Hawkes.

Nicol followed the beat of the music to the 2 I's. He was developing the chops to sit in with any musician in need of a drummer. This talent would serve him well as he began his descent down the steps of the 2 I's basement and his ascent up the British music industry ladder. Nicol had developed a raw, energetic style that could swing from the rafters with his full, muscular, arms-flying approach to drumming.

The music scene for drummers began to change in the mid-1950s. Many big bands were beginning to lose favor with this new generation of teens who wanted their own music. Jazz and swing-band percussion players formed smaller groups to twist their sound into Rock and Roll combinations. Bill Haley's "Rock Around The Clock" was a guiding force to Brit drummers listening for Rock music's new percussive patterns, and it set them free to experiment with their own kits.

Apprenticeship

Tony Crombie, a drummer who backed up singer Wee Willie Harris, was mining the rhythm and blues sounds of the 1940s to develop a new sound in England. In 1956, Crombie left Wee

Willie Harris to start up his own Rock combo modeled after Bill Haley.

——— Wee Willie's loss of drummer Crombie was Jimmie Nicol's gain, for Nicol briefly filled in behind Wee Willie on the drum kit.⁸ In the second half of the 1950s, Wee Willie served his apprenticeship at the 2 I's coffee bar as its resident piano player. Harris loved American Rock and Roll and performed with great energy to rile up the crowds. He would go on to record the song *Rocking at the Two I's* that would immortalize the club and an era. Jimmie Nicol learned a valuable lesson in showmanship from his brief stint with Harris that would serve him well with future bands.

During his day offs, Nicol would spend his time hanging out with other drummers. Brian Bennett, a drummer who would end up playing with Cliff Richard and the Shadows, recalls, "Through other drummers and my self used to have some great workouts together. They were Red Reece, Jimmie [sic] Nicol and Clem Cattini." He says they all used to get advice from veteran drummer Crombie. "Tony Crombie, a really fine player, lived above one of these coffee houses and often came in to give us words of advice and encouragement, which meant a great deal to us all."⁹

Drummers in the 1950s used a standard dance band drum set that included a bass drum and a hi-hat pedal, with a small tom-tom mounted on the bass drum. Off to the drummer's right hand laid the floor tom, with a snare drum tucked between the legs. On the left side, the hi-hat cymbals faced each other like clapping hands and were controlled by the left foot pedal that could bring them together on an offbeat pattern to accompany the snare drum. Two larger cymbals were used respectively for the sudden "crash" sound and the continuous time-keeping play of the "ride".

Nicol's first kit at the 2 I's lacked the mounted tom-tom and a crash cymbal. However, he more than compensated for his smaller kit with his hard hitting enthusiasm and precision. Nicol's white bass drumhead featured a nondescript blank white face, for he had not yet come up with a name or logo to display.

Jimmie continued paying his dues at the 2 I's and other coffee houses in Soho by sitting in for any band or singer who needed a drummer. This gave him the opportunity to listen, learn, and practice. Word began to spread that Jimmie Nicol could *really* play the drums. For a brief time, Ronnie Blackwell took Jimmie under his wing and provided him with an informal apprenticeship. Blackwell, who is considered Britain's first true Rock and Roller, was exciting teens with his wild performances in the 1950's. With his group, the Blackjacks, Blackwell was a regular performer in the London pubs, dance halls, and especially at the 2 I's coffee club. Occasionally, when the cockney singer came out front to sing his wild, new Rock music, he would let his trainee Jimmie Nicol slide behind his drum kit to quarterback the Blackjacks' rhythm section. Despite his love of drumming, Blackwell was happy to share the spotlight with his young up-and-coming protégé Mr. Nicol.

Guitarist Rick Hardy recalled working with Jimmie Nicol in 1958. "I first met Jimmie Nicol in the 2 I's Coffee Bar. Most Rock musicians at the time would 'pop' in to mix and get up and play. Jimmie was so good when he arrived on the scene that he MUST have had previous experience but I don't know what it was."¹¹ Rick Hardy had recently started as a guest singer at the 2 I's Coffee Bar. Soon afterwards he was asked to join the resident house band – "The Worried Men". "I was the resident singer at the 2 I's from March 1958 until May 1959. During that time, I made over 30 appearances there and when that happened I was the only singer to get paid! I can remember Jimmie Nicol sitting in quite a few times."¹² The Worried Men were impressed with Nicol's work behind the kit. "He swung like the clappers, as we used to say," says Hardy. "Jimmie was as good as anybody and better than most. And he was very professional in his manner."¹³



London's Soho District, late 1950s

Nicol had mastered Rock and Roll drumming very quickly and had developed the necessary hand and foot mechanics, accurate time keeping, and his own swinging groove to attract the interest of several up and coming bands. All he needed now was a steady, full-time, paying gig with a band, and he would be on his way. A steady gig would have to wait, however, for two men to come along who would turn the loose fraternal musicianship of the 2 I's into Britain's first wave of Rock stars. Their names were John Kennedy and Larry Parnes. They would become Britain's first Rock and Roll managers.

The Men behind the Curtain and Britain's Elvis

As the music of the 2 I's washed out of the cellar onto the street like water breaching a levee, the waves of backbeats washed over John Kennedy. Kennedy, a Heathrow freelance photographer, was invited by the club's owner on this particular night to check out The Vipers skiffle group. It was a hot, sticky fall night in September 1956.

Curious at the loud music pouring onto Old Compton Street, Kennedy decided to investigate. After squeezing through the crowded entrance and down the steps to the basement, through swinging masses of humanity, he witnessed what many say was the moment Rock and Roll was born in England.¹⁴ Kennedy was no music producer, nor did he have perfect pitch to evaluate the young man singing up on stage that night. However, what Kennedy lacked in a musical ear, he more than made up for in his astute observations of the singer's style and the crowd's reaction. "The music bounced back and forth off the walls, flooded through the crowd and hit you in the ears like a tidal wave," he recalls.¹⁵ What he saw was a revelation. Waves of young men and women were smoking cigarettes and drinking their coffee, with eyes fixed on a blond youth singing, strumming, and dancing about on the stage. The cheeky lad had strolled casually up onto the stage during a break in The Vipers' set. Kennedy was witnessing modern day idolatry and "layer after layer of adulation."¹⁶ The young man was singing a new Elvis Presley song, *Heartbreak Hotel*, normally reserved for the

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