Book review: The 'cutest' Beatle finally gets his close-up

May 21, 2016 12:00 AM
By Glenn C. Altschuler

In the mid-1950s, while Jim McCartney sat in the living room of his home in Liverpool, listening to Mantovani on BBC radio, his son Paul was upstairs, with Bakelite headphones strapped to his ears, trying to sing along with and write down the lyrics of recordings by Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Chuck Berry beamed across the English Channel from Luxembourg.

Young Paul’s exposure to rock ‘n’ roll, and his fascination with Elvis’ voice, his clothes, his guitar and his ability to whip up female frenzy, led him (and his chum George Harrison) to join a group called the Quarrymen, led by John Lennon, that would in the 1960s (in homage to Buddy Holly’s Crickets) begin to call themselves The Beatles.

In “Paul McCartney: The Life,” Philip Norman, the author of “Shout: The Beatles in Their Generation” and “John Lennon: The Life,” draws on interviews with family members, friends and associates in a comprehensive biography of the legendary pop music icon that sheds light on his childhood, his tumultuous relationship with John Lennon, his career after the breakup of the “Fab Four,” his marriage to Linda Eastman, the love of his life, his struggles with alcohol and drugs, and his disastrous union with and divorce from Heather Mills.

The biography is full of interesting bits of information. Intended as a message of comfort for 6-year-old Julian Lennon, whom John had abandoned following his divorce, Mr. Norman indicates that “Hey Jude” (originally titled “Hey Jules”) morphed into an homage to Thomas Hardy’s novel “Jude the Obscure.” Apparently, John missed the point completely, seizing on the line “You have found her, now go and get her” as an endorsement of his affair with Yoko Ono. Later, Mr. Norman adds, Lennon maintained that when Paul sang the refrain of “Get Back” — “get back to where you once belonged” — he stared menacingly at Yoko.

Mr. Norman’s explanation of the breakup of the Beatles sticks pretty closely to conventional wisdom. They “were no longer gods,” he writes, “no longer hungry but sated a thousand times
over, no longer passionate but weary beyond imagining, and no longer amenable to being driven by anyone on earth.” Especially the perennially disciplined Paul McCartney. The Beatles dissolved, Mr. Norman adds, “in synch with” the divisive 1960s.

This interpretation seems at odds with his claim that had Lee Eastman, Linda’s father, become the manager of the band (instead of Allen Klein) following the death of Brian Epstein, “their partnership might never have ended in the messy, anticlimactic way it did.”

To this reviewer, who, to be sure, is not a Beatle-maniac, Mr. Norman’s narrative of Mr. McCartney’s life since the 1970s is far too long. Most readers, I suspect, will grow bored with the details of every charge and countercharge in Mr. McCartney’s divorce proceedings. And when Mr. Norman ventures into politics, they will find some of his claims dubious. He asserts, for example, that Tony Blair’s revelation that he sang with a student band called The Ugly Rumours and played the air guitar in front of his wardrobe mirror, “contributed significantly” to the landslide victory of “the hip, even hippyish” prime minister.

More important, though, Mr. Norman does help explain why Mr. McCartney’s talents peaked when he was in his 20s. He suggests that the tense, competitive relationship Mr. McCartney had with Lennon was a source of creativity for both men. He speculates that while under “The Curse of ‘Yesterday,’” Mr. McCartney found it almost impossible to match “Penny Lane” or even “When I’m Sixty Four.”

And, of course, Mr. Norman reminds us that we should be truly grateful that the Magical Mystery Tour guided by Paul McCartney remains a gift that keeps on giving.

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