December 27, 1960

They had begun to pour into the village of Litherland as they always did, half an hour before the doors opened. Nightcrawlers: their bodies young and liquid, legs spidering along the sidewalks, exaggerated by the blue glare of the streetlamps. This time of year, Sefton Road at 6:30 was already dark; evening pressed down early from the desolate sky, raked by gunmetal gray clouds drifting east across the river toward the stagnating city of Liverpool.

Tuesdays at Litherland’s town hall were usually what promoters referred to as “soft nights”—that is, midweek affairs attracting a reasonable 600 or 700 jivers, as opposed to the weekend crush of 1,500—but tonight’s shindig was billed as a Christmas dance, which accounted for the unusually large crowd. Every few minutes another double-decker bus groaned to a halt outside the hall and emptied a heaving load of teenagers onto the pavement. The crowd, moving erratically in the brittle night air, swelled like a balloon waiting for a dart.

The main attraction, ex post facto, had not yet arrived. Running customarily behind schedule, the band had left West Derby Village later than anticipated after choosing, by consensus, a playlist for that night’s performance. The selection process was no mean feat, considering their repertoire of well over 150 rock ’n roll songs, from the seminal hits (“Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” “What’d I Say”) to pop standards (“Better Luck Next Time,” “Red Sails in the Sunset”) to obscure gems (“You Don’t Understand Me”); each demanded brief consideration. Afterward, equipment was loaded into the old bottle green van that had been recruited for service only that morning.

The four boys, riding in the dark, grimy cargo hold like astronauts in a cramped space capsule, braced themselves with experienced hands as the
old crate rattled north along the Stanley Road, past shops splashed with a waxy fluorescence. The road hugged the shoreline, where they could see harbor lights and the wharves of the distant port, then broke inland along the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Even to a native, which they all were, it was difficult to tell where one borough ended and another began: Crosby became Kirkdale and eventually Bootle, then Litherland, their boundaries marked only by wide-mouthed intersections and the occasional shop sign incorporating a piece of local heritage into its name.

They stared silently out the back window for a while, absorbing the hallucinatory darkness. Paul McCartney and George Harrison, both prodigiously handsome, straddled two boxy amplifiers, while Pete Best, shifting and elusive, posted like a cowboy atop a bass drum case. Unspeaking also, John Lennon, who had been to Litherland twice before, rode shotgun in order to direct their driver to the proper location.

Chas Newby knew he was the odd man out. Crouched perilously on an enameled wheel arch, he regarded his mates with respectful detachment. Until a week before, nearly half a year had passed since he'd last heard them play. Those few months ago, they were like most other aspiring Liverpool bands, talented but unexceptional, performing identical cover versions of current hits that everyone else was doing. "I certainly didn't think they would make much of an impression," he says, recalling their muddy sound, their clumsy, mechanical attack, their unintentional anarchy. In fact, his former band, the Blackjacks, in which Pete Best had played, was no better or worse at entertaining the kids who followed local groups from dance club to dance club to dance club. On any given night, five bands on a bill would perform the same set of songs—the same way. Homogeneity was the criterion on which the whole scene turned.

Now suddenly everything had changed. When Chas had arrived at Pete's house in West Derby Village the week before, he was quite unprepared for the scene inside. The living room was overheated and brighter than usual. An umbrella of purple smoke hung over the coffee table, Coke bottles lay scattered like chess pieces. As Newby moved toward the couch, his eyes filled with a vision that looked like one of Rouault's Gothic monochromes: four ravenlike figures were grouped there, clad in ominous bruised leather and blackness—trousers, T-shirts, jackets, boots, a riot of black. It took him a few seconds, reading the faces of the caped quartet, to realize they belonged to Pete Best and musicians he'd previously known collectively as the Quarry Men.
The band hadn’t played a date in weeks, owing to a creeping malaise that nearly rendered them extinct. Then, a week ago, four decent gigs materialized, which they’d hungrily accepted, despite one glaring obstacle: their bass player, Stuart Sutcliffe, was spending the holiday in Germany with his girlfriend.

“We need a bass player,” one of the musicians complained,courting Newby.

Best nodded significantly. “Get yourself a bass and practice with us,” he said. Newby was amused and touched by their invitation. His know-how extended only to rhythm guitar, but he was familiar with droning bass figures, and George Harrison, the band’s true technician, volunteered to simplify it for him.

Newby borrowed a bass from his friend Tommy McGurk and agreed to an impromptu practice. They set up shop in the Bests’ capacious basement—a room that moonlighted as the Casbah jive club, where kids came to hang out and dance—and ran down some songs. “The sort of music they played was fairly easy to pick up,” Newby says. But the sound they made unnerved him. It was still dependent on cover versions of current hits, but unlike the reverential copies performed by all other Liverpool bands, they burst through an entirely new dimension. These songs were not meticulous imitations, there was nothing neat or controlled about them. They were fierce, rip-roaring, they had real muscle, underscored by Best’s vigorous drumming—a lusty, propulsive volley that drove each song over a cliff—and the vocal acrobatics of McCartney. Newby was amazed at how Paul, especially, had transformed himself from an able crooner into a belter whose vocal range seemed to spiral off the charts. “Paul had developed this way of falsetto singing that knocked me for a loop,” he says. “No one in Liverpool sang like that, like Little Richard—no one.”

Lennon, more than anyone, knew they had made great strides. (Years later he would acknowledge as much, saying, “We thought we were the best before anybody else had even heard us, back in Hamburg and Liverpool.”) But only that August the band had left Liverpool a virtual embarrassment. Their playing was haphazard, their direction uncharted. The word around town was that their band was the worst outfit on the circuit—not even a band, if you took into account that they were unable to hold a drummer. Howie Casey, who fronted the Seniors and would one day play for Wings,
prologue

says, “We sure didn’t know them, and I don’t think anybody else . . . knew them either.” Only one bandleader of significance was able to recall a nightmarish triple bill they’d played that May at Lathom Hall, in the Liverpool suburb of Seaforth. “They were so bad,” he said, “[the promoter] just shut the curtains on them!”

So it had been off to Hamburg and then, afterward, the bleak likelihood of an apprenticeship on the Liverpool docks, a clerk’s position at the Cotton Exchange or British Rail, or rivet duty at one of the automobile plants sprouting in the suburbs. No doubt about it, after Germany there would be no further high life. John Lennon had been chucked out of art college for extreme indifference, a disgrace he seemed to court, as if a dark diagnosis had been confirmed. Paul McCartney had squandered his early academic promise by performing so poorly on his exams that teachers abandoned any hope that he’d advance to the university level. George Harrison, who regarded school as a terrific inconvenience, had decided to sit for exams—and failed every one of them. Thrilled by performing, Pete Best had drifted away from plans to attend a teachers training college. Only Stuart Sutcliffe, who was an impassioned, proven artist, had any hope of success, and his bandmates knew he would eventually forsake music to pursue his destiny as a serious painter.

But Hamburg had thrown them all a powerful curve. Something strangely significant had happened there, something intangible opened a small window of hope and gave their dreams an unpredictable new lift. Their shows took on an excitement that bordered on anarchy. Frustrated by the feeble drone that English rock ’n roll bands had settled into, they exploited their notoriety as “a gang of scruffs” and pumped up the volume. They began retooling their show to reach the audience through antics gleaned from hell-raisers like Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis. In the process, they became not only rigorously proficient onstage but immensely popular with the German nightclub crawlers.

Then, just as mercurially, it all came crashing down.

The Hamburg gig had ended in tumultuous disarray, with the boys being deported in an unbecoming fashion and shipped north again in irregular, onerous shifts. For two weeks they bummed around Liverpool, sad and aimless, avoiding one another like animals forced to share a cage in a zoo. Evidence that their dream had ended loomed starkly, and the freight of one another’s company made it that much harder to bear.

It was in the midst of this deepening depression that John and Pete turned up together at the tiny Jacaranda coffee bar. They had come for a
coffee and, by chance, encountered Bob Wooler, a nappy, courtly man of twenty-eight with no youth left to him aside from a passion for popular music. No one nurtured the Liverpool rock 'n roll community more ably than Wooler, a failed songwriter, until it was jerked sideways by the vise grip of Brian Epstein a few years later. He projected the dazzling eloquence of an actor and anchored his voice with a facile, flowery resonance that gave his young protégés a sense of confidence. All afternoon Lennon and Best sat sulking, ill at ease, at one of the tiny postage-stamp-size tables, surrounded by clusters of bearded university students, and whined to Wooler about their professional situation. They wanted to work again—badly. Anything would do: a show, a dance, a club date, even a party. He had to help them, he just had to, they insisted.

The only event of significance was the upcoming Christmas dance at Litherland Town Hall. Wooler called promoter Brian Kelly from the Jacaranda's kitchen, while Lennon and Best stood nearby, hanging on his every word. On the other end of the line, Kelly's stagy sigh leched impatience. A cantankerous entrepreneur who was among the small band of missionaries spreading the gospel of rock 'n roll, he had heard it all before and was used to the gale force of Wooler's rhetoric when it came to plugging musicians. As far as Kelly was concerned, Wooler was trying to pick his pocket. Besides, he had already booked three bands to entertain. But Wooler was persuasive.

"They're fantastic," he assured Kelly, who deflected the compliment with a discernible grunt. "Could you possibly put them on as an extra? Like I said, they've been to Hamburg."

To punctuate this distinction, Wooler asked him for a fee of £8 for the band, an extraordinary amount for a local attraction. Kelly didn't take more than a second to respond. "Ridiculous!" Determinedly, Wooler pursued another line of argument to help further his case. "Yes, but they're professionals now," he said. This made Kelly sputter in disgust. "Professional! I don't give a sod about them being professional," he said.

Wooler cast an uneasy eye over his shoulder at the vigilant boys, their faces slipping in and out of the late-afternoon shadows. Hamburg had aged them, he thought. Best, the taller of the two, was bristle-haired, with a ghostly transparency in his eyes and the type of soft, matinee-idol features that could quicken a girl's pulse; Lennon, although a few inches shorter, seemed more in command by the hard glare he threw and the pitch of his face, set in an expression of thin-lipped satisfaction. And it was apparent to both of them that the conversation was not going as planned.
Momentarily distracted, Wooler threw them a swift, professional smile before returning to his sales pitch.

He and Brian Kelly went at it for another five minutes, feinting and jabbing with particulars that served their respective causes, until they had brokered an acceptable deal. Afterward, Wooler faced another uphill battle, persuading Best and Lennon to accept Kelly’s £6 offer. It was considerably less than they had made overseas, nothing that would give them much incentive. But after all, it was a gig, it was another opportunity to play rock ’n roll. For the moment, they were back in business.

Past the old container dock in Bootle, Stanley Road broke up into a couple of two-lane tributaries that fed into Linacre Road. The road began a descent, and rounding a curve, they saw the town itself, stretched haggard beneath the unflattering winter light. Litherland had a great many shops, with a Methodist mission whose solid buff-and-red brick hulk was used as a mortuary during the Blitz. The floodlit Richmond sausage works sign, with its giddy neon pig marching off with a string of pork links, provided a beacon to the south; the stubby marquee outside the Regal Cinema glowed at the opposite end; the rest of the town existed obliquely behind the main road. There was no visible horizon, just block after block of wafer-thin terrace houses joined at the hip and strung together like shabby plastic beads. There had been a time when Litherland, with its rich green farms, stood proudly at the mouth of the Mersey, but the Luftwaffe had ruined its dreams. The brick-faced match works, hit by German incendiaries, remained a bombed-out blackened shell, while farther on, flattened gaps in row houses and caved-in church roofs stood as signposts to the area’s tumultuous past.

Frank Garner, the band’s driver (none of their families owned a car), pulled the van as close as he could to the entrance so the boys could unload their gear. In the gathering darkness, they could see a dozen or so teenagers lingering by the doors. The lack of a dense queue made the band uneasy until they realized that everyone had already gone inside to avoid the gamy stench seeping from the tannery on Field Lane, just beyond the hall.

In a scramble, they climbed out, lugging their equipment, and hurried in through an old wooden corridor cobbled to an open cloakroom that reeked of Minor’s hair lacquer and disinfectant. The town council chamber and auxiliary offices, where villagers paid their bills, had been closed since 5:30, so the band wound along a hallway lined with deserted rooms to the backstage area, where Bob Wooler fussed over the evening’s playlist.
Wooler was pleasantly surprised to see them. In the course of booking the date, John Lennon had bristled that the fee wasn’t worth all the effort, and Wooler pleaded, “For God’s sake, don’t let me down.” Lennon assured him they would turn up, but Wooler was skeptical.

Still, he decided to put them on at nine o’clock—the “center spot,” as it was known—between the Deltones and the Searchers. “It meant that everyone would be inside the hall,” Wooler recalls, “no one entering late or leaving early. For a half hour, they would have Liverpool’s complete attention.” Why Wooler did this remains a mystery—even to himself. Although he’d heard the band on an earlier occasion, it was only for a song before he fled to the refuge of a pub, leaving him without much of an opinion. Nor was he encouraged by their attitude. But as a victim of artistic frustration, Bob was drawn inexorably to the band’s sorry predicament, especially to John’s vulnerability. Wooler sensed in Lennon a person of awesome complexity and ambition; the boy seemed to emanate heat, signaling some kind of raw, restless talent. There was something there worth exploring, he concluded. “So I just trusted my instinct that they would go down in an unusual, important way.”

The house was full, framed in hazy silhouette—not a fleet of drunken sailors, like in Hamburg, but local teenagers, many of whom they had gone to school with. Wooler busied himself with preparations, but between the second and third records of the intermission (there was a rule: three songs between sets, no more, to avoid the possibility of fights), he walked over to deliver some last-minute advice. “I’ll announce you,” he hastened to tell them, “then go straight into a number as soon as the curtain opens.” He watched the recognition register on the boys’ faces but noted a faint disapproval in their manner. So be it, he thought.

Out front, they could hear the overheated crowd, its attention slipping away. The throng of teenagers wanted action. They had danced distractedly between acts; the records were no substitute for the real thing, and now, in the rambling fade, their liquid laughter and stridence signaled an excitement that sought to condense into impatience. Besides, there was a general curiosity about the next band, which had been added at the eleventh hour and was advertised as being “Direct from Hamburg.” A German act. It would be interesting, from the pitch of their accents and their delivery, to see how they contrasted with the sharpness of Liverpool’s top bands.

The hall was packed with teenagers, many of whom had gathered at card tables along both sidewalls to await the next act. The majority were
attired in what was respectfully called “fancy dress” for what remained of the holiday festivities. The well-scrubbed boys, whose dark suits were also their school uniforms, looked stiff and self-conscious, while girls, sheathed in tight calf-length skirts and white shirts, paraded gaily to and from the upstairs bathroom, applying last-minute retouches to their makeup. Those who danced drifted casually across the big, open dance floor, keeping an eye on the stage as the band shuffled into place behind the curtain. Promptly, amps crackled in resistance: John and George plugged into a shared Truvoice that saw them through infancy, while Paul switched on his trusty seafoam green Ampico. The audience stirred and half turned while Bob Wooler crooned into an open mike: “And now, everybody, the band you’ve been waiting for. Direct from Hamburg—”

But before he got their name out, Paul McCartney jumped the gun and, in a raw, shrill burst as the curtain swung open, hollered: “I’m gonna tell Aunt Mary / ’bout Uncle John / he said he had the mis’ry / but he got alotoffun . . .”

Oh, baby! The aimless shuffle stopped dead in its tracks. The reaction of the audience was so unexpected that Wooler had failed, in the first few seconds, to take note of it. Part of the reason was the shocking explosion that shook the hall. A whomp of bass drum accompanied each quarter note beat with terrific force. The first one struck after Paul screamed, “Tell,” so that the charge ricocheted wildly off the walls. There was a second on Mary, and then another, then a terrible volley that had the familiar bam-bam-bam of a Messerschmitt wreaking all hell on a local target: an assault innocent of madness. The pounding came in rhythmic waves and once it started, it did not stop. There was nowhere to take cover on the open floor. All heads snapped forward and stared wild-eyed at the deafening ambush. The music crashing around them was discernibly a species of rock ’n roll but played unlike they had ever heard it before. Oh ba-by, yeahhhhhhh / now ba-by, woooooo . . . It was convulsive, ugly, frightening, and visceral in the way it touched off frenzy in the crowd.

The band’s physical appearance created another commotion. For a tense moment, the crowd just stared, awestruck, trying to take in the whole disturbing scene. Four of the musicians were dressed in the black suits they’d bought at the Texas Shop in Hamburg: beautiful cracked-leather jackets with padded shoulders and artificial sheepskin lining that proved sweltering under the lights, black T-shirts, and silky skintight pants. With instruments slung low across their bodies, they looked like a teenage-rebel
fantasy come to life. Nor could anyone take his eyes off the rude cowboy boots with flat, chopped heels that each man wore, especially John Lennon’s, which were ornate Twin Eagles, emblazoned with birds carved on both the front and back and outlined with white stitching.

“I’d never seen any band look like this before,” says Dave Foreshaw, a Liverpool promoter, who gazed on the spectacle in utter astonishment. “I thought: ‘What are they? Who are they?’”

As if someone had flashed a prearranged cue, the entire crowd rushed the stage, pressing feverishly toward the footlights. Impetuous girls and boys alike abandoned their social proprieties to a purely emotional response. Everyone had stopped dancing; there was now a total gravitation toward the stage. Sensing that a fight had broken out, Brian Kelly rushed inside with several bouncers in tow. The promoter experienced a moment of real panic. According to Bob Wooler, “Long afterwards, [Kelly] told me they were seconds away from using brute force when he finally realized what the fuss was about.”

The band, too, arrived at the same conclusion and began working the crowd into a sweat. They turned up the juice and tore into a wild jam. Drawing upon stage antics they’d devised while in Germany, they twisted and jerked their bodies with indignant energy. John and George proceeded to lunge around like snapping dogs and stomp loudly on the bandstand in time to the music. (Newby, forced to watch Harrison’s hands for chord changes, joined in the fun at irregular intervals, although to his dismay, the lack of decent cowboy boots made his part in the clowning “far less effective.”) “It was just so different,” recalls Bill Ashton, an apprentice fitter for British Rail, who sang part-time as Billy Kramer with a band called the Coasters and had come to Litherland to size up the “foreign” competition. “To act that way onstage and make that kind of sound—I was absolutely staggered.”

Like everyone else, Kramer was used to bands that patterned themselves after Cliff Richard and the Shadows, England’s top rock ’n roll act and practitioners of smooth, carefully tended choreography. Up till then, everyone had followed in the Shadows’ dainty footsteps. This band, however, was a beast of a different nature. According to Dave Foreshaw, “Normally, [popular Liverpool bands such as] the Remo Four or the Dominoes would come on and . . . perform in a polite, orderly way. This band’s performance attacked the crowd. They [played] aggressively and with a lot less respect. They just attacked them!” And when John Lennon
stepped to the mike and challenged the crowd to “get your knickers down!” the audience, in a state of unconscious, indiscriminate euphoria, screamed and raised their arms in delight.

Brian Kelly, especially, perceived a seismic shift in the landscape and moved fast to contain it by posting bouncers at the doors to prohibit rival promoters like Foreshaw from poaching his bounty. But it was too late for such empty measures. The house erupted in hysteria as the band concluded its half-hour set with a rousing version of “What’d I Say,” in which Paul McCartney jackknifed through the crowd, whipping the kids into rapturous confrontation. Over the last wild applause, Bob Wooler managed to say, “That was fantastic, fellas,” but it was doubtful anyone paid much attention to him. They were too busy trying to connect with what had just gone down on that stage, what had turned their little Christmas dance into a full-scale epiphany.

This much was inevitable: the band had somehow squeezed every nerve of the local rock ’n roll scene, and that scene would never be the same. In the wall of grinding sound and the veil of black leather, they had staked their claim to history. And in that instant, they had become the Beatles.