

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #239
The Tragic Life Of Brian Epstein - The Man Who
Discovered The Beatles
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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about Brian Epstein - The Man Who Discovered The Beatles.

[00:00:31] If I asked you to name the members of The Beatles, I imagine you could do it. John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Star.

[00:00:41] But there was another member, a man Paul McCartney called “the fifth Beatle”, and his name was Brian Epstein.

[00:00:51] The reason you may not have heard of him is because he didn't play guitar or sing.

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[00:00:56] He wasn't up there on [stage](#)¹ with them. And when you see any pictures of The Beatles, there are four of them, not five.

[00:01:06] But Brian Epstein played a hugely important role in the most famous rock & roll band in history, and we are going to tell that story today.

[00:01:16] From his early life to how he discovered the Beatles, how he changed their image and [set them on course](#)² for success, but how his life was [mired](#)³ in tragedy, and how it all came to a crashing end when he was only 32 years old.

[00:01:34] It is a sad but amazing story, so I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:01:40] OK then, The Tragic Life Of Brian Epstein.

[00:01:45] Brian Samuel Epstein was born in 1934, the first-born son of a middle-class Jewish family in Liverpool, in the north-west of England.

[00:01:57] Epstein had a relatively [privileged](#)⁴ childhood, attending good schools and living in a good area of the city. His father wanted him to [take on](#)⁵ the family business, a

¹ a raised floor or platform on which artists perform

² made it likely for them (to succeed)

³ covered by, was deep in

⁴ having certain advantages

⁵ start working on

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furniture business that his grandfather had founded, which his father had expanded later into a record store.

[00:02:18] And Brian Epstein might well have lived a happy, semi-anonymous life, had he not been working in his family's record store at 3pm on Saturday, October the 28th of 1961.

[00:02:33] An eighteen-year-old boy walked into the store and came up to Epstein.

[00:02:39] He said "There's a record I want. It's "My Bonnie" and it was made in Germany. Have you got it?"

[00:02:48] The record store Epstein was managing was one of the most popular in Liverpool. They had thousands of records, and people [flocked⁶](#) to the store from all over the north of England to buy music.

[00:03:01] But the store didn't have "My Bonnie", or at least Epstein didn't think they had it.

[00:03:08] "Who is the record by?", he asked the boy.

[00:03:12] "You won't have heard of them. It's by a group called 'The Beatles'".

[00:03:16] But Epstein had heard of The Beatles.

⁶ came in large numbers

[00:03:19] He wasn't just the manager of a family record store. He was starting to [make a name for himself](#)⁷ in the music business, and had recently started writing a music column in a local magazine.

[00:03:33] So he [had his ear to the ground](#)⁸ when it came to [up and coming](#)⁹ groups, and he had heard mentions of a group of young men called The Beatles.

[00:03:44] The Beatles had formed a year earlier, in 1960, but had not seen great success. They had toured clubs in Liverpool, and spent three and a half months playing clubs in Hamburg, in Germany.

[00:04:00] But they were far from the Beatles that you might think of.

[00:04:05] They [tended](#)¹⁰ to wear black leather, and their hair was long and [messy](#)¹¹. They played [cover songs](#)¹², they played other bands' music, and they didn't have any songs of their own.

⁷ become known

⁸ was well informed

⁹ likely to be successful

¹⁰ were likely to

¹¹ untidy, not taken care of

¹² songs of other bands or artists

[00:04:18] But they were starting to get better known, and the fact that a young man came into the store and asked Epstein for that record specifically, well, it [piqued his interest](#)¹³, he wanted to find out more.

[00:04:34] He saw that the band was scheduled to play a concert the following Thursday. It was a lunchtime concert at a club within walking distance from the record store, so Epstein decided to use his lunch break to go along and check it out for himself.

[00:04:53] What he saw was the [scruffy](#)¹⁴, [untidy](#)¹⁵ group of young men dressed in [leather](#)¹⁶. But he sensed that there was something there, there was star potential.

[00:05:05] He later said, "I was immediately [struck](#)¹⁷ by their music, their [beat](#)¹⁸ and their sense of humour on [stage](#)—and, even afterwards, when I met them, I was struck again by their personal charm. And it was there that, really, it all started".

[00:05:24] He decided that he wanted to become their manager, and spent the next couple of months trying to convince the band to accept.

¹³ made him interested

¹⁴ showing lack of care, untidy

¹⁵ showing lack of care, not arranged with care

¹⁶ material made from the skin of an animal

¹⁷ very impressed by

¹⁸ strong regular repeated pattern of sound, rhythm

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[00:05:34] The first time that Epstein actually proposed managing the band, all four of them were late.

[00:05:42] John Lennon, George Harrison and the previous drummer, Pete Best were at the pub. When they finally arrived Epstein was there, but Paul McCartney wasn't.

[00:05:55] George Harrison told Epstein that McCartney was late because he was in the bath, explaining that "he may be late but he'll be very clean".

[00:06:06] It took another month for everything to be finalised, but on January 24th of 1962 Brian Epstein officially became The Beatles' manager, [entitling](#)¹⁹ himself to 10 to 15% of their income.

[00:06:22] The thing was though, that Epstein had no experience managing a band, he had never done this before.

[00:06:30] He impressed The Beatles because he was a bit older than them - he was 27 and the oldest member of The Beatles, John Lennon, was only 21.

[00:06:40] What's more, he drove a nice car, he wore nice suits, and he was the manager of one of the biggest and most [prestigious](#)²⁰ record stores in Liverpool, the band's home city.

¹⁹ giving the legal right of

²⁰ respected and admired

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[00:06:53] The Beatles, on the other hand, came from a very different background, they came from a working class background.

[00:07:01] John Lennon, who actually had the most middle-class [upbringing](#)²¹ of the four of them, later said, “Epstein looked efficient and rich,” while McCartney admitted “we were very impressed by anyone in a suit or with a car.”

[00:07:17] He was also Jewish.

[00:07:19] Although Jewish people still faced significant anti-Semitism in most aspects of life, and Epstein had been regularly [bullied](#)²² as a child for his Jewish faith, reportedly the fact that Epstein was Jewish was helpful with [winning over](#)²³ the Beatles.

[00:07:37] This was because of a [stereotype](#)²⁴ Paul McCartney’s father had told his son that Jewish people were good with money, and therefore they should trust Epstein.

[00:07:48] So, because of all of this, Epstein was made manager.

[00:07:52] His first move as the band's manager was to [tidy up](#)²⁵ their image.

²¹ bringing-up, raising

²² hurt and frightened, harassed

²³ making them feel sure about him and support him

²⁴ a fixed or set idea people have about something

²⁵ arrange in a orderly and attractive way

[00:07:58] Gone were the [leather](#) jackets, replaced by smart suits and ties.

[00:08:04] Gone was the long hair, with the young men all now cleanly shaven and with [tidy](#)²⁶, short haircuts.

[00:08:12] They now [bowed](#)²⁷ on [stage](#), and they stopped smoking, eating and drinking during performances.

[00:08:19] They became a respectable, [tidy](#) group of polite young men.

[00:08:25] The group's [fortunes](#)²⁸ soon started to change.

[00:08:29] Epstein's reputation as a manager of an important record store [opened doors](#)²⁹ for them, and he got them meetings with record labels.

[00:08:38] They were signed to the record label Parlophone in June of 1962, they started recording their first album in early 1963, from which almost immediate national, then global, success followed.

²⁶ orderly and arranged in a nice way

²⁷ bent or lower the head or upper part of the body as a sign of respect and greeting

²⁸ conditions or circumstances

²⁹ created opportunities for success

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[00:08:53] Now, this episode isn't about The Beatles [per se](#)³⁰, it's about Epstein, so we will skip over [the ins and outs](#)³¹ of The Beatles' career. Much of it, I'm sure, is already familiar to you.

[00:09:07] They toured Europe, North America, Australia and East Asia. The band was [mobbed](#)³² by [adoring](#)³³ fans everywhere they went, so much so that there was even a word for this: Beatlemania.

[00:09:21] To state the obvious, they were the biggest, most famous, most influential and best known band in the world.

[00:09:29] And Epstein was the glue that kept them together, the man [behind the scenes](#)³⁴, organising tours, TV appearances, negotiating business arrangements, and so on.

[00:09:41] He was known as incredibly efficient, hard-working, [trustworthy](#)³⁵, and he made everything run [smoothly](#)³⁶.

³⁰ basically, essentially

³¹ the details

³² surrounded, crowded

³³ showing deep love and admiration

³⁴ doing things not known to the public

³⁵ able to be trusted

³⁶ easily, without problems

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[00:09:49] But Epstein had a secret, or at least a secret that the band knew about but was something that was closely [guarded](#)³⁷ and hidden to the outside world. He was gay, which was a criminal offence in the United Kingdom until 1967.

[00:10:08] And Epstein throughout his life had, like no doubt the majority of gay men at the time, suffered terribly with trying to live a double life, trying to pretend that he was something that he was not.

[00:10:22] His sexual orientation had got him in trouble from an early age. In 1952, at the age of 18, he had been [conscripted](#)³⁸ into military service, and [stationed](#)³⁹ in a base in London.

[00:10:37] He had always [taken great pride in](#)⁴⁰ his appearance, he liked to dress well, and the clothes provided by the army were, well, they didn't quite meet his standards.

[00:10:50] So, he got his own suit made, which looked much more like an officer's suit than a [private](#)⁴¹'s.

[00:10:57] And when he had a free evening, an evening off, he would wear this fancy suit and go to bars to meet men.

³⁷ protected against becoming known

³⁸ forced to join the army

³⁹ put, assigned to

⁴⁰ was very proud of

⁴¹ a soldier of the lowest rank

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[00:11:07] One evening, though, he was stopped by the police when he was returning back to his [barracks](#)⁴². He was wearing what appeared to be an officer's [uniform](#)⁴³ but he wasn't an officer.

[00:11:20] It was actually a crime to [impersonate](#)⁴⁴ an officer, to pretend to be an officer, and he was almost [kicked out](#)⁴⁵ of the army.

[00:11:29] He only managed to avoid this by agreeing to see a psychiatrist, after which he was [kicked out](#) of the army for being “emotionally and mentally [unfit](#)⁴⁶”, which was code for “gay”.

[00:11:44] Now, none of this mattered to The Beatles, as of course it shouldn't have.

[00:11:49] They joked about Epstein's sexuality, joking that he [fancied](#)⁴⁷ them and he wanted to be their manager as a way of getting closer to them. But they were all incredibly [fond of him](#)⁴⁸.

⁴² building where soldiers live

⁴³ the special set of clothes that has to be worn by soldiers

⁴⁴ pretend to be

⁴⁵ thrown out, expelled

⁴⁶ not suitable or able

⁴⁷ found them attractive

⁴⁸ having a liking or love for him

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[00:12:02] And there were actually persistent⁴⁹ rumours that Epstein had some sort of sexual relationship with John Lennon during a holiday they went on to Barcelona, but Lennon denied this, saying "Well, it was almost a love affair, but not quite. It was never consummated⁵⁰... but we did have a pretty intense relationship."

[00:12:25] Epstein's double life continued to weigh on him⁵¹.

[00:12:29] He started taking more and more drugs, and became more out of control than the boys six years his junior⁵² that he was supposed to be in charge of⁵³.

[00:12:40] He took stimulants⁵⁴, smoked marijuana, and took cocaine and heroin.

[00:12:46] While The Beatles were experimenting with drugs and drinking heavily, they seemed to know when to stop, but Epstein didn't.

[00:12:55] He was spiraling⁵⁵ out of control⁵⁶.

⁴⁹ lasting for a long time

⁵⁰ completed by having sexual relations

⁵¹ worry or trouble him

⁵² younger than him

⁵³ to be responsible for

⁵⁴ substances that speeds up the body system

⁵⁵ entering a bad situation fast and continuously

⁵⁶ without having control of the situation

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[00:12:58] He was also a [voracious⁵⁷ gambler⁵⁸](#). He had been growing rich off the Beatles' success, but he was known to lose money as fast as he made it, and was known to lose tens of thousands of pounds in a single evening.

[00:13:15] When the Beatles famously met Elvis Presley in 1965, Elvis's manager, another [unusual⁵⁹](#) character called Colonel Tom Parker, reportedly [set up⁶⁰](#) a roulette wheel and Epstein immediately started gambling.

[00:13:32] To anyone who didn't know what was going on in Epstein's life, it might have seemed like he was [on top of the world⁶¹](#).

[00:13:39] There he was, the thirty-something manager of the most famous band in the world, [immaculately⁶²](#) dressed, always on time, [looking the part⁶³](#), and arranging for his band to fly all over the world and be [mobbed](#) by [adoring](#) fans.

[00:13:56] Yet beneath the surface, he was in great emotional pain.

⁵⁷ having a strong desire for something

⁵⁸ someone who often played games of luck for money

⁵⁹ interesting because he was different from others

⁶⁰ placed, arranged

⁶¹ extremely happy

⁶² in a perfectly clean and arranged way

⁶³ having the appearance of an important and successful person

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[00:14:01] It got even worse when The Beatles stopped touring, when they stopped going on tour, in 1966.

[00:14:10] Epstein's talent and strength had been to keep things together when the band was on the road, and when they paused to focus on writing new material and recording, well he didn't have so much to do.

[00:14:25] Epstein's destructive cycle continued, and it only ended when he was found dead in his flat on August 27th of 1967, aged just 32 years old.

[00:14:40] He had accidentally [overdosed](#)⁶⁴ on a drug called Carbrital, which he had been taking to help him get to sleep. There were suicide notes found in his room, but they had been dated from several weeks before, and were hidden inside a book.

[00:14:57] It seems like Epstein had considered killing himself at least twice, and had gone so far as to write two different suicide letters, but had decided against it. And his death was [ruled](#)⁶⁵ accidental.

[00:15:13] The Beatles were, as you would expect, [rocked](#)⁶⁶ by the news of his death, and the group officially broke up three years later.

⁶⁴ taken too much of

⁶⁵ legally considered to be

⁶⁶ greatly shocked

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[00:15:22] Although there were plenty of reasons for the group to [split](#)⁶⁷, the unexpected death of their manager, the “fifth Beatle”, was an important one.

[00:15:32] Indeed, John Lennon later said, "I knew that we were in trouble then... I thought, 'We've f***** had it now.'"

[00:15:41] Epstein had lived in the Beatles’ shadow, he had managed all of their affairs, negotiated all of their commercial contracts and done all of the management so that John, Paul, George and Ringo were able to focus on what they did best: the music.

[00:15:58] With Epstein no longer there, there was this [gaping hole](#)⁶⁸.

[00:16:03] The group did, of course, [end up](#)⁶⁹ getting another manager, Allen Klein, but it was not a happy relationship, it was nothing compared to the bond that they had had with Brian Epstein, a man they [affectionately](#)⁷⁰ referred to as “Mr Epstein”.

[00:16:20] He was, by all accounts, a kind, generous, and loving man.

⁶⁷ end, disband

⁶⁸ very large hole

⁶⁹ did it in the end or eventually

⁷⁰ in a way that showed love and respect

[00:16:26] But he was driven to [despair⁷¹](#) by the cruel laws of the time, which [prohibited⁷²](#) him from being the man he really was.

[00:16:35] And although he had never done it before, he was clearly a talented band manager. He found four [untidy](#) young men in a dark Liverpool club and turned them into the most famous band on the planet.

[00:16:51] You might think that The Beatles might have had just as much success, if not more, had they never met Brian Epstein.

[00:16:59] You might be right.

[00:17:00] But the people who were there, who certainly know more than me and I imagine also more than you, definitely thought that the group [owed⁷³](#) a considerable part of their success to him.

[00:17:13] Cynthia Lennon, John Lennon's first wife, said that they wouldn't have got anywhere without Brian.

⁷¹ complete loss of hope

⁷² didn't allow him to

⁷³ had it because of him

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[00:17:20] And when Paul McCartney was asked about him in a 1997 documentary, he [summed up](#)⁷⁴ Epstein's importance for the group, "If anyone was the Fifth Beatle, it was Brian."

[00:17:35] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Brian Epstein - The Man Who Discovered The Beatles

[00:17:42] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:17:46] If you're a Beatles fan, then perhaps you knew about the importance of Epstein already.

[00:17:51] And if you had never heard of him before today, well, then you'll know about the man behind The Beatles.

[00:17:58] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:18:01] How important do you think Brian Epstein was in the success of The Beatles?

[00:18:06] What would have happened if they hadn't changed their image?

[00:18:10] How would their music have changed, if at all?

[00:18:13] Without Brian Epstein, would The Beatles as we know them even have existed?

[00:18:18] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

⁷⁴ expressed or described in a few words

[00:18:22] You can head right into our community forum, which is at
community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:18:31] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo
English.

[00:18:36] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Stage	a raised floor or platform on which artists perform
Set them on course	made it likely for them (to succeed)
Mired	covered by, was deep in
Privileged	having certain advantages
Take on	start working on
Flocked	came in large numbers
Make a name for himself	become known
Had his ear to the ground	was well informed
Up and coming	likely to be successful
Tended	were likely to
Messy	untidy, not taken care of

Cover songs	songs of other bands or artists
Piqued his interest	made him interested
Scruffy	showing lack of care, untidy
Untidy	showing lack of care, not arranged with care
Leather	material made from the skin of an animal
Struck	very impressed by
Beat	strong regular repeated pattern of sound, rhythm
Entitling	giving the legal right of
Prestigious	respected and admired
Upbringing	bringing-up, raising
Bullied	hurt and frightened, harassed
Winning over	making them feel sure about him and support him
Stereotype	a fixed or set idea people have about something
Tidy up	arrange in a orderly and attractive way
Tidy	orderly and arranged in a nice way

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Bowed	bent or lower the head or upper part of the body as a sign of respect and greeting
Fortunes	conditions or circumstances
Opened doors	created opportunities for success
Per se	basically, essentially
The ins and outs	the details
Mobbed	surrounded, crowded
Adoring	showing deep love and admiration
Behind the scenes	doing things not known to the public
Trustworthy	able to be trusted
Smoothly	easily, without problems
Guarded	protected against becoming known
Conscripted	forced to join the army
Stationed	put, assigned to
Taken great pride in	was very proud of
Private	a soldier of the lowest rank

Barracks	building where soldiers live
Uniform	the special set of clothes that has to be worn by soldiers
Impersonate	pretend to be
Kicked out	thrown out, expelled
Unfit	not suitable or able
Fancied	found them attractive
Fond of him	having a liking or love for him
Persistent	lasting for a long time
Consummated	completed by having sexual relations
Weigh on him	worry or trouble him
His junior	younger than him
To be in charge of	to be responsible for
Stimulants	substances that speeds up the body system
Spiraling	entering a bad situation fast and continuously
Out of control	without having control of the situation

Voracious	having a strong desire for something
Gambler	someone who often played games of luck for money
Unusual	interesting because he was different from others
Set up	placed, arranged
On top of the world	extremely happy
Immaculately	in a perfectly clean and arranged way
Looking the part	having the appearance of an important and successful person
Overdosed	taken too much of
Ruled	legally considered to be
Rocked	greatly shocked
Split	end, disband
Gaping hole	very large hole
End up	did it in the end or eventually
Affectionately	in a way that showed love and respect
Despair	complete loss of hope

Prohibited

didn't allow him to

Owed

had it because of him

Summed up

expressed or described in a few words

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com