

Memoirs of a Beatlemaniac

By Joe Stone

I was born a musician.

I remember being around 5 or 6 years old and pressing my ear to the speaker of my mom's Victrola record player, playing records by Fats Domino, Pat Boone, and Elvis, over and over again. It filled me with such a joyful feeling. I could pick out the individual instruments and how they were integrated. I knew then what I was going to be doing the rest of my life. I like to say that I didn't choose music but music chose me.

My parents saw how much I loved music, and signed me up for accordion lessons. I would ask the instructor to play the song first and then I would pretend to be reading the notes on the page while playing. He caught on when he noticed that I never turned the page of the sheet music. I was able to play songs that I had heard with ease. I picked up an old guitar and figured out how to play it on my own, and did the same at the piano, and eventually the same on a saxophone, and even drums. I never really learned to read music - I didn't have to, since I could hear a song once and figure out how to play

it immediately, on whatever instrument I picked up. Once at my grandad's house, he said that if I could play one of his violins, I could have it. I sat down with it and figured out some little song, and played it for him. It's now hanging on the wall in my home.

Growing up, I would play our piano for family gatherings and singalongs. My family moved a lot and I was the new kid in the neighborhood. My best friend was my music. If I wasn't listening to my favorite songs, I was playing an instrument.

I was in the eighth grade, living in Jersey City, NJ, when I first heard The Beatles on the car radio. It was December, 1963. I had just turned 14, and my family was returning home from a trip to Florida, where my grandparents lived. The car radio was tuned to a New York City station called, "WABC," but the DJ was saying "W-A-Beatles-C." I was confused. It was then that I heard "I Want To Hold Your Hand". It was exhilarating! I guess Florida was a bit behind the scene. Returning to my 8th grade class after Christmas break, all the girls were swooning over them, and most of the boys were jealous.

I, on the other hand, was changed forever! I knew immediately just how incredible and important the

Beatles and this new music was. These songs were nothing like the typical three-chord, doo-wop songs of the 50's. Rather, they had quite complex chord progressions. They came very naturally to me, and I could play them all before anyone else was able to figure them out.

I couldn't wait to hear their new songs and to start playing them. Keep in mind, in those days, you couldn't just stream the songs on Spotify, and there were not even cassettes, 8-tracks, or CD's yet. You either had to buy the records, or wait until the radio station played the song again to hear it on your transistor or car radio. It was always so exciting to hear them play a new Beatles song! To me, there was no other group anywhere near as good as the Beatles. They were SO much better than any others! I always wished I was about 7 years older so I could hang out with them and make music with them.

I felt blessed with this talent I possessed. However, there were times when I felt it was a curse. While most guys were interested in becoming successful financially, I was more interested in playing music and singing. I had a dream of writing and recording a symphony, by playing all the instruments myself and overdubbing several times - a one man

orchestra! I felt that would be groundbreaking, and quite an accomplishment. I did experiment with that, writing some sections and playing some of the instruments, but didn't have the proper recording equipment to fulfill this dream. I never really went back to it, as life took me in different directions.

Always in a band, I played Beatles songs as often as possible throughout high school. Most of their albums came out during those years. In 1968, I went to Maui for 2 years and attended Maunaolu College. I always had a guitar with me and knew all the Beatles songs and played them for my college friends. About that time, I started writing my own songs too, songs that I thought the Beatles would like.

After college, I returned to NJ, then moved to Florida around 1973. I played as a soloist in a few clubs and played at parties for friends. It was there that I met Mary (who also loved the Beatles!) and we hit it off and ended up getting married in 1975 in her hometown of Flint, Michigan. Our honeymoon was a three month camping trip across the country.

We settled in southern California, where George Harrison had just started a new record company, Dark Horse Records, in Los Angeles. I wanted him

to hear the songs that I had written and recorded on my Dokorder 4-track tape deck. I had a phone conversation with an A&R man at Dark Horse Records, who told me to bring him a cassette tape and he'd have a listen. I told him I only have my 4-track and asked if I could bring that so he could listen to my songs through headphones. He agreed, and when he listened to a few of my songs, he said he'd like some others there to hear them. He told me to transfer them from the 4-track to a cassette and bring it back. I was excited, and began the process of recording some new songs and getting them on a cassette. After a short time when I had completed that process, I was ready to bring them over to him and gave him a call. Unfortunately, I was told that he no longer worked there! I guess I had let too much time go by. Oh well.

I found a few places to play as a soloist and formed a couple of bands, always including a lot of Beatles songs in our repertoire. My band was playing here and there at small venues and clubs, and was getting a good response. In the 70's, the disco music craze was entering the scene. I hated disco! I wanted to play Beatles songs but they were not the easiest to dance to, and it seemed everyone was into disco dancing! In leisure suits! I wore flannel shirts and jeans.

About this time, I saw an ad for an upcoming event called "Beatlefest." The producers were auditioning bands that played Beatles music to perform at this event. I set up an audition with the producers, Mark Lapidos and Erwin Beer came and heard us play in my drummer's garage. Of all the bands in the Los Angeles area, my band was selected to be the headline act at the "First Annual Los Angeles Beatlefest" at the Bonaventure Hotel Ballroom in November, 1976. I named the band "Blue Jay Way," the name of a Beatles' song, and also the name of the street where George Harrison lived in L.A. It was quite an honor, and a lot of fun. We played all three nights of the festival. Little did I know that gig would mark the beginning of my "Beatle band" career, at a time when no other Beatle bands really existed.

For the next few months, I continued playing in clubs and bars around the Los Angeles area, and started to meet more musicians and formed new bands. One day, my drummer called to tell me of a production company looking for Beatle sound-alikes, and gave me a number to call. The person answering asked if I looked like one of the Beatles, and I told him that I did resemble McCartney and certainly sounded very much like

him. He told me they were looking for cast members for a new stage play called, "Beatlemania. The production had already started in New York and was soon to open in L.A.

He asked me to come down to SIR Studios in Hollywood to audition. I was ready for a change, so I shaved my beard and cut my hair to look more the part, although I wasn't really interested in being in a play and pretending to look and act like the Beatles. I was much more interested in recreating the Beatles music, and in sounding as close to the Beatles as possible.

I showed up the next day with my guitar, and played and sang with some of the guys who were already hired as cast members. Then I sat at the piano and sang "Hey Jude," complete with all the screaming at the end. I could see everyone there sitting on the floor around me in amazement. I knew they never heard anyone sound more like McCartney than me.

After that, the producer asked if I could play the bass. I told him I didn't own a bass guitar, but I was sure I could play one. I saw his disappointment, and he told me I had to be a bass player like McCartney, and to come back when I could play the bass. I went home, found a pawnshop, bought a

cheap bass guitar, figured out “Penny Lane” and a few other songs that I knew were in the show, and returned the very next day. “Penny Lane” is one of the more intricate bass lines of all the Beatles songs. The producer was truly impressed, and asked me to join their rehearsals, which I did for a few weeks.

Since I was a latecomer to the production and the Los Angeles cast had already been selected, the producer asked me to be in the cast that was to open up in Chicago. That didn’t sit well with me, as my wife and I were settled here in Southern California, and were not interested in moving to Chicago.

Besides, I was already becoming disillusioned with the way the play was being produced. In my opinion, too much emphasis was being placed on look-alikes, costumes, gear and scripts. There were some musicians auditioning for the part of John Lennon who sounded incredibly like him, but were not chosen because they didn’t resemble him enough. Also, the song selection would not have been my first choice. The flow of the play ended on a slow song, “Let it Be,” and lacked the excitement of a real live Beatles concert, which always ended with a high-energy song. To me, it missed the mark

and was a bit of a downer. They prerecorded “Can’t Buy Me Love” and the McCartney cast member lip-synced to it. I would never do that.

Then the phone rang. It was Don Podolor, the producer of Three Dog Night, The Grass Roots, Steppenwolf, Iron Butterfly and many other big groups of the 60’s. He told me that he wanted to hire me to put together a Beatles band and that he was going to create a multimedia show behind my band and put the show on a concert circuit throughout the country. I would have complete control of the band and show.

This offer was very appealing to me, and the timing was perfect. I decided to accept, and I let the producers of Beatlemania know that I was not willing to move to Chicago, and had to decline their offer. They pleaded with me to stay, but I was more excited about the new opportunity that I was given, which also allowed us to stay in southern California.

Beatlemania was put together by a couple of guys who were more interested in producing a play than a Beatles live concert recreation. There were three locations, New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. There were multiple alternates for every

cast member at each location. I, on the other hand, would be the only McCartney in my show.

I met with Don Podolor at his Hollywood studio and told him I was going to call it “Beatlefever” with the tagline “catch it.” He had a guy who portrayed Buddy Holly (who was also a comedian) and an Elvis impersonator to be our opening act. I met with both of them, and we all got along great.

I rounded up the best sounding Lennon, Harrison and Ringo and started rehearsing with them in what would be an energetic concert, much like the Beatles would have done. We would end on a high note. It didn’t matter to me that I was the only one that really resembled a Beatle. We were the best sounding Beatle band ever! We kept our own identity but would often speak in an English accent just to fool around. I could dance around and interact with the audience, unlike the rigid confinement of being an actor and cast member of Beatlemania.

Our show started off with 20 minutes of the Buddy Holly guy, Robert, warming up the audience, followed by 30 minutes of a fantastic Elvis impersonator, Raymond. Then a massive rear screen projection was launched, showing scenes

from the 60's, like the Vietnam War, the 60's, and the Assassination of JFK. The incredible sound system played the 2001 Space Odyssey theme song as Beatlefever took the stage. The lights came up and we started with "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and continued playing for about an hour. I played my newly acquired Hofner bass like McCartney's and I played the piano on a few songs, such as "Lady Madonna" and "Hey Jude." I also played my acoustic guitar on "Blackbird" and "Yesterday. We always ended on a powerful, upbeat song, usually either "Ticket To Ride" or "She Loves You."

We played for packed houses at fairgrounds, universities, dinner theaters, and arenas all over the country and parts of Canada. Before long, we were performing in main showrooms in Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe and Reno.

Once, when we were playing at the Six Flags Over St. Louis amusement park, a stagehand came back to our dressing room after our show to tell me that some girls wanted to meet me. I came out on stage to see a group of 8 or 10 teenagers giggling and I said "You girls must really like the Beatles!" They all answered in unison, "no, we like YOU guys!"

Somehow, that unexpected response has always stayed with me.

I was often conflicted with imitating McCartney and felt that I was compromising my own creativity. I was a songwriter and was afraid of being known only as that guy who does McCartney. However, I did believe that I could do it better than anyone else, and that the audiences loved it. And of course, the attention and money was very good.

In early 1979, our producers asked us to get passports, because they were working on a deal to bring the show to Japan. We had recently learned that Mary was pregnant with our first child, and so I said, fine as long as it's not in May when our baby is due. After some time had passed, they told us the trip was confirmed and sure enough, it was set up for May! I told them I wanted to be with Mary for the birth of our baby, so I would not be going to Japan in May. Then they said Mary could come and the baby could be born there. Of course I said flatly no! They replaced me with some wannabe and took the show to Japan. As it turned out, they were slapped with an injunction from Beatlemania and returned without performing! My son was born May 22, 1979.

Beatlemania and ATV music, the Beatles publishers, sued our Beatlefever show for a million dollars, specifically naming Don Podolor and me in the lawsuit. It made the front page of "Variety," a major Hollywood entertainment publication. I always felt it was good publicity, being sued by Beatlemania and the Beatles' publishers. We settled the lawsuit by agreeing not to pretend to be the Beatles (we didn't anyway) and not to use the word "Beatles" in our name. So we changed it from "Beatlefever" to "Liverpool." Beatlemania, being stuck in one place in a theater, apparently didn't like that we beat them to bringing a Beatles show on the road.

In December 1980, John Lennon was killed and I was in mourning for several days. I have never really gotten over it. Our show was scheduled to appear a couple of months later in the main showroom of the Silverbird Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas on the main strip. I was reluctant to do it, so soon after John's death, but was soon convinced that the world needed a Beatles tribute now, more than ever.

Just before opening in Vegas, Podolor wanted us to record a "Direct to Disk"

album on Crystal Clear Records, which would be distributed worldwide. Direct to Disk is a recording method by which we would record live, one take per side, and the recording would be cut directly onto the vinyl. This was generally used when recording orchestras and symphonies. We recorded two sides with six songs per side. We couldn't stop or start over. The process was very tedious and unforgiving but as confident as I was, I welcomed the challenge. I don't know anyone else who would have or could have done that. It was my first record contract for which I was paid \$1,000.00.

In February 1981, we opened as the headliners in the Main Showroom of the Silverbird Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas strip. The Fifth Dimension had just finished an extended engagement there, as well as many other well-known performers. It was exciting to see our names on the marquis and be a part of this prestigious entertainment scene. We played two shows a night, seven nights a week, during our five-week engagement.

The whole show was built around my strength as a performer and as the leader and spokesman. I did radio and TV interviews throughout the country. While in Las Vegas, I met Elvis Presley's doctor, who kept me in "good singing voice" after I

developed a condition known as “Vegas Throat,” likely caused by singing so much in the extremely dry Las Vegas air. The doctor showed me the car that Elvis had given him and told me he had heard my interviews when discussing Elvis’ drug use. He was impressed with my responses during those interviews. I basically defended Elvis, saying we shouldn’t judge him, not knowing what he had to endure, or something like that.

I signed a lot of autographs, usually with “All My Lovin’, Joe/Paul.” Once after a show, a group of us were dining in the Casino restaurant. As the headliner, I had “the power of the pen” and could order anything and just sign for it. When my check came after eating, I thoughtlessly signed it, “All My Lovin.” I had to explain it to the waitress. That was embarrassing!

There was a small door, maybe 2'x2', about chest high in my dressing room at the Silverbird, where I could look down at the stage from above and behind the audience. From the stage, you can see the small opening of that door. We were finishing up our five-week engagement and after doing two shows a night seven days a week, we were getting a little silly with each other.

Robert and I were always making each other laugh. He was on stage and I opened the little door to see where he was in the show, while we were preparing to take the stage after he and Raymond finished their performances. I don't know what possessed me, maybe the release of almost finishing the engagement, but whatever, I stood on a chair close to the small door, pulled my pants down and stuck my butt out of that opening. Yep, I mooned him! I knew he could see me and he gasped somewhat and carried on with his show. Then, it was my turn to take the stage. When I was singing "Yesterday," with all the stage lights and attention on me, I could see and hear a commotion up there, as three or four guys were fighting for position themselves, to moon me through that opening at me in retaliation. It did rattle me a bit. After the show, Robert was shouting "I want that door nailed shut!" It was hilarious!

I should mention that this was so out of character for me. I was probably the oldest of the bunch being 31 yrs old, and I've always been more mature than my peers. I often felt like a chaperone when we were on the road. I know they looked up to me (literally - haha!) and respected my talent and leadership.

There was always someone wanting to hang out with me. It was often difficult to find solitude, which I craved. I remember feeling somewhat drained at times. I'm certainly not comparing myself to Elvis, but I can somewhat understand the pressure he was under, always having to be what people expected him to be and the life of the party.

At 31 years old, I thought to myself, I'm headlining in a main showroom in Las Vegas - how can I top this? And when am I going to get recognition as an original songwriter? I decided to book some recording time at Number 9 Sound Labs recording studio in Hollywood and recorded two of my original songs. I paid my drummer to put down the basic tracks while I played my guitar and then I overdubbed all the other tracks. I had a thousand records pressed, and it was distributed throughout the country and was receiving airplay when I put together my original band.

I mentioned this to Podolor, and he set up a show in southern California for me to perform my songs. The show was a huge success and I signed autographs afterwards and mingled with the fans.

Earlier, when I was on the way to this show, I heard my song on the car radio. It was on a local radio

station close by, so I made a detour and showed up unannounced at the station. The DJ's name was Sunny Daze. He recognized me from my record jacket picture and did a live interview with me.

Some time later, I got a royalties check in the mail from ASCAP, stating that it was for foreign airplay of my record. I thought it must be a mistake and I called them. Apparently, my cousin, who was in the Air Force stationed off the coast of Spain in the Azores, put my record in the jukebox at his air base. It must've gotten a lot of plays, because the check was for \$84.00!

I sent one of my records to a publication called, "The Music Connection" magazine, which included a column by a notable music critic, reviewing newly released records. After some very harsh and unfavorable reviews of several records submitted by others, he ended his "Singles File" reviews with mine, saying this: "The Contrast..Joe Stone, on the other hand, hits the Beatles 1965 acoustic pop/rock sound on the nose in "Alone With You," making it one of the high points of this file." That felt very satisfying, to say the least. When people hear my songs, they tell me they remind them of the Beatles. I take that as a great compliment, like if

you were an artist and were told your paintings remind them of Rembrandt.

After the Las Vegas Silverbird engagement, I told the producers that I would probably be done with the show and wanted to concentrate on my own songs. They thought I was holding out for more money and kept enticing me with more and more. The other guys in the show depended on me too, and didn't want me to give it up. I succumbed and agreed to do another Canadian tour.

A Japanese promoter had bought our show, and he was the most professional guy I met in the music business. He loved me and did everything he could to accommodate my every need, such as providing more stage monitors and a better sound system. He spared no expense. He had a road manager who would ask me backstage each night, "Joe, what would you like to eat tonight?" We would have lavishly catered spreads. I admit, I did enjoy being treated like a star. Soon I would be home changing diapers. Talk about culture shock!

We traveled on a tour bus, which was followed by a truck carrying our equipment. The tour bus was rented from the Allman Brothers band. At times we had to make it to the next show quicker than the

bus could get there. I remember getting on a small propeller plane with the guys, and it was raining hard. Robert called it the "Buddy Holly Special." I was not amused.

Again, on this Canadian tour, I often felt like I was babysitting some of the guys who were always looking to party. I managed to keep them in line most of the time. There was quite an entourage traveling with us - the sound crew, a lighting crew and members of the bands. Most of the guys were well behaved, but a couple were doing cocaine, which had me concerned by association. I had tried it and wasn't impressed with it. Fortunately, I do not have that addiction gene. Even alcohol just puts me to sleep. Thank God!

After that tour, I decided to go out on my own, and started a touring show I called, "Yesterday - Today's Greatest Tribute to The Beatles." I booked my new show back in Las Vegas at the Dunes, and at the Grand Hotel at Disneyland, among other places around southern California.

Meanwhile, I learned that a new promoter had bought the Liverpool show, and unbeknownst to me, did a few performances in Canada, advertising that they had just completed headlining in Las

Vegas at the Silverbird. It was a bunch of imposters pretending they were us! A week or so later, Raymond told me that someone had sent him a news clipping of that Canadian show, which gave it an absolutely horrible review. He sent me a copy, and thank God it had photos, because there was this guy with MY name under his photo, getting slammed as perhaps the worst McCartney portrayal ever! They printed a retraction after Raymond called them out on it. I still get a kick out of someone impersonating me, impersonating McCartney!

I continued booking my "Yesterday" show, putting together a tour of five Colorado ski resorts, traveling in my 1974 International Scout. Most of the time on this tour, the roads were icy and very treacherous. From one mountaintop to the next, there were hazardous conditions and travel warnings. There were steep cliffs with little or no shoulder on the roadway. It would likely be fatal if we slid off one of those cliffs.

I was trying to make up some time and driving perhaps a bit too fast on a long straightaway, when I saw a stopped, disabled Jeep ahead in my lane. I couldn't hit the brakes for fear of sliding, so instead, ever so lightly, I pumped the brakes. There wasn't

going to be enough space to stop so I needed to go around him without hitting the brakes and I turned the wheel gently. All of a sudden I saw another car coming right at us and I had to maneuver back into my lane. I over-corrected and started sliding towards the oncoming car, driver side first. Turning the wheel back, I slid the other way, just missing the oncoming car. My band mate in the back seat said I shouted "NO" and now, still sliding, we were headed for the cliff and we went over, diving about 20 feet or so into a soft snow bank stopping us from going completely over. Had we been at some other section of road, we could've gone off a very steep cliff. We were okay. Help arrived and a wrecker was called to pull us out and got us back on the road. Lucky to be alive, we were close to our destination and made it to the next ski resort just in time.

A couple days later was Thanksgiving Day 1983, and my band ate that night at some local restaurant. I missed my wife and 3 children. After that, and after the near miss on the icy roads, I decided that this lifestyle was not for me. That was my last tour.

I moved my family back east and took a job at the business school that my father owned. He had been wanting me to come back to the east coast

and eventually take over his business but I didn't want to do that. I went to school at night and completed my bachelors degree in business at Monmouth College in Long Branch, NJ. That was the 5th college that I had attended over the years, including those years in Maui, so I had already earned many of the needed credits. I eventually started my own accounting business, which I always considered a "side job" to my musical career.

I continued getting calls from agents and turned down a tour of New Zealand with Gary and the Playboys. I never gave up performing and found some musicians to play covers and dance music in some local clubs. After six years in New Jersey, we were ready for a change.

We moved to Westerville, Ohio in 1990 to be closer to Mary's family, and have lived in Ohio ever since. I quickly met other musicians in Central Ohio, and started a 4-piece band called, "Spectrum," which played at clubs and events all over Central Ohio.

Some time later, I co-founded a show band called "The British Invasion." We played Beatles, Stones, Kinks, and a wide variety of artists belonging to that genre. At one large July 4th event, we were

performing as the opening act for Peter Noone of Herman's Hermits. While I was singing, "The Long and Winding Road," Peter was in his trailer dressing room nearby. He heard me and came out and stopped by the stage to look up at me in amazement. I coaxed him up and he sang some songs with us. When he finished, he told the audience, "this is my favorite band in America!"

After much success with the British Invasion, I decided to start a new band, and formed "Legal Tender," playing mostly 60's covers, which, of course, included lots of Beatles songs. I came up with that name wanting to conjure up something that everyone wants and thought, how about money? I looked up synonyms for money and "legal tender" jumped out to me. On the dollar bill is written, "This note is legal tender for all parties, public and private." I changed the word "note" to "band" as a tagline.

After a series of scheduling conflicts with a band mate, I taught my wife, Mary, to play bass on a keyboard, amplifying it through a 300-watt bass amp, which made it sound more like a bass guitar. With her as the bass player, and with a drummer, Legal Tender played throughout Central Ohio for over 20 years. We first played at clubs, almost

every weekend, and later only at special events and street festivals, as a very family-friendly band. We were very popular.

I did miss playing more Beatles songs, so I eventually started “All You Need is Joe - A Solo Tribute to The Beatles.” I performed at a few upscale restaurants regularly, as well as other special events. I also volunteered to perform at the Great American Heart Association's “Heart Walk” in downtown Columbus where 30,000 walkers would walk by me while I played Beatles songs. I have played at this event for several years. AYNIJ continues to this day, and was recently hired to perform at a Jayco RV Owners meetup in Indiana, as a fellow Jayco owner.

After the COVID pandemic and a serious illness of my own, we had pretty much stopped performing as a band for a couple of years, and Mary and I both missed it. We enjoyed playing so much, and we knew it brought joy to our audiences. At home, I would play and sing for Mary, and she convinced me that I needed to be out there performing for others, and should be sharing my gift of music.

By this time, we were both getting up there in age, and the thought of lugging large PA equipment

around, and finding places to play was not something we wanted to do. We had always talked about someday performing as a duo, and that day had finally come.

So my latest venture is “The Gemstones,” our duo, where we play the old “gems,” songs mostly from the 50’s and 60’s. We volunteer to perform at senior living communities in and around Westerville, Ohio. It brings us so much joy to see how the residents light up when they hear us play songs that bring back memories of their younger days. And yes, we play some Beatles songs. It has been very fulfilling for us, and we plan to continue our duo indefinitely, also playing at other family-friendly events along the way. There will always be people who enjoy hearing these songs, especially the Beatles songs that we include in our show.

Epilogue

By breaking away from Beatlemania and being the first Beatles tribute band to tour the country and play in a main showroom in Las Vegas, I was a trailblazer, like my 5th great grandfather, Daniel Boone. Finding out that I am a direct descendant of D-Boone has inspired me to learn about his life and all of his amazing accomplishments, and I am very

proud to share his bloodline. He followed his heart and took risks on his journey, and I believe I have done some of that in my musical journey.

I've written and recorded over 50 songs which are published with CD Baby and being heard all over the world. My hope is that they may be bringing some joy to others.

All My Lovin'

Joe/Paul

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