

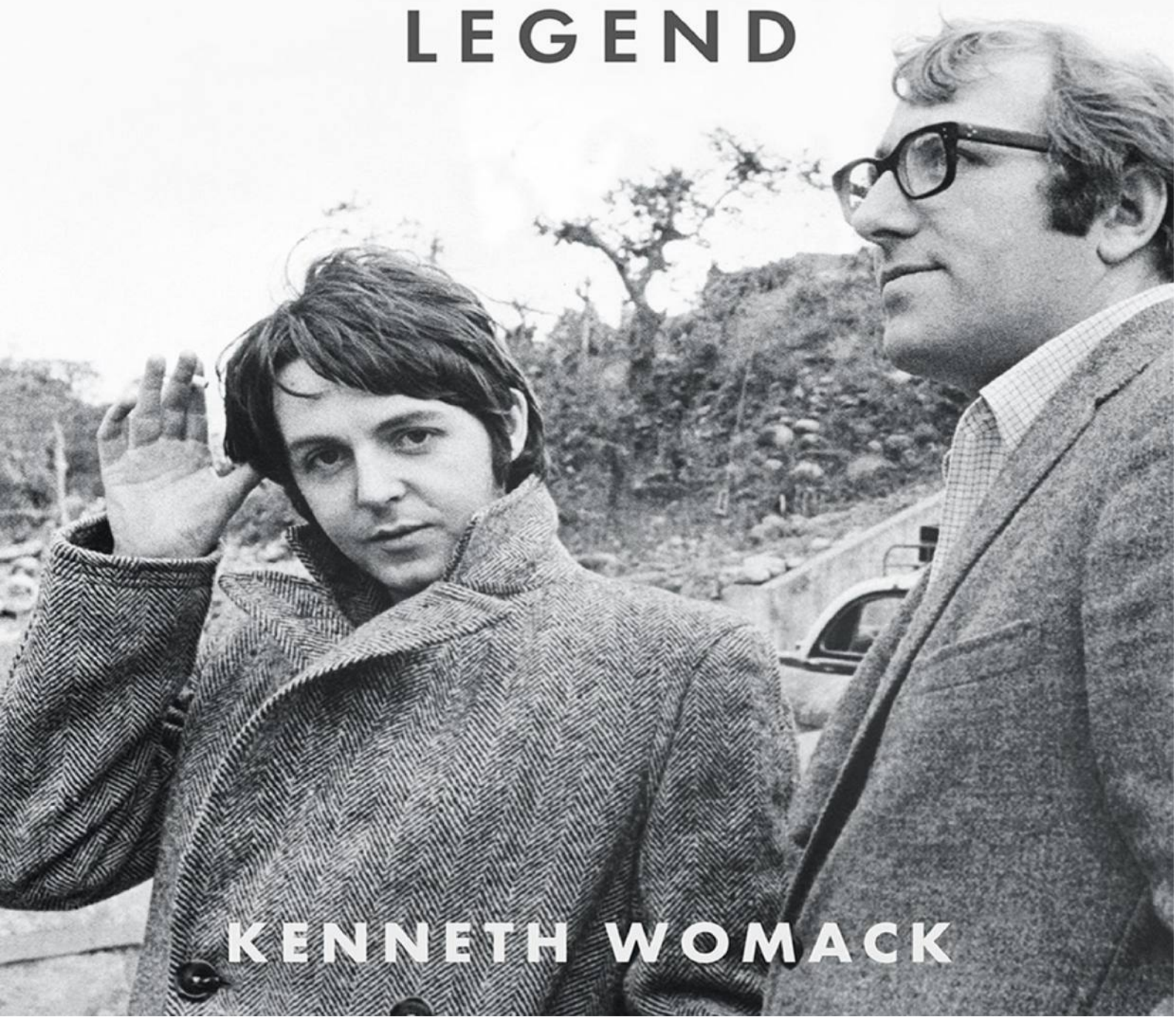
ON THE ROAD WITH THE FAB FOUR

THE MAL EVANS STORY

LIVING THE

BEATLES

LEGEND



KENNETH WOMACK

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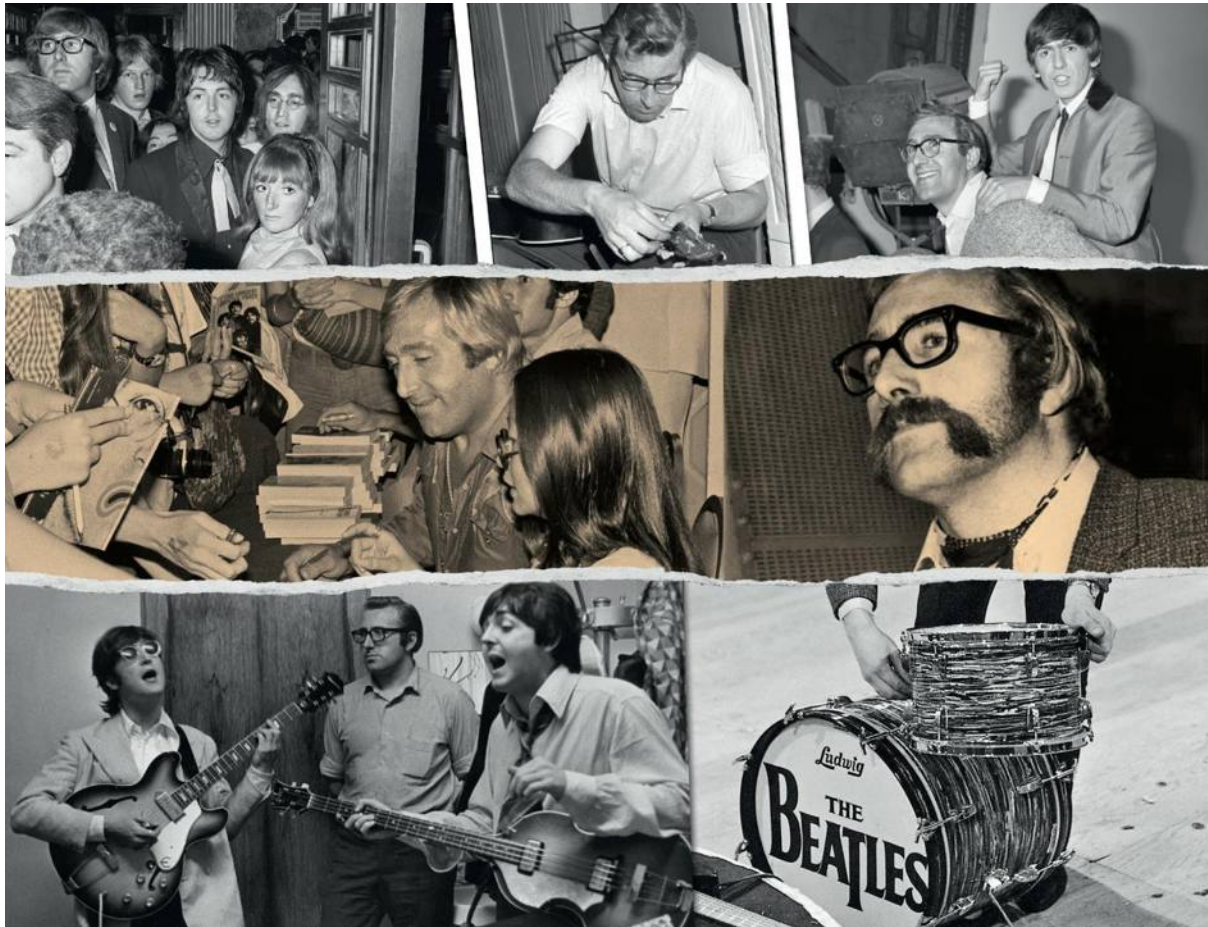

MUDLARK



Mal in front of his Hillside Road home



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Montage 2 – top: Beatles Book Photo Library; middle: *(left)* Bob Gruen; *(right)* Beatles Book Photo Library; bottom: *(left)* Robert Whitaker; *(right)* Alamy

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DEDICATION

For Lily of Allerton

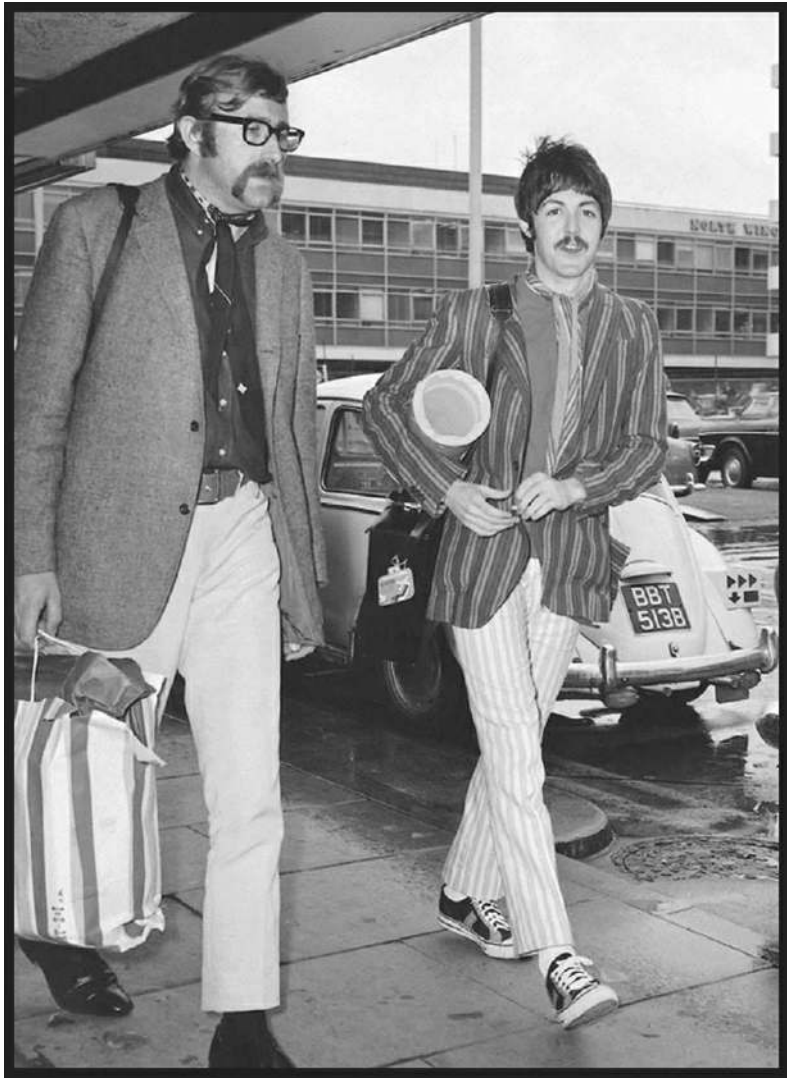
EPIGRAPH

*Baby, let me be your lovin' teddy bear.
Put a chain around my neck and lead me anywhere.
Oh, let me be your teddy bear.*

—ELVIS PRESLEY

*I wonder what the future holds
Now that I'm fast and fancy free.
Have I destroyed my happiness
Cutting down my family tree?*

—MAL EVANS



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This book is the product of decades of toil. It would not have been possible without the initial determination of my father, Mal Evans, to capture the Beatles' story as it unfolded before him. He knew, even in his earliest days as a bouncer at the Cavern Club door, that the boys were something special. As he traveled with them across the whole of England and, eventually, the world, he recorded his memories in the pages of his diaries and filled up notebooks with his drawings and recollections, all the while taking thousands of candid photographs and saving ephemera of all shapes and sizes—a receipt here, a scrap of lyrics there.

When my dad sat down to compose his memoir for Grosset and Dunlap in 1975, he realized the difficulty inherent in taking up a pen to capture his thoughts. Fortunately, he was aided by a stenographer, who transcribed his words to the letter, and by the sage advice of Ringo Starr: “If you don't tell the truth,” he told my dad, then “don't bother doing it.” And so, Dad did.

On January 4, 1976, when he simply couldn't stomach the act of living another day, my father orchestrated his own demise in a Los Angeles duplex. He left behind the fruits of decades of collecting, along with a full draft of his memoir, which he planned to call *Living the Beatles' Legend: 200 Miles to Go*. He had even gone so far as to plot out the book's illustrations, with the assistance of a friend who had served as an art director, and mocked up a couple of cover ideas.

My dad's death threw all this into disarray. For a time, Grosset and Dunlap made various attempts at publishing *Living the Beatles' Legend*, but my mother, Lily, understandably distraught over her estranged husband's tragic death, simply wanted his collection to be returned to our family back in England, so that we could sort things out for ourselves. As we later learned, in the days after my father died in Los Angeles, Grosset and Dunlap transported the materials from L.A. to New York City, eventually placing them in a storage room in the basement of the New York Life Building.

And that's where they sat for more than a dozen years, to be rescued from the garbage heap only by the quick thinking of Leena Kutti, a temporary worker who discovered my dad's materials—along with the diaries, the photographs, and the memoir—recognizing she was in the presence of a most unusual archive. When her efforts to raise the alarm with the publishing house fell on deaf ears, Kutti took it upon herself to march uptown to the Dakota, where she left a note for Yoko Ono, one of the few genuine heroes in the strange progress of my father's artifacts. In short order, Yoko alerted Neil Aspinall, my dad's counterpart during the Beatles years. With the assistance of some shrewd Apple lawyering, Neil saw to it that the collection was finally delivered to our family home in 1988.

For several years, my dad's manuscripts and memorabilia were stored in our attic. I would periodically dip into them and reacquaint myself with the person whom I had lost when I was fourteen years old. Thumbing through the materials reminded me why I loved my father so dearly, in spite of the flaws that drove him away from us and led to his death at age forty. Over the years, my family has struggled with the idea of sharing Mal's story. Then, in 2004, a forger created an international sensation when he claimed to possess Dad's collection in a suitcase full of artifacts he had discovered in an Australian flea market. The news was quickly picked up and shared across the globe with much fanfare before it was proven to be a hoax.

To stem the ensuing confusion, my mum and I consented to a 2005 interview with the *Sunday Times Magazine*, even going so far as to allow the publication of a few excerpts from my dad's diaries. The tide began to change for us in July 2018, when I decided to follow in my father's, and the Beatles', footsteps and retrace the famous "Mad Day Out" photo session on its fiftieth anniversary. I was joined that day by my good friend, actor and playwright Nik Wood-Jones. Along the way, we had the remarkable good fortune to cross paths with filmmaker and Beatles aficionado Simon Weitzman, who was on a similar mission.

As my friendship with Simon developed, I confided in him about the ongoing challenge of sharing my dad's story with the world. He assured me that he knew just the guy to make it happen. Through Simon, I met Ken Womack via Zoom in 2020, during the first few months of the Covid19 pandemic. Ken had already authored several books about the Beatles, but more important, Simon trusted him implicitly. Almost as soon as we began working together, I knew that Ken was the right collaborator to tell my dad's story with the historical integrity it required. Over the years, I have come to understand the ways in which Beatles fans the world over adore "Big Mal," and to his credit, Ken has been able to honor that connection while also mining the truth of my dad's life, warts and all.

Working with our friends at HarperCollins, we are proud to share the present book with you—a full-length biography detailing my dad's life with (and without) the Beatles. A second, even more richly illustrated book will follow in which we provide readers with highlights from my dad's collection, including the manuscripts he compiled, the contents of his diaries, numerous drawings and other ephemera, along with a vast selection of unpublished photographs from our family archives and from his Beatle years.

The present effort simply wouldn't have been possible without the saving graces of people like Leena Kutti, Yoko Ono, Neil Aspinall, Simon

Weitzman, and Nik Wood-Jones. And now, thanks to Ken, readers will be able to experience my dad's story with the vividness it deserves. Ken, you kindly lent me your ears over the past three years; I got by with more than a little help from you, my friend.

My father meant the world to me. He was my hero. Before Ken joined the project, I thought I knew my dad's story. But what I knew was in monochrome; now, some three years later, it is like *The Wizard of Oz*, my dad's favorite film, when the scene shifts from black-and-white Kansas to the dazzling multicolored brilliance of Oz. Ken has added so much color, so much light to my dad's story. He has shown me that Mal Evans was the Beatles' greatest friend. Yes, Big Mal was lucky to meet the Beatles, but the Beatles possessed even more good fortune when, for the first time, all those years ago, my dad happened to walk down the Cavern Club steps.

The rest is music history.

PROLOGUE

WINDSCREEN

JANUARY 23, 1963

For Mal Evans, it would be nothing short of a primal moment. For the Beatles, it would be a much-cherished memory along the unsteady road to extraordinary fame. It would exist inside their collective museum of recollections as the emblem of a more innocent time and place when everyone and everything that truly counted in their world could be measured inside the cramped interior of a van.

A Ford Thames 400E Express Bus, to be exact. Cream-colored and sporting license plate number 6834 KD, the vehicle had been the Beatles' workhorse since the summer of 1962, when manager Brian Epstein purchased it via automobile salesman Terry Doran, a Liverpool chum. With the Beatles' twenty-one-year-old assistant, Neil Aspinall, behind the wheel, the group had barnstormed through an incessant run of dance halls and ballrooms across Northern England, desperate to launch their debut single, "Love Me Do," as far up the English record charts as it could go; it reached maximum altitude at number seventeen for the week of December 27, 1962.

At twenty-seven, Mal wasn't just the new guy—he was also, quite literally, the *old* guy. He had five years on John Lennon and Ringo Starr and even more on Paul McCartney, who had turned twenty back in June, and George Harrison, still a teenager at nineteen. Mal was the odd man out in more ways than one. He held an honest-to-goodness real job, making regular

money as a telecommunications engineer for the General Post Office, and he had a home and a family to boot. With his beloved wife, Lily, he had set up housekeeping in Liverpool's Allerton district, where they were raising their fifteen-month-old son, Gary.

Then there was the matter of Mal's height. At a tad over six feet, three inches, he towered over the lot of them. And he was built, too. Over the years, he had thoroughly toned his broad frame as a dedicated cyclist and swimmer. Mal was known to bike for hours—full days, even—on the rural outskirts of Liverpool. And when it came to swimming, there was scarcely a body of water he'd pass up. From the frigid Irish Sea to a serene country lake to a modest-size chlorinated motel pool, Mal lived to swim. And no mere soak would do. For him, thrashing about or playing in the shallows was for amateurs. He preferred the vigorous exertions of the breaststroke to the comparatively pedestrian aquatic splashings of ordinary folk.

It was a simple twist of fate that landed Mal behind the wheel of the Ford Thames van that January day. Aspinall, the Beatles' full-time road manager, had taken ill with the flu. He was hardly the only Briton felled during that unusually severe winter. During the last week of December, a blizzard swept across southwestern England and Wales, leaving snow drifts of up to twenty feet in its wake. The ensuing weather emergency came to be known as the Big Freeze, with dangerously low temperatures plaguing Great Britain throughout January.

Known as Nell among the Beatles' entourage, Aspinall had succumbed at an especially inopportune moment. The group's second single, "Please Please Me," had been released on January 11. When the Beatles recorded the up-tempo song back on November 26, their normally staid producer, George Martin, had gone out on an extraordinary limb. Overcome by a moment of "bravado," he announced, "Gentlemen, you've just made your first number-one record."¹ The very notion that the four Liverpoolians would release a chart-topper was so far-fetched that "the boys," as Martin and manager Brian Epstein had lovingly dubbed them, promptly broke into peals of laughter. But as January wore on—and with the Big Freeze stranding millions of Britons at home, "Please Please Me" was fulfilling the producer's daring prediction. Snowed in with radio and television as their chief sources of entertainment, record numbers of viewers watched the band's January 19th performance of the song on the popular Saturday night television program *Thank Your Lucky Stars*. That night, the Beatles held the lowest rung on a seven-act bill. But not for long.

With the single racing up the charts, Epstein had booked a fresh spate of radio and television appearances, necessitating the Beatles' journey to

London on the day after their *Thank Your Lucky Stars* appearance. But on the morning after the TV show, Neil had woken up feeling feverish. When he arrived for the band's evening gig at Liverpool's Cavern Club, he announced that he would be unable to drive them to London. The Beatles were unsympathetic, saying, "Well, you'll have to get somebody else, won't you?" In the fog of his illness, Neil "didn't have a clue who I could get. I went up the Cavern steps into Mathew Street just to get some fresh air, and Mal was standing there."

As it happened, Mal and Lily had just arrived at the Cavern that night. Having worked as a part-time bouncer at the basement club, Mal had become a familiar presence to the Beatles and their crowd of "Cave Dwellers," as deejay Bob Wooler had christened the Cavern's regulars.

"What are you doing for the next couple of days?" Neil asked Mal.

"Would you like to drive the Beatles to London?"²

For Mal, it was a no-brainer. Being near the action was what had drawn him to the Cavern in the first place. An inveterate Elvis Presley fan, he relished the Beatles' company, swapping stories about the King and growing especially close with George, who had befriended the giant, bespectacled man. Mal enjoyed peppering the band with requests for Elvis tunes. He held a particular affection for "I Forgot to Remember to Forget," which George intentionally bungled, singing, "I'm so bloody lonely" in place of "I'm so blue and lonely." The bandmates invariably introduced their songs for Mal by playfully altering his name: "This one's for Malcontent," or "This one's for Malfunctioning," or "This one's for Malodorous."³ Mal took it all in stride, good-naturedly playing along with his new friends.

While Mal didn't miss a beat in accepting Neil's offer, he knew he would have to take several days off from work to make the trip. And like every other Briton, he was aware of the forecast, which, in keeping with the weather patterns across that fabled month, called for heavy snow. But at this juncture, the weather was the least of the Beatles' problems. Mal knew this trip loomed large for Epstein and the band. In Brian's calculation, it was essential to consolidate their fame as swiftly as possible. And outside of a quartet of recording sessions at EMI's facility on Abbey Road—not to mention their failed January 1962 audition with Decca—the upcoming journey marked only their second visit to the capital for promotional purposes.

The first, back on October 8, in support of "Love Me Do," hadn't gone so well. After a lukewarm appearance on Radio Luxembourg's *Friday Spectacular* program, they had opted to make an impromptu stop at the offices of London's journalists. By the time they arrived at *NME* (*New*

Musical Express) on Denmark Street, they had absorbed earfuls of regional prejudice. At *NME*, Liverpoolian journalist Alan Smith asked the group about their impressions of Londoners. “Not much,” they told him.

“If they know you come from the north, they don’t want to know.”⁴ Determined to make the most of the upcoming trip, Brian had concocted an aggressive itinerary for the January 1963 southern jaunt, including a whirlwind press tour and no fewer than three prerecorded radio spots.

For Mal, who had never driven in Central London before, the trip would prove positively daunting. As a northerner, he was unfamiliar with the city’s confusing matrix of narrow backstreets and thoroughfares, not to mention its confounding, often unpredictable traffic patterns. Yet his more immediate concern was the state of the Beatles’ van. After leaving his own car in West Derby, where Neil rented a room above Mona Best’s basement Casbah Coffee Club, Mal drove the Ford Thames van to his Hillside Road home in Liverpool’s Mossley Hill district. The five-mile trip made for “not a very auspicious start as she was missing on one cylinder.” The next morning, Mal took the van to a garage in Crosby, where a mechanic remedied the cylinder problem.⁵

By the time Mal and the Beatles began the long drive to London, around midday on Monday, January 21, the van’s brakes had begun to slip. During the early leg of their journey, brakes didn’t really matter. Traffic had come to a standstill outside Liverpool as they waited for the snowplows to clear the roads. By afternoon, they were barreling down the M1 without further incident—although Mal found the van’s headlights somewhat ineffective in cutting through the ubiquitous fog. It was well past dusk when the fivesome arrived at EMI House in time to record the band’s sophomore appearance on *Friday Spectacular*.

The cozy theater accommodated a one-hundred-person studio audience, mostly comprising young girls, autograph books in hand, ready to meet their pop idols. As the boys readied themselves backstage, Mal hastily set up their equipment, so they could lip-synch renditions of “Please Please Me” and “Ask Me Why.” Standing in what would become his familiar position at stage right, he witnessed the sudden, dramatic shift in the Beatles’ fortunes in real time. As press agent Tony Barrow later wrote, “The teen audience didn’t know the evening’s lineup of artists and groups in advance, and before [announcer] Muriel Young brought on the Beatles, she began to read out their Christian names. She got as far as ‘John... Paul...’ and the rest of her introduction was buried in a mighty barrage of very genuine applause.”⁶

It was well after midnight when Mal and the boys crawled into their crumbling, timeworn digs at the Hotel Cavendish, on Gower Street. But Mal

didn't care. He was elated to be sharing a room with Ringo and Paul, while John bunked with George. "Everywhere we went," Mal later wrote, "the Beatles included me. It was always a case of 'meals or drinks for five,' making me feel a part of their world."⁷ He simply couldn't believe his good fortune.

By the next day, January 22, things only seemed to get better. Letting the boys sleep through breakfast, Mal rose early and rounded up coffee and toast to fortify them for the day's breakneck schedule. First up was an interview on the *Pop Inn* radio program, broadcast live from the BBC's Paris Studio, on Regent Street. Mal took the opportunity to cart the Beatles' gear to their next destination, which was mistakenly listed on Brian's itinerary as "Aeolian Hall." Rather than becoming flummoxed by the hiccup, Mal began asking around, eventually learning that *Saturday Club* was being recorded at the Playhouse Theatre with Brian Matthew, Mal's "favorite compère," whom he was overjoyed to meet in the flesh.⁸

Afterward, Mal and the boys returned to Paris Studio, where the band recorded their performance, including a rousing take of "Please Please Me," for *The Talent Spot*, hosted by Gary Marshall. While the group left to meet with the *Daily Mail's* Adrian Mitchell for an interview in Brian Epstein's suite at the posh Mayfair Hotel, Mal stayed at the Paris Studio to pack up their gear for the journey back to Liverpool. That's when he realized he didn't have the foggiest idea how to get to the Mayfair. Drawing on his natural gift of gab, he asked a member of the BBC's team to provide him with directions, which were helpfully scrawled on the back of the band's copy of the radio script. For Mal, the entire experience was a joy. "It was great meeting all the people I'd seen on TV," he admitted. "I was really star-struck." And he took pleasure in observing people as they encountered the boys' incipient fame: "I quickly realized, of course, that people were being nice, trying to get to know me, just to use me to get to the Beatles. I soon got to spot them a mile off."⁹

After a large celebratory meal at Forte's, the popular British hotel/restaurant chain, Mal and the boys set off for home, leaving London at around 10 p.m. With the exception of the fog, which seemed to have grown even more profuse, the trip was smooth sailing along the M1. Eventually, Mal pulled the van off the highway to make the rest of the journey along the regional byways leading back to Liverpool.

And that's when it happened: Sometime after midnight, as Mal drove the van along the quiet rural roads, the windscreen "cracked with a terrible bang." With the windscreen splintered into dangerous shards of glass, Paul observed as a quick-thinking Mal "put his hat backwards on his hand,