Echoes of the Beatles in Hamburg
The telling of the origin story

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Abstract: The Beatles’ Hamburg period is important for the group’s early career in particular, and is among the most rewritten periods, not least after the group split in 1970. The aim of this article is to identify the original British Hamburg narrative from the 1960s, both its sources and changes in the stories during the decade. For this purpose, a broad review has been made of existing media material from the period. The result shows the existence of extensive 1960s source material and several contemporary narratives of the period, divided here into three categories: the ‘Liverpool narrative’, the ‘national narrative’ and the ‘official narratives’. The most primary is the Liverpool material; the most diverse is the national material; and the one with the greatest impact both in the 1960s and later is the official publications.

Keywords: the Beatles, Hamburg, Star Club, Kaiserkeller, Indra Club, Top Ten Club

The Beatles’ time in Hamburg was given, from the very beginning, while the band was still playing there, great importance for their development into a top act (Mersey Beat 1961c: 5). The importance of the Hamburg era for the band also recurs, as will become clear later, in both the group’s own stories and media reporting during the 1960s, and the period is given central importance in many
later publications about the group as well (e.g., Gottfridsson 1997; Lewisohn 2013; Knublauch 2021).

Sure WE [the Beatles] come from Liverpool. There are hundreds of groups there, many on an R and B kick. But you won’t hear us shouting around about a Liverpool Sound, or Merseybeat, simply because it’s been dreamed up as an easy way to describe what’s going on with our music, ‘Hamburg stamp and Yell’ music might be more accurate, It was all chat work on various club stages in Germany that built up our beat. (George Harrison in Beatles Book 1964: 23)

This article traces the original story of the Beatles’ Hamburg period in the British media between 1960 and 1969. The intention is to make a complete review of the existing material in the field and to identify the origin of the original stories. The aim is also to see connections between different sources and changes in the stories during the decade. However, there is no ambition to establish the degree of historical truth in the stories, to create a biography of the Beatles’ Hamburg period, or to explain the origin of events.

Narrative storytelling can be described as using the narrative form as a tool to study and structure the past. There are several principles for this, one of which is a division between chronological-based narratives and structure/discourse-based narratives. However, arguments can be made that both of these perspectives are required for understanding and can be used together (Puckett 2016). This means that the source material on the Beatles’ Hamburg era is presented here in the form of a structure/discourse-based narrative where the material has been divided into three categories: the ‘Liverpool narrative’, the ‘national narrative’ and the ‘official narratives’. This division is based on the content, origin and context of the source material and is further defined later in the article. The material is also categorized and interpreted from a chronological perspective, where the material is presented in order of publication and analysed based on the extent or otherwise of a chronologically coherent storyline. Stories are also a product of context, and narratives change continuously depending on time and circumstances (Puckett 2016). So, too, does the Beatles’ Hamburg
narrative, and, as initially stated, this article also aims to identify the changes in the stories told during the decade.

This article is based on a complete review of British media material from the 1960s with references to the Beatles’ Hamburg era, such as newspapers, magazines, books and interview material from press conferences, television and radio. The fact that media material about the Beatles is extensive and not fully available through public archives or digital sources has in turn made the collection and analysis a time-consuming part of the work on this article.

The Liverpool narrative

The ‘Liverpool narrative’ is based on local Liverpool media, main sources being the entertainment magazine *Mersey Beat* and the daily *Liverpool Echo*. The source material in *Mersey Beat* is extensive, a total of over twenty features between 1961 and 1963, making it the publication that wrote about the subject on the greatest number of occasions during the 1960s. The features in the *Liverpool Echo* are fewer, but they were the first in which a wider audience could read about the group and their connection to Hamburg.

*Pre-fame reporting between 1961 and 1962*

The first public account of the Beatles’ time in Hamburg can be found in the first issue of *Mersey Beat*, published in early July 1961, just days after the group had returned from the second of a total of five stints in Hamburg between 1960 and 1962. The source is the John Lennon-penned text ‘Being a Short Diversion on the Dubious Origins of the Beatles’, which elaborates on the reasons for the band’s residency. According to Lennon’s version of events, the background to the first contract to play in Hamburg in 1960 was that ‘a man [Allan Williams] with a beard cut off said—will you go to Germany [Hamburg] and play mighty rock for the peasants for money? And we said we would play mighty anything for money’ (*Mersey Beat* 1961a: 2). In the piece, Lennon also gives, albeit in
a sheepishly goonish way, a first set of foundations for the future Hamburg narrative. Here, beside recounting the origin of the Hamburg contract, he also describes how Pete Best joined the band for the Hamburg trip, the fire at the Bambi-Filmkunsttheater/Bambi Kino [Bambi Film Art Theatre/Bambi Cinema], the expulsion of Paul McCartney and Best, and how George Harrison was sent home because he was a minor. His article ends with the Beatles returning from Hamburg having originated a musical identity with a new style of their own, performing at various clubs in Liverpool for a period before returning to Hamburg for a second visit (Mersey Beat 1961a: 2).

In the second issue of Mersey Beat, another basic feature of the Hamburg story was given: the recordings the Beatles made with Tony Sheridan. This time the story featured as front-page news (Mersey Beat 1961b: 1). During the autumn of 1961 Mersey Beat continued to report on the release and availability of the Hamburg recordings. At the end of November, the paper reported how Brian Epstein, prompted by inquiries in his record shop, directly imported the single ‘My Bonnie’ from Germany (Mersey Beat 1961d: 6). Later, the magazine also recounted how, with Epstein’s help, this record was released in the UK in January 1962 (Mersey Beat 1961—62a: 4). Along with Melody Maker, Mersey Beat also reported that the Beatles had carried out a second recording session with Sheridan in Hamburg in the spring of 1962, when they recorded ‘Swany’ [Swanee River] and ‘Sweet Georgia Brown’ (Mersey Beat 1962e: 7; Melody Maker 1962b: 2). Mersey Beat was also the only British source that noted the release in Germany of the LP My Bonnie (Mersey Beat 1962c: 9).

Another of the future cornerstones of the Hamburg story can be found in the Mersey Beat of August 1961, where Cavern DJ Bob Wooler, in his column in the paper, was the first writer to refer to Hamburg as the place where the Beatles underwent a transformation to return to Liverpool as a top act (Mersey Beat 1961c: 5). This is a mantra that would be consistently repeated in future reporting about the Beatles’ time in Hamburg.

In December 1961 Mersey Beat wrote again about the Beatles and Hamburg, this time as part of a biography of Derry and the
Seniors, the first Liverpool band to go to Germany. In the article, Howie Casey, a member of the band, praised the Beatles, who shared the stage with them in Hamburg in 1960. Casey also recalls ‘the kingsize cock-up when it was arranged for us [Derry and the Seniors] to do a season at Blackpool, and so like Greenhorns, we all turned pro, and then nothing came of it!’ (Mersey Beat 1961–62b: 4). The comment lacks context but is a preface to the narrative, and refers to a cancelled tour that ultimately led to the band and Williams travelling to London in search of work. There they met the German club owner Bruno Koschmider and got a contract to play the Kaiserkeller in Hamburg. This story would not become widely known until the publication of Hunter Davies’ official biography of the band, The Beatles, in 1968.

During 1962 Mersey Beat continued its reporting on the Beatles’ activities in Hamburg, now in real time as events happened. The focus was on their ongoing gigs at the Star Club, but also events such as Stuart Sutcliffe’s sudden death in Germany (e.g., Mersey Beat 1962c: 8; 1962b: 4; 1962d: 8). The magazine also noted that Ringo Starr, not yet a member of the Beatles in early 1962, had joined Sheridan at the Top Ten Club in Hamburg (Mersey Beat 1962a: 4).

In August 1961, the local daily the Liverpool Echo picked up a story from Mersey Beat regarding how Paul McCartney had lost the address of a girl in a hospital in Liverpool to whom he had promised to bring a doll from Germany, and added that he had spent three months in Germany with a group from Liverpool, the Beatles (Mersey Beat 1961e: 4; Liverpool Echo 1961: 3). This was the first time, albeit in a very brief piece, that a wider audience was able to read about the Beatles and their residency in Hamburg. The Liverpool Echo continued to write about the band’s Hamburg connection during 1962; in January, in conjunction with the UK release of ‘My Bonnie’ (Liverpool Echo 1962a: 16; 1962b: 17), and again in May, linked to the news that the group had secured an audition for Parlophone (Liverpool Echo 1962d: 6). The Liverpool Echo also mentioned the Hamburg connection when reporting the death of Sutcliffe in April 1962, but without mentioning the group by name (Liverpool Echo 1962c: 10).
Reporting after the national breakthrough from 1963 and onwards

Between April and September 1963 *Mersey Beat* published an eleven-part series of articles on the Beatles’ early career, the first of its kind. Although the articles do not form a coherent narrative but are rather a series of independent interviews and reflections without direct connection to each other, they provide the embryo for the first more complete Hamburg narrative and comprise well over 1,500 words on the subject. Here, Allan Williams gives his version of how the first Hamburg contract came about, how Best was hired for the Hamburg job, and how he himself took the Beatles to Hamburg in his minibus. The tough living conditions in Hamburg are also described, as are the many hours on stage and how the demanding German audience quickly forced the Beatles to broaden their repertoire and develop their stage act. The series also includes McCartney and Best’s first testimony about the fire incident at the Bambi Cinema and their expulsion from Hamburg in December 1960. The recordings with Sheridan are also highlighted, as is ‘My ‘Bonnie’ as the reason why Epstein discovered the band and became their manager. Also included are Casey’s personal memories of both playing with Sutcliffe and sharing the stage with the Beatles in Hamburg. Among Casey’s memories are those telling of how the Seniors and the Beatles, in order to get a new and better stage at the Kaiserkeller, together destroyed the old one. This story would also be retold later in the 1960s in alternative versions by both Best and the Beatles (see *Beatles Book 1963–64* / Shepherd 1964; *TeenSet* 1965: 44–48; Davies 1968). Finally, the *Mersey Beat* series also featured Rory Storm and the Hurricanes member Lu Walter’s recollections of his time in Hamburg with Ringo Starr (*Mersey Beat* 1963a).

After mid-1963 the number of Beatles and Hamburg features in *Mersey Beat* decreased considerably. However, there are two later features in the paper worth mentioning, as they are exclusive to the Liverpool narrative. The first is about a private recording made by Lennon, McCartney and Harrison with the aforementioned Walters and Ringo Starr in Hamburg in October 1960, which was financed by Williams and whose existence is otherwise only briefly mentioned in a by-line in the *Disc and Music Echo* (*Mersey Beat* 1963a).
1963–64: 17; *Disc and Music Echo* 1966: 2). The other is a colour photograph of the Beatles live at the Star Club in 1962, part of a set of photos commissioned by Bill Harry, founder and editor of *Mersey Beat*, and published exclusively in the magazine in March 1964 (*Mersey Beat* 1964: 1).

As a final aspect of this framing period, it can be highlighted that the reporting in *Mersey Beat* not only focused on the Beatles and their time in Hamburg but also on other Liverpool bands playing there, and artists such as, for instance, Kingsize Taylor and Lee Curtis, who were both more successful in Hamburg than the Beatles and came to have the major part of their careers in Germany (e.g., *Mersey Beat* 1962f: 9; Krüger 2010). Also in focus was the strong musical bond that developed over time between Liverpool and Hamburg, or, as the magazine later called the city, ‘the other Merseyside’ (*Mersey Beat* 1963f: 9).

As the first source for the Hamburg era, the Liverpool narrative provides the basic elements of the story. However, although the initial summary of the Beatles’ career can be found here, this narrative lacks a coherent storyline. Furthermore, its impact was limited outside Merseyside and Northern England during the 1960s.

The national narrative

The ‘national narrative’ is based on the British pop and teenage press and interview material from press conferences, television and radio. The latter material is limited in scope, while the press material is much more extensive, consisting of nearly fifty different features spread across more than twenty different magazines, with most published between 1963 and 1964. The main source is *NME*, which, together with *Melody Maker*, contains just over a third of all articles from the period.

The source material for the national narrative lacks a coherent form. Here, to improve clarity, the material has been organized by content.
The narrative in the press before ‘Love Me Do’

All the writing about the Beatles in the national British pop and teen press before the release of ‘Love Me Do’ in October 1962 is about the Hamburg recordings. The earliest features comprise a number of reviews of the UK release of the single ‘My Bonnie/The Saints’ from early January 1962 (NME 1962a: 4; Melody Maker 1962a: 11; Disc 1962a: 9). To these can be added a review of ‘My Bonnie’ in the Gloucestershire-based weekly the Tewkesbury Register (Tewkesbury Register 1962: 3). Another early reference to the Hamburg recordings is a brief mention in Melody Maker in August 1962 that the Beatles, or ‘Beaties’ as the magazine called them, had recorded ‘Swanee River’ with Sheridan for German Polydor (Melody Maker 1962b: 2). This event was also noted in Mersey Beat (Mersey Beat 1962e: 7).

The British pop press continued to give the Hamburg recordings space after 1962, mainly in connection with the release of both new records and reissues of old material that followed in 1963–64 in the wake of the Beatles’ success (e.g., NME 1964c: 6; Melody Maker 1964: 1). However, while record releases were a frequent topic in the British pop press in the early 1960s, the nature of the recordings themselves was never touched upon in any detail. Most informative is an interview with Sheridan in Disc and one with him and German music publishing executive Alfred Schacht in Fabulous, both from 1964. However, even these sources are sketchy in their details of what was recorded and where and when these recording sessions took place (Disc 1964: 2; Fabulous 1964: 8–9). Also notable from press material is that although the Hamburg recordings were high on the sales charts in many countries during the 1960s, both the Beatles and Sheridan were quick to express a clear distaste for them in the press (e.g., Melody Maker 1963a: 1; Combo 1964: 3; Cashbox 1964: 28). In addition, one can add to this ambivalence the critical discussions in the British pop press in the 1960s about how damaging the re-release of the Hamburg recordings was to the Beatles’ contemporary career (New Record Mirror 1963b: 3; 1964: 11).

In summary, the Hamburg recordings are the single subject that the press wrote about most during the 1960s. It can also be noted that during this decade these recordings were released on disc in
a large number of versions and variants worldwide, not only in the UK, and today they are among the most reissued recordings of all categories (Gottfridsson 2001).

**The narrative in the press after ‘Love Me Do’**

It was only after the release of ‘Love Me Do’ that the national British pop and teen press began to pay attention to the Beatles as a band. During the autumn of 1962 several articles about them were published, many with reference to their ongoing engagement in Hamburg, but also their history in the city (NME 1962b: 2; 1962c: 6; New Record Mirror 1962: 6; Disc 1962b: 4). At the same time, trade papers such as The Stage and Television Today and EMI’s Record Mail also picked up the story, with the latter being the first at the national level to give a more detailed account of the group’s time in Hamburg and the recordings made there with Sheridan (The Stage and Television Today 1962: 7; Record Mail 1962: 6). Several self-produced advertisements can also be located in the pop press towards the end of 1962, in which the band sent seasonal greetings from Hamburg to their supporters in the UK. An example can be found in Pop Weekly (Pop Weekly 1962: 17).

The first national British pop magazine to report in depth on the emerging British music scene in Hamburg and the Beatles’ time in the city was New Record Mirror. In March 1963 it sent a reporter to Hamburg to interview Peter Eckhorn, owner of the Top Ten Club, and Iain Hines, one of the British Hamburg rock ‘n’ roll pioneers and then manager of the same club. The article addressed the fact that the Top Ten Club had become a hot spot for British bands, but it was also the first, apart from Lennon’s article in Mersey Beat, to tell the story of the fire at the Bambi Cinema and the subsequent expulsion of McCartney and Best. It was also the first to tell how the Beatles, thanks to Eckhorn, were later able to return to Hamburg, and that ‘My Bonnie’ had so far sold 100,000 copies in Germany (New Record Mirror 1963a: 2). Eckhorn was interviewed again just over a year later by the same reporter in Record Mirror, this time in London. New information this time included Eckhorn’s account of how he travelled to Liverpool in late December 1961 and hired Ringo Starr as Sheridan’s drummer, an event already noted
in *Mersey Beat* in January 1962. He also recounted how, during the same visit, he reunited with the Beatles and met their new manager, Brian Epstein, for the first time (*Record Mirror* 1964: 8—9; *Mersey Beat* 1962a: 4).

*Record Mirror* was not alone in sending reporters to Hamburg during the 1960s. *Fabulous* and *NME* also interviewed Manfred Weissleder, the owner of the Star Club. In *Fabulous*, in 1964, Weissleder told the story of how the Beatles, whom he described as lively boys, borrowed a car from him to go to the seaside, which they then wrecked and abandoned. He also claimed, contrary to many others, that the Beatles were never poorly paid in Hamburg, especially not at the Star Club (*Fabulous* 1964: 8—9). In *NME*, in 1966, Weissleder recalled how the Beatles destroyed his car and told of how Lennon performed at the Star Club with a toilet seat around his neck, the latter a story that had already been recounted in 1964 by Horst Fascher, a friend of the Beatles and an employee of the clubs they played at in Hamburg (*Beatles Book* 1963—64/Shepherd 1964). Weissleder’s narrative also includes an account of how, when he saw the Beatles for the first time, long before he hired them, he perceived them as visitors from another planet. Moreover, he talked about how Lennon and Little Richard used to argue with each other constantly, but also how the latter predicted that the Beatles could become the biggest act in the whole world. The stories also included how Epstein, when he demanded higher wages from Weissleder, used the argument that the Beatles would one day be bigger than Elvis (*NME* 1966: 3). The *NME* article, written at the same time as the Beatles’ return to Hamburg in June 1966, also recounts how old friends from the early years in the city visited the band backstage between their performances, and how Astrid Kirchherr then returned a number of letters to Lennon that he had written to Sutcliffe in Hamburg. *Fabulous* in turn contained, in addition to the interview with Weissleder, others with Hines, Sheridan and Schacht. Also memorable from *Fabulous* is that the Beatles feature ends with a twist, in which the journalist who wrote the piece orders a Beatles dish — a chocolate drink in a bottle, long, fat curry sausages, and yellow chips — from the same woman who once used to serve this menu to the band (*Fabulous* 1964: 8—9).
Sheridan’s importance as a mentor to the Beatles in Hamburg was already established in 1963 in *Mersey Beat* (*Mersey Beat* 1963d: 2; 1963f: 9). By contrast, his own accounts of his time with the Beatles in Hamburg were limited across the wider 1960s, and in the interviews that he did give to the press he was usually more interested in promoting his own ongoing career than sharing old memories of the Beatles (e.g., *Combo* 1964: 3). Examples of press material in which Sheridan does address his time with the Beatles in Hamburg are the aforementioned interview in *Disc* and a shorter interview in *Fabulous* (*Disc* 1964: 6; *Fabulous* 1964: 8—9). Most informative, however, is an article in *NME* from March 1964 in which he described his time with the Beatles in Hamburg: a rave from morning to night, long hours on stage, poor accommodation and frequent visits to the British Seamen’s Mission for tea and breakfast cereal. Standing out in Sheridan’s *NME* story is a violent fist fight outside the Top Ten Club between him and Best, which ended, however, in reconciliation (*NME* 1964b: 7). This obviously had some impact on both combatants, as it was also recounted by Best in various contexts during the 1960s (e.g., *TeenSet* 1965: 44—48; Davies 1968). In the *NME* report, it can also be read that Sheridan claimed at the time to have recorded a joint composition by him and McCartney from the Hamburg era, ‘Tell Me if You Can’ (*NME* 1964b: 7). This was a recording that the paper had already listed as Sheridan’s next single release the month before, but which never materialized (*NME* 1964a: 10).

The wider public first knew of Astrid Kirchherr’s connection with the Beatles through Shepherd in late 1963 (*Beatles Book* 1963–64/Shepherd 1964). Her own media debut was in the German tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* in February 1964 (*Bild-Zeitung* 1964: 5). Six months later she was interviewed in British *Rave* and American *Motion Picture* (*Rave* 1964: 19—24; *Motion Picture* 1964: 1—5). All of these articles, which offer the first building blocks in the legend of the great love story between her and Sutcliffe and their importance to the Beatles, are largely similar in character and content. They are about the couple’s first meeting at the Kaiserkeller, their love affair, Kirchherr’s photographs of the band, Sutcliffe’s ambition to be a painter rather than a rock star, his early death, and Kirchherr as the
grieving girlfriend. Unlike *Bild-Zeitung* and *Motion Picture*, however, *Rave* does not acknowledge Kirchherr as the creator of the Beatles' hairstyles, nor Sutcliffe as an original Beatle. Also specific to *Rave* is the almost excruciatingly detailed description of Sutcliffe's illness and death, a subject that is admittedly also a main focus in the other two articles but not dealt with in such detail (*Rave* 1964: 19–24).

To the material on Sutcliffe from the 1960s can be added a biography of him published in September 1968. The article, published in the *Observer*, contains the first comprehensive account of his life and work and includes contributions from, among others, his mother, Millie Sutcliffe, Liverpool friend Rod Murray, and his teacher at the Hamburg College of Art, Eduardo Paolozzi (*Observer* 1968: 23–24).

In the 1960s Iain Hines was one of the most frequent commentators on the Beatles' time in Hamburg (e.g., *New Record Mirror* 1963a: 2; *Fabulous* 1964: 8–9; *16 Magazine* 1965: 9–12; *Beatles Book* 1966a). In the spring of 1966 he appeared in a series of articles about British beat bands in Hamburg in *Beat Instrumental* (*Beat Instrumental* 1966). In these articles he once again recounted, among other things, his memories of the Beatles' expulsion from Germany in the winter of 1960. What was new was that he breathed new life into the story of how he, Sheridan and the Jets were the first British rock band to travel to Hamburg, thus paving the way for the Beatles and other bands. The *Record and Show Mirror* had written about this as early as November 1960, but with the dominance of Liverpool bands in the early 1960s it had faded from the media reporting by the mid-60s (*Beat Instrumental* 1966: 18; *Record and Show Mirror* 1960: 17).

In passing, it can be noted that the Beatles' own statements about Hamburg in the British pop and teen press during the 1960s are relatively few and that it is instead mainly in the official material that their accounts can be found. Worth noting from the press material, however, is a feature in *Melody Maker* from August 1963, where the band for the first time in the national press addressed the importance of the Hamburg era (*Melody Maker* 1963b: 6–7). Also interesting is a comment by Lennon in *NME*, in July 1966, where he claims that they were framed by the owner of the Kaiserkeller for
the fire at the Bambi Cinema (NME 1966: 3). A comment by Harrison two years later in the same paper can also be added, where he says that the group at that moment were working to become as musically tight as when they were on stage in Hamburg and at the Cavern (NME 1968: 3). This statement heralded the ‘Get Back’ project of the following January, through which the band sought to return to the basics of their music-making. Finally, there is McCartney’s now largely forgotten story, also from NME, about how the band were, to their dismay, served fish and horseradish sauce for Christmas dinner by good friends in Hamburg in 1962 (NME 1963: 3).

In the case of ex-Beatle Pete Best, his narrative of the Hamburg era was presented primarily in the American press, and between mid-1964 and the summer of 1966 he contributed to nearly ten different American youth magazines. Most of these stories later reappeared in Davies’ biography of the band, but never in the British press (Davies 1968).

In conclusion, what characterizes the national narrative after ‘Love Me Do’ is the many individual stories, which are often detailed, not infrequently with a nostalgic touch, and largely unique in terms of content and narrator. Some of them deepen knowledge of already-known events; others provide completely new perspectives or add new parts to the story. Missing, however, is a more unified and coherent narrative.

**Interview material from radio, television and press conferences**

The worldwide interview material from radio, television and press conferences in which the Beatles talk about the Hamburg period is scarce, and of the nearly 150 interviews and press conferences preserved from 1962 to 1969 in ‘The Beatles Interviews Database’, the most complete source on the subject, only a little more than a handful relate to the Hamburg era. If you only look at British material, the sources are even fewer.

However, two examples of interest can be cited. The first is a radio interview that the band gave to Radio Clatterbridge, a hospital radio station based at Clatterbridge Health Park, Wirral, UK, at the end of October 1962. Here the band talked about how Williams got them their first contract in Hamburg, but also about their dislike
of the Hamburg recordings (Radio Clatterbridge 1962). The other is the BBC TV documentary ‘Mersey Sound’, which was originally broadcast on British TV on 9 October 1963, but was recorded at the end of August of that year. Here the group recounted how it was in Hamburg that they learned to ‘Mach Schau’ [make a show] and found their style. They also recounted how, on their return to Liverpool in December 1960, they were billed as ‘Direct from Hamburg’, leading the home crowd to believe they were a German band (BBC ‘Mersey Sound’ 1963).

The official narratives

The ‘official narratives’ are publications by the Beatles camp themselves. These are also the first narratives in which the Hamburg era is retold in a more coherent form and with an agenda. The publications are fewer in number than in the other two narratives, but greater in volume and more collected in format. The narratives from the 1960s also had the greatest spread and impact.

The Shepherd storyline of 1963/1964

The first official, more unified material on the Hamburg period can be found in the series of articles ‘A Tale of Four Beatles’ in the fan club magazine Beatles Book and the book The True Story of the Beatles (Beatles Book 1963–64; Shepherd 1964). Both were published at the turn of the year 1963/64 and were written by Peter Jones, editor of the Record Mirror, under the pseudonym Bill Shepherd (Guardian 2015). The book is the more content-rich of the two sources and, although published somewhat later, forms the basis of the article series.

In Shepherd’s texts, many of the cornerstones from Mersey Beat are retold, albeit in more detail and with a chronologically coherent storyline. Several new parts are also added, and parts of the story are both emphasized differently and told in alternative ways. The sources in Shepherd are both the band members themselves and friends such as Sheridan, Kirchherr and Fascher (Beatles Book 1963–64/Shepherd 1964).
In the Shepherd material the image of Hamburg as a place of hard work and hard play is emphasized more clearly than in *Mersey Beat*. Here the foundation is also laid for the future story of the return to Liverpool from Hamburg in December 1960 and how, after a humiliating homecoming, the band rose from the ashes and became a top act on Merseyside. Shepherd also includes for the first time the story of Kirchherr and Sutcliffe’s love affair, although, unlike a contemporary article in the German press, their influence on the Beatles’ image and world of thought is not yet fully acknowledged (see *Bild-Zeitung* 1964: 5). Sutcliffe and Best’s personas are also established for a wider audience. Both are portrayed as quiet, ‘James Dean’ types, beloved by the public but withdrawn in private. Neither of them belonged to the band’s inner core, and both were almost destined to leave from the start in this telling of the story. Hamburg is also, in Shepherd’s version, the place where the Beatles and Ringo Starr got to know each other and where he played his first gigs with the band. Further, the Hamburg recordings are described in more detail than in *Mersey Beat*, as also is the way in which requests for ‘My Bonnie’ in Epstein’s record shop eventually led to him becoming the group’s manager (*Beatles Book* 1963–64/Shepherd 1964). This story was also retold a few months later in Epstein’s own autobiography, *A Cellarful of Noise* (Epstein 1964). Also of note is the different version of the fire at the Bambi Cinema told by Shepherd. It is stated here, contrary to earlier in *Mersey Beat*, that the cause of the fire was not McCartney and Best accidentally setting fire to a piece of cord but the ignition of a stove that got out of hand (*Mersey Beat* 1963c: 3; 1963e: 8; *Beatles Book* 1963–64/Shepherd 1964).

Finally, Shepherd also offers a number of more or less independent anecdotes that would accompany the Hamburg story going forward, sometimes in alternative versions: how the Beatles, after their return to Liverpool, were marketed as ‘Direct from Hamburg’ and were mistaken for a German band; how the band parodied Hitler and the Nazis on stage in the clubs in Hamburg; and how Lennon, during one of his pranks, got stuck in a TV antenna on the roof of the Top Ten Club. Shepherd also recounts how the Beatles, when they arrived for their first stint at the Star Club in April 1962, learned of Sutcliffe’s
death at Hamburg airport and how, during the same Hamburg stay, they received a telegram from Epstein about the Parlophone session. Even the later, oft-retold story of how Lennon walked around the Star Club with a toilet seat around his neck, wearing only swimming trunks, has its origins in Shepherd (Beatles Book 1963—64/Shepherd 1964). Harrison later claimed that this was his funniest memory from the Hamburg period (Beatles Book 1966b: 7–8).

The Hines storyline of 1966
A three-part series of articles called ‘Their First Visit to Hamburg’ was written by Iain Hines and published in the Beatles Book concurrent with the Beatles’ German tour and return to Hamburg in 1966 (Beatles Book 1966a). Hines’s account is independent of Mersey Beat, Shepherd and Davies, and is instead based on his personal memories.

In the 1960s, as pointed out earlier, Hines on several occasions in both the British and American press described the Hamburg scene and his time there with the Beatles. In the Beatles Book, he returned to the subject one last time, on this occasion with his most detailed account. In the articles, Hines talked about his memories, from his first meeting with the Beatles in Hamburg in 1960 to his last one at the Star Club in 1962. He also wrote about everyday life in Hamburg and the people there, such as Rosa Hoffman, housekeeper at the Kaiserkeller/Top Ten Club, also known among the British groups as ‘Mutti’ [Mother]. Hines’s memories of Hoffman included how she made sure that the Beatles got through the day with clean clothes and food, and how, when McCartney used to sit on the roof of her houseboat and rehearse, the dockworkers would gather to listen. Other main characters in these stories that do not appear anywhere else include Jim Hawk, the head of the British Seamen’s Mission, who served the Beatles and other British bands cornflakes and milk, and Liane (surname unknown), the barmaid, whose home they went to in their spare time for meals and to listen to records (Beatles Book 1966a).

Notable also in the articles is a detailed account of the Beatles’ deportation from Germany, a story which both Hines and Best had previously told in the American press but which now for the
first time reached British audiences in full (see *16 Magazine* 1965: 9–12; *TeenSet* 1965: 44–48). Another anecdote that stands out is the story of how the Beatles, among other antics, walked around St Pauli in Hamburg wearing German Afrika Korps caps with small white swastikas (*Beatles Book* 1966a).

Finally, it can be noted that neither Hawk nor Liane tell their own stories in any context, although British musicians in Hamburg on many occasions spoke warmly of Hawk and his activities at the Seamen’s Mission (e.g., *NME* 1964b: 7; *Fabulous* 1964: 8–9). Hoffman, on the other hand, was interviewed at the same time as the articles in the *Beatles Book* by the German *Bild-Zeitung*, and talked there about the Beatles’ energy on stage in Hamburg and how she had McCartney’s then-girlfriend, Dorothy Rhone, living on her houseboat when she and Lennon’s future wife, Cynthia Twist, visited in 1961 (*Bild-Zeitung* 1966: 8). A few years later she also appeared in the British *Daily Mail* and described how the Beatles lived on her houseboat in Hamburg and her role as an extra mother to the band, especially McCartney (*Daily Mail* 1969: 9).

**The Davies storyline of 1968**

*The Beatles: The Authorised Biography* by Hunter Davies is the only formally authorized biography of the band, although Shepherd’s material has the same status in practice (Davies 1968). A large part of the narrative in Davies is in the author’s own words, without clear sources being indicated. The named participants in the Hamburg part, however, include the Beatles themselves, mainly Lennon and Harrison, Kirchherr and Klaus Voormann. Best also makes an appearance, and many of the Hamburg recollections he previously shared in the American press resurface in the Davies biography (e.g., *TeenSet* 1965: 44–48; 1966: 40–42, 58–59, 61). Similarly, earlier interviews with Kirchherr in the German, American and British media are clearly related to her input in Davies’ work (see *Bild-Zeitung* 1964: 5; *Rave* 1964: 19–24; *Motion Picture* 1964: 1–5).

Davies’ narrative largely follows the same framework as Shepherd and *Mersey Beat*, repeating the mantra of Hamburg as a place of hard work, tough living conditions, crazy antics, wild living,
and the place where the group turned from amateurs to professionals. Davies’ narrative tone is darker, however, and he recounts Lennon’s shoplifting, violent club fights, Preludin abuse, sexual escapades, and the group’s failed robbery attempt on a British sailor. Tensions within the band are also addressed, as well as how the members regretted their harsh treatment of Sutcliffe and, to some extent, Best. The emphasis of Davies’ narrative also differs from Shepherd’s; for example, he gives the Hamburg recordings and the Beatles’ time at the Top Ten Club less space, while their time at the Kaiserkeller gets more attention. What they have in common, however, is that neither gives the residency at the Star Club much space, something they also have in common with other sources from the 1960s (Beatles Book 1963–64/Shepherd 1964; Davies 1968).

Newly added parts in Davies are the descriptions of the Beatles families’ reactions to their first Hamburg contract and a socio-economic account of Hamburg. Also new is the recognition of Kirchherr and Sutcliffe’s influence on the Beatles’ early clothes, hairstyles and mindset. Kirchherr’s photographs of the band are also highly praised. In Davies, a different background to the Hamburg contract is also given compared to earlier in Mersey Beat (Mersey Beat 1963b: 9). In Davies’ version, the centre of the story is moved to 21s in London instead of Hamburg, and the event gets a completely new context. Even the story of the fire at the Bambi Cinema is told differently. Gone is the explanation about the ignition in a stove as the cause. Now the explanation is, as Best told the US press a few years earlier, that an accident occurred when he and McCartney tried to make some light to clear out of their living quarters at the Bambi Cinema (TeenSet 1965: 44–48; Davies 1968).

As noted, Shepherd and, to some extent, Mersey Beat contain a number of more self-contained anecdotes that would accompany the Hamburg narrative going forward. From Davies came the story of how Lennon, challenged by Harrison, paraded in the street wearing only a pair of long underpants while reading an English newspaper (Davies 1968). This story was previously told in the American press by both Fascher and Best, but was now repeated for a British audience (Motion Picture 1964: 1–5; TeenSet 1965: 44–48).
The original 1960s Beatles in Hamburg narratives – conclusions

The Liverpool narrative, based primarily on the Mersey Beat magazine, contains the first account of the Beatles’ time in Hamburg, and many of the future cornerstones of the Hamburg narrative derive from it in terms of content and basic structure. What is lacking, however, is a coherent chronological narrative, and the impact of the narrative was also limited in that the audience it reached in the 1960s was mainly confined to Merseyside and north-west England.

The fact that the Liverpool narrative was in many cases documented in real time or very close to real time, that it has an insider’s perspective, and that the Beatles had not yet achieved fame outside Liverpool makes the reporting authentic. The fact that the narrative focuses not only on the Beatles but also on other Merseyside groups who travelled to Hamburg also gives context to the story of the group’s time there, something that is lost in later reporting where their Hamburg experiences are increasingly made unique and exclusive.

The Liverpool narrative changed form from 1961 to 1963, from stand-alone reporting on current events to finally being told in a more retrospective collective form. This was done through a series of articles in Mersey Beat, the first to summarize the group’s career and the first to cover the Hamburg era in more detail. The series also marks, with a few exceptions, the end of the magazine’s coverage of the group’s time in Hamburg. Its post-1963 reporting instead focuses on the Beatles’ ongoing careers in real time, and the focus of the Hamburg coverage shifts to the ongoing activities of other Liverpool groups there.

All British 1960s narratives of Hamburg, not just the Liverpool narrative, are based on the memories of relatively few people. The Beatles’ own testimonies are most evident in the Liverpool narrative and in the official narratives. In the national narrative, various people around the band are the main sources, such as various club owners, music colleagues and friends. It should also
be noted that the similarity between the different narratives is not primarily the result of a direct transfer of texts but rather a consequence of the same individuals repeating the same stories in several contexts. The differences in the narratives are thus more dependent on the choice of narrator than anything else.

The national narrative brings together the story of the Beatles’ time in Hamburg as told in the British pop and youth press and in interview material from radio, television and press conferences. Of these, the press material is the main source. In the 1960s the pop and teen press was a central transmitter of rock and pop culture to teenagers, and its readership was large, both within and beyond Britain. The Hamburg material in these papers was, in turn, varied in content and included everything from record reviews to interviews with key figures from the Hamburg scene, and most of the stories were also unique and rich in detail. However, the pop and teen press periodical format, as with Mersey Beat, limited the stories’ impact, and the fact that the Hamburg features, unlike in Mersey Beat, were scattered across many different papers makes the Hamburg stories in these sources even more of a puzzle without context. It was only later, through publications such as Mark Lewisohn’s books starting with The Beatles Live! (Lewisohn 1986) and, for example, through publications such as Thomas Rehwagen and Thorsten Schmidt’s Mach Schau: Die Beatles in Hamburg (Rehwagen and Schmidt 1992), Hans Olof Gottfridsson’s The Beatles: From Cavern to Star Club (Gottfridsson 1997), Thorsten Knublauch’s The Beatles Mach Schau in Hamburg (Knublauch 2021) and others that more coherent contexts were created from the parts.

The national narrative is largely independent of the other narratives, even if a certain connection exists through the same narrators. No clear overall trends in the material can be discerned either. The reasons for the decline in articles about Hamburg after 1965 are also not fully understood. It is possible that the stories that could be told had been told, and their news value had disappeared. The release of the Hamburg recordings in the UK, around which much of the music press’s interest in the Hamburg era had revolved, had also largely ceased by this time, and the fact
that the British Hamburg scene in general was also in decline from
the mid-1960s onwards probably also further reduced interest.

The official narratives can be divided into three different
tracks: ‘the Shepherd storyline of 1963/1964’, ‘the Hines storyline
of 1966’ and ‘the Davies storyline of 1968’. These represent the
only Hamburg narratives from the 1960s that have a coherent
chronological storyline. However, it should be noted that neither
the official narratives nor any other narrative from the 1960s fully
render the time, place and context of various events during the
Hamburg period accurately. Only later, with publications such as
Lewisohn’s and others, does research into the Hamburg period
become more exploratory in nature, with events placed in their
proper chronological context.

As the Hamburg story was told in a coherent format, a clearer
agenda followed. The different storylines were also formed at
different points in the group’s career. When Shepherd wrote his
texts, the band were in their foundational phase, and there was
little knowledge of them outside Liverpool. The basic features of
the band’s history had to be told to a new audience. The Hamburg
period was also still a relatively large part of their overall career
and was also close in time. When Davies’ storyline was formed,
the Beatles were both well known and well established, and
the Hamburg period more clearly represented a past time in
their history. In Davies’ storyline the boy band image is also less
prominent, and their views on, for example, drug use are more
liberal, and stories about crime, sexual escapades and violence are
less toned down. Similar examples of the influence of the zeitgeist
on the Hamburg story, although from a completely opposite
perspective, can be found in the Beatles’ parodies of Hitler and the
Nazis, which are told in all three storylines and which today would
be more politically charged than in the 1960s.

Both Shepherd’s and Davies’ stories have a clear connection
to the Liverpool narrative. Davies also builds on Shepherd in his
narrative. Hines’s Hamburg narrative, in turn, stands free from
Shepherd and Davies, and is instead entirely based on his personal
memories of the Beatles. Some limited connections also exist to
the national narrative, which depends on the same narrator.
Most normative for the Hamburg story as a whole, not only in the 1960s but also later, are Shepherd’s and Davies’ storylines, mainly because the biographies in which they appeared were published in several languages and sold millions of copies. The Hines storyline, published only in the *Beatles Book*, had a much smaller impact. The same goes for the Liverpool narrative and the national narrative.

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