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Abbey Road ON THE RIVER

The long and winding road leads to Louisville for America's biggest Beatles music festival.

BY BARBARA WAYMAN

John, Paul, George and Ringo.

Four names that set the bar in popular music. Most number-one singles on the Billboard Hot 100 chart? Check. Top-selling music artists of all time? Check. Only group in history to have the top five slots on the Hot 100 chart simultaneously? Yep. Most critically acclaimed band in the history of popular music? Affirmative.

Although it's been more than 40 years since they last appeared on stage together, the mop-tops from Liverpool have left a legacy that still has the power to inspire. Now Louisville, Ky., has become home to Abbey Road on the River, the largest Beatles music festival in North America. Each Memorial Day weekend for the past three years, tens of thousands of fans have gathered along the banks of the Ohio River for a five-day, music-filled event where it's still possible to bask in the glow of a simpler era.

"It's a great way to kick off summer. We discovered this two years ago and have been back every year since," said Kevin Novinger, who drove with his wife, Marijo, from Michigan City, Ind.

Ten stages feature 75 Beatles tribute bands from as far as Sweden, Japan, Canada, Germany, Great Britain and the Czech Republic. In addition to the musical performances (all 13 core Beatles albums are performed during the festival),



At Abbey Road on the River, the Beatles take the stage again in the form of numerous cover and tribute bands (below and right).

there are Beatles films, merchandise, lectures and sing-alongs. The event takes place at Belvedere Festival Park and the Galt House Hotel in downtown Louisville, which recently underwent a \$60 million renovation. With many restaurants and attractions within walking distance, guests can park their cars at the hotel and not move them again until it's time to head home.

COME TOGETHER

Approaching our hotel room, my husband Jim and I noticed a guy with a bowl haircut in a Nehru suit checking into the room next door. He was just the first of many second-glance-worthy John Lennons, George Harrisons and Paul McCartneys we'd see over the weekend. Apparently, Ringo's features are a bit harder to imitate.

My first order of business was to try to understand what made Beatles music so enduring.

"It's so accessible. Most of the songs are about love and harmony. It's relatable to everyone," said Kevin Gibson of Louisville. "These four guys were so charismatic. People just loved them."

Marijo Novinger agreed.

"The music is inspiring. It's spiritual.



That's why it's stood the test of time," she said. "At first their stuff was just fun, and then it evolved. As I grew up, the music grew up, too."

A TICKET TO RIDE

Part of the fun of the festival is listening to some of the international bands. The Beatrips are a Beatles cover band from Kyoto, Japan. Although they sing in English quite well, the moment they addressed the crowd between sets it became apparent that they had learned the songs phonetically.

The band made fans of Bill and Rhonda Herringdine of Wrightsville, Ga., who come to their Abbey Road performance every year wearing custom designed Beatrips T-shirts that Rhonda Herringdine gives away over the course of the weekend.

"They're our favorite," she said. "We've driven to Cleveland to see them, too, and we've become friends. Maybe someday we'll get to Japan."

The youngest Beatles band at Abbey Road on the River is Stockwood, from Woodstock, Ill. Although its four members average 12 years old, and two of them still wear braces, the band performed like seasoned professionals and drew enthusiastic crowds. The band got its start at a talent show three years ago, then continued at a benefit appearance before becoming an ongoing effort with appearances fit around the school year.

"They all want to pursue a career in music. They're booked just about every weekend this summer," said band manager Rob Murphy. "It's important to them to be a tribute band, not a cover band. They play all the correct Beatles equipment, down to the smallest detail."

My favorite group was the Rigsbys, based in Louisville. Although none of the members look like any Fab Four member, their sound is smooth and polished, and they gave well-received performances of many Beatles favorites.

"We call ourselves a celebration, not an imitation," said Gary Metcalf, a Rigsbys vocalist and guitar player. "This music is the Mozart, Beethoven and



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In Louisville

These museums and attractions are all within walking distance of Abbey Road on the River.

- **The Ali Center.** This museum chronicles the life of Muhammad Ali and his career as a boxer, humanitarian and civil rights leader. Two-and-a-half levels of interactive exhibits and multimedia presentations are on display at the facility, which was opened by Ali himself in 2005. www.alicenter.org.

- **The Belle of Louisville.** Take a cruise on the Ohio River in a historic, 93-year-old steamboat that once ferried settlers and goods. Public cruises are offered year-round. www.belleoflouisville.org.

- **Louisville Science Center.** Founded in 1871 as a "cabinet of curiosities" in the public library system, the Louisville Science Center is Kentucky's largest hands-on science center. It features 150 interactive exhibits and activity stations and a four-story IMAX theater. www.louisvillescience.org.

- **Louisville Slugger Museum.** In the building where the official bats of major league baseball are handcrafted, the Louisville Slugger Museum offers guided factory tours and exhibits that share the history behind the product first registered as a trademark in 1894. www.sluggermuseum.org.



Bach of our era. It's loved around the world. It's family-oriented, and it stands the test of time."

PAPERBACK WRITER

I enjoyed chatting with author and Beatles historian Bruce Spizer, who has applied his skills as a tax lawyer to tracking down the definitive story of how the band got its start.

"I got into this because there was so much misinformation out there. For example, every book I read said the Beatles' first record was released in the summer of 1963, but I was able to show that it wasn't released in the summer because the president of the record company embezzled a couple hundred thousand dollars, so they didn't release any records that summer," Spizer said.

Spizer relied on documented evidence to recount the launch of the Fab Four in his book *The Beatles Are Coming! The Birth of Beatlemania In America*. The printed materials he found were often at odds with accepted first-person accounts.

"While memories change over time, original documents do not," he said.

Spizer stays busy at Abbey Road selling books, introducing bands and talking with fans.

Another Abbey Road regular is Mike "Olie" Oltersdorf, who looks so much like Sir Paul McCartney he's able to run a business from it, doing corporate speaking and appearing at Beatles festivals, trade shows and special events.

"I didn't look at all like him growing up. It wasn't until I got older and gained 40 pounds that the resemblance appeared," he said.

As "Sir Paul of Livermore," Olie has met Ringo Starr and appeared on *Good Morning America*. He cheerfully poses with fans for photos that are sure to surprise friends back home.

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

A highlight of the weekend was the world concert premiere of the *LOVE* album, which combined five bands and 31 performers in a presentation of elements from 130 Beatles recordings. The piece is the soundtrack to the popular *LOVE* Cirque du Soleil show in Las Vegas.

Too young to experience the Beatles

era, I was somewhat surprised that everyone I told about my trip to Abbey Road on the River had an immediate story to share: "I watched them on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and memorized all the words to their first album when I was a kid!" "I grew my hair like theirs!" "I listened to all their albums over and over again."

Whatever it was about the Beatles that connects so deeply with people, the magic still lingers at Abbey Road on the River. I don't know if it's the familiar songs, the laid-back crowds or the opportunity to reflect on the humanistic ideals the group championed. Whatever it was, I felt it. When I came to Louisville, I didn't have a Beatles story of my own. Now I do.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

For more information on Abbey Road on the River, visit www.abbeyroadontheriver.com or www.galthouse.com. For travel information, visit AAA.com.

H&A

■ Barbara Wayman is a regular contributor from Dublin, Ohio.