



Fall 2007

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Recommended Citation

Weis, W. Michael (2007) "Students follow the Beatles' path from Liverpool to London," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss3/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Students follow the Beatles' path from Liverpool to London

Story by Professor of History W. Michael Weis



Students from Illinois Wesleyan's London Program visited Penny Lane, the setting of a popular Beatles song. Weis and his students also made stops at Liverpool's Cavern Club, where the Beatles played in their early years, as well as the childhood homes of Lennon and McCartney.

Program, which I led in 2005, the idea of bringing a group of students to the UK to specifically study the Beatles proved irresistible.

To actually see where the Beatles grew up and made their music is akin to visiting Stratford-upon-Avon when you're studying Shakespeare. To the extent that it's possible, you can put yourself in the picture. When I directed the London Program in the fall of 2005, our flats were located in St. John's Wood, one block from Paul McCartney's house (we even got his autograph) and two blocks from Abbey Road, where the Beatles recorded their greatest albums. Also nearby was Mickie Most's studio, where Donovan and Jeff Beck recorded and where Led Zeppelin lead guitarist Jimmy Page got his start playing studio gigs. While in London, our class saw Ray Davies, lead vocalist and songwriter for the legendary Sixties band the Kinks, perform at the Royal Albert Hall.

By far the biggest highlight for me and many of the students was a four-day stop in Liverpool. Despite being only the size of Peoria, Liverpool is an international city with large Welsh and Irish populations. In the 1960s, Liverpool spawned the Merseybeat sound made famous by the Beatles, and the city maintains an active music scene. Dozens of clubs featuring live bands line Mathew Street, including the famed Cavern Club, where the Beatles played almost 300 concerts between 1961 and 1963. Named because of its location in an old wine cellar, the Cavern was

Among the things I love about teaching at Illinois Wesleyan is that I've received the opportunity to follow my passions and share them with students. One of the most exciting of those opportunities involved teaching a travel version of my course, "The Beatles and Their World."

Studying the Beatles has helped me to come to a new understanding of the Sixties, and I wanted to share those insights with students when I first created the Beatles course in 2002. Having previously taught May Term courses in Nigeria, Italy and Cuba, I knew how much students benefited from learning about a topic in its place of origin. With the establishment of IWU's London

closed in 1973 but rebuilt in 1984, using the original bricks, and is now one of Liverpool's hottest tourist spots.

Other old Beatles haunts that we visited in Liverpool were Lennon's and McCartney's childhood homes and St. Peter's Church, where the two first met as teenagers 50 years ago. We walked outside Strawberry Fields, an orphanage where Lennon used to play in the trees with his boyhood friends and attend summer garden parties with his Aunt Mimi. It's the location that inspired one of Lennon's greatest songs, "Strawberry Fields Forever." We also visited Penny Lane, a street junction where Paul and John would meet to catch a bus to the center of Liverpool, and which inspired another great song, the McCartney-penned "Penny Lane."

Those two songs, comprising what is regarded as the greatest rock single of all time, were recorded during the sessions for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, though they were not released on that classic album. Standing in those very spots that Lennon and McCartney evoked when describing the images and feelings of their childhoods was both touching and profound. It made our Beatles pilgrimage complete.