



Why the ‘Empire Windrush’ Seems So Very Yesterday to Me

Media & Culture

Tony Broadbent Thu, 14 Mar 2019 14:13 GMT



Why the ‘Empire Windrush’ Seems So Very Yesterday to Me

Media & Culture | Tony Broadbent | Thu, 14 Mar 2019

Sometimes, two news items unexpectedly collide and spark a new train of thought. I’d just read about the latest highly-critical investigation into the Home Office’s continued string of failures in dealing with the “Windrush” scandal that questioned the legal status of immigrants from the Caribbean, who’ve lived in the UK for upwards of 70 years, in most cases. The whole wretched affair, needlessly, of the government’s own making. The report, concluded, much as did the three earlier official public investigations that: “The human consequences of this appalling scandal are tragic and well documented. But there is a long way to go before the Home Office can credibly claim to have put things right.”

The comments of the public accounts committee chair, Meg Hillier, hitting home, like the four/four thud of a soundly kicked bass drum. Soon after which, an old musician friend of mine emailed me the link to the trailer to the new ‘Rom-Com’—for which read romantic comedy—‘Yesterday’ penned by the insanely clever Richard Curtis (‘Four Weddings and a Funeral’, ‘Notting Hill’, ‘Love Actually’) and directed by the superb Danny Boyle (‘Shallow Grave’, ‘Trainspotting’, ‘Slum Dog Millionaire’) that’s scheduled to hit cinemas all around the world in June. The film posits a world without Beatles; a real “Blue Meanie” of a time and place that’s never even heard of the magical group or its wondrous music; the entire premise being that The Beatles had never existed. Perish the thought.

The imagined horror of such a musical vacuum brought the arrival of the MV Empire Windrush on 22 June 1948 back to top of mind. Point being, you wouldn't believe just how hugely important the "Windrush" generation is to British popular culture or the key role one particular West Indian immigrant played in helping bring about events that changed the entire British music industry. Then, again, given the sorely neglected facts of the matter, you just might. Got a moment to take a voyage on a sea of dreams; just as did those 492 West Indian immigrants that came to the United Kingdom aboard the MV Empire Windrush? If so, let's embark on a little voyage of 'what ifs' and 'without whoms.'

There were any number of singers and musicians aboard the Windrush the day it docked at Tilbury; including two of Trinidad's top calypsonians, Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner (the designation "Lord" an honorific bestowed by fellow musicians); the great majority of whom made straight for London to drum up work. Almost every other West Indian in that first wave, whether male or female, answering their mother country's call to come (officially subsidized low-cost boat fares an added inducement) help reduce the acute labour shortage; more specifically, to help keep the capital city of postwar Empire running on time. Which was why most everyone settled in and around London: Brixton, in the main. But one handsome young Calypso singer, songwriter, and musician took his steel pans up to Liverpool. His given name Harold Adolphus Phillips; his stage name: 'Lord Woodbine.' So dubbed, because of a calypso he'd written about the all but ubiquitous, British 'working class' brand of cigarettes: Woodbines. Not that it was his first time in Great Britain. In 1943, the young 'Woody' lied about his age and enlisted in the RAF, to fight for his 'king and country,' before returning home to Trinidad, in 1947.

'Woody's 'All Caribbean Steel Band' was one of the country's first 'steel bands'. An irrepressible entrepreneur he also ran a couple of music-cum-drinking-sometime-strip clubs in Liverpool 8. (The pre-Hamburg Silver Beatles played both clubs.) More importantly, from time to time, he was also a close business associate of, one, Allan Williams: music promoter and owner of Liverpool's Jacaranda coffee bar by day/cellar club at night, and the Blue Angel nightclub. The self-same businessman who acted as booking agent and would-be-manager of the four-man, rock 'n' roll group, plus any available pick-up drummer, that was variously called: Johnny and The Moondogs, The Beatals, The Silver Beatles, and then, simply, The Beatles.

'Lord' Woodbine and his steel-pan band regularly performed at the Jacaranda and almost always filled the club to capacity. One night, in early Spring 1960, they so impressed a crowd of visiting seamen from Hamburg, that 'Woody' and his crew were urged to 'come' play the nightclubs in the dockside area of St. Pauli; the city's infamous 'red light' district. 'Woody' and the band left for the Continent, within days, without telling Williams and, rather cheekily, renamed the 'Royal Caribbean Steel Band,' they proved a huge success with Hamburg audiences ever hungry for any kind of 'new' entertainment or music.

'Woody' returned to Liverpool brimming over with excitement about the club scene in St. Pauli and the opportunities it presented for 'live' music. And he persuaded Williams to accompany him back to Germany, so the music promoter could see the state of play for himself. Williams did. And that trip out to Hamburg's Grosse Freiheit, off the Reeperbahn, led him to the city's then only live rock 'n' roll club, the Kaiserkeller, and the club's owner, Bruno Koschmider.

Having had one very successful, crowd-drawing Englisher rock band lured away from him by a rival St Pauli club owner, Koschmider desperately wanted more Britisher Rock 'und' Roll musicians to come play in his club. Williams immediately offered himself as the most reliable supplier of such, and thus were sown the seeds of the all-important Liverpool-Hamburg music link. And when, soon afterwards, Williams drove the now five-man Beatles to Hamburg (John, Paul, George, and bass-player, Stuart Sutcliffe, having just taken on Pete Best as the group's drummer) in a hired Commer van. Williams accompanied by his Chinese wife and her brother Barry. And also along for the ride, to help pave the way once they got to Hamburg, none other than 'Lord Woodbine.' There's a famous photo, taken *en route*, early on the morning of August 17, 1960, at Arnhem War Cemetery, at Oosterbeek, in the Netherlands. The legend on the marble war memorial, behind them all, as they sit sipping coffee from a vacuum flask, reads: 'Their Name Liveth For Evermore.'

'No Hamburg; No Beatles.' The first part of the equation initially formulated by the world's foremost Beatles' expert, Mark Lewisohn, author of: 'The Complete Beatles Chronicle' and 'The Beatles - All These Years. Vol. 1: Tune In' etc. based on rock solid fact. The Beatles had to play 7-hours a night; 7-days a week; for 16-weeks, straight. Hamburg, the pressure cooker that transformed the group from a rough and ready band of amateurs; all but the lowest of the low on the Merseyside beat group totem pole; into a rock-band powerhouse. When The Beatles returned home, in December 1960, and appeared as 'unknown' last-minute additions, 'Direct from Hamburg', at a Christmas Dance, at the Litherland Town Hall, and started belting out their new found, hard-hitting, boot-stomping sound, they took Liverpool's beat music fans by storm and instantly became the top 'live' draw on Merseyside. Their position atop the first ever 'Mersey Beat' Annual Poll, assured for years to come when they came under the influence of the immensely talented British rock 'n' roller Tony Sheridan (Paul McCartney dubbed him "The Teacher") during their next season, in Hamburg, where they played 92-nights, straight, at the top-ranking Top-Ten Club.

At which point we drop Lewisohn's second shoe or, rather, Cuban-heeled Beatle boot: 'No Allan Williams; No Hamburg.' As a lifelong Beatles' fan I firmly believe: 'No Brian Epstein; No Beatles'; similarly, 'No George Martin; No Beatles.' And, yes, of course: 'No Liverpool; No Beatles.' And, yet, Beatles' historian Mark Lewisohn's remarkably trenchant observation: 'No Allan Williams; No Hamburg. No Hamburg; No Beatles' is paramount. It not only confirms Allan Williams'

essential role in the very early years of The Beatles, but also spotlights the city of Hamburg's singular contribution to all that then ensued. As John Lennon, himself, later, declared: "It was Hamburg that did it... That's where we really developed."

Given which, it's no stretch, at all, to also posit: 'No 'Lord' Woodbine'; 'No Beatles'? For as Allan Williams also later insisted: "I wouldn't have even thought of going to Hamburg, if not for 'Lord' Woodbine." Ergo: 'No Windrush'; 'No Beatles.' Not to suggest that the charismatic, talented black musician, 'Lord' Woodbine, was the sole reason any of us ever got to hear the Fab Four, he's but one link in the whole extraordinary chain of people and events that helped gave birth to The Beatles. But the fact remains; he played a singularly unique and important role in the story of The Beatles. Without whom, etc.

No question about that.

And so 'Brexit' or 'No Brexit,' we're all of us the 'Windrush Generation. At least, all those of us born into postwar Britain that grew up loving Rock 'n' Roll, R&B, Merseybeat, and The Beatles. (And even the Rolling Stones dug The Beatles!)

No question about that, either.

So I say we don't just need to remember the 'Empire Windrush'; we need to celebrate it. Celebrate all the many contributions that all those who sailed in her, and all the generations since, have made to British culture. Not only in their contributions to music, but to literature, fashion, food, politics, and every other aspect of British life, even humour. As come to think of it, a life without Lenny Henry almost doesn't much bear thinking about, either, does it?

Brexit or No Brexit, the 'Windrush Generation' is part of who we are. No question they've more than earned the right to be here and to stay... many times over...and I believe in 'Yesterday'.

Disclaimer: Views expressed by writers in this section are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of 7Dnews.