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Our kid and his mates... IN PICTURES

Mike McCartney's new book of photos shows the Liverpool of his youth, including his brother and a certain band he played in

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore

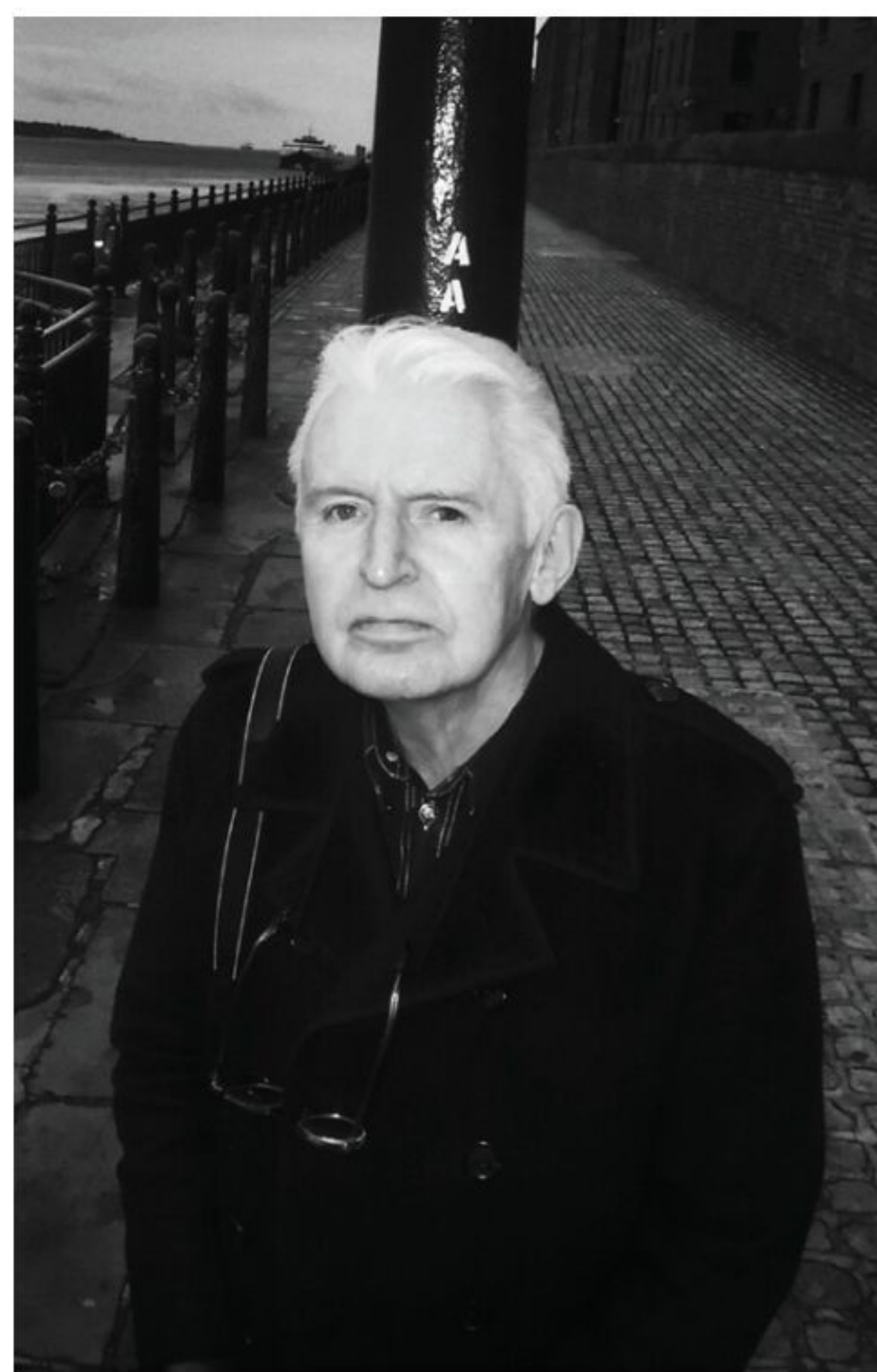
He was on hand during the advent of the most famous band of all time. So, when Mike McCartney finds a long-lost image, it creates worldwide interest.

Recently, a previously unseen colour photograph of Mike's brother, Paul, together with John Lennon and George Harrison performing in McCartney's Auntie Gin's front room in March 1958 gained international press attention.

Now Mike McCartney's *Early Liverpool* brings together his finest works, including a wealth of Beatles photographs and treasured drawings. In the book,

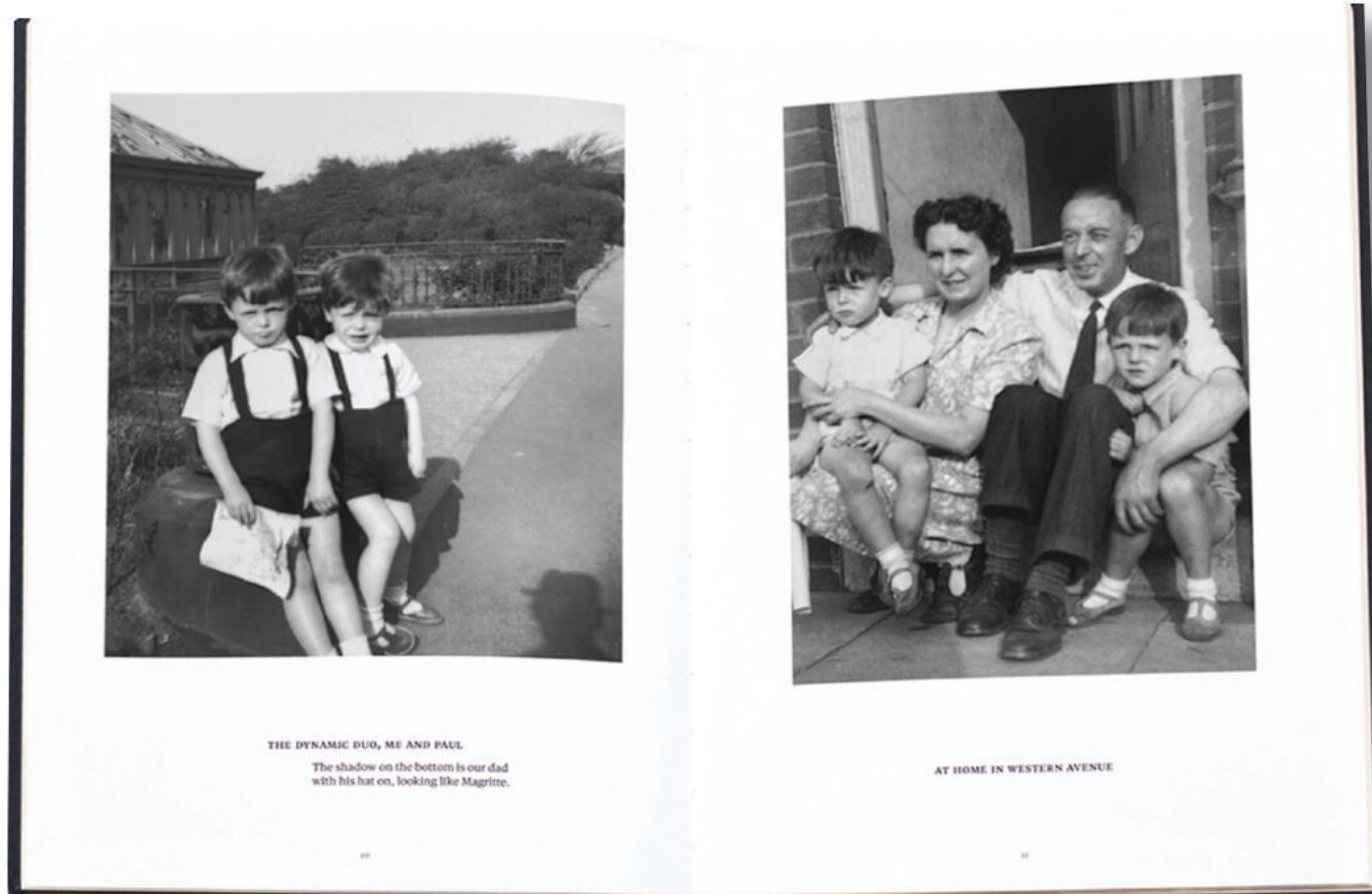
Mike, who has lived at Heswall since 1964, takes us from his very first family photographs, snapped with the family Kodak Brownie box camera, to experimenting with his Rollei Magic camera and finding a love in surrealism, through to capturing the booming Merseybeat scene in Liverpool.

The venues at the heart of the city are all featured, including the Casbah, the Jacaranda, Hope Hall, the Tower Ballroom, the Royal Iris and the legendary Cavern Club, along with the bands of the time including Mike's own satirical comedy, poetry and music trio, *The Scaffold*.



ABOVE: John, Paul, George and Dennis... The then Quarrymen: Harrison, Lennon and McCartney, with friend Dennis Littler, pictured in 1958 at a wedding reception at Paul's Auntie Jin's home in Dinah's Lane, Liverpool

LEFT: Photographer Mike McCartney had access to the Beatles and other iconic acts who visited Liverpool in the 1960s



THE DYNAMIC DUO, MIKE AND PAUL
The shadow on the bottom is our dad
with his hat on, looking like Magritte.

AT HOME IN WESTERN AVENUE

Bringing this wealth of material together into what he calls his definitive statement of a magic era has been a labour of love for Mike during lockdown.

The book depicts post-war Liverpool and the bands that made its streets hum, as well as the visiting rock and roll heroes that inspired them: Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard.

Mike, though, is aware his brother's band is the big selling point. 'I found over the years, if I'd have done a book all about the rock and roll stars and had one Beatle photograph in it, that would be the only one that would get any publicity. But the nice thing about it is I have also given them the other side of Liverpool, which was dynamic, so this book is the best of both worlds.'

Exhibitions of Mike's work have been staged at venues including the Smithsonian in Washington and the National Portrait Gallery in London. He has also served as Wirral's Cultural Ambassador and was awarded British Empire Medal for services to the community in Merseyside. His photography though had far humbler beginnings.

'In those days, because you're poor, taking photographs was the last on your list of survival. My mum died in 1956, so my dad had to bring up two boys on his own.

'He was a cotton salesman and was on £10 a week at that time to bring up two growing boys. Photography was only done with a box camera, then you had to go to the chemist to have it developed to see the result, so I couldn't afford it.'

Mike found his own way to pursue his new passion, taking out

as many books on photography as he could find at the library. He learned how to develop and print his photographs at home to save money. 'My big posh studio was my back bedroom! I did them on the carpet and the bathroom of our home.'

He dried the prints by hanging them on a long piece of string attached with clips from Andre Bernard's hairdressers in Liverpool City Centre, where he worked as a junior alongside two other future Merseyside stars – Jimmy Tarbuck and Lewis Collins. He kept them from curling up by placing them inside hardback books – one place he has rediscovered prints decades later.

During one of the Beatles' legendary stints in Hamburg, Paul wrote home to tell his brother he was bringing him a Rollei Magic camera, recommended by German photographer Astrid Kirchherr, who was a big friend and influence on the young Beatles.

Mike started to experiment with natural light, depth of field and composition. He was introduced to surrealism through cinematography and watching television programmes about Salvador Dali. Seeing these mind-blowing visuals, he says, he realised what he was watching was making the normal abnormal, turning it into a dream.

Shooting through net curtains and washing on the line, he famously captured Paul lost in music, playing his guitar in the backyard at Forthlin Road. Four decades later, the iconic image was to grace the cover of Paul's 2005 top 10 album *Chaos and Creation In the Back Yard*.

In brother Paul, he found a

LEFT:
The McCartney brothers and their parents, Mary and Jim

willing volunteer. One image captures Paul in front of his own self-portrait; we see Paul after an all-night session at the Cavern with his hair slicked back in rock and roll style.

Taken from inside Barratt's shoe shop, the young Beatle is captured looking longingly through the window at the winklepicker shoes, but not being able to afford them.

Mike's family connection afforded him unprecedented access to the band long before the huge scrum of press photographers that would follow them around the world just a few years later.

As a member of the family, they felt relaxed around him, meaning his pictures often captured candid, unguarded moments.

So, for example, we're treated to an intimate photograph of Paul and John writing *I Saw Her Standing There* in the front

BELOW:
A young Paul McCartney captured through an upstairs window, in the days when brother Mike was experimenting with photography



Mike McCartney's own band, The Scaffold: Mike McGear (real name Peter Michael McCartney, seen left), comic entertainer John Gorman, centre, and poet Roger McGough



room at Forthlin Road, where the McCartney brothers grew up and is recognised as the birthplace of the Beatles.

‘This book has a lot of my brother and the Beatles because, at that time, they were the ones I was practising on. Our kid and his group were practising on their guitars, writing songs, just to see what might happen.’

He learned that to be a photographer means having to tell your subjects what to do. ‘You tell John Lennon what to do. Can you imagine that extraordinary power?’ he laughs. ‘And John never said two words when one would do, always very strong.’

In the book we find ourselves inside the Cavern where you can see the paint peeling from the ceiling and get a sense of its

ABOVE: George Harrison with the McCartney brothers’ father, Jim, taken when fledgling photographer Mike McCartney was experimenting with composition and lighting

BELOW: Mike McCartney was able to take candid and unguarded images of the Beatles, which now feature in his new book, Mike McCartney’s Early Liverpool

unique heady atmosphere, even if the smell Mike describes as ‘sweat, toilets and rotten fruit’ is thankfully missing.

‘What I love is having a photograph you can step inside of: it’s living. You’ll be in the dressing room, be in our bedroom, on the stage of the Tower Ballroom and see Jerry Lee Lewis singing. The stars, the rock and roll heroes that came through, to have the honour of meeting them and taking their photograph was extraordinary.’

Mike and his father, Jim, left Liverpool for Heswall in 1964 to escape the hordes of Beatles fans who gathered outside every day. Paul had called Jim and asked where he would like to live. He told his father he could live anywhere.

As Mike says in the book, to Jim, the poshest place in the world wasn’t London, it was Heswall. So, Paul gave in and they moved to a new mock Tudor home called Rembrandt across the Mersey.

One photograph in Mike’s new book shows Beatle Paul and his then-girlfriend, actress Jane Asher, in the garden at Rembrandt.

As the Beatles took the world by storm, The Scaffold became stars in their own right. Mike’s pictures take us along on their tours as well as behind the scenes at 1960s TV

pop shows and the Beatles’ second feature film, Help!

Between preparing the book, Mike spent lockdown reworking his 1967 hit with the Scaffold as Thank U Very Much For The NHS (originally written to thank Paul for his gift of a Nikon camera) to raise money for NHS charities.

The NHS is close to Mike’s heart – his mother Mary was a nurse, a midwife and health visitor and his daughter is a nurse.

‘To be able to convert it to Thank U Very Much For The NHS was an honour and a lovely thing to do to thank them very much for all they’re doing. Every day they’re putting their lives on the line for you and me and so we should put that song out every day.’ ♦



Mike McCartney’s Early Liverpool is available as a signed, limited edition book from Genesis Publications and in Collector and Deluxe editions from genesis-publications.com/book/9781905662661/mike-mccartneys-early-liverpool

