

matt jones

Interview – The Beatle’s Sister, Pauline Sutcliffe

From *The Journal* (Newcastle, UK), April 1st, 1994.

Fifth Beatle Stuart’s five star appeal

*Stuart Sutcliffe, the fifth Beatle, has been rescued from obscurity by a film and a new book written by his sister, Pauline. She shared her memories with **Matt Jones**.*

He looked like James Dean, painted like Jackson Pollock and helped turn a scruffy rock-’n’-roll band called Johnny And The Moondogs into the greatest pop group of all time.

He was also Pauline Sutcliffe’s older brother and now, 32 years after the sudden death of Stuart Sutcliffe, she has co-written a book about the “fifth” or “lost” Beatle. Published today, *Backbeat* coincides with the release of Iain Softley’s film of the same name.

“I had been planning a biography of Stuart long before the film was made,” explained Pauline, 50, a psychotherapist now living in London. “Over the years there have been numerous exhibitions of his paintings and I wanted to emphasise the growing reputation he had as an artist before he played with The Beatles in Hamburg.”

But although Pauline admits the offer to link the book with the film was fortuitous, she says there are significant differences between the two. “The book is a pop biography about Stuart from infancy to his early death, whereas the film is essentially a love story about Stuart and Astrid Kirchherr – it focuses on just two years, between 1960 and 1962.

“Stephen Dorff is absolutely magnetic in the film, all charisma, and that was certainly a quality Stuart had. In some scenes I really did think I was watching Stuart. But while the performance was magnificent, there are certain weaknesses in characterisation: the way the part was written. In terms of intellectual weight and complexity, Stuart’s character was not fully realised. In the film he comes across as a foul-mouthed lad, which is not how I remember him.”

In the course of researching the book, however, Pauline did come to see her brother in a different light. “It was most illuminating. The book is co-written with Alan Clayson, but I conducted the interviews myself. Speaking to others, I began to see Stuart through the eyes of friends, teachers and lovers, and discovered all those other aspects of his character that, as a sister, I hadn’t seen before. Certainly, his decadent lifestyle in Hamburg was hidden from me.”

(more)

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On a recent trip to Japan, Pauline met Astrid, the Hamburg photographer who gave Stuart the mop-top haircut that the other Beatles, and the world, later copied. Together, Astrid and Stuart helped turn The Beatles from a greasy rock-'n'-roll band into a more self-consciously arty group.

“Ironically, Stuart’s paintings and Astrid’s photographs were on display in Japan at the same time,” said Pauline. “It was very good to see her again after all those years. The old charisma and magic is still there. We talked about Stuart, how his death affected us and what has happened since.”

But Pauline has had very little contact with the other Beatles. “I haven’t kept in touch with them, nor should I,” she said. “I was my brother’s kid sister, four years younger than him. Although I met them from time to time, they were my brother’s mates, not mine.”

Pauline was, however, a Beatles fan. “The first time I saw Johnny And The Moondogs play I was sent along by my mother. She was beside herself. In the late 1950s, it was not as commonplace to join a band as it is now. It was really quite unusual and my mother could only experience it as some kind of threat. Stuart was a successful student who seemed destined for a career as a painter. He appeared to be giving that up for a place with a rock-'n'-roll band.”

But Pauline’s report back to Millie Sutcliffe was a good one. “We knew Stuart wasn’t a terribly gifted musician so my expectations were low. But they weren’t at all bad. I went home and said, ‘Mother, they can actually play a whole tune.’”

But Stuart’s time with The Beatles was little more than an interlude. During their second trip from Liverpool to Hamburg he left the group, moved in with Astrid and enrolled at art school. When he died, from a cerebral haemorrhage, on April 10, 1962, he was gaining quite a reputation as an artist, one that his sister has been fighting to maintain in the years since.

Now, with the release of Pauline’s book and the film, and with a major exhibition of his work touring the world, Stuart Sutcliffe can no longer be written off as the little-known “fifth Beatle”, or as a footnote in the history of the legendary band.

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