My hard days and nights in Hamburg

Adrian Bridge goes on the trail of the Beatles, 50 years after the then unknown teenagers headed to the German port

It is not hard to see how five young lads from Liverpool who had barely been abroad before might have been taken with Hamburg. This German port had a reassuring grittiness to it. It had the raw energy and power that comes with a seafaring tradition. It had creative tension and edge. It had money. It hadamphetamine. And it had sex. No wonder they liked it.

Like many British bands back then, the Beatles— who at the time of their first visit to Hamburg numbered John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Pete Best and Stuart Sutcliffe—went there to seek their fame and fortune. And they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Incredible though it may seem, on August 17 it will be 50 years ago to the day since the band played their first of what, during the course of five separate visits over the next two and a half years, would be 281 concerts in Hamburg.

Their work rate was phenomenal—at one point in 1961 they played for 98 nights in succession, frequently starting at 7pm and going through until 7am. They learned how to survive on their wits, their hair for improvisation, their innate cockiness—and on a steady stream of sleepers.

It is no exaggeration to say that it was in Hamburg that the Beatles properly learnt how to play as a band. (“It was our apprenticeship,” Harrison said.) It was in Hamburg that they made their first recording (as the backing band on a Tony Sheridan version of My Bonnie) and it was in Hamburg that John, Paul and George first played together with Ringo Starr (he was at the time the drummer with the rather superior Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, and told the lads that they had better work on their act if they wanted to get him to join).

That first performance 50 years ago was at the Indra Club—a dingy little place that doubled as a strip joint in the Grosse Freiheit (“Great Freedom”) on the fringes of Hamburg’s Reeperbahn red-light district. The band had driven from the Hook of Holland in an Austin minivan and had been given digs in a couple of bleak storage rooms in the back of a nearby cinema, the Bambi Kino (“It was a pig sty,” Lennon recalled later. “We were right next to the ladies’ toilet.”)

Rock ‘n’ roll glamour it was not, but for the first time in their lives they were being paid proper money to perform. Their eyes were being opened to a world of prostitutes and sailors and gangsters, and their ears to a wealth of new music. Hamburg felt like the place where the action was; they stuck it out.

The Bambi Kino and the Indra are firm fixtures on the growing number of Beatles-related tours being offered in Hamburg in the run-up to the 50th anniversary of that first concert. And both will feature in a series of events on Tuesday that will mark the moment.

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At the Indra, a band of five Beatles and Hamburg enthusiasts calling themselves Bambi Kino will be performing the original set performed at that concert on August 17 1960.

There will be further celebrations at Beatlesmania, an outstanding new exhibition dedicated to the band that opened last year on the similarly newly created Beatles-Platz, a square on the Reeperbahn that takes the shape of a vinyl record containing the stainless steel silhouetted figures of the Beatles.

On Tuesday, Beatlesmania will stage Let It Beat, a series of concerts by bands and solo performers and DJs playing mixes of classic and new-style Beatles beats. Male visitors will be invited to try a mop top haircut, the style the band adopted while in Hamburg.

With the naming of a square after the band and the opening of Beatlesmania, the city is making a great deal out of its connection with the Beatles, but this has not always been the case.

For decades it was played down—largely owing to a reluctance to highlight the fact that the band spent nearly all its time in the less salubrious surroundings of the Reeperbahn.

One of the first to recognise the need to take pride in the Beatles link was Stefanie Hempel, a huge fan of the band who grew up in East Germany and who on coming to Hamburg six years ago was shocked to discover there was almost nothing marking their time there.

She started her own magical mystery walking tour, involving explanations of the key sights—and musical accompaniment in the form of Beatles songs played on her ukulele.

In addition to the Indra and the Bambi Kino, Hempel’s tours typically take in the Top Ten club (where the band played three 58 nights in a row in 1961), the Gloot & Allow Kneipe (pub) where they used to like to drink, and the Kaiser Keller (still a functioning music venue).

It was the Kaiser Keller to which the Beatles moved after the Indra was closed down within two months...
of their first arrival (there had been complaints about the noise).

At the new club they were asked to play long sets seven days a week – and to “suck it and see” – or put on a show, something Lennon in particular liked to do; once he fooled everyone on stage wearing nothing but his underpants – and a toilet seat around his neck; he frequently addressed his audience with the greeting “Hello, Hitler.”

Hempel explains how they played right through the night with only short breaks and drew on every musical influence they could. They learnt fast. As Lennon recalled: “Every song lasted 20 minutes and had 20 solos in it. That’s what improved the playing. There was nobody to copy from. We played what we liked best and the Germans liked it as long as it was loud.”

An early admirer was Klaus Voormann, a graphic artist who became a friend (he later designed the cover for the Beatles’ albums). He recognised him as an “amazing talent”. He says: “I’d never seen anything like it. They were wild; they had that Liverpool attitude; they had a freshness and a quickness of ideas.”

Through Voormann they came into contact with their first subculture, the “eeks” (eclectics), and met Astrid Kirchherr, who is credited with having converted them to the mop top haircut.

Kirchherr, Sutcliffe’s fiancée, before his death from a brain haemorrhage in 1962, captured the Beatles’ time in Hamburg in a series of moody black-and-white photographs that are among the most impressive exhibits of the Adventures exhibition.

As Stefanie Hempel leads us along the Grosse Freiheit (it may have been cleaned up a bit but it still boasts plenty of strip joints), it is clear that she enjoys her work. “Most visitors come here now that the Beatles came to the city but have no idea just how much time they spent here or how much it shaped their development as a band,” she says. “I love the fact that even serious Beatles fans can discover a lot of new things here – that this was the place where they first properly met, recorded and learnt how to play. That Harrison was only 17 in 1962; that he, McCartney and Rost were all deported. Hamburg was a huge adventure for them.”

As it continues to be for visitors today. Hempel’s tour concludes at Beatles This and the nearby plaque marking the spot of another venue in which the Beatles performed, the Star Club (destroyed by fire in 1967). It was at this club, on December 11, 1962, that they played the last of those career-defining early concerts in Hamburg. Ten days later their second single, Please, Please Me, was released and went to the top of the charts.