

Excerpt #2 - When Rock Was Rolling: The Discovery of the Beatles

Ronan O'Reilly—legend in his own time and in his own mind. I had the pleasure of meeting the Irish nobleman Ronan O'Reilly who discarded his substantial inheritance to pursue his dream of owning a rock-and-roll radio station. In the 1960s, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the sole radio source for Great Britain, encompassing many stations, all with the same music theme: concerts, the opera, and symphonies. Rock and roll was prohibited. There was no venue for British rockers to have their music heard. Imagine all of the rock bands, that we now know as icons, not being able to have any radio audience. Ronan is credited with launching the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other early members of the British Invasion. Ronan and I first met in the 1980's. Ronan said, "You are the most intriguing and attractive women I have ever met. Please stay in London and spend time with me." Or did he say, "Nice to meet you, care for a cocktail?" I get so confused when I meet someone really, really cute. When an attractive man asks to meet me to discuss business, I always believe that he wants to meet me to discuss business. I bring my briefcase and the files, along with the personal-sized stapler. It's a wonder I ever have a date.

In the early 1960s, Ronan abruptly left the family estate, complete with fox hunts, polo matches, and elegant nightly dining. Ronan rejected the international family business for his dream in music. One drawback was that Ronan had no musical talent of his own; he could only recognize the talent and marketability of others. Aha, a talent in itself! Ronan contacted a few of his English boarding school chums and asked to borrow money to start the new venture, promising part ownership and money back. Ronan could only raise around 50,000 British Pounds but was able to finagle the ownership of a World War II minesweeper ship that was due for the salvage yard in Amsterdam. Ronan went about cleaning the old ship and getting it ready to moor and hopefully stay afloat two hundred miles offshore in the North Sea. He barely had enough funds to take possession of the ship and purchase the broadcasting equipment. Everything was acquired with a handshake, a wink, and a promise.

The idea was magic. Ronan could broadcast to Great Britain, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, and parts of Western Europe with his strong and unimpaired radio signal. He named the station Radio Caroline after JFK's daughter. Radio Caroline launched in the summer of 1961 and became an immediate success. The first radio station ever to play American rock and roll and the newly formed band of soccer-oriented ruffians from Liverpool, the Beatles. The Liverpool Sound quickly moved to London, and the rest is history. A Paul McCartney tune called "Scrambled Eggs" eventually became "Yesterday," the most widely reproduced song worldwide. Radio Caroline was uninterrupted and the sole rock and roll station until the late 1960s when the BBC had to change their programming due to public demand. The phenomena of worldwide British cultural inclusion began with Radio Caroline. A book, "When Pirates Ruled the Waves" was written about Ronan O'Reilly and the Radio Caroline days. A motion picture followed. Both the book and film defined how one broadcasting offshore ship changed the social climate of a continent, if not the world.

Ronan invested in several recording companies, made a fortune from musical production, with an interesting journey along the way. Ronan had a torrid love affair with rocker and actress Marianne Faithful who was not worthy of her name. They made a film in Paris, all financed by Diner's Club credit cards and the cash from the office safe at the Hotel George V, leaving corporate promissory

notes in its place. The notes were paid, but not immediately. The overly accommodating concierge at the Hotel George V lost his job but had a great time while the film was in production. As a little mental exercise, please make yourself a cocktail and ponder the following: Have you ever wondered how and why the marketing geniuses and board members of Diner's Club International lost their edge and let the worldwide credit card market slip through their collective sausage-like fingers when they had the first universal credit card ever used? It just boggles the mind. Make that a double! That just goes to show that you don't have to be first to be the winner in any category. Somewhat reminiscent of first marriages.

The Green Machine

On one trip to London, I phoned Ronan, and we agreed to meet at the Hotel Claridge for cocktails. Ronan was en route to Morocco to judge the Hawaiian Tropic Beauty Pageant. Men! One of Ronan's very well-dressed Buds came by. We ordered a round of drinks with the Bud. The Bud, who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty, was on his way to the Press Club to meet Prince Phillip, but still had a moment for a martini.

Ronan told me this story after the Bud's departure. In the late 1960s, the Bud was new in London and wanted to blend in with his aristocratic girlfriend and her snot-infused friends. This crumpet-crunching coquette was so "refined," she wouldn't use an inferior wine as a solvent. The Bud had lavish tastes and no money to indulge those tastes. He had looks, charm, and a clever sense of humour. (See: English story = "humour," not "humor.") The Bud gave off a look of ease, but knew his days were numbered socially if he couldn't find a way to support himself. He told Ronan the following scheme came to him in the middle of the night while walking along the Thames, having just been evicted from his boarding house. Along this walk, the Bud noticed a number of large cargo ships in the London Harbour (harbour, not harbor). Those cargo ships were licensed in Panama, Liberia, Libya, etc. His scheme involved billing the ship owners for an environmental harbour tax while the ships were docked in London. Such a tax would be based on the ship's tonnage and the days of moorage. The Bud waited in the rain for the morning newspapers. The newspapers listed all of the commercial ships, their origins, tonnage, and length of moorage. With the last of his meager funds, the Bud purchased stationary, a post office box, and starting sending out invoices for "environmental harbour clean-up services." There was no invoice for less than twenty thousand British Pounds.

Within a month, the bank drafts arrived at the post office box; later, the bankwires were sent to his account so the ships wouldn't be quarantined due to lack of payment, causing more illusionary charges to occur. Within a year, this visionary entrepreneur (creative crook) pocketed over five million pounds, less the cost of the rowboat that circled the harbour looking for debris, which when found, would be scooped up in a fisherman's hand net. When the Bud achieved his goal, he wrote the ship's owners, thanking them for their contribution in cleaning up the London Harbour. The Bud married the aristocrat and all was well around the estate, thus proving behind every fortune is a crime (or sort of crime). The Bud founded one of the largest European insurance pools, which included insuring cargo ships. Just ask Darwin, origins are tricky.