

# Get Back

to where you once belonged

THE 'NICE' BEATLE IS BACK WITH THE RE-RELEASE OF WINGS' *BAND ON THE RUN*, FORTY YEARS AFTER THE BEATLES SPLIT, PAUL MCCARTNEY REMEMBERS THE HIGHS AND LOWS, THE FIGHTS AND FALL-OUTS

WORDS | BRITT COLLINS

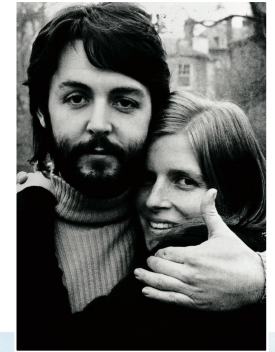
**ROCK STARS DON'T COME MORE FAMOUS** than Paul McCartney. Days before our interview, I dreamt that I had to go to some desolate spot on the North Sea to meet him. It has been a long journey: this summer there was talk of meeting on the road in Nashville or Philadelphia where he was touring. Always between planes and appointments, the 68-year-old superstar has been busy: after finishing a sell-out world tour, he went to the White House to receive the Gershwin Award for popular music, addressed the European Parliament in Brussels, campaigned for animal rights and climate change and wrote a song for Robert De Niro's recent film, *Everybody's Fine*.

Following a flurry of emails and phone calls, finally, there we were, suddenly thrown together. "Hello Britt, how are you?" he says in his familiar breezy voice. He has an easy, immediate charm and it's hard not being star-struck by one of rock's last surviving legends. As an icebreaker, I tell him that I think Ringo is the most talented Beatle. "Oh, I've been dreading someone discovering that," he says, laughing. "I'll tell him you said that."

While John Lennon is largely considered the cool, rebellious Beatle and McCartney the talented, sensible ▶

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**"RINGO WAS THE MOST TALENTED BEATLE? I'VE BEEN DREADING SOMEONE DISCOVERING THAT! I'LL TELL HIM YOU SAID SO"**

square, I was forever drawn to Paul, the pretty-boy animal lover, who seemed gentler, wiser and, as his longtime friend David Bailey once told me, "the most fundamentally decent guy you'll ever hope to meet."

Suddenly the Beatles are here, there, everywhere. Just days before, Lennon fans around the world had been celebrating what would have been his 70th birthday, his widow Yoko Ono selling out his music to car commercials and his son Sean flogging his new band. Along with various Beatles books and reissues, McCartney is returning to his roots with a special-edition of Wings mega-album *Band on the Run*.

The making of this 1973 record was as haphazard and shambolic as anything out of *Spinal Tap*. The night before they were due to fly to Lagos, Nigeria, to record their third, make-or-break album, half the band quit. After debating whether to go or not, in the end just three band members got on the plane.

"There was a fashion for exotic places then, so I got a list of EMI's studios all over the world," he says. "They had China, Barbados, Sweden, but I chose Nigeria. We thought, 'Great, we'll lie on the beach all day and then breeze into the studio in the evenings,' not realising the studio wasn't built and it would be monsoon season."

Flying across the jungle was just the start of the adventure and an omen of things to come, McCartney recalls a heated discussion concerning the position of the landing strip. "One pilot looked to the other and said, 'Is that it down there?' I'm thinking, 'God, surely they must know.'"

From the moment they arrived in the virtually lawless Lagos, the Wings party – Paul, Linda, guitarist Denny Laine and engineer Geoff Emerick – were in for a culture shock, enduring everything from panic attacks and run-ins with the locals, to McCartney suffering from a suspected heart attack. "Well, it was hardly a heart attack," he jokes. "I think I fainted, actually."

Only days into the trip, they were mugged wandering back to their villa from the studio. Five Nigerian thugs appeared out of the shadows and stuck a knife to McCartney's throat. They took everything of value, including the bag containing their recordings. "We were told not to walk around at night. I guess we were hippies," he reflects, in his permanently sunny, spirited way. "The weird thing is the people who mugged us had no idea what these little cassettes were and probably chucked them in the bushes. But hey, I survived."

He has had his share of sorrows, from losing his



**FLYING HIGH:** Wings never attempted to replicate the Beatles success, *top left in the 1960s*, says McCartney; *top opposite*, with Linda and her daughter Heather on their wedding day in 1969; *bottom opposite*, a Polaroid taken during a Wings recording session

© 1973 Paul McCartney, Rex, Corbis, Camera Press, Getty, Tom Munnay/IF

**"I WENT THROUGH A PRETTY BAD PATCH. IT WAS SUDDENLY VERY LONELY AND HEARTBREAKING BEING THE ONLY BEATLE WHO DISAGREED WITH THE BEATLES"**

mother as a kid, aged 14, and later his wife, Linda, both to breast cancer, and then his old mates Lennon and Harrison – not to mention his very ugly public divorce from Heather Mills, who painted him as a wife-beating miser in the media. Though the question on everyone's lips was why someone as sophisticated as McCartney had ever fallen for Mills, just another attractive woman with one leg and a sad story. He is now stepping out with Nancy Shevell, a 50-something American heiress, an old friend who became his girlfriend three years ago.

McCartney recently topped the *Sunday Times* rich list after quietly building up a showbiz empire with his publishing company and his Beatles royalties. Yet, despite his £475 million fortune, he stresses he's just an ordinary bloke from Liverpool and he goes to great pains to live as normal a life as his stardom allows.

He likes to slip on to the London Underground unnoticed and "walk around Soho as I've always done". There was a recent story about McCartney cruising around Manhattan on public transport. "New York is not like London, it's all 'Hey Beatle' on the street. I got on the bus, paid my fare and knew the other passengers noticed me sitting on my own. Then this lady at the back shouted: 'Hey, are you Paul McCartney? What you doin'

on the bus?' I could see all the other passengers laughing. So I said, 'I'm going uptown just like you are, but don't go shouting across the bus. Come and sit here beside me.' We had a good chat.

"You know it's dangerous believing your own legacy," he says, which brings us back neatly to the Beatles. After walking away from the band, McCartney fell apart and, with their finances tied up in the ongoing legal disputes, he was broke too. Feeling lost and abandoned, he went off with his family to his farm at the end of the earth in Scotland and sunk into a black hole of deep depression, "hurt by the sorrow of losing a great band and great friends". "I was impossible," he told *Playboy* at the time. "I hit the bottle and couldn't get out of bed. For the first in my life I was on the scrap heap. I don't know how Linda stuck it out."

Bizarrely, while he slipped into exile that autumn of 1969, there was an international news story that Paul was dead – what started out as a self-perpetuating hoax that he had died in a car crash in '66 caught fire and continued to smoulder for years.

"It was very difficult," he says now, "the circumstances of the Beatles breaking up. I think if we'd all said, 'We've had enough, let's fold the band and go our



**"WE WINGED THE WHOLE THING. OUR ROADIE WENT IN AND SAID: 'WE'VE GOT PAUL MCCARTNEY IN THE VAN. DO YOU WANT HIM TO COME IN AND PLAY?'"**



**FAMILY BUSINESS:** Paul insisted his new wife Linda was part of Wings, pictured top with Denny Laine, so they wouldn't be separated when he went on tour. Their daughters Stella and Mary, above, grew up on the road

separate ways,' that would've been fine. But the fact that a businessman had come in and, in my eyes, was trying to rip us off made it difficult, particularly as the other three liked him and I didn't." Paul had wanted his father-in-law, Lee Eastman, to manage the band, which the other band members rejected as nepotism and voted to work with the notorious Rolling Stones manager Allen Klein. "I saw through him and I said: 'Look he's ripped off the Rolling Stones.' To this day, this guy's company, I won't get into it 'cos it's all, you know, messy," he fumes. "He still actually owns a couple of the Stones records.

"It was heartbreaking and suddenly very lonely being the only Beatle who disagreed with the Beatles. I went through a pretty bad patch. But Linda helped me snap out of it. She said, 'You don't want to get too down. You're pretty cool and it could work out.' She encouraged me to put it back together."

The Beatles were a hard act to follow, but McCartney needed to reclaim his place in the world. "You couldn't try to be the Beatles. That was difficult enough for other bands, never mind me," he says. "I wanted to do something different. Wings was an experiment. I'd just seen Johnny Cash doing these small gigs. He put

together a little band with Carl Perkins and a couple other players, and I thought, 'that looks exciting'. So from there we started Wings."

Inspired by Johnny Cash's low-key road trip, he assembled a band, piled the kids and dogs into a flower-painted van and hit the university circuit. "We didn't book dates, hotels or anything," he recalls. "We winged the whole thing. Our roadie went in and said, 'We've got Paul McCartney in the van, do you want him to play?' We'd show up the next day and charge 50 pence on the door. We only had 11 songs, so we played a lot of them twice. Those were great memories. It was so mad... we had such a laugh."

His new band didn't immediately reverse his fortunes. He was under assault from his former bandmates and critics, and Wings first two albums were generally ignored or dismissed as "sheer banality". But when *Band on the Run* came out in America, it was an instant success – even Lennon, for a moment, gave his blessing. "It was great praise indeed," McCartney says, chuckling to himself. "Our relationship was always to take each other with a pinch of salt. If John said something I did was rubbish, I wouldn't take it to heart. But if he said it was great, I'd believe it." ▶

**"I GOT ON THE BUS IN NEW YORK AND THIS LADY AT THE BACK SHOUTED: 'HEY, ARE YOU PAUL MCCARTNEY? WHAT ARE YOU DOIN' ON THE BUS?'"**



**ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE:** After his acrimonious divorce from charity campaigner Heather Mills in 2008, top, with whom he has a daughter, McCartney has been dating New York businesswoman Nancy Shevell, above

There is still a mystery hovering over the rekindling of the McCartney/Lennon friendship in the mid-70s. They'd had a terribly public war, wounding each other with words and lawyers. Whenever McCartney was in New York, he'd contact Lennon usually to be greeted with, 'What the fuck do you want?' Then one day when he rang expecting his usual hostility or indifference, Lennon invited him to the Dakota, the grand Central Park-facing apartment building where he was living. His favourite cat, Alice, had fallen from an open window and died. Like Paul, John had always been deeply attached to his cats and was crushed.

"Yeah, that did happen," McCartney says wistfully. "We ended up watching *Saturday Night Live* that night. I didn't know the *Saturday Night Live* people had asked NBC to get the Beatles on and the producers got them session musicians instead. So it became a running joke, they'd say, 'Beatles, if you're listening, we can offer you \$24.50'. John thought it would be funny if we hopped in a taxi and showed up at the studio."

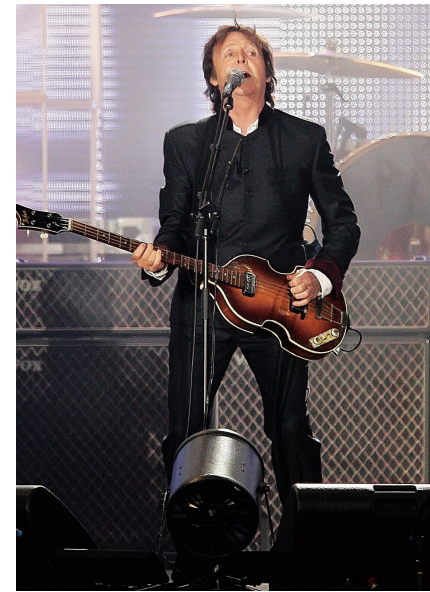
For all his spectacular success and worldly display of laid-back bohemianism, McCartney still feels a lingering hurt over the Beatles fall-out. Seeing old photos or archive footage, he has mixed emotions. "These days, when I do a Beatles song there's enough time gone by for me to stand back and enjoy it as it was meant. It led me to thinking I can do a John song, which before that point I refused to do. I remember I was in Liverpool and wanted to do a tribute to John, so we started with *Give Peace a Chance* and *Help!* and I enjoyed it so much."

There's an overwhelming sense that he carries the scars of the raked-up memories, the rifts and the things unsaid. "Sometimes I feel teary," he admits. "I do a song called *Here Today*, which is like a letter to John. That can get emotional because you know the verse where I'm singing, 'If I say I really loved you and was glad you came along,' just thinking of saying that to John, and performing this song in New York where he was killed, can be very upsetting. Doing John and George's songs can be hard, but at the same time it's lovely."

What are his favourite Beatles songs? "Oh let's see... *California Girls*, *Born in the USA*... These are Beatles songs, aren't they?" he teases, laughing. "Oh my Goad," he goes on taking the piss in an American accent and singing: 'Once I had a secret love... Imagine I'm in love with you.' It's difficult to choose 'cos I love them all."

That's hardly an answer. "Oh, you're cheeky. OK, I've still gotta do the disclaimer... the disclaimer is: It depends what kind of favourites. If you want emotional, soul classics, it might be *I'll Get You*, *Nowhere Man*, *Don't Bother Me*. You know, deeper stuff because of the memories attached to them. If you want deeper, *A Day in a Life*, *Something*, *Hey Jude*. But then you've left out *Eleanor Rigby*, Oh God, *Strawberry Fields*, *Here Comes the Sun*. What you realise is they're like your children... you don't wanna have a favourite. They're all too great.

"But," he says, "it's a joy to choose a set list. At my age, I should be jaded but I get the same thrill of being on the road as I did years ago. After my divorce I've got this custody thing with my little girl," he says of his seven-year-old daughter Beatrice, the child of his volatile



marriage to Mills. "If I'm with her I don't wanna work, so I organise my work schedule around her."

McCartney is keen to stress that he's more than a 60s icon. When he's not touring, he divides his time between his new girlfriend and his children and is also a passionate green and animal-rights campaigner.

If he ran the world what would he change to make it a happier place for animals? "I'd cut out slaughterhouses. That'd be a good start," he says instantly, shifting the conversation to his Meat Free Mondays initiative like an old pro. "Livestock produces more greenhouse gases and the meat industry is more destructive than all forms of transport combined. The best thing anyone can do for the planet is go vegetarian."

He tells me about the collection of rescued animals that share his Sussex home. "We've got loads of horses. Linda was into horses and she got me interested. And I've got cows, rabbits, cats, sheep."

In between his touring and charity work, he enjoys his lo-fi side with his ambient, experimental group, the Fireman. "Our first album sold 500 copies. It gives me great freedom to go into the studio, mucking around on the guitar and having a laugh with the lads. We once rang up a sex line and recorded it."

He's playful and unpretentious – citing Radiohead and Kings of Leon among bands he hates, he laughs and goes off on flights of fancy: "Kings of Leon, I like them. I've never tasted them. I hear they've got very good legs... legs of lion. Now we're talking about eating people. Where's this conversation going?"

Does he have any regrets? "No," he says disingenuously and starts singing in a Serge Gainsbourg voice, 'no... no regrets... Je ne have no regrets. Edith pia-off... what do we do?... Have I just jumped?'"

I leave him on a high note. ▶  
Band on the Run is out 1 November