

Badfinger - a great group - but an incredibly sad story

Written by Andy Owen



A few weeks ago, back in May, I lost my big brother.

I travelled up from Cornwall to Swansea for the funeral to say goodbye to him. I stayed in a hotel in central Swansea the night before. It was very close to the railway station.

After the funeral and reception were over, I got a lift back to the station, to start the long journey back down here to Cornwall.

As I walked in the main entrance, this plaque was on the wall.



To be honest, I had forgotten Pete was a Swansea boy.

It was a few years ago, after all.

But, I knew at that moment, I was going to write about him and the great band he played in.

Badfinger.

For all of you that were fortunate enough to have breathed in that inspirational air in the sixties, the name Badfinger will take you back to those wonderful times.

Badfinger were good. *Very good.*

They were also part of the Beatles' inner circle. So, they became very interesting to us as well, for that very reason.

Pete Ham was the band's leader and figurehead. There was a lot of similarity between him and John Lennon, especially how he delivered a song.

But, despite Pete's huge talent and the band's influential connections, they never reached the heights they should have done.

They could have been one of the truly great bands. But, Lady Luck was very unkind to them - and there were other reasons, too...

...most of them, sad and tragic. It's a hell of a tale that starts in the early 60's...



Swansea's Ham, Ron Griffiths, Roy Anderson and David 'Dai' Jenkins formed a group called The Panthers. They did OK locally and had quite a following.

In 1964 they changed their name to The Iveys and acquired a manager.



Bill Collins

His name was Bill Collins, who is said to have played in a jazz band with Paul McCartney's father. Collins' son was Lewis Collins, who played in the Merseybeat band The Mojos - and later became a successful TV and film actor.

He played alongside Martin Shaw as the co-lead character William Bodie, in the very popular television series *The Professionals*, which is still regularly shown on satellite channels.

The group started to spread their wings, playing all over the UK and acquired quite a following.

In March 1965, drummer Roy Anderson left and was replaced by Mike Gibbins. In 1966, they left South Wales behind and established a base in Golders Green, North London.



Early in 1968, The Beatles' assistant Mal Evans, who knew Collins from way back, was in the audience one night at the Marquee Club in London, when The Iveys played their set.

He was very taken with them and told the boys about them. They were invited to record some demos for Apple.

George Harrison liked them a lot. So did John and Paul and the Apple Press Officer, Derek Taylor.

They won a contract. And they went down in history, as the first non-Beatles act to be signed to the label.

The Iveys' first single, *'Maybe Tomorrow'*, was issued in November 1968. It didn't do much at all in the UK or US, although it fared a lot better elsewhere.

A follow-up single, *'Dear Angie'*, was released in Europe and Japan in July 1969, and The Iveys' only album, *'Maybe Tomorrow'*, was issued in Italy, West Germany and Japan.

It was at this time - a key point in their development - that Lady Luck first turned her back on the group.

The album was blocked by the disastrous Beatles' business manager, Allen Klein, who had been drafted in by John, George and Ringo, to audit the company's chaotic finances.

Paul was against Klein from the start, but was overruled.

Badfinger took the setback on the chin and soldiered on. And they were soon rewarded, when Paul offered them a new song he had just written, called '*Come And Get It*'

Ham wasn't too happy about using a non-original song to promote the band, as he had gained confidence in the group's own compositions.

But the rest of the band reminded him of the fact it was a McCartney song and he became convinced of the springboard effect of having a likely hit single.

The Iveys recorded it in August 1969. Paul produced it.

Before the single was released, there was a lot of discussion about the band's name. No one really felt The Iveys suited them, or the time.

So, one of the Beatles came up with 'Badfinger'.

Badfinger was suggested, because 'Bad Finger Boogie' was the working title of The Beatles' '*With A Little Help From My Friends*' - a song that was being worked on at Abbey Road at the time.

'*Come And Get It*' was a typical Paul song with a great melody and a stunning hook. It was a big hit - and was also selected for the soundtrack of the film *The Magic Christian*, with Peter Sellers and Ringo.

Badfinger were on their way...

Their first album, '*Magic Christian Music*', was released in 1970.

It was at this time, that the group were pressured to seek professional business management. Collins had done OK for them in the UK, but clearly they needed someone with more international experience.



Stan Polley

Enter stage left, Stan Polley, who was an American entrepreneur with a roster of mainly American artists, including Al Kooper and Lou Christie.

Polley had experience in arranging large U.S. tours for clients. He impressed the band - and was hired.

He immediately set up a New York-based business on behalf of Badfinger called Badfinger Enterprises Incorporated. The revenues from the band's recording and touring efforts were funnelled into this business, to be used for reinvestment.

The band members were paid a salary, rather than receiving immediate income from contract advances and tours.

The final piece of the jigsaw was in place. Or so they thought.

It started off well. Ham was a prolific writer and he wrote '*No Matter What*' in late 1970, and the band put it out as a single.

It became another worldwide hit - and sold over a million copies.

The group then followed that with two more hit singles - both written by Ham - '*Day After Day*' and '*Baby Blue*'.

Badfinger's links with The Beatles lasted well into the 70's - and George Harrison co-produced their album '*Straight Up*' in 1971, the same year that guitarist Joey Molland and Tom Evans played on John Lennon's '*Imagine*' album.

The connection with George, especially, was strong - and Ham, Evans and Molland were invited over to George's house at Friar Park to be part of a large group of players involved with the making of '*All Things Must Pass*'.

They also played on the groundbreaking '*Concert For Bangladesh*', organised by George, which culminated in two August 1971 benefit gigs at Madison Square Garden.



They were due to perform a couple of their own songs at the concert, but bad luck struck them again, when Bob Dylan belatedly agreed to perform.

However, Pete Ham enjoyed some consolation, when he was given the incredible privilege of strumming the now-familiar acoustic guitar opening on Harrison's solo studio chart-topper '*My Sweet Lord*'.

In 1971, they recorded and released a new album, called *'No Dice'*. They all felt it was the best album so far.

It was critically acclaimed.

No Dice contained a song *'Without You'*, written by Ham and Evans.

American singer Harry Nilsson, who had become part of the Beatles' inner circle, was at a party, when the album was being played. He heard *'Without You'* and loved it. He thought it was a Beatle song.

A friend corrected him: "No, this song is from a band called Badfinger."

Harry Nilsson covered the song later in 1971 and it became a huge international hit. It has since become a standard and has been covered by hundreds of artists.

Pete Ham was granted two Ivor Novello awards for the song in 1973.

The story of the song is interesting.

It was a total one-off, in that Ham and Evans, who usually wrote separately, had put together the verse from a Ham song, *'If It's Love'*, and the chorus from Evans' also unrecorded *'I Can't Live'*.

Strangely, Ham never really rated the song - and when congratulated by an old friend at a party, told him: "It wasn't so much the song, it was the treatment Harry gave it".

This was pretty typical of the man. Pete Ham was a very honest, modest bloke - and very well liked.

He - and the rest of the band members - didn't deserve what was going to happen to them.

Without the group's knowledge, Stan Polley negotiated and landed a \$2 million contract with Warner Bros., which guaranteed the release of two albums per year for 3 years.

Apple were very unhappy that Polley had done this. The band were under contract to Apple at the time- and given the label's support of the group, they expected that to be renewed.

The band released a final album on Apple - titled *'Ass'* - and their début for Warners - the *'Badfinger Album'*, in quick succession.

But, the Warner's deal, which looked stunning on paper, was not what it seemed. After they signed it, the band members started to look more closely at it.

When you deducted the cost of making the albums they had to pay for, plus Polley's cut and heavy expenses, the money split between Collins and the four guys in the group, came to very little - around \$50,000 each per album.

Initially, they'd really thought they were millionaires. But, after analysing it, they looked at each other and realised that the Warner's deal wasn't what it seemed.

The group's finances were already in massive disarray thanks to gross mismanagement, with millions missing from the band's accounts.

This realisation of a bad deal, only added to the concern they felt.

The members of Badfinger were all in personal debt, and relations with Warner Bros had deteriorated. Yet despite these pressures, the band were still trying to make music.

In Dan Matovina's excellent book '*Without You: The Tragic Story of Badfinger*', he suggests that '*Head First*' was another rush job.

Polley had apparently phoned out of the blue and given them three weeks to complete it, leaving drummer Gibbins, for one, unhappy:

"We thought, what are we doing this for, when we haven't got the money for the last one yet? Our hearts weren't in it. But, being a musician, it was a case of, at least we're doing something, at least we're playing music."

But the pressure was building. There were reports that the mild-mannered Pete Ham had thrown a precious Martin guitar across the studio in rage during one session.

Clearly, things were about to blow.

Interestingly, around that time, Ham and Tom Evans had dinner with May Pang, John and Yoko's secretary, (soon to be John's lover) and their appearance worried Pang.

"They looked different, especially Pete", she said. "Their look of worry had changed their appearance."

'Head First' was never released.

The label withdrew copies from shops after they discovered that a sizeable advance placed into an escrow account, had mysteriously disappeared.

On December 10th, 1974, Warner Bros. filed a lawsuit against Stan Polley and the musicians, at the Superior Court of Los Angeles. The subsequent lawsuit against Badfinger Enterprises resulted in Stan Polley being accused of mishandling the band's affairs.

In early 1975, Badfinger's contract with Warner Bros was terminated.

This action immediately halted all promotion of the band and the entire international distribution of albums and songs, completely ending Badfinger's career.

Polley disappeared and the band were left penniless. Rumours at the time suggested Stan Polley was connected to the mafia.

During the first four months of 1975, Pete Ham tried to contact Polley, but without success. He also tried to talk with other agents and managers with a view to taking over managing the band.

But no one was interested, because of the court action by Warners.

Ham's friends noticed that his behaviour began to get strange. He had a 'dead look' and was constantly seen by his colleagues extinguishing cigarette butts on his own body.

On the night of April 23rd, 1975, Peter Ham received a call from the American Justice Department, saying that all his money was gone.

He called Tom Evans and they met in The White Hart Pub in Surrey. They drank together for hours. Pete downed ten whiskies and told Tom, "I think I've got a solution to all this."

Evans took him home at 3am on April 24th 1975.

On the morning of 24th April 1975, in deep depression, Pete Ham hanged himself in his Surrey garage.



Anne
of love you
Blair I love you
I will not be allowed to
love & trust anybody
This is better.
P.S. Stan Polley is a soulless bastard.
I will take him with me

His suicide note was addressed to his girlfriend and their unborn son - and blamed the band's business manager Stan Polley.

The note read:

"Anne, I love you. Blair, I love you. I will not be allowed to love and trust everybody. This is better. Pete. P.S. Stan Polley is a soulless bastard. I will take him with me."

The pressures on Ham had clearly been immense.

He had recently moved out of Park Avenue and into a new house in Surrey, but with Badfinger's funds frozen, he was struggling to pay the mortgage.

Ham's son was born one month after his death.

Paul McCartney was in Los Angeles with Wings, recording the '*Venus And Mars*' album, when he heard of Ham's suicide.



Paul & Wings in LA in 1975

He said: "This is tragic, because Pete was so good, so talented. It makes me think, what if I had called him a week ago? Would that maybe have stopped him?"

Over the next few years, the remaining members of Badfinger tried very hard to control their increasingly complex legal and financial problems, but it was a losing battle.

Polley was hunted down by Warners and ended up in court. He pleaded no contest to charges of misappropriating funds and money laundering in a \$200,000 swindle involving an engineering firm.

He was placed on probation for five years.

Gibbins kept a handhold on full-time music, occupying the drum stool behind rising Welsh singer Bonnie Tyler. By 1978, Molland was a carpet fitter in LA - and Evans was working in the UK, insulating pipes.

So when the chance came for the pair to re-form Badfinger with ex-Yes keyboard player Tony Kaye and former Stealers Wheel drummer Peter Clarke on board, they jumped at the chance.



In 1979 they released the album 'Airwaves', which was followed by a second album, 'Say No More', in 1981.

The albums did OK, because of the loyal fan base, but nothing special.

But tragedy was just around the corner once more - and was about to hit them again. Evans and Molland fell out big time in 1981, and for two years operated rival bands, both called Badfinger.

Then on 19th November 1983 - just over 8 years from Pet Ham's suicide, Tom Evans hanged himself.

In truth, he had never recovered from Pete's death. He had just had an argument with Molland on the phone about the royalties from *Without You*.

The phone call confirmed that he was financially ruined.



Tom Evans

Tommy went into the garden behind his home in Richmond, England, and hanged himself from a tree.

The years of frustration and unhappiness with the band's business dealings, finally took its toll.

There was no note, but his wife said at the time:

"Tommy said I want to be where Pete is. It's a better place than down here."

In 1986 Molland and Gibbins got back together and reformed the band for tours, until the latter left in 1990. Joey Molland's Badfinger continued to tour for a few more years.

In October 2005, drummer Mike Gibbins died of a brain aneurysm at his Florida home at the age of 56.

A statement on his website read: *"To all of Mike's fans, it is with deepest regret to inform all that he passed away on October 4th, in his sleep by natural causes. He will be terribly missed by all."*

Molland continued playing in various rock groups and duos and he also released some solo recordings from 1992 to 2001.

His last album, *'Return To Memphis'*, was released on 13 December 2013.

Then, in late 2019, Molland toured with Todd Rundgren, Jason Scheff, Micky Dolenz and Christopher Cross, in celebration of The Beatles' White Album.

The tour was called "It Was Fifty Years Ago Today - A Tribute to the Beatles' White Album".

As part of the set, Molland performed the Badfinger songs *'Baby Blue'* and *'No Matter What'*.

'Baby Blue' experienced a resurgence of popularity in 2013, when it was featured in the television program *'Breaking Bad'*, during the closing scene of the series finale.

The Badfinger tale is a very, very sad story.

There is a final irony to all of this - and it centres on *'Without You'*.

The two songwriters - Ham & Evans - were due significant revenue from the success of the song. But, neither of them saw a penny of it while they were alive - and they endured severe financial hardship, leading to their suicides.

Royalty payments from the era had stopped coming through in 1974, with Apple agreeing to hold on to them until ongoing financial conflicts had been ironed out.

Three years later, the sum had grown to "embarrassing proportions" and they applied to have publishing royalties paid to a court appointed receiver.

In a sad irony, agreement was reached in September 1985 regarding the division of Apple royalties, a windfall that might well have saved Evans' life. But it was 2 years too late...

Little wonder that Will Birch suggests the Badfinger story may have been one of a band *"mismanaged and exploited beyond the bounds of human decency"* .

Since then of course, the CD re-release revolution has seen everything from *'Magic Christian Music'* onwards reissued, plus an excellent *'Best Of'* (the first 'new album' on Apple for two decades), generating additional funds that would have kept both Ham and Evans in comfort for the rest of their lives.

On 27th April 2013, the official blue plaque was unveiled by Swansea City Council to honour Pete Ham in his hometown.

The occasion was attended by two former members of the original Badfinger band, The Iveys - Ron Griffiths and David Jenkins - plus former Badfinger member Bob Jackson.

Polley died in California on July 20, 2009 - outliving Pete Ham by 34 years and Tom Evans by 26. He never once expressed any remorse for his actions, which destroyed the lives and careers of these enormously talented musicians and their families.

The story of Badfinger is one of the most tragic rock'n'roll stories.

They could - and should - have been huge. They had *everything*.

Except luck.

They tried. So hard.

But a mixture of a crooked manager who stole all their money, a series of personal tragedies and appalling misfortune, plus other rock n' roll let downs, left Badfinger as little more than a sad footnote in popular music history.

They deserved so much better.

