

## He was a Beatle for 13 days. But, where is he now?

Written by Andy Owen



### What has happened to him?

On 3rd June 1964, Ringo was in London doing a photo-shoot for The Saturday Evening Post newspaper.

He had woken up that morning not feeling too well, but, after an invigorating shower and a couple of cups of coffee, he had perked up a bit - and decided to get over there and get it done.

It wouldn't take too long, hopefully. Within an hour, he had collapsed. An ambulance was called and he was taken to the University College Hospital where he was diagnosed with tonsillitis.

He was told his tonsils would have to be removed, followed by rest for 10 days.



The timing of this unfortunate event could not have been worse.

Beatlemania was at fever pitch, all over the world.

The Beatles were about to embark on their first-ever world tour to Denmark, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand, with the first date of that tour, due to take place in Copenhagen, just two days later.

The tour was a sell-out. In fact, it could have sold out 50 times over.

Everything was done. Hotels and concert halls were booked and security was in place. Promotional activities arranged, media interviews and celebrity meetings arranged and, much, much more.

It was set to be the biggest grossing tour in music history.

But, it was only 48 hours away - and the Beatles had no drummer.

Clearly, Brian Epstein and his management team had a massive problem.

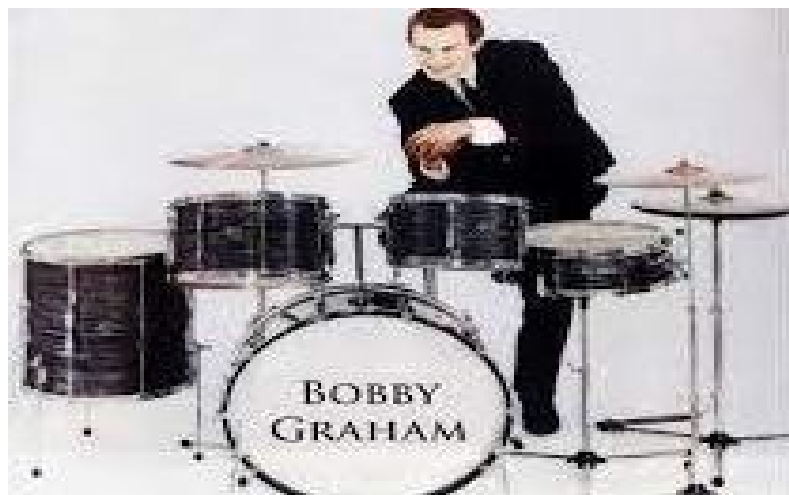
In those days, there were no cancellation clauses in contracts, so to pull out of the tour, would have cost millions and bankrupted him.

They had to find a replacement drummer. He had to be experienced and he had to know the group's songs, as he would have very little time to rehearse.

And they had to find him in a matter of hours.

One hell of a challenge...

They first turned to session drummer Bobby Graham.



Bobby was known to Epstein, as he had previously invited him to join the band in 1962, when they were advised to replace Pete Best, by George Martin.

In 1962, Graham turned him down. As he recalled:

"He said that they needed a change. I said, 'No thanks' as The Beatles hadn't had any hits and anyway, I had a wife and family in London. I don't think he had even discussed it with The Beatles, as surely they would have wanted someone from Liverpool."

In 1964, Graham was one of the most in-demand session drummers.

When he was approached again to join the Beatles for the world tour, he turned them down a second time, because he had committed to so many sessions and he knew his reputation would be damaged if he just upped sticks and took the gig.

And he also knew that Ringo would be back in a few weeks.

Apparently, after Graham's rejection, Epstein approached a second drummer, but his name was never released. His third choice came from a recommendation from George Martin.

He approached Jimmie Nicol.

Jimmie was a seasoned session drummer and band member that Martin had worked with on a number of recent recording sessions.

Jimmie's career break came many years earlier in 1957, when he was spotted by impresario Larry Parnes whilst drumming with various bands in London's The 2i's Coffee Bar.



Parnes invited Nicol to join Colin Hicks & The Cabin Boys whom Parnes co-managed.

Colin Hicks was the younger brother of Tommy Steele, who was also in the Parnes stable.

After taking a temporary break from the group to be a member of the original pit band in the Lionel Bart musical *'Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be'* at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, Nicol rejoined Hicks's band for their appearance in the 1958 Italian film documentary *Europa Di Notte*, breaking them in Italy which saw them tour there extensively.

During the early sixties, Nicol went on to play for a number of artists, including Vince Eager, Oscar Rabin, and Cyril Stapleton - and was kept in regular work through Charlie Katz, a well-known session fixer during that period.

He had also drummed on a 'Top Six' budget label album as part of an uncredited session band, as well as an extended play single (with three tracks on each side) of Beatles cover versions (marketed as 'Teenagers Choice' and titled *Beatlemania*).

Clearly, this meant he already knew most of the songs and their arrangements.

In 1964, Nicol was playing in a band he helped to form, called The Shubbubs - with former Merseybeats bassist Bob Garner.

It was a jazz line-up similar in musical style to Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames, a group with whom Nicol had sat-in with, when they were the resident house band at London's famous Flamingo Club.

It was while he was playing with The Shubbubs, that he received a telephone call at his home in West London, from the Beatles' producer, George Martin.

Jimmie recalled: *"I was having a bit of a lie down after lunch when the phone rang."* It was a call that would change his life for ever.

The agreement and subsequent arrangements were made very quickly.

Nicol was invited to attend a quick audition/rehearsal at Abbey Road Studios, then he had to rush back home, get his passport and pack his bags, all in the same day.

As soon as Ringo's situation was confirmed, Epstein spoke personally to John, Paul and George. John and Paul quickly accepted the solution of using an understudy.

George did not. In fact, he was a real fly in the ointment.

He was extremely unhappy and threatened to pull out of the tour. He shouted at Epstein and Martin: *"If Ringo's not going, then neither am I."*

*You can find two replacements."*

It took all of Epstein and Martin's persuasion to tell George that if he didn't do it, he was letting everybody down.

He reluctantly agreed.

When he was asked about it a year or two later, George said: *"I was very against that. I didn't want to do the tour without Ringo."*

*The Beatles were, always will be, the Four Fabs, so three Fabs and a not-so-Fab is not The Beatles. At least, that's how I felt.*

*When I think back, it was also no help to Jimmie Nicol's life to be king for a day."*

How true that last statement turned out to be...

In his hospital bed, Ringo was also pretty unhappy - and showed his fragile side when interviewed.

*"It was very strange, them going off without me. They'd taken Jimmie Nicol and I thought they didn't love me any more - all that stuff went through my head."*

Nicol's first concert with the Beatles took place on 4th June at the KB Hallen in Copenhagen, only 27 hours after he took that first call from Brian Epstein.

He was quickly given a Beatle hairstyle, put on Ringo's suit and went on stage to an audience of 4,500 Beatles fans.



Their set was reduced from eleven songs to ten, dropping Ringo's vocal spot of "I Wanna Be Your Man".

This was the set list:

*I Saw Her Standing There*  
*I Want To Hold Your Hand*  
*All My Lovin'*  
*She Loves You*  
*'Til There Was You*  
*Roll over Beethoven*  
*Can't Buy Me Love*  
*This Boy*  
*Twist and Shout*  
*Long Tall Sally*

If you weren't around in those days, it will be hard for you to understand, what a frightening situation Jimmie had been catapulted into. The Beatles had become - in a very short time - a phenomenon.

They changed *everything*.

Music. Culture. Fashion.

And pretty much everything else.

They influenced the way people dressed. They influenced the way people thought. They opened up so many doors for musicians, artists and writers in all four corners of the world.

They changed the culture of music so much, it was a 'light the blue touch paper moment', that literally ignited singer-song writers to perform, play guitars, write, and explore areas that did not exist before.

They single-handedly created stadium concerts - and the music they created, brought the world closer together. They made an astonishing concept album - that will never be equalled - which sparked new ways in which music was made.

And, they inspired more than their own generation.

In 1964, they had only just got started.

But Jimmie was thrown into this maelstrom and he had to get it done.



He did.

Superbly.

He was a true pro - and it showed.



When he was interviewed later about his brief celebrity, Nicol reflected:

*"The day before I was a Beatle, girls weren't interested in me at all. The day after, with the suit and the Beatle cut, riding in the back of the limo with John and Paul, they were dying to get a touch of me.*

*It was very strange and quite*

But he discovered that, aside from acting as a Beatle, he could behave much as any tourist could:

*"I often went out alone. Hardly anybody recognised me and I was able to wander around. In Hong Kong, I went to see the thousands of people who live on little boats in the harbour. I saw the refugees in Kowloon and I visited a nightclub. I like to see life.*

*A Beatle could never really do that."*

Jimmie Nicol played a total of eight shows until Ringo rejoined the group in Melbourne, Australia, on 14th June.

The next day, he did his final television interview as a Beatle and he met with Brian Epstein, who warmly thanked him for his help - and gave him his air tickets back to the UK and a gold Eterna-matic wrist watch inscribed:

*"From the Beatles and Brian Epstein to Jimmie - with appreciation and gratitude."*

He also gave him a cheque.

The size of this cheque remains a mystery to this day.

It was widely reported that it was for £500. On the surface, this seems to be a tad low, given the vital importance of what he did and how much it was worth to Epstein and his organisation.

However, when you consider prices of things in 1964, perhaps it makes a bit more sense. For example, an average London property could be purchased for £2,900. Average salaries were around £1,000 per year. A new family car would set you back around £900.

Nicol claimed in a rare interview, that he was offered £2,500 per show, plus an additional £2,500 to temporarily sign with the band's label.

That's a pay-off of £22,500. The equivalent of about 7 average London houses.

That looks and sounds highly unlikely, especially when you consider that only 9 months later in 1965, Nicol declared bankruptcy with debts of £4,066.

So, maybe £500 and a gold watch worth about £150, was the deal after all.

*(Just imagine how much that watch, complete with inscription, would be worth today...)*

Unfortunately, he was unable to say goodbye to the Beatles, as they were still asleep when he left for the airport, and he did not want to disturb them.

This rather sad picture was taken of him at Melbourne Airport, while waiting for his plane ride home.



George Martin later spoke very warmly about Nicol whilst recognising the problems he experienced in trying to readjust to a normal life again:

*"Jimmie Nicol was a very good drummer who came along and learnt Ringo's parts very well. He did the job excellently and faded into obscurity immediately afterwards".*

Paul McCartney also recognised what Nicol had done: *"It wasn't an easy thing for Jimmie to stand in for Ringo, and have all that fame thrust upon him.*



*And the minute his tenure was over, he wasn't famous any more."*



Soon after getting back to the UK, Nicol reformed the Shubbubs, renaming them Jimmie Nicol and the Shubbubs.

They released two singles, but neither of them did anything at all.

In a weird twist of fate a few months later, Nicol was again asked to be a stand-in.

Dave Clark of The Dave Clark Five fell ill and Nicol's band, Jimmie Nicol and the Shubbubs, filled in for them at some gigs in Blackpool.

Whilst he was there, he was starkly reminded of just how popular, albeit briefly, he had been as a stand-in Beatle. He received over 5,000 fan letters passed on to him from an Australian radio disc jockey.

He was later reunited with the Beatles when his band appeared on the same bill as them and The Fourmost on 12th July 1964, at the Hippodrome in Brighton.

But, Jimmie was struggling.

His band was not selling any records despite some radio and TV appearances. The music was too much of a fusion of rock and jazz and people wanted to hear the British rock music of the day.

He had spent nearly all of his money on the band. In 1965, he went bankrupt.



Soon after, his wife divorced him and he became estranged from his son.

He ended up living in his mom's basement.

His world had fallen apart.

And all this happened, less than two years after he had become a Beatle for a couple of weeks.

*"The media built him up and then tore him down with glee. The last article was about how he was penniless,"* author Jim Berkenstadt said.

When Paul McCartney read that story he was sad and concerned for Jimmie - and called Peter Asher of Peter and Gordon and said,

*"Hey, maybe you could give Jimmie a little work on your next tour, because he's a very good drummer and it looks like from this article he really could use some help."*

Although Peter and Gordon gave him some concert work, Nicol was soon unemployed and broke again.

When the Spotnicks, a successful Swedish instrumental group, offered him a gig in 1965, Nicol grabbed it with both hands.

He didn't tell anyone. He just upped and left.

After a few months, he was made a permanent member of the band.



He recorded with them and twice toured the world.

It would appear that during this time, he did quite well - and almost certainly repaired his finances a fair bit.

But, he had started to dabble in drugs.

Whilst playing with The Spotnicks on an extended stay in Mexico in 1967, he vanished again.

He stayed in Mexico, studying samba and bossa nova rhythms.

He pretty much dropped out of sight. He reappeared in 1975 and strangely became involved with housing renovations.

I can't find any information about this and whether he was successful or not.

In 1984, he made a surprise guest appearance at a Beatles convention in Amsterdam.

In 1988, some new information emerged about Jimmie.

It was rumoured that he had died, the year after making his final interview.

But in an article in 2005 by The *Daily Mail*, they claimed that he was still alive and living in London.

And he was still refusing to do any interviews or talk about his tenure with the Beatles.



In that rare 1987 interview, he explained his feelings on this:

*"After the money ran low, I thought of cashing-in some way or other. But the timing wasn't right. And I didn't want to step on the Beatles' toes. They had been damn good to me."*

It is thought that Jimmie - who is now 82 - is living in Mexico with his wife Josefina. But, despite quite lengthy searches in the country, he has still not been located.

His family and friends have had no contact with him for years.

His son, Howard (Howie) is in his sixties and is a BAFTA award-winning sound engineer. He hasn't seen or heard from Jimmie for over 10 years.

He is not sure if he is still alive.

There's a final twist to all of this.

Jim Berkenstadt wrote a book about Jimmie, called 'The Beatle Who Vanished'.

The film rights have recently been purchased by Alex Orbison, son of Roy Orbison - and Ashley Hamilton, son of actor George Hamilton and actress Alana Stewart. Apparently, the script is in production.

What would Jimmie think about his life being turned into a film or TV series?

His son, Howie, 62, said his father would hate it.

Speaking to The Times, Howie said: *"He will be mortified if there is a film, which will define him, that will be terrible. It is just two weeks in a person's life. I can understand why historians and fans are interested and I am interested myself, but it is an enormous thing to cope with."*

So, was being a Beatle good for Jimmie?

I'll let him answer that himself:

*"Standing in for Ringo was the worst thing that ever happened to me. Until then, I was quite happy earning £30 or £40 a week.*

*After the headlines died, I began dying too."*

**There is no doubt, that Jimmie's is a hell of a tale.**

**But a rather sad one, too.**

**He got a gig that millions of people would have given *everything* for.**

**He suffered ups, downs and everything in between.**

**Just like we all have, I suppose, in our own way.**

**I personally hope Jimmie is OK - and life is being kind to him, wherever he may be...**

