



‘They were scruffy boys who didn’t want to pay any tax’

*Nearly 50 years after being the Beatles’ accountant, Harold Pinsky gives his first and only interview about that time, to **Peter Taylor-Whiffen***

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IN the Beatles’ 1966 song Taxman, George Harrison berates Harold Wilson’s proposed 95% “supertax” on the UK’s highest earners. “If five per cent appears too small,” he sings bitterly, “be grateful I don’t take it all.”

But there was one man to whom the Fab Four were genuinely thankful for keeping their Revenue bill down: their accountant, Harry Pinsky.

Many people claim to have been in the Beatles’ inner circle, but Pinsky truly was. From 1961 to 1970 he oversaw their finances, set up their companies, helped buy their homes - even signed off their grocery shopping.

“I first met them in my office – they were just four scruffy boys,” recalls Pinsky, now an engaging 87-year-old. “I hadn’t heard of them – few people had, outside Liverpool.” He smiles. “That changed!”

Pinsker hadn't planned to become an accountant. Born in Hackney, east London, he harboured ambitions to be a doctor or solicitor. But he lost months of education through war (he was evacuated to Norfolk and Cornwall), racism (Truro College said it "could not take a Jewish boy") and illness (he spent days in intensive care with peritonitis). "Missing schooling meant I failed Latin, necessary for medicine or law," he says. "So I became an accountant."

On leaving school in 1947, Pinsker was articled to the London office of Bryce Hamner & Co, who audited theatrical clients including Arthur Askey and impresario Jack Hylton, through whom "I met my childhood heroes – Flanagan and Allen, Jimmy Edwards. It was wonderful."

But fate was already at work. In Liverpool, Bryce Hamner's main branch's clients included local furniture store owner Harry Epstein – and when in 1961, his elder son Brian began managing pop groups and wanted to formalise their accounts, the Merseyside office referred him to their "showbiz" colleagues in London – and Pinsker.

"Brian Epstein was charming, and the Beatles were polite and did whatever he told them. Although they were naïve. I set up a company, with all of them directors, and said we'd need a secretary. John Lennon said: "What about that bird who opened the door on the way in?" I explained I meant a company secretary ..."

Pinsker – who also audited Epstein's other rising stars Cilla Black and Gerry & The Pacemakers – quickly proved himself adept at negotiating deals and solving problems. "When Brian got the Beatles London flats they needed a phone, but you had to wait six months. I was doing a government audit so top secret even I didn't know what the business was – I later discovered it was guided missiles. But I rang the GPO and said this top secret work needed telephones at four addresses. So the Beatles got their phones within a week!"

More importantly, Pinsker's expertise protected the Beatles' assets with a range of creative but perfectly legal ideas to keep down their tax bill. For instance: "We created a song-writing company called Lenmac, which Learned Counsel deemed an investment company, whose revenue was defined as unearned income and subject to higher tax. I saw it as a trading company and appealed to the Inspector of Taxes, arguing that if a newspaper was used to wrap fish and chips, it was still a newspaper, so Lennon and McCartney's songs would always still be songs – and therefore represented earned income. The Inspector agreed."

But he found he had to warn "the boys" against profligacy. "Early on, the press called them millionaires. I had to clarify to them that million pounds was earnings, not assets, and they needed to set aside a lot of those earnings for tax.

"They were never happy with that – that's why George wrote Taxman. They'd been poor boys, who'd worked hard and made money, and now someone was trying to take it away."

Inevitably, Pinsker's work brought his family into contact with the Beatles. But while daughters Sharon and Barbara were the envy of their schoolfriends, the girls themselves – and Pinsker's wife Ana – were harder to impress.

Recalls Sharon: "When I was about eight they came to our house to meet Daddy, while their girlfriends drank tea in the kitchen with us. Mummy wasn't impressed with Paul's sheepdog Martha leaving hairs on our new carpets, so he took the dog home. I also remember asking (George's girlfriend) Patti Boyd: "Can I put a Monkees record on? Only I don't really like the Beatles!"

But as the group became more powerful, Pinsker found them less willing to follow advice – especially after Epstein's death of a heart attack aged 32 in 1967. Months earlier Pinsker had suggested they offset their expected huge tax liability by setting up a new company, Apple, which included a record label and a shop in London's Baker Street. "The idea, which Brian had approved, was to follow the Epstein family business and open a furniture store – selling high-end pianos, record players etc."

"Suddenly I got a message from the boys saying 'we're selling clothes instead' and they had paid a company called The Fool £40,000 to design them. I was horrified – furniture offered much more tax allowance, and if it had to be clothes, couldn't they do sale or return? Back came the reply: "We want the best. You don't understand Harry, we're going to be like Marks & Spencer."

As Pinsker feared, the Apple Boutique was a disaster: "Clothes just kept disappearing – people were stealing them. It was a stupid idea." It closed after seven months.

He was, however, canny enough to sell the building at a small profit – although his involvement in Apple Records had a sting in the tail, which effectively ended his association with the group.

In November 1968, Lennon released on Apple his first solo album *Two Virgins*, whose cover featured a nude photograph of him and new love Yoko Ono. Some Beatles biographies claim Pinsker quit Apple in protest, but the truth is different: "Our solicitors said if John didn't withdraw the album Apple would be sued for indecency and as a director, I would be liable! I phoned John and asked him to withdraw the record. He said no, with some colourful language, so I resigned. I continued to do some work on their other companies but within a few months the Beatles had broken up, and I never had any business contact with them again."

But the band paid one final affectionate tribute to Harry. As they rehearsed in Abbey Road studios in 1969 for their final album *Let It Be*, they improvised a tune and started singing "Hare Krishna" – and changed the words to "Harry Pinsker". "I didn't know until years later they'd even done it," says Pinsker, "but it's now on YouTube. I'm very honoured!"

He continued to audit other musicians, including Cream and Genesis, and remained with Bryce Hamner until retiring in the 1990s. But, he says: "The Beatles were special. Paul was down to Earth, John had weird ideas, George and Ringo were quieter, and all were lovely boys. They were such great writers, with such rhythm and such electrifying stage presence. I was lucky to work with them."

Pinsker has written his own story – and numerous more anecdotes – in a memoir he hopes to publish, but says his most cherished compliment came in a recent biography of Paul McCartney. “He was asked about the Beatles’ finances,” he says. “I was touched when, after all those years, he replied: ‘Harry was the only one who really knew what went on.’”