

SID BERNSTIEN INTERVEIW

interviewed by John DeBellis

He's the man responsible for bringing the Beatles to America. That could be enough for several past and present lives. Add to that the Rollingstones, the Kinks, Manfred Mann, the Dave Clark Five... the British Invasion. He was also the first man to book a rock and roll act into Carnegie Hall, and Madison Square Garden, where he broke the color line bringing in James Brown. Oh, and he was also the first to book a rock and roll band into a stadium, (the Beatles in Shea Stadium). On a lesser note, but more significant to my stomach, he took me to Pasty's restaurant on 117th St and First Avenue for the best brick oven pizza I ever had. All that said, I think his greatest accomplishment is that he is as nice a person as he is successful. To rephrase, Will Rodgers, "I haven't met a man that wouldn't like Sid Bernstein."

JOHN: As a tailor's son, how did you get involved in promotions?

SID: I went to James Monroe High School, a big school in the East Bronx. My first promotion was the first Alumni reunion dance. I got all the names and addresses out of the yearbook. It came off very well. So I got the yearbook from the year before that and did that class. And the one the year before that was even bigger. So my first promotion was in gym at James Monroe. But my next promotion was at the Hunt's Point Palace, which was a bigger room. And I raised the price a little bit. Then I started to book Latin dances and concerts.

JOHN: Why Latin?

SID: Because I lived on Tremont Avenue. It didn't become Jewish and Italian, it became very Spanish. My father wanted to open up a dry cleaning store for me. My head wasn't into dry cleaning. I said this is pretty good I'm making more money than my father did. It was a challenge and it was original.

JOHN: You were living by your wits.

SID: Yeah whatever it was. Yeah I like that. You can say that. It's even stronger than that (laughing).

JOHN: Wits and wisdom.

SID: (joking) In tune with incredible instincts.

JOHN: You're a World War II veteran.

SID: I saw a lot of action in Europe. I did manage to come home in one piece though.

JOHN: How does a guy brought up on American Swing music, return from World War II, where he spent some time in England, two decades later brings this unknown rock and roll band from Liver pool and book them into Carnegie Hall and then Shea Stadium?

SID: I loved England's gentility, it's civility. I'm from the Bronx, with a Bronx accent. I love the beauty of its language, the ways it's spoken. I love the green grass of England, and the flowers. I love the island. It's an island. The people were nice. I loved their form of government, their two houses. When I came back home, I continued to read English newspapers. I used to go to the out of town newspaper stand on Forty-second Street. The British newspapers were not as prevalent as they are now. I'd pick up one or two papers. I read about four kids creating havoc in the town of Liverpool. I'd never heard of Liverpool before. I knew of London. I hear Kids were falling for them in other cities.

I read the second week, the third week, the fourth week. With each week the stories kept getting bigger. I thought, this looks like something I should look into.

JOHN: Where did you go from there, you're next step?

SID: Some how I find Brian Epstein's, number. I call him up. He hadn't yet moved his operation yet to England. His mother answers the phone.

JOHN: The Beatle's manager mother answered the phone?

SID: Brian was still living at home, upstairs. His mother calls him to the phone. I can still hear the footsteps coming down the stairs like it was yesterday. That's a phone call I'll never forget.

JOHN: I'd never forget that, but I'd probably have lost the number... I could lose a tattoo.

SID: (Laughs) So Brian says, you're the first American to call me. I tell him I want to bring the Beatles to America. He says, "You want to bring my boys to America? Why do you want to take them to America, we're not getting any airplay and why should I take them to America if they're not getting airplay?"

JOHN: How did you answer him?

SID: I get this idea. It wasn't a stroke of genius. Maybe, God did come down, who knows I believe in God. So I say to him, "the language is the same, Mr. Epstein." I'm calling him Epstein and he's calling me Bernstein. This is the first call. So he corrects me. He says, "My name is Epstein, Mr. Bernstein." So I say, "My name is Bernstein, Mr. Epstein." That was the first call.

JOHN: That's hysterical.

SID: Being the fact that he didn't laugh, I thought he had no sense of humor.

JOHN: What did you tell him?

SID: I said, "I'd like to present them in New York. " I want to give it to you accurately, as I said it in my book?

JOHN: What is the title of your book?

SID: "Not Just The Beatles."

JOHN: Great title.

SID: It was a soft cover book. The front cover was of Abbey road, which we paid a handsome fee for.

JOHN: Why did you bring them here, to New York?

SID: I had to think of something. I said, "I think they'd make it here, because well, we speak the same language and of all the crazy stuff going on there could happen here."

JOHN: So you made that up on the spot.

SID; Yeah, I adlibbed that. So he asked, "When do you want to present them?" I said, from my experience with dance and with Latin concerts, it takes six or eight weeks to promote. So I say, "Six to eight weeks from now." He said, "Oh that's too soon." He was getting spoiled by all the attention he was getting. "I wouldn't want my boys going so soon." He never said the Beatles, he always said "my boys". It was February or March of sixty-three, so we settled on a year ahead. That year ahead turned out to be February 12th Lincoln's birthday, 1964. I picked Lincoln's birthday because I knew the kids would be out of school.

PEFECT TEN: Talking about thinking ahead, wow. To me staying in the moment is thinking too far ahead. That was brilliant.

SID: At that time I left a 500 hundred-dollar deposit for the date. They sent you downstairs to the box office. In the mailroom was the man considered the dean of Box office people, Ned Pasnick. He, said, "I never heard about them. Are they good?" I said, "They were great." I hadn't heard them yet. I asked, "What we should charge?" He says, "If they're great we can charge top dollar." Top dollar then was \$3.50, 4.50 or 5.50. I said, "Great." I really didn't exactly know what I was doing. But I knew after reading about them in the news I had to get them. I was in love with England. Maybe I dreamed of real green grass.

JOHN: This was way before they were booked on Ed Sullivan.

SID: A year earlier. I found out later from Ed Sullivan that when he put them on he hadn't heard them yet. Mr. Pasnick, asked me what I wanted the tickets to say. I said "Sid Bernstein Presents The Beatles". He prints the tickets. Ten days later they're ready. They sat there and collected dust for almost a year.

JOHN: A year?

SID: A year. No body cared about them yet. Suddenly in October of 63 their records start to play and play and play.

JOHN: When you heard them, what was your reaction?

SID: I liked it. I liked their act. I felt like I done something. But all I done was dial the right number. That's all I really did.

JOHN: If you didn't have the love of England you wouldn't have had the curiosity.

SID: Whatever you wanted to attribute it to. My religious friends said, "God did it."

JOHN: Branch Ricky, the old Dodger GM, said, “luck is the residue of design.” I believe in it a little different. I believe that luck is the residue of grand design. That there’s something more powerful helping us pull the strings.

SID: Could very well be. The booker from Carnegie Hall hadn’t heard the Beatles yet, either. But maybe because I sent her flowers to thank her, I get a call from her saying I got a date that’s open Mr. Bernstein. The Beatles were coming on Feb 12th. The Feb 15th. date was open. I take it. I come up and give her a box of candy. A couple of days later I get another call. There’s another date that opened up. So it’s within that same ten-day time area. My first ad reads Sid Bernstein Presents the Beatles on Feb 12, Shirley Bassey on Feb 15. and three days later Count Basie and Tony Bennett. Bernstein presents the Beatles, Bassey, Basie and Bennett.

JOHN: Wow, great bookings and you can’t be much more poetic than that.

SID: I became a manager of Count Basie and Tony Bennett for a while. ...But forget my life. With the Beatles I lived at the John Radem, a big building on 12th street. Kids used to form lines waiting to see me. “Could they get a front row seat for the Beatles?” I knew nothing about the box office. It was all so new. I didn’t even put seats aside for the press. People were selling their seats for \$150 for balcony to \$200 for middle section.

JOHN: How did booking them in Shea Stadium happen? Where did the idea come from?

SID: When I came back the next day. This is still before the show or Sullivan. Ned, the dean of the Box office, said, “I’d never seen anything like that. Kids slept over night to get tickets.” This is winter now. People came with mattresses and blankets for their kids. They all wanted to be first on line. I started that happening. There were still tickets for

Bassy and Bennet and Basie. The Beatles were sold out immediately. I told Brian we could have sold out Fifty days.... We could have made thousands. We could have made 50 times the money. Carnegie Hall still has the same 2030 seats. Brian and I hadn't met yet. We finally meet for the first time prior to the Sullivan show and Prior to my thing (Carnegie Hall). He love the way I handled it. We agreed before he left New York, that we'd book them in Madison Square garden. Madison Square Garden was the old Aladdin. It had 17,000 seats. But I changed my mind I called Brian. There are a lot of kids calling me. Their fathers are calling me; their mothers are calling me. The Garden didn't satisfy our needs. I want to change it from Madison Square Garden to Shea Stadium. He asked, "How many seats is that, sir?" I said, "Fifty-five thousand." "Do you think you'll fill it?" I said, "Brain, I'll give you ten dollars for every seat that is empty." He said, "Do you mean that, every empty seat?" I said, "No, not every seat that was empty, every seat that is not sold!"

JOHN: I guess you didn't have to pay him anything.

SID: The first time Brian stayed at the Plaza. The boys stayed in the suite next to him. I saw the boys looking out the window. They couldn't believe what was happening out there. This is bigger than what happened in England. Kids everywhere on fifty-ninth street, around the Plaza. The Beatles are looking out waving at the kids. It was quite a scene.

PERFECT: Did you ever imagine being the guy behind such an event?

SID: I happened to guess right at the right moment period.

JOHN: But, then you brought the Stones here. How did you find out about them?

SID: I'm reading the newspapers and I see that the next group coming up is the Stones. Right on the heels of the Beatles. I called their first manager. And he said, "I was hoping you would call me."

JOHN: It makes sense that they would have heard of you by then.

SID: So I make a deal also for Carnegie Hall. The Box office Lady let me in. It must have been all those flowers and stuff I sent her. The Beatles were no trouble... lots of girls. The Stones were black-jacketed guys, a rough crowd. A whole difference between the black leather jackets and the pretty dressed girls, with the ribbons in their hair, teenagers, standing on the seats screaming, nothing broken. With the Stones the pictures on the walls were shaking. She says to me "Don't ever, ever, ever come back in again." So I brought the next one in. The Dave Clark Five.

PEFECT TEN: I didn't realize that. Who else?

SID: I brought in the next twelve guys in. The Dave Clark Five, The Kinks, Manfred Man, something like that. It was the British Invasion. They took over from Sinatra, Perry Como, and every body... The airwaves were full of the Beatles. It changed everything. The Beatles were everywhere.

JOHN: You not only brought us the Stones but one of the most underrated British bands, the Kinks.

SID: I was not a jerk.

JOHN: You picked some winners. What was it like working with the Stones?

SID: I liked them, but the Beatles had melody. I was not a fan of the Stone's music. I made a lot of money with them. I brought them over five times.

JOHN: I heard they were wilder too.

SID: Oh... Yeah... That's for another time.

JOHN: How did George Martin come into the picture?

SID: George Martin was doing comedy records.

JOHN: Comedy records?

SID: Yeah, that's how he started. Peter Sellers... British comedians. Brian brought him because he worked for the record company. He said he heard something. He took the shot. Brian later told me eight people passed. He didn't. He's very special, you see him, there's an aura about him. He was the fifth Beatle, not Murry The K. Brian was the sixth and I was the twenty-fourth.

JOHN: I think you're the number No. 1 American Beatle. While all this was happening with the Beatles. What was your favorite experience?

SID: I love people. It gave me contact with people, young and old. And the right and privilege to meet new people everyday. That's my way of life. That's why I had a lot of kids of my own.

JOHN: You have six kids.

SID: My wife cheated me- I wanted eight. I made some money. I got a larger apartment with each kid at the John Adams till we out grew that.

JOHN: You also brought the American group the Rascals to Shea Stadium.

SID: No.... I got them into Madison Square Garden ... They were the second big pop act to play there. Up until then the Garden didn't take that kind of acts. Pop acts. I brought James Brown in first. It was all black. When I booked him I got him off the Chitlen circuit. My wife and I and maybe two other white couples were there to see a black act. There were no incidents. You should see what James Brown said about me.

JOHN: What did he say?

SID: Some kid just did a documentary on me which they're editing. It'll be another month or two before they show it. James Brown likens me to a white Martin Luther King of the music business. Said, I broke the color barrier at the Garden and uh... I forget where else.

JOHN: You don't see color.

SID: I grew up in Harlem with blacks.

JOHN: You see artists.

SID: Yes...I looked for talent first, always talent. The only thing I don't talk about much, and don't ask me, is the Bay City Rollers too. I brought them here. People thought I was bringing over another Beatles over. I never said the Beatles. I just mentioned Shea Stadium and they thought they were the Beatles. You should see the money I got. I became their New York Manager.

JOHN: A few years ago when the Beatle album came out with all the number one hits. It sold off the charts and much of the sales went to college kids. Why do you think?

SID: The music is still relevant and they got a great head start, look who they are. It's like saying the Yankees. Not long ago I got a call to talk in a school in Nashville. The Nashville University Of Entertainment and Music. Half the school turned out to hear me. It wasn't me, it was the Beatles. Nine out of ten questions were about the Beatles. As a result of that talk, the dean calls his friend in Cleveland who's from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and I got to speak at the Rock and Roll Hall of fame. Nice turn out.

JOHN: I think the Beatles were the band that broke down all the world barriers. In a way they brought the world together.

SID: They brought people together. Everybody singing, strangers standing around holding each other singing. It's amazing what the Beatles have done.

JOHN: Especially as I get older, there music becomes more relevant. I love John's song, "In My Life."

SID: My favorite song in the whole world is "Imagine." By my favorite songwriter. My other favorite is Jacque Berel. The show is unbelievable and the music is so great.

JOHN: Is there any music today that you like or knocks you out.

SID: No. It doesn't knock me out. But then again, I don't listen much. Don't put this in, but I don't know how to put a cassette on, or how to play a record, or cd. I get my sons and daughters to come over. I don't have a car. I don't know a lot that's going on.

JOHN: You still go out and see music.

SID: Yeah, but I don't go out as much. Sine I hurt my leg my kids put me under house arrest. If you go see anyone interesting give me a call. I'll go.

JOHN: Is there any talent that should have made it or you should have handled?

SID: I made my mistakes. I passed up on Barbara Striesand; I passed up on Neil Diamond. Striesand, what I hear about her, would have shortened my life. I'm just kidding, she's a dear friend.

JOHN: Did you hang out socially with the musicians, celebrities?

SID: My kids, no celebrities. For a while I was close and friendly with Tony Bennet. He was my favorite singer.

JOHN: Did you ever take the Beatles here? The Pizza is amazing.

SID: I brought them.

JOHN: I heard that John Lennon used to call you about Italian restaurants.

SID: Well, I took him to Paluccis on Mulberry Street. John gave them the biggest tip they ever had. He came there with six or seven other Rock stars, Harry Nilson and a few others. I was told they were the most well behaved polite customers.

JOHN: What do you think that drew everyone to Lennon?

SID: How do you describe charisma? He's one of those figures that come along once in a generation. They people would turn out for Paul, turn out for George, but mobs would turn out for Lennon.

JOHN: What's next?

SID: Paul called me. We talked about getting together. I think that if Paul calls me one more time. I want to do Paul again, for a cause. My big thing is for cancer research and to end world hunger. That's my thing. The things I'm interested in.

JOHN: Everyone I have spoken to about you have nothing but kind things to say.

SID: Well, I defy whoever it was, I think it was Lincoln, who said you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time. We'll I've fooled all the people all the time.

JOHN: I don't think so.

SID: I got to tell you this, though; it's been an interesting life. No regrets. I made my mistakes but I enjoy my life more and more.

JOHN: Is there anything in your life that you want to do now?

SID: To be a grandpa.