



the
BEE GEES
the biography

DAVID N. MEYER

Author of *Twenty Thousand Roads: The Ballad of Gram Parsons and his Cosmic American Music*

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The Bee Gees

— the biography —

David N. Meyer



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*Twenty Thousand Roads:
The Ballad of Gram Parsons and
His Cosmic American Music*

*The 100 Best Films to Rent
You've Never Heard Of*

*A Girl and a Gun:
The Complete Guide to
Film Noir on Video*

dedication

to and for

Jené LeBlanc

with love

Devin McGinley

Lester Bangs

epigraph

The essence of BeeGeeness, the reason why I love them so, is that they're so astonishingly unhip.

—Simon Frith,
“Confessions of a Bee Gees fan,” *CREEM*

Disco will never be over. It will always live in our minds and hearts. Something that was this big and this important and this great will never die. For a few years and maybe many years it will be considered passé and ridiculous. It will be misrepresented and sneered at or worse, completely ignored. People will laugh at John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, white polyester suits and platform shoes and going like this! (Shoots fist into the air diagonal to body.) Those who didn't understand will never understand. Disco was much more and much better than that. Disco was too great and too much fun to be gone forever. It's got to come back someday. I just hope it will be in our lifetimes.

—Josh Neff,
The Last Days of Disco
written and directed by Whit Stillman

The central difficulty in analyzing the Bee Gees' lyrics is that in order to understand them, you have to forget that the Bee Gees wrote them.

—Bruce Harris, “Please Read Me:
A Definitive Analysis of the Bee Gees' Lyrics,” *Jazz & Pop*

Beyond the basic Bee Gees mystery of “who are these guys?” lies the more pervasive and enduring mystery of “why do we all so respond to their music?” When I started this book and began to tick off Bee Gees lyrics in my head, I was surprised at how many songs I remembered whole or in part. I was also surprised, given that I cannot carry a tune, at how many I could hum or sing. When I asked my music-obsessed friends—none of whom ever mentioned the Bee Gees—I learned that all of them could hum or sing multiple Bee Gees songs.

The Bee Gees are everywhere and in everyone’s heads, and still—outside their legion of die-hard fans—don’t get the respect they deserve. They are never held up as icons of anything we hold up pop stars as icons of: not of genius or sex appeal or style or innovation or imagination or transgression.

The most unfair and least accurate slander to hurl at the Bee Gees is “imitators.” Over the decades, so many rock and cultural writers—most of whom should have known better—defaulted to this slander instead of listening with open ears. To name only the best-known examples of the Bee Gees’ singularity, “Jive Talkin’” sounds like nothing else before or since. It’s wholly original; revolutionary. “New York Mining Disaster 1941 (Have You Seen My Wife, Mr. Jones?)” and “To Love Somebody,” ditto. “Nights on Broadway” and “Stayin’ Alive,” like “Jive Talkin’,” owe nothing to nobody. The early Bee Gees may evoke the Beatles or the Hollies. The middle Bee Gees may evoke Donovan. The later Bee Gees may evoke Stevie Wonder. But that’s all they do, evoke.

In their early days, The Beatles and the Rolling Stones imitated or covered their influences. Both bands’ early records feature covers of—or direct cops from—their idols. Few accused them of imitation, either because nobody knew the music of their influences (Irma Thomas’s version, for example, of “Time Is on My Side” for the Stones or the Isley Brothers’ “Twist and Shout” for the Beatles) or because by the time the Beatles and Stones imitated their influences, their influences had become part of the canon (Muddy Waters for the Stones, for example, or Little Richard for the Beatles). The Bee Gees came to rock and roll so late, and were so young when they hit big, that their main influences were still on the charts.

You might hear aspects of the Beatles or Herman’s Hermits or the Band or Eddie Kendricks or MFSB in their music. But all Bee Gees songs, no matter how clearly an influence can be perceived, sound like the Bee Gees. And the Bee Gees, unlike every one of their peers, never covered anybody. Their records contain only originals. The Bee Gees belong to no broader musical movement and work in no genre save the one they invented.

Except disco.

The top-selling acts in pop music have sales totals so close, if you start rounding off to millions of units, that comparing their successes becomes absurd. The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Paul McCartney, Garth Brooks, Madonna and the Bee Gees: nobody has moved more product.

The Bee Gees never get their proper due, in part, because they always seemed odd—off, somehow—always awkward and clueless. Never mind that nobody achieved remotely their level of success showcasing such misguided fashion sense, not even Garth Brooks. Never mind Bee Gees’ boy

haircuts in the late 1960s and, really, never mind the windblown sateen disco jackets and crotch-grabbing glimmering trousers with two-foot flairs, because during disco, everybody dressed like that. Give the Bee Gees a fashion period and they always chose the worst possible options.

No matter how they tried, their innate yobbo insecurities—their enduring self-perception penniless, twerpy, working-class outcasts—led them to make self-defeating, self-defining choices. In defense of what they knew to be true, like most twerpy outcasts, they developed an uncrackable arrogance, even when they dressed like their mother bought their clothes at the Dollar Store. Or, at the bespoke rock-and-roll version of the Dollar Store. Always trying too hard, the Bee Gees never got near hipness or cool.

There's so much they never got. Even when selling 25 million copies of one album, the Bee Gees always seemed on the outside looking in, noses to the glass, half disdainful, half dying for an invitation to the party. Their pre-*Saturday Night Fever* lyrical content suggested few other concerns—all those aching orchestral elegies to alienation, loss and heartache. Were they singing about unrequited love or their inability to connect in the world, or were they singing about dealing with one another? Robin said of their lyrical content: "I can't imagine why anyone would want to hear a song about my emotions." Viewed through that prism, it was only popcraft.

As family acts go, the Bee Gees are an anomaly. Given their longevity, universal popularity, sales figures and idiosyncratic sound, they're anomalies on pretty much every level. But most family acts—like most successful child stars—have at least one abusive parent. Most family acts never outgrow the abuser who controls them. And woe betide the offspring who demonstrates genius in the face of a mother's or father's mere talent. When an abusive parent sees the child moving beyond his or her control—from Mozart onward—violence is the default response.

The first and worst rock father that comes to mind is Murry Wilson, sire of three-fifths of the Beach Boys: fat, balding, oily hair, cheap suits, jaw-up posture, pushing himself forward like the worst bullying salesman. Murry the abuser, fond of popping out his glass eye at parties and shouting at his son in the studio. Murry shouting at his son Brian—the American Mozart—that Brian's version of a song didn't sound as good as Murry's version. Murry, beating Brian so badly and so often that Brian ended up deaf in one ear and mad as a Hatter. Brian eventually severed ties with Murry, but not until Murry had inflicted so much damage that his son could never be what he might have become with the blessing of paternal love. Or even the absence of paternal hate.

Such behavior was anathema to the loving Hugh Gibb, perhaps the most fortunate child-managing parent in the history of child-managing parents. Mr. Gibb had, prior to guiding his boys' early careers, demonstrated that he was the absolute model of a guy who could fuck up a baked potato. Hugh never succeeded at anything. He had, however, played drums in dance bands, and he had an ear. His boys—the thirteen-year-old fraternal twins Maurice and Robin and seventeen-year-old Barry—barnstormed Australia, singing the songs Hugh insisted they sing: English music-hall ditties or standards that were already three generations out of date. Slowly the boys came to listen to—though they don't sound like they ever fully understood—the music their contemporaries were listening to and creating. The things began to happen.

Ever the anomaly, Hugh never seems to have resented his boys' success. He never seems to have intruded in their lifestyle or tried to shape their music. It's as if the unlikeliest person to do so

recognized the Gibb boys' genius, found his role and peace serving it, and stayed out of its way. How many parents could do that?

But, after the single luckiest act of his life, his only moment of unvarnished good fortune—sending his boys' acetates to Robert Stigwood—Hugh Gibb proved inert as a parent, passive and onlooking. The Bee Gees' true paternal figure became and remained their mentor and manager, Robert Stigwood. Stigwood evinced all the mythological paternal aspects of provider, arbiter, would-be destroyer and aspirational model. Decisive, relentless, impatient, ambitious, aesthetic, ruthless and grasping, Stigwood would supply the fuel, the drive and the all-necessary object of resentment and inspiration that Hugh Gibb could never provide.

Despite Stigwood's power over them, the Gibbs were and remain a closed shop, a family affair. Hugh and Barbara lived most of their lives with one son or the other. Their sons had enormous mansions, but still. The boys wanted their parents close and vice versa. Is that touching and inspiring or perverse and unsettling? Are those ideas even mutually exclusive when applied to families?

Anyone who's been in a band—a band that made a living being a band—will tell you: being in a band is more complicated than family, more complicated than friendship, more complicated than brotherhood, more complicated than marriage.

Being in, say, a quartet is not like being in four marriages. It's like being in four to the power of four marriages. Every relationship intersects every other and every relationship within the band is affected by every relationship without. Band members—Fleetwood Mac, Blondie, Yo La Tengo and the Raveonettes aside—don't usually expect sex from their band mates, and so bands lack the primary pressure valve and intimacy restorer that marriages rely upon. Band members—Richard and Linda Thompson aside—don't usually have children together, and so can't find in all the humbling aspects of parenthood what all parents discover: a constant reminder of their total lack of hot-shittedness.

In working bands, work schedules, travel circumstances, and the likelihood of drug, alcohol and crappy food consumption raise the pressure. Add to that pressure that any successful band is either an absolute monarchy—the Ramones or the Rolling Stones—or an absolute democracy—R.E.M. or U2. There is no middle ground. All band power-paradigms devolve into one or the other or the band breaks up. Either somebody is in charge or everybody is in charge. Either someone is telling you what to do all the time while ignoring your suggestions, belittling your input and making more money, or you have to put up with everyone's stupid face and stupider opinions that you've seen and heard a million times already. How does any band survive?

The short answer is: by every band member resenting, if not loathing, every other band member and being resented, if not loathed, in return. Except for when two band members get along for a while and resent everybody else together. And by all the ancillary benefits that band life provides. What makes that resentment even more virulent is that every band member needs every other to do the one thing in life that grants each the most joy and self-satisfaction. That paradigm, too, is inescapable. Doubters need only listen to Mick Jagger's solo records. Or Keith's.

When asked—during the era of rumors of George Harrison quitting the band—if he ever considered joining the Beatles, Eric Clapton said: "They were like the most close-knit family. And so the cruelty and the viciousness could be unparalleled." And the Beatles weren't even related, let alone brothers. The Beatles all made viable, best-selling music on their own, even Ringo. Free of the group

George blossomed; John, in his way, blossomed. Paul stayed the same, but he made a pile doing so. Each learned they did not need the others to express themselves or please the marketplace. When the Gibb brothers tried separating, they learned the opposite.

The inescapable dynamics of band and family life make the Bee Gees even more anomalously opaque, indecipherable and bizarre. They composed, played and toured together for forty years! With their parents right there on the bus, in the studio, waiting in the kitchen, minding the kids, loading the dishwasher all wrong, etc. If family dynamics are unbearable and band dynamics are unbearable, how did the Bee Gees bear it?

One way was by conspicuous consumption of almost anything that could be consumed—women, clothes, drugs, liquor, cars, boats, houses, etc. But compensatory overconsumption's a sadly normal feature of family life and one great allure of being in a band. That the Bee Gees' success allowed them to consume like King Farouk seems hardly worth mentioning. The wages of their various sins became all too apparent over the years.

Most family acts that endure for decades cite outside religious influences. Not the Bee Gees; they learned how to live with each other, however painfully. Also, they never trusted anyone outside the family, save Stigwood. Periodically, they didn't trust him, either. Until the various resentments became too deep, they took advice and support from one another. And for decades, the Gibb twins took orders from Barry.

Hands down, Barry won the Gibb genetic lottery.

From the earliest photographs of the boys performing together in their pathetic tuxedos in the dinner theaters of Australia, seventeen-year-old Barry looked indestructible. As the band got popular, then famous, then forgotten and then more famous than anyone in popular music before them, Barry became only more radiant. The Beta twins, Robin and Maurice, took second and third to Barry's incontrovertible Alpha. Andy, some years later, had the looks and energy to surpass the twins, but proved weaker on the inside. Andy had Barry's head hair and chest hair and teeth and inner glow. But Andy lacked a sufficiently bulletproof shell to live the famous Gibb life. That life ate him up. Barry gobbled it down and asked for more, never once saying either "please" or "sir." Now, Barry's the last man standing.

Barry evokes a centaur. His long glossy mane and glowing equine eyes, that Roman nose with its great horsey nostrils and those piano-key teeth shining above an endless jaw just waiting for a bit. He looks like a stallion, of course, which means he bestrides the planet as he pleases and as Keith Richards said: "has the right to piss in the street." In those outsized eyes burns the flame of shrewdness, remove, constant strategy and no small amount of hostility. Barry possesses the voice of an angel, and that isn't a devil on his shoulder. It's a chip, and fifty years of unimaginable success have neither reduced nor dislodged it. Barry's a centaur, and he's also always been Odysseus, a cunning, distance man prepared for the journey, determined not merely to survive but to prevail, to cope with whatever and impose his will. Barry is not a guy to get lost in song, to give in to the frailer emotions. And so far, Barry's never been bested.

You might think that between the Beatles and McCartney's solo records, Sir Paul is the most successful, Alpha of the Alphas. But Paul never purpose-built #1s for others. Barry has written double-digit #1s for other artists, songs tailored to their sounds and personae that rang the bell

worldwide. When he was only twenty-two, Barry wrote the greatest Otis Redding song Otis Redding never recorded, “To Love Somebody.” And if Otis never recorded it—he died before he could—everyone else on the planet did. Barry’s purpose-built #1s are hard to identify because he seldom copped to writing something for somebody else. He’d say: “Oh, I found an old song and it worked out for them.” Only Odysseus pulls off such self-deprecating boasting.

Barry’s Alpha-hood spawned some tough moments. Barry stopped letting Robin sing lead, even on Robin’s own compositions. Robin absorbed a hard lesson in what it meant to be a Beta young brother, one of many such lessons inflicted over the decades. Maurice had subsumed those same lessons long before. Maurice, who—until alcohol overtook him—could play any instrument he touched, routinely spent three-quarters of a set onstage without getting near a mike. Andy Gibb was handed a career based on singing songs that Barry had written or co-written and produced. The guy was paid large, and made Andy an international heartthrob. But Andy couldn’t live out the basic premise—that his career was Barry’s Lite—and his overconsumption took a bad turn.

Throughout the years, no matter how successful or reviled, the Bee Gees remained, in so many ways, ridiculous. Their ridiculousness forces even those who love them to shrug and smile. Those who find the Bee Gees a contemptible plastic amalgam of cheesy pop and pernicious disco still admit, in whispers, to having deep emotions or meaningful memories built around one or two Bee Gees’ tunes.

Everyone on the planet knows all or part of a Bee Gees song. No matter who you ask, no matter how young or her level of hipness, musical sophistication, literacy, geographical location or familiarity with the English language; in Timbuktu or Mindanao, in Buenos Aires or Shanghai, in Kiev or Nairobi, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, or Gainesville, Georgia, stop the first person you see who’s older than fifteen and ask them to hum a Bee Gees song. Not to name one—to hum or sing. And they will, smiling guiltily. Then ask them the same thing about Garth Brooks . . .

With the Beatles or Madonna, that kind of global market penetration makes instinctive sense. It’s easier, somehow, to acknowledge that their songs are in the ether.

The Bee Gees are the ether.

The Bee Gees made hits for forty years, they sold a quarter of a billion albums, everyone on earth knows their music and yet, they still seem like they don’t really belong.

The Bee Gees’ origin story is straight out of Dickens: so difficult and so foreordained. They came out of nothing, worked their asses off and were incredibly lucky. But, like the show-biz cliché that they are, every time they got a lucky break, they had the will and talent to make the most of it. Their ambition never flagged. Among the most compelling conundrums of the Bee Gees’ rise is, Where do they get their drive, their motivation, their determination to overcome every obstacle?

Most likely, they did not get it from their dad, Hugh Gibb. Hugh was a pretty good drummer. In a sense, in the universe, there are only two kinds of drummers. There are the bullying, atavistic, wildly talented, competitive madmen who will only play it their way and insist that you do, too. Avatars of the first kind are Ginger Baker of Cream, jazz great Elvin Jones and big-band psychotic Buddy Rich. That’s the first kind of drummer. The second kind is everybody else. The second kind of drummer is best characterized by Ringo. When asked why he became a drummer, Ringo said the bass was “too hard.” Hugh Gibb is the second kind of drummer.

Hugh had a dance band during World War II. As a musician, he was granted a deferment from military service. He met Barbara May Pass in 1941 at a gig in Manchester, England. Barbara sang occasionally. Some histories present her as a professional vocalist; that’s an exaggeration. They dated for three years and married on May 27, 1944. As they emerged from the church, they passed through a column formed by Hugh’s band members, their instruments held aloft in a gleaming V-shaped roof of unplayed music protecting the newlyweds. Seven months later, Barbara gave birth to their first child, Lesley, and shortly thereafter, the Gibbs moved to the Isle of Man—in the Irish, or Manx, Sea-Isle, between northern England and Northern Ireland. Hugh found a steady gig playing the tourist hotels on the Isle.

Barry Gibb was born on September 1, 1946. In the signature event of his early childhood, he spilled a cup of scalding tea on himself at eighteen months. Barry went into a coma and was ill for half a year. The accident and the illness seemed to slow his development. On December 22, 1949, Robin and Maurice, fraternal—not identical—twins, were born, in that order. Later in life, Maurice would assume the role of conciliatory middle brother and Robin the role of perpetually petulant youngest brother.

Things turned tough for Hugh in 1954; the cream of his band split the isle for better work on the mainland. In 1955, Hugh lost his contract with the hotels and took odd jobs to pay the rent.

“As much as our mother doesn’t like to hear about it today,” Robin said, “we were flat broke. It was post-war Britain and people were finding their feet. I have memories of my father counting out pennies to see if we’d make it to the end of the week. It was almost Dickensian. But we weren’t aware of our state of finances. We were too busy having fun.”¹¹ The family moved back to the mainland, to the grimy industrial city of Manchester. Almost all English rock stars born in this era, whether in big cities or rural areas, stress how gray and desolate post-war England could be. Gas and sugar were rationed, unemployment was rampant. In a gray, harsh nation, few places were as gray and harsh as Manchester. It was one tough town.

The Gibb boys had little or no parental supervision. They ran rampant. All three were obsessed with fire, and proved to be urchin pyromaniacs. “We used to set fire to allotments and shops,” Barry said.^[2] “Barry and Robin used to set fire to shops and billboards and things,” Maurice said.^[3] While such behavior used to be regarded as pathological, current thinking suggests that the urge to light things up and burn them down is a natural aspect of childhood development. In other children however, this urge is often subject to parental restraint. “We’re more like friends than parents,” Barbara Gibb later told an interviewer. “We’re not pushy—we just get a kick out of being with the boys.”^[4]

In the Bee Gees’ official autobiography, Barbara Gibb laughingly characterized young Robin as ‘firebug.’ Robin would come home from school, grab matches from the kitchen and take off. Barry planned their fire expeditions; Robin usually caught the blame. “The police would come to the door at the time demanding that our parents ‘get these boys off the streets,’” Barry said. “We were going to end up in Borstal (the fearsome English reform school/juvenile penitentiary) if our parents didn’t take control. Mum and dad were trying to earn a living—I don’t think they were aware of what we were doing.”^[5] In a town as hard as Manchester, the nine- and six-year-old brothers Gibb were already regarded as a threat to public order.

The boys started singing together under the loose guidance of their father. One of their first numbers was “Lollipop” by the Mudlarks, perhaps the most content-free hit of the doo-wop era. They soon moved on to originals. “When I was about ten, and Robin and Maurice about seven,” Barry said, “we started writing songs. Now that’s a bit young for writing songs and we certainly didn’t write anything that was worth anything. We wrote one song called ‘Turtle Dove’ and another about a year after that called ‘Let Me Love You.’ We were little kids sitting at home thinking, ‘Let’s write songs. We had natural three-part harmony . . . No one knew how we got it, least of all us, but we had it without understanding anything we were doing. There was something there that said, ‘You guys are going to be on stage the rest of your lives.’ There wasn’t any question what we were going to do . . . we knew where we were going and what we wanted to do even as children.”^[6]

All future performers seem to say this; it’s a trope of success. In the Gibbs’ case it seems to be true. As boys they never pursued anything else—excepting fire—and poured all their energy into developing as singers and performing. The need to be seen, to be acknowledged by a crowd, came naturally to them as harmony. “Even in those early years,” Hugh Gibb said, “their whole lives revolved around waiting to be discovered. They’d stand on street corners singing ‘Wake Up Little Susie’ to passersby. They had to have an audience.”^[7]

On a fateful Christmas in 1955, Barry got a guitar; or maybe he got it for his birthday. As with so many foundation myths, the details are murky. “I got a guitar for my ninth birthday,” Barry said. “The guy who lived across the road from us had just come back from Hawaii, so he taught me that tuning. ‘That’ll get you started,’ he said, and I never changed from that tuning!”^[8] Barry was probably taught an open tuning, in which the strings are tuned down to form a chord without fretting. This eased learning the basics of creating harmonious sounds on a guitar, but would confound anyone trying to play complex lines or learn detailed fretwork. This never posed a problem for Barry, who viewed his voice as his instrument and approached the guitar as a prop and songwriting tool. The unusual cho

progressions that become natural in open tuning in some part explain the singular sound of their first hit, “New York Mining Disaster 1941 (Have You Seen My Wife, Mr. Jones?).”

Local kids would perform every week at a Manchester movie house, the Gaumont Theatre. They mime to a current hit record played on a scratchy phonograph backstage. “We used to watch them every week,” Robin said. “We thought: ‘Why can’t we do something like that?’ There were five of us—Maurice and Barry and myself, and our neighbors Paul Frost and Kenny Oricks. We called ourselves the Rattlesnakes.” The Rattlesnakes decided to mime to the Everly Brothers’ “Wake Up Little Susie.” “The Saturday morning came, just before Christmas,” Robin said. “We were going up the stairs of the Gaumont when Barry dropped the record! It smashed. We thought: ‘What are we going to do?’ Barry had his guitar, which he had taken along to help the miming, and he suggested that we really sing. So out we went and sang ‘Lollipop’ by the Mudlarks, and it went well . . . and that was how the Bee Gees began.”^[9]

As every great origin myth must, this tale features the perfect Jungian symbolic moment. Barry, the eldest, the Alpha, the most ambitious, the one with the guitar, bears the precious object—the record. But that precious object also contains falsity—under the spell of that falsity, the boys will deny their gifts and only pretend to sing. When Barry enters the temple—the Gaumont Theatre—in a moment of apostasy, he drops the sacred object; he smashes it to the floor. With that “accident,” Barry frees himself and his brothers from imitation, from false performance, from false ceremony, from living a lie in front of the congregation. Barry, consciously or not, had no interest in going onstage and faking anything. By smashing the record, he allowed the brothers’ true natures to be revealed. Smashing the record meant that the Gibbs expressed themselves in their own voices. Smashing the record gave their voices primacy. Smashing the record meant they were ready to own their abilities and own the ritual of performance.

“It was amazing,” Barry said. “I started singing and trying to play, and suddenly I found the six-year-old twins with me doing three-part harmony. I fiddled with the guitar until I found my own chords. I still play that way.”^[10] The urchins were in business. They sang in theaters, talent shows and on street corners. Passersby would fling coins at them and they’d root around the Manchester gutter scabbling for every copper. “Our next date was at the Walley Range Odeon,” Robin said. “Maurice and I added banjos. We did the Palentine Theatre as Wee Johnnie Hayes and the Bluecats—Barry was Johnnie Hayes. We got £5 a week for our act. This was in 1958 and we went on doing matinee performances for about two years.”^[11]

Their first adult gig came shortly after the Odeon. Hugh’s band was playing the Russell Street Club. He snuck the boys through the backdoor and rushed them up onstage before anyone could stop them. The crowd loved the brothers.

The British had transported convicts and undesirables—mostly Irish—to Australia since the “First Fleet” established a penal colony there in 1788. Australia was built and maintained for decades on the slave labor of convicts administered by a series of corrupt gangs of soldiers and their administrative lackeys. A gold rush in the 1850s brought Englishmen to Oz of their own volition, and “transportation” began to wind down. But traditions die hard in the UK, and in the late 1950s, England began to encourage emigration. Australia needed families to rebuild the post-war economy. England, paralyzed by terrible unemployment, fearing labor unrest, sought to reduce the number of the

unemployed not by hiring them, but by chucking them out of the country. The solution was simply to transport the unemployed and undesirable to Oz at state expense, and let them make the best of things when they disembarked.

The police came, as they often did, to the Gibbs' door in July of 1958. The boys were becoming worse delinquents; their public performances had not deterred their vandalism. The brothers were considered such a menace at ages twelve and nine that they were being thrown out of the toughest town in England and ordered overseas. It was that, or Borstal. An added inducement to the authorities for shipping out the Gibbs was Hugh's chronic unemployment, and his place on the dole. He was considered a drain on the Manchester economy. "The policemen had three words for my dad," Robin said. "'The 'Ten Pound Plan.' Our behaviour and dad's inability to find an income was the reason we were left. Parents [paid] 10 pounds each and kids [traveled] free. We went by ocean—12,000 miles over five weeks."^[12]

The family arrived on September 1, Barry's twelfth birthday. Hugh took a miserable job as a salesman—traveling on the massive truck convoys known as "road trains" that served the consumer needs of boondock towns and isolated ranches in the outback. He would be gone for months at a time. When he returned, his gambling and living expenses had eaten most of his pay. The family was destitute. Within a year of landing, the boys were selling sodas at a racetrack, the Brisbane Speedway. As they sold, and when they weren't, they sang for tips and to draw customers. Once again, the crowd threw money at them and the boys scabbled around gathering it up. "Not that we ever put any pressures on them," Hugh said. "Most kids want to be train drivers at one time or another, but singing was the only thing the boys ever wanted to do. We couldn't stop them. It's no secret. They kept up going for a long time."^[13]

Bill Good, a local racer, heard the boys and had them sing over the racetrack loudspeakers during breaks. Bill Gates, a local disc jockey, heard the brothers at the track and recorded them for his radio show. "They had a unique sound even then," Gates said. "We bought them new guitars and made tapes for air play. This got them known, and jobs followed in hotels . . . until the problem of their ages arose [with the Child Welfare office]. At early recording sessions the big problem was keeping the twins from wrecking the place. We'd spend a whole day mucking around trying to get them organized. Barry could knock out a song in five minutes. One time we had three songs ready to tape and wanted another. We asked Barry if he had a song written and he replied: 'No, but I'll write one now.'^[14]

Bill Gates and Bill Good created the name, the Bee Gees, from their own initials. Though stories vary over time and with who's doing the telling, it seems that the brothers Gibb's name or initials never figured in their professional moniker. Yet, they never changed it. They got famous Down Under as the Bee Gees, and the Bee Gees they remained.

The radio shows brought requests from local TV, and by 1960 the boys were regular visitors to the households of Brisbane. "My boys have got the show business bug," Barbara said. "I can't remember when the boys haven't been singing. On the boat coming to Australia they entertained the passengers all the way."^[15] "Show business," Robin said, "is something you have to have in you when you're born."^[16] From the start, the boys never saw themselves as rock and rollers or folkies or as belonging to any type of music or scene. They were performers, in show business, and their duty was to the

audience, not themselves.

The brothers set up a pretend studio beneath their home to practice for their TV appearance. Maurice, aged ten, told the *Australian Women's Weekly*: "We have a different script every day, and we're always changing the floor plan and the sets around."^{17} "We got on to television in Brisbane in 1960 with our own show, 'Cottie's Happy Hour,'" Robin said. "We got very big in Brisbane. The three of us played Surfer's Paradise at the Beachcomber Hotel for six weeks, three shows a night."^{18}

Barry, age thirteen, told the *Weekly*, "I like to make up the tunes I sing. I get the words from romance magazines and stories my 16-year-old sister, Lesley, reads."^{19} Barry was writing songs in a serious, professional way, looking for a hit. Robin joined him, and later, tried to take more than his share of the credit. "The first song we ever wrote was 'Let Me Love You.'" Robin said. "Our first songwriting success was 'Starlight of Love,' which was recorded by producer Col Joye and got to No. 1. We became an overnight success but our first hit didn't come until 1965, although the Bee Gees were always big TV-wise."^{20}

As their fame increased, Bill Gates no longer wanted to deal with the logistics. Hugh was reluctant to take the reins, but Barbara insisted. She wanted any managerial money kept in the family and she wanted the boys to have paternal supervision. "Is it my job or is it going to be them?" Hugh told the *Bee Gees'* official biographer, David Leaf. "I felt their future's going to be stronger than mine, so, to be quite frank, they kept us. I gave up my work to drive them around. They were only kids; they had to have somebody. I never wanted to be their manager, but by force of circumstances I had to be."^{21} "If he would've had his opportunity in his own life he would have been a big star," Barry said. "But he didn't, so it was through us that he was going to make it."^{22} "We're an extension of father's frustration. He never quite made it, but he can live it with us."^{23}

It's never easy for anyone when children start supporting parents. The "parentified child" is a recurring motif for every child performer. The kids have to take on aspects of adulthood they cannot perceive or understand, but they do understand that crucial roles are being reversed. Hugh would try to maintain control by making the boys sing and dress like little adults—like his modeling of proper showbiz. The boys would react to the discomfort of the situation by turning Barry into the surrogate father. Barry could write songs and play the guitar—he was the de facto breadwinner. The twins looked up to and followed Barry as if he were the parent. By turning a brother into a paternal figure, the twins only delayed their own development. This dynamic functioned for a good long while. But when it blew up, as it did during the recording of *Odessa* in 1969, there would be considerable collateral damage.

The boys played a lot of dives, and always for adult audiences. "The only way we could capitalize on our popularity as boys in Australia was doing club work for an adult audience," Maurice said. "The rock 'n' roll touring circuit for kids hadn't completely happened yet."^{24} "We used to hit clubs in Australia where I'd have to sneak them 'cause of their ages," Hugh said. "But even then they had a professional show. I've always enjoyed the touring more than the studio work."^{25} "We worked in places," Maurice said, "where the men were so drunk they couldn't stand up, so they would figure out sitting down. Wonderful, innocent times they were."^{26}

Referring to such a brutal memory as “wonderful” and “innocent” might be the essence of denial. Maybe the boys didn’t know how tough their circumstances were, but no child likes to watch drunk adults beating one another. Any kid who lives through that while having to be “professional”—which means masking one’s true feelings—can scarcely be called a youngster. Traveling and performing under those conditions taught the boys early, if it taught them nothing else, to depend only on one another. As is often the case for the parentified child, there is no actual childhood.

Hugh was a tough taskmaster; he evaded child labor laws and booked the boys for show after show. They had to perform his choreography, do the material he chose, dress just so and smile. Hugh seldom encouraged the boys and never told them whether their performances were objectively good or bad, improving or worsening. Hugh’s only concern, and the only subject of his feedback, was whether the audience liked them. “My father never called me ‘son,’ or ‘lad,’” Maurice said. “It was always ‘You sung flat.’”^[27]

They grew up as performers with no real sense of themselves. The person who knew their music best never told them if they were getting better, and perhaps he never knew. The Bee Gees would forever suffer from not being able to tell their best material from their worst. Sincerity and artistic expression were never their concerns. Making an audience like them was their only job. Proper timing, being charming, smiling, singing in tune and harmony, and dancing correctly were all that mattered. Hugh taught the boys early on to be artificial and he taught them well. In films of them at this time singing old English music hall numbers like “My Father Was a Dustman,” the boys’ robotic movements and fixed facial expressions are heartbreaking. Barry, certainly old enough to know better, seems horribly sincere. The twins sing and move like soulless automatons.

As they got older and heard the music their contemporaries were listening to, they wanted to grow their hair. Hugh asked them, “Will you sing any better with longer hair?” (Robin later had a specific agreement with Bee Gees manager Robert Stigwood that his hair length was his own business.) It is hard not to feel compassion for Hugh. His music never made it. His other attempts at earning a living failed. His children were his only shot, the only thing he might control, and control them he did. Hugh drove his boys hard, but he was never physical or emotionally abusive, which puts him well above the bar set for parents of child stars. His children never expressed regret.

“We had a great time,” Maurice said. “Schooling was never any good for us. We grew up with adults, other artists, strippers, jugglers. I got laid when I was nine though I didn’t enjoy it.”^[28] “When a kid wants to be a rock star he isn’t thinking how much money he will make,” Barry said. “He’s thinking about being famous, and for us it was the idea of being famous, not the idea of making money. What came along was, ‘Oh, you can make money out of this too.’”^[29] The boys dressed like little adults—or monkeys—for their club gigs, in tuxedos with slicked-back hair. In some early TV appearances, they wear tuxes or dress like Theodore Cleaver. Barry looks so much older and sturdier than the twins, who seem tiny and underdeveloped. Barry’s a teen heartthrob and the twins are two of the gooniest-looking kids on the planet. It’s wrenching to see them working their act, being so impenetrable, and still so young and clueless.

In 1962, Colin Jacobson, better known as Col Joye, a popular Australian singer of the period, began recording and producing singles for the boys, who sang backed by the Joy Boys—Joye’s studio band comprised in part of Col’s brothers. The Gibbs ascended through the snake pit of the Australian music

business, which was isolated from the rest of the world, self-contained and competitive. As the earnings increased, the Gibb family moved to Sydney, and the brothers opened for Chubby Checker at Sydney Stadium. “We went to Sydney, which was like going to London,” Robin said. “It was the biggest break we ever had.”^{30}

They dropped out of school at the minimum legal age to do so. The twins lied about their ages, claiming to be fourteen, and dropped out a year early. In October of 1963, Barry signed a composer agreement with Belinda Records and started writing songs for other artists. He was seventeen. The Bee Gees kept recording their own songs, but could not get airplay. The Bee Gees signed an onerous agreement with Festival Records in 1963. While the boys recorded their own material for Festival, they also appeared without credit on the recordings of other Festival artists. Festival owned the rights to the Bee Gees’ Australian music until 2005 and released and rereleased the same music constantly, much to the chagrin of the Bees Gees.^{31}

“The first hit we had in Sydney was ‘Wine and Women,’” Robin said. “But we had to buy out the record shops ourselves to give it a chance. We had the wrong image to sell a record, we were too young. It wasn’t like today when any age is no barrier if the record is a hit. Then, you had to be sort of near enough to 18. We weren’t even in our teens, although Barry was about creeping up there. So we assembled our fan club in Sydney Town Hall, about ten people.” “We found out from the record company when radio stations check the stores to compile the charts,” Barry said. “We got together £200, about \$400, and sent our fan club into the most important city shops and department stores and had them buy our record. We told them to go into the record shops that the radio stations used as a guide. It was basic mathematics. How do you get on the charts? Answer: Sell records! How do the radio stations know what’s selling? We figured the radio stations would call the biggest shops and the key department stores to see what was selling. So that’s where we had our fan club do the buying.” “We found out what day,” Robin said, “TUE, which was the biggest Top-40 record station at that time in Sydney, made up their chart. It was done on Tuesday, printed on Tuesday night, and was in the stores on Wednesday. So we got together on Friday because we had to have a good sale on the weekend for them to pick up on Tuesday.” “No one,” Barry said, “was buying our record.” “It went up on the Tuesday after that weekend,” Robin said, “at #30 on the charts. They stepped up the airplay, the airplay got the people to buy the record, and that was it. I guess that was a cheat, but you always spend a bit of money on PR don’t you?”^{32}

The boys were unknowingly following the example of many great rock producers and promoters. Their business savvy—their understanding that music was nothing without promotion—was incredibly advanced for their age. As was their shamelessness and determination to succeed.

“We were hyper, paranoid, neurotic and wanting to make it,” Barry said. “We followed that with three complete flops,” Robin said. “The first, ‘I Was a Lover, a Leader of Men,’ won an award for the best composition of the year but it wasn’t a hit.” Shortly after “Lover/Leader” flopped, in October 1965, the Bee Gees released their first LP, *The Bee Gee’s [sic] Sing & Play 14 Barry Gibb Songs*. The album got decent reviews, but even then, the Bee Gees were accused of writing obscure and confusing lyrics; no one could tell what they meant.

The Gibbs met another producer, Ossie Byrne, who gave them unlimited time to work on some follow-up songs behind a local butcher’s shop. “We met Bill Shepherd, who [later when he reunited

with them in England] became our musical director, and Ossie Byrne, our producer. We were on the Spin label [which also belonged to Festival] and used to record until seven in the morning. ‘Monday Rain,’ our first for him, was an absolute flop. Our next, ‘Cherry Red’ (1966) again, an absolute flop. “The producer of Spin records, Ossie Byrne,” Barry said, “gave us a drummer and all the time we needed to experiment. Over six months we recorded an album which included the song ‘Spicks and Specks.’”^[33]

The Bee Gees knew they had exhausted the commercial possibilities of Australia. Barry, with good reason, feared the draft and compulsory military service, which might well have meant being sent to Vietnam. The Gibbs made plans to leave Oz for England.

On August 22, 1966, Barry married his girlfriend of two years, Maureen Bates. Barry was approaching twenty; Maureen, a year younger. She had assumed the title of Secretary of the Bee Gees Fan Club so she and Barry could be together as he toured and the family moved around. Maureen had been pressuring Barry to marry her. She knew if they were not married, she would be left behind and that the only way her parents would let her travel to England with Barry was as husband and wife.

The newlyweds were estranged almost from the start. Six months after the wedding, when the Gibbs readied to leave, Maureen was not invited to travel with her husband. She would stay in Australia, at least for a while, and follow on a later boat. It’s questionable whether Barry gave Maureen much thought during his voyage. She, however, was reminded of him often. “Spicks and Specks” was getting airplay and moving up the Australian charts.

As the Bee Gees worked their way upward in Australia, Robert Stigwood was doing the same in England.

Stigwood was born in Australia—Adelaide—to a lower-working class household. He escaped at twenty-one, in 1956, shipping out to England. After years of low-end jobs and running a home for delinquents, he opened a talent agency, offering actors for TV commercials. “We found a niche,” said Stigwood’s partner at the time, Stephen Komlosy. “There used to be ‘advertising magazines’ on British television, actors discussing products for fifteen minutes. Advertisers who couldn’t afford to buy their own commercials would take time on the magazines. There were eight presenters and we had them all.”^[34] One of Stigwood’s actors was a young heartthrob, Johnny Leyton. Leyton could sing, but every UK label rejected him. Stigwood took Leyton to Joe Meek.

Meek was a rarity. He could arrange, record and produce a record, an unusual set of skills to be found in one man in England at the time. He had a home studio, which was equally rare. Among Meek’s trademarks was his “futuristic” sound featuring electronic bleeps and tons of reverb. He would later produce and release a huge hit, “Telstar,” by the Tornados. Meek worked with Tom Jones, Petula Clark, Gene Vincent and hundreds of others. He’s recognized as a pioneer of audio production for his overdubbing of multiple tracks using only two-track machines, and for his use of compression, which would figure heavily in—to name only one band—the early recordings of the Who. (The Who would later end up briefly on one of Stigwood’s labels, a move that cost them dearly in the litigation that followed.) Meek was a pioneer in his business practices; in his day the major record labels in the UK ran a functional monopoly. If the majors did not sign someone, he or she would never be heard. Meek—and Stigwood—broke that monopoly. Meek would bring a completely finished song to the majors and sell only the record, not the rights to the performer. Meek was unstable and, at times, dangerous. He suffered from depression, and from the legal and social oppression that came with being gay in England when homosexuality was illegal, as it remained until 1967. Gay men were subject not only to harassment by the police, but also to blackmail from lovers and associates. In 1967, Meek suffered a breakdown, murdered his landlady and killed himself.

Stigwood brought Leyton to Meek as a potential teen idol. Leyton recorded “Johnny Remember Me,” and Stigwood made sure Leyton sang it on the television series that had recently cast him. When the song hit #1, “Stigwood was in business, he claims, as Britain’s first independent record producer.”^[35]

Stigwood established from the start the model he would follow in music, theater and movies. “When I conceived the idea that in show business you can monopolize all areas of income by controlling and managing the artist,” Komlosy said. “If you start with the star, you control when and where he appears; if you promote him yourself, you become the record company. If you publish his music, you get the publisher’s cut. The idea was not to let anyone in from the outside.”^[36] Stigwood and Komlosy watched the Beatles’ ascent with dismay; by writing their own songs, the Beatles rendered Stigwood’s business model obsolete. The Beatles didn’t need songwriters and they didn’t need someone to take

them how to sound. The Elvis-imitating pop of the “single, hip-swiveling artist was no longer what was wanted,” Komlosy said. “It was all groups—and they really flooded in.”^{37}

Stigwood adapted, as he always would. After a few setbacks, he joined Beatles manager Brian Epstein’s management and promotion company, NEMS. Stigwood was the booking agent for the Who when his big break arrived. Eric Clapton left John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers—whom Stigwood managed—and Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker left the Graham Bond Organization—whom Stigwood managed. Clapton, Bruce and Baker formed Cream, Stigwood became Cream’s manager and Cream blew up huge.

Brian Epstein was tired of managing the Beatles. He was an overwrought, fragile soul, and was burning out. With the Beatles no longer willing to tour, Epstein understood that managing them would be little more than office work—dealing with contracts and difficult personalities without any of the rock-and-roll fun. The Beatles had matured beyond Epstein’s ideas; they weren’t going to dress alike, they weren’t going to appear in movies, their public pronouncements would be what they really thought, they were going to do drugs without pretending they weren’t and they wanted to be left alone.

Brian Epstein saw in Stigwood a possible means of escape. “The first night they met at a party at Stigwood’s, a plan was made to go to Paris together for what [Stigwood’s financial backer and partner] Shaw called ‘a dirty weekend.’ In Paris, in a three-bedroom suite at the Lancaster Hotel, Brian told Stigwood he was planning to retire. He wanted to go to Spain and manage bullfighters. Hanging with bullfighters was Epstein’s oft-stated fantasy retirement goal. “To Brian, Stigwood and Shaw seemed like the perfect choice to take over the daily operation of NEMS. Brian felt that Stigwood had the creative potential and that Shaw had a sharp financial mind. Most important to Brian, Stigwood was intelligent, amusing, and affected an elegance similar to his own.”^{38}

When Epstein told the Beatles he was considering selling his management company, NEMS, to Stigwood, they reacted strongly. McCartney in particular wanted nothing to do with Stigwood. It’s not clear where his dislike originated, but it was formidable. “We told Brian,” Paul McCartney said, “that if he sold us to Stigwood, we would only ever record out-of-tune versions of ‘God Save the Queen’ [for the remaining five years of our contract].”^{39} Epstein backed off and in a complex transaction Stigwood and his partner agreed to acquire 51 percent of NEMS after a twelve-month period of working together. The contract was signed in early January of 1967.

With that deal, unknowingly, Stigwood and the Bee Gees began to vector toward one another.

On January 3, 1967, the Gibb family embarked from Australia, bound for England, aboard the *S/S Fairsky*. The boys, frustrated by a ceiling they could not break in Australia, were determined to go to England, even over Hugh and Barbara’s protests. “It doesn’t matter if you become the biggest thing in Australia,” Maurice said. “Because the furthest away you’re known is New Guinea and Tasmania.”^{40} When their parents saw that the boys would go without them, they decided that the family would return to their homeland together. Hugh and Barbara had little desire to leave Oz. Once again, the Gibb parental-child structure was overturned as the kids made adult decisions for the whole family. “They wanted to stay in Australia,” Robin said, “but we said no.”^{41} “We came back to England because of them,” Hugh said. “I had a good job, but it was me or them. One day they said they wanted to go home so I said: ‘OK, off we go.’”^{42}

“There was no choice,” Robin continued. “The manager of our record company said, ‘Look, you’ out, get out! We don’t want to make another record with you!’ In those days, a record company had its top artists and its nobody artists. We were the nobody artists. The top artist would get all the time in the studio. The most recording time they gave us was an hour to make a two-sided record. Every time we released a record they said (spoken in a weary voice for emphasis), ‘Here they go . . . trying again!’ Those were our reviews! That was all our reviews consisted of: ‘Another Bee Gees record. Phew!’ That’s what they’d write, an exasperated ‘phew,’ like why didn’t the Bee Gees give up the ghost?”^[43]

The Bee Gees reached a certain level, and the structure of the business in Australia meant they could go no higher. “Big artists would come to top the bill there,” Barry said. “But we were young and sweet and killing their acts and doing great! We thought: if we can do this well—why not have a crack at Sydney? We went to Sydney and got a recording contract and made the first of 15 flop singles in a row. People would tap us on the head and say: ‘Go play with your toys.’ They thought we were kids who would never make it. We got into the Australian Top 10 with ‘Wine and Women’; then ‘I Was a Lover, a Leader of Men’; then ‘Spicks and Specks.’ It was No. 1 when we decided to leave Australia. But we went without one word of Press.”^[44]

“Spicks and Specks” wasn’t #1 when they left, but it was rising. There was no press in part because the Gibbs did not want any. They’d seen groups abandon Oz for the big time, only to return less famous and more broke. The Bee Gees wanted to slip away. The Bee Gees’ official autobiography, published in 1979, claims that Festival records tried to serve them with an injunction to prevent them from leaving the country. Later research makes that seem unlikely.

“In August 1966,” Robin said, “we went into the studio desperate to get a hit before we left for England. We made ‘Spicks and Specks,’ but Spin didn’t want to release it. They thought we were unfinished, a financial loss. It was released eventually and went to the top in four weeks. It had been on our minds for the past years to come to England. ‘Spicks and Specks’ gave us the money.”^[45] But not quite enough money for the entire family’s passage. Hugh made a deal with the ship: the boys would perform nightly to cover his and their fare.

The Bee Gees sailed away as “Spicks and Specks” rose on the charts. “The memories I have of Australia,” Barry said, “were that they were unfair to us right to the end. Even on the boat, we’d get reports from friends about ‘Spicks and Specks.’ The record became a hit while we were on the boat and the local papers had stories like: ‘Bee Gees Abandon Australia.’”^[46]

The boys thought they’d be singing for their supper the entire voyage. “We got on the boat,” Maurice said, “and they didn’t even know we were supposed to be there. If Dad hadn’t gone to see the purser, we could’ve travelled for free and never worked. But we only did about six shows in six weeks.” “The entertainment room was over the captain’s cabin,” Barry said, “which was good for us because he said, ‘No, no, no. I don’t want entertainment at certain times, because I’ve got to go to bed.’ The captain called the purser in and told him he didn’t care. So we did one show a week.” Those shows were encouraging. The kids on board turned every performance into a celebration. “Puff, the Magic Dragon” was a particular crowd-pleaser.

“We worked our way over,” Maurice said. “We had heard that the original Seekers [a folk group that hit with “I’ll Never Find Another You” and “Georgy Girl”] had worked their way to England

too.”^[47]

“We stopped off in India, the Middle East, Cairo, the Pyramids,” Barry said. “And the things we discovered in back street bazaars! You could buy bottles of Dexedrine, every kind of stimulant, no questions asked. We were on a ship, but we flew all the way.”^[48] “We were up all night writing,” Robin said, “because we’d bought some Dexedrine in Aden. It was legal there. There was a war in Aden, and warships in the harbor. We went into a drugstore, and the owner said, ‘There’s a war on and I’m getting out. Here, take what you want.’”^[49]

“Spicks and Specks” became the top single in Oz more or less while the family was still on the *Fairsky*. It’s a structurally complex song, built on weird chords. The chopping guitar, bouncy beat and layered voices evoke Herman’s Hermits. In mid-bounce, though, the song stops dead and Barry sings a—soon to be characteristic—solo lament with no instrumental backing. A Beatles-esque cornet takes the song out. “Spicks” is a sophisticated pop construction, a harbinger of the idiosyncratic lyrical rhythms, pacing and embellishments that would become the Bee Gees’ sound.

If the music of your puberty shapes your taste for the rest of your life, what about your scars from the same period? Their #1 caused little rejoicing among Barry, Maurice and Robin. They’d been treated shabbily, they knew it, and were in no mood to savor the irony. Their feeling toward Australia was good riddance and kiss my ass. They looked toward England feeling like battle-scarred veterans of the record label wars.

And like teenagers on Dexedrine.

The *Fairsky* docked in Southampton on February 6. The family stayed the night in a crap hotel in London. They reached out to Colin Petersen and he found them a cheap furnished flat. Colin was from Brisbane. When he was nine he starred in the Australian movie *Smiley*. He also had roles in *The Scam* and *A Cry from the Streets*. Colin starting drumming at twelve, and joined the Australian band Steve and the Board. They moved to Sydney in 1965 and released their first single on Spin. He met the Bee Gees in Sydney, and moved to England shortly before they arrived in London.

“When we arrived in London,” Barry said, “we had nothing. We were unknown. We had no recording contract and no work.”^[50]

“So we reach England,” Robin said, “and what happens when we arrive? The first people we meet coming off the ship is another rock group who advised us to go back. They told us the Walker Brothers were fading and Eric Clapton was rising and they tried to convince us not to try to make it in England. That gave us the added incentive to give it a go. We had sent tapes ahead before we left Australia and had hopes that someone who heard them would contact us.”^[51]

Hugh’s luck is worth pondering, as is Barry’s. Hugh never caught a break on his own, yet the Bee Gees’ luck in those early years was phenomenal. Hugh, in his determined but hardly dazzling way, attempted things that never work out for anyone, and yet, for his boys, they did. Before leaving Australia, Hugh had sent acetates of Bee Gees material, along with a painfully earnest letter, to several UK labels and management outfits.

Hugh’s letter arrived at NEMS on December 3, 1966, and read in part:

This is just a preliminary letter to advise you of the arrival in London of a young vocal group, who, having reached the top of

their field in this country, are returning home to the UK to further their career. They are the “Bee Gees,” who consist of three brothers, Barry Gibb, aged 19, and twins Robin and Maurice, aged 16. . . .

Although still youngsters, the boys have had an enormous amount of experience in all facets of show business: TV, recording, pantomime, hotel and club work etc. Naturally, their records have been aimed at the teenage market and at the time of writing they have a hit record, “Spicks & Specks,” which has just reached the number 3 position in every state in Australia. We quite realise that this does not mean very much overseas, but considering the enormous size of Australia, this is considered quite a feat here.

That Hugh cited “pantomime” and “hotel and club work,” suggests that he had not the slightest idea of what the music business in England would be like.

Like every other manager of every other aspiring band on the planet, Hugh sent music to NEMS. The odds of anyone at NEMS sorting through their weekly pile of unsolicited material to uncover a diamond in the rough are incalculable. Yet, somebody did. Epstein handed the acetates off to Robert Stigwood. He played them, and, being Stigwood, started searching for the Bee Gees.

That is the canonical version, as told in the Bee Gees’ authorized biography and elsewhere.

There’s another, only slightly less romantic version, and it showcases every bit as much luck. It might also have the virtue of being true. In 1966, a representative of Barry’s Australian publisher reached out to Ronald Rennie, the managing director of Polydor, UK—a small subsidiary of the enormous German record label. Rennie received recordings of “Spicks and Specks” and other tracks. Rennie wrote back to Festival as a preliminary to making a deal to release the Bee Gees music on Polydor in the UK. If the music sold well enough, Rennie would bring the band from Oz to tour.

But suddenly, here’s Barry off the boat, making the rounds, with no idea that Festival had reached out to Polydor. Barry knocked on Rennie’s door, introduced himself and gave Rennie another set of acetates. Rennie thought Barry had appeal, and called his buddy Robert Stigwood to suggest that Stigwood immediately sign the Bee Gees and manage them.

Stigwood knew where the boys were and how to reach Hugh because Rennie told him. Rennie knew that because Barry had left him a contact number. Showman that he was, Stigwood never spilled the beans.^[52]

However it happened, Stigwood thought what he heard had promise. Since he wasn’t going to manage the Beatles, Stigwood was searching for a vocal group he could guide and shape, one that might possibly outdo the Beatles. Stigwood never thought small. His ambitions were matched by Barry’s.

“One night in 1967, I turned up at Robert Stigwood’s place,” Paul McCartney said. “He said, ‘What do you think of this record?’ And he played some young songwriters. It was a couple of their early songs. I liked them, and he said, ‘Oh, great, ’cause I’m thinking of signing them.’ And that was the start of them for me.”^[53]

“I loved their composing,” Stigwood said. “I also loved their harmony singing. It was unique, a sound only brothers could make.”^[54]

Stigwood found out the Gibbs were heading to England. He knew the date of their arrival. One way or another, Stigwood got the phone number of the rental house they’d occupied for only two days. He called and kept calling. Hugh had never heard Stigwood’s name; he only knew about Epstein. When he

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