

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Craig Brown: Beatlemania (1963)

Peter Moore: Peter Moore here with a few quick words before we begin. I promise I won't keep you long. First of all, thank you for the lovely feedback you've been sending us about last week's two episodes. We're really happy to get it, of course. If you are enjoying the podcast, we'd be incredibly grateful if you'd spare a moment of your time to leave us a 5-star rating on Apple Podcasts. It's pretty much the best way that we have of reaching more listeners. In compensation for your kindness though, we do have two new episodes for you today and this is the first of them. It's an absolute treat. Without further ado, welcome to *Travels Through Time*, the podcast made in partnership with Jordan Lloyd and ColorGraph.

[1960s music plays]

We're off to the early 1960s in this episode; a time when Britain seemed revitalised after the drab, post-war years; a time when anything seemed possible. Leading the charge of the new cultural movement, of course, was a band from Liverpool called The Beatles. Today's guest is a prolific, prize-winning and much-loved journalist and humourist. Craig Brown is known for his parodies in *Private Eye* and for writing more than a dozen books. His latest, *One, Two, Three, Four: The Beatles in Time* is just out. According to the *Sunday Times*, it is 'a ridiculously enjoyable treat'. Also, a ridiculously enjoyable treat is this conversation between Craig and Artemis. Please excuse the occasional burst of doodling underneath the microphone from Craig. You'll just have to imagine him scribbling away like a latter-day John Lennon. Otherwise, enjoy.

Artemis Irvine: Thank you so much for joining us on *Travels Through Time*, Craig.

Craig Brown: It's my pleasure.

Artemis Irvine: I thought we could start by me asking you some questions about your book, *One, Two, Three, Four: The Beatles in Time* because there are so many books about The Beatles out there and it feels like quite a brave endeavour to write a new one.

Craig Brown: Yes, I saw somewhere that there were 733 books [laughter] and so mine is the 734th. They tend to be either very dogged, telling you almost what they did every minute of their lives; if they drove in a car, telling you what the registration number of the car is and that kind of thing. Every detail - so Proustian detail - or they're very, very niche. I've got a book called *The Beatles in Coventry* [laughter] or I've got the autobiography of The Beatles' hairdresser, Leslie Cavendish.

Artemis Irvine: Wow! [Laughter].

Craig Brown: That the kind of thing but I thought that there was nothing which combined autobiography, history, random thoughts and little intellectual essays or parallel histories, like what if such and such hadn't happened. I think also there was a slight sense of humour lacking in the way that people have written about The Beatles. Certainly in the first few years, The Beatles had great fun and they were funny, so I think it's appropriate to do a funny book. It's also appropriate, when they go slightly off the rails, to be slightly more cynically humorous. I thought there was something to be done there. I was worried that The Beatles' nerds, the hundreds of people who argue about the tiniest detail, and I thought they wouldn't enjoy the book but there doesn't seem to be any major criticism of it.

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Artemis Irvine: Good [laughter]. They've granted you mercy on this occasion.

Craig Brown: I think so [laughter].

Artemis Irvine: I wanted to ask you about the chapter in which you discuss when John was meant to have punched someone at a party or he did punch someone at a party. You run through all of the different versions of this story, both from people who were there or people who heard it secondhand and then all of the biographies. You thoroughly go through, in a very funny way, exactly what the assault was like, what it was caused by and what the aftermath was to the point where you even make a table laying it all down [laughter]. I was just going to say, I thought it was really funny but it's made me think that is what history is.

Craig Brown: It was probably in 1962 or 1963 when John beat up this disc jockey in Liverpool. If people can't even get things accurate that recently, then how can you possibly think about Henry VIII's court or further back in medieval times? How can you get any degree of accuracy? Historians always talk about written sources but the written source is very likely to have made it up or has got the wrong idea. A lot of these people who were at the party and witnessed the beating up, they spoke pretty quickly after it and they all had a different idea. They weren't just lying. It was just a misreading of the situation.

Artemis Irvine: People's relationship with The Beatles is so emotive that you feel like you believe the interpretation that suits what you want to believe about John Lennon.

Craig Brown: Yeah, so if you think John is marvellous, you make the injuries he did to this disc jockey, Bob Wooler, very minor [laughter] and if you don't like John, you make them major. There is a particularly virulently anti-John biographer called Albert Goldman. He virtually had Bob Wooler as dead on the ground [laughter] and if you check anything in the Bob Wooler book, which was the first huge book about John Lennon, it's not accurate.

Artemis Irvine: Really?

Craig Brown: Yeah.

Artemis Irvine: Why did he have such a vendetta against John?

Craig Brown: I think he was one of those biographers - another one is Kitty Kelly - American biographers tend to be either very honest, very fact checky and slightly dry or completely off the rails [laughter] and just putting in whatever they want. There doesn't seem to be much in between. I think English biography is more - it's not, let's say, knockabout but it's slightly more lively.

Artemis Irvine: Were there any biographies or general books about The Beatles, that you came across while you were researching, that any avid Beatle fan listeners can make sure they go and read after they've obviously read your one?

Craig Brown: Well, I like first-person ones. Most of them would be ghostwritten but I can't see anything wrong with ghostwritten books. It's just a form of oral history if they're done well. There is one by John's best friend from school, who remained a constant friend through his life, called Pete Shotten. That gives a very vivid picture of them as 10-year-old children. They were mad on the *Just William* books. You can see but I have a chapter on the influence of *Just William* on John Lennon's life. So I'd say the Pete Shotten book.

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Artemis Irvine: We're going to have to focus in on just one year today and so I'm going to ask you the question that we ask all of our guests. If you could travel back in time to any year in history, what year would it be?

Craig Brown: The year I've chosen is 1963, which you could say is barely history. I was born in 1957, so I was six years old. I'm interested in the age of five or six for anyone because I think it's when you first become aware of news beyond the family and beyond the village. It's the first year that I remember distinct things.

Artemis Irvine: Do you remember hearing about The Beatles?

Craig Brown: Yes, I think it must have been at the end of 1963, at Christmas, that my brothers and I were given Beatles' wigs [laughter] for Christmas. It can't have been the main - I hope it wasn't our main Christmas present [laughter] because they weren't even real wigs. They were made out of plastic and they cut into you. If you moved your head slightly, you'd feel your ear being pierced. We were aware of The Beatles and I think everyone was aware of The Beatles. Everyone went on about their hair and even though it now looks almost bizarrely short, I remember the wigs. I don't have any other distinct memory of The Beatles.

Artemis Irvine: It's amazing to think how quickly, even then, tacky merchandise was already being seized upon as something that could be done out of their fame.

Craig Brown: While researching their manager, Brian Epstein, I discovered that it took him completely by surprise. That kind of merchandising hadn't been done before or not in such a big way. Though Brian Epstein was a very good manager and an honest man, he completely misjudged that. I don't think I put into the book because it was too complicated but basically, he sold the rights to the merchandising for virtually nothing. He could have got 70% and he got 2% or something. That was the only big mistake he made as their manager. It was a year later that they became famous in America and, in particular, they were selling things like air that The Beatles had breathed [laughter].

Artemis Irvine: Really?

Craig Brown: After they'd stayed in a hotel, they cut up all the sheets and sold them in square inches. There is something in the book. With regard to The Beatles' wigs, at one point when they were over there in 1964, they were importing 50,000 to New York every day or perhaps it was every week. I think George Martin, their producer, said that when he was in New York, he looked out of a car window and saw quite ordinary businessmen wearing Beatles' wigs [laughter]. It was the year of merchandising.

Artemis Irvine: That's interesting. We're going not just talk about The Beatles today because I know the first scene that you've chosen to visit in 1963 is the Great Train Robbery in August. Would you like to tell us a bit about where you'd like to be in the story of the Great Train Robbery?

Craig Brown: Yes. I remember the Great Train Robbery as the first really exciting story that I became aware of in the papers. I remember reading all the papers avidly to see more and more about the train robbery. Excitingly for me, as a six-year-old, they dumped some of the money at Leith Hill near Dorking and we lived just near Dorking.

Artemis Irvine: Oh [laughter].

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Craig Brown: So £100,000 was found at Leith Hill where we used to go on bicycle rides. I had this amazing idea that I would soon be the beneficiary of their theft. I thought, 'There must be more money to be found.' That was very exciting. Basically, what happened is that in August 1963, these 15 villains stopped a Royal Mail train which was carrying £2.5 million, which would be, roughly, £55 million now, in used banknotes. I think they were just going to be destroyed. You could say it's almost a victimless crime. They stopped the train and robbed it. They did actually kosh the driver and so it wasn't entirely victimless. It was all very, very well planned and very well executed and they got away with all but eight of the 128 sacks that there were. They got them into a big van and scooted off. They went to a place called Leatherslade Farm, which was about 27 miles away. They hung out in Leatherslade Farm. They'd bought this farm a few months earlier and that was where they were going to hang out. They managed to tune into police radio systems and they realised that the police thought they were in the area. The police thought they were within an hour radius of the crime and so they then decided, eventually, to scoot away before they had planned to. They left behind, in Leatherslade Farm, things like 34 loo rolls. It proved that they were going to be there for a long time as they'd originally planned.

Anyway, where I'd like to be, in 1963, is at Leatherslade Farm and playing Monopoly with them. They played Monopoly. Obviously, these 15 rogues had to pass the time in some way. They couldn't go outside at all as they would be recognised and so they played Monopoly but with real money because they had all this real money [laughter]. Actually now, I probably could [laughter] - Mr. Rich - play Monopoly, just about, with real money because you can buy things. The most expensive is Mayfair for £400 [laughter]. I suppose it would be a push to get a complete set of all the properties, plus hotels and things. Obviously, in those days, £400 would have been far more. That would have been exciting, I think, with people listening to the police radios and that air of tension. I probably wouldn't have liked their company, actually. [Laughter] They were quite thuggy characters and I don't think they would have liked me. I'd like to have been a fly on the wall rather than a participant. I'm sure they argued about who owed what money to whom in the Monopoly game.

Artemis Irvine: Their characters are something that I wanted to ask you about because I was reading about the time before they were caught and how, when the press asked people on the street what they thought about the Great Train Robbery, they'd say, 'Well, good on them.' They didn't feel that opposed to the idea.

Craig Brown: Of course, at school, we learnt about Robin Hood and there was actually a big Saturday night series of *Robin Hood* (riding through the glen). They did seem a bit like Robin Hood and his merry men by stealing from the rich. Well, they didn't give to the poor, unless you classify them as poor [laughter]. Just recently, when I was looking up about it, I did see that Graham Greene - I'm leaping ahead - basically, they were arrested and sent to prison. Two of them escaped from prison. At the time of their escape, Graham Greene wrote to *The Telegraph* and he said, 'Am I one of a minority in feeling admiration for the skill and courage behind the Great Train Robbery? More important, am I in a minority in being shocked by the savagery of the sentences?' They were sentenced to 30 years in prison.

Artemis Irvine: Wow!

Craig Brown: Amazing really, given that there was a little bit of violence but not much and then it was only done by one of them.

Artemis Irvine: Why do you think people felt so sympathetic towards them?

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Craig Brown: I think it was because they saw them as lovable rogues. It was very, very cleverly planned. It was at the same time as Michael Caine was in those kinds of heist films and so I think everyone felt that it was a bit of an adventure. It was such an outrageous amount of money. Obviously, people like it if they're not stolen from themselves [*laughter*] and I think that was the reason. Although, the judge said 'it was a crime of sordid violence inspired by vast greed.'

Artemis Irvine: Pretty damning stuff.

Craig Brown: I think saying 'sordid' - they sort of koshed the train driver which is bad. They always say that he died later of the injuries but, in fact, he died of leukaemia seven years later. He didn't go back to work. It was kind of GBH (grievous bodily harm) but it wasn't mass murder.

Artemis Irvine: To what extent do you think you could link it to - people often talk about the end of an age of deference happening in the '60s and people being more in favour of anti-establishment figures. Maybe you could say that a bit about The Beatles in some ways.

Craig Brown: You certainly could say it about the Great Train Robbers. I guess if it had happened ten years earlier, people would have been less sympathetic but there was something about this Ealing comedy idea, I think. That was what they seemed most like. Of course, when they were on the run - I think five were on the run because some hadn't been caught anyway - that was an amazing high jinx. Ronnie Biggs scaled the prison wall, jumped onto the top of a lorry and then got to Paris. He had a bit of plastic surgery and then got to Australia. He was almost found in Australia and so he moved to Rio de Janeiro. People were following the life of Ronnie Biggs. He then came back to Britain to die. This robbery kept the public enthralled for 40 years. The other ones when to Mexico. People on the run; it's always exciting, I think.

Artemis Irvine: So he evaded capture for all of his life?

Craig Brown: Yeah, virtually. He was caught, went to prison, escaped very quickly from prison and then he was found in Brazil. A policeman called 'Slipper of the Yard' had been maniacally trying to catch him. He got him in Brazil but, luckily for Biggs, he'd got his girlfriend pregnant and so they couldn't extradite him because he had a son on the way.

Artemis Irvine: It is a really good story. There's something irresistible about it and romantic, even though you know that if you looked into the details of it, they probably were all not very nice people and criminals.

Craig Brown: Most of them had been to prison before. Yeah, they were rough types.

Artemis Irvine: There are so many popular TV programmes nowadays about gangsters, like *Peaky Blinders* and stuff like that.

Craig Brown: Yes, and who are turned into heroes, aren't they?

Artemis Irvine: Yeah, exactly. I wonder if that trend started with the Great Train Robbery.

Craig Brown: Yes, it could have done.

Artemis Irvine: For your next scene, we're somewhere a lot cosier than hiding out with criminals.

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Craig Brown: Yes.

Artemis Irvine: Would you like to introduce where we are?

Craig Brown: Because of my interest in The Beatles, I've chosen to be, at the end of 1963, at 57 Wimpole Street with Paul McCartney. That's where he was living. In April 1963, The Beatles appeared at the Royal Albert Hall with an odd little assembly. I love the groups you see on the playbills in those days because they were such an odd mixture. He was with Del Shannon, who did that song *Runaway*; Rolf Harris, who we all know about; Shane Fenton, who then became Alvin Stardust and became briefly famous in the 1970s; and George Melly, the jazz singer. It was kind of a mixed bag. This was the first concert where things had gone completely wild. They were really screaming and climbing on the roof of their car and blocking the way. Sent along by the *Radio Times* to interview The Beatles and to cover the concert was the 16-year-old actress, who had been in three or four films by then, Jane Asher. She was also famous because she was on *Juke Box Jury*, which was the big pop show - she was also very pretty - so they took a real interest in her. After the concert, they went back to a journalist's house - a very small house - and John, who was quite a bully, especially in the early days, started bullying her and upsetting her. Paul then took her to the next-door room and, in a very sedate fashion, they sat and talked about *The Canterbury Tales* which they had both studied at school; Jane at Queen's College in Harley Street which was a private school and Paul in Liverpool. Paul had a very good English teacher and so he was interested in English literature. You had this thing after a huge Beatles concert of these two people talking about Chaucer [laughter] - these two youngsters. Paul wasn't as young but he was 19 or 20. He then dropped her off at her parents' house in Wimpole Street and asked for her phone number. Their romance began then. Before the year was out, he'd been invited by Jane's parents to go and live there. He had his own room at the Ashers' house in Wimpole Street. They were a particularly interesting family which is, I think, one of the reasons Paul so landed on his feet. Jane Asher was an attractive, nice person and her parents were particularly interesting. Her father was a doctor, Dr. Richard Asher. He would be famous, in a way, regardless of this connection because in 1951, he identified and named Munchausen syndrome.

Artemis Irvine: Oh!

Craig Brown: So he is part of medical history. He also wrote very funny articles for *The British Medical Journal*, which I really enjoyed reading. I wasn't expecting to understand any article in the BMJ. One of them was called *Why Are Medical Journals So Dull* [laughter]. Anyway, within this environment, Paul really blossomed. The other Beatles were either just married or having fun going to nightclubs. He rather loved these intelligent, cultural conversations. There were also two other brothers that Jane had. They played word games and they would have proper sit-down dinners and argue about intellectual things. Paul remembered one argument between Dr. Asher and Peter, who was Paul's age, on when the tomato was first introduced to England. They were very specific [laughter] historical discussions. At the same time, Margaret Asher, Jane's mother, was a music teacher and she taught George Martin - I think it was the oboe - at the Royal College of Music. He taught Paul to play the recorder. He could already play piano and guitar. He played the recorder on *Fool on the Hill*. They also encouraged him to read widely and so he read Jung and Aldous Huxley. He went to Pinter plays and listened to Stockhausen. He just kind of broadened his horizons. At the same time, it was a very fruitful time for him composing and these amazing songs would just pour out of him. There was a music room in the basement and so when Margaret Asher wasn't using it, he would sit at the piano there and he composed songs. There should be a plaque at Wimpole Street. He composed *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, *And I Love Her*, *We Can Work it Out*, *Here, There and Everywhere* and *Yesterday*. Famously, he woke up having

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dreamt the tune of *Yesterday*. He just woke up with it in his head. I don't want to just be in Wimpole Street. I want to be Paul in Wimpole Street [*laughter*].

Artemis Irvine: And I want to be Jane [*laughter*].

Craig Brown: It was a kind of perfect setup. He was there for three or four years. They were engaged and then the engagement broke off but it was a perfect time for him and very productive.

Artemis Irvine: You've touched a bit on it already about how fruitful his composing was. You feel like they really had an enormous influence on him. How did he start to maybe differ from the other three in his writing, if they weren't also having that same experience that he was having?

Craig Brown: He's discreet about it. Unusually, unlike people now, neither he nor Jane has ever talked about their relationship and so I suppose he doesn't talk much about living there. He's always been very appreciative of the Ashers. I think John did pop round and John and Paul were still composing things together. Definitely, *Yesterday* was purely Paul but they wrote *I Want to Hold Your Hand* together. I think that the John and Paul partnership was always quite rivalrous and that's what spurred them on. They each wanted to better the other in some way and I think that applies to all the songwriting partnerships. It may be any artistic partnership. You're friends but you're also rivals. They were always trying to top each other and I think they never sat down to write a song without a song coming out. They could write a song in an hour or two. With other pop stars at that time, like Bob Dylan or Paul Simon (the really good ones), they are very, very ambitious, even at that kind of hippyish time. When they were 16 and 17 and writing songs in their bedrooms in Liverpool, they would always write 'a new song by Lennon and McCartney' as if they were already established. I think that conveys their sense of great determination to succeed.

Artemis Irvine: Yeah, definitely. It is an amazing scene. I know you wrote in the book that if you could be any Beatle at any time, you'd be Paul.

Craig Brown: Paul there [*laughter*].

Artemis Irvine: Yeah, there. I completely agree. Maybe this is just my personal preference for Paul, as a huge Beatles' fan myself, but I always felt slightly resentful that John gets the reputation for being the really arty one.

Craig Brown: I'm glad you say that because most people, I think, tend to side with John. They broke up and it ended in tears, at least for a time. John would write letters to *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* against Paul. There was this completely crazy feud in public. Like you had earlier, when you had to choose between The Stones and The Beatles, people had to choose between John and Paul and that still lingered. Of course, after John died, he became sanctified and Paul was seen as the commercial one, less talented, less passionate and more of a showman. I think now people are realising that maybe without John, Paul would have succeeded because I think Paul has that kind of drive and talent. I think John was too lazy and too uncontrollable to have succeeded without Paul. That doesn't take away from John's talent. Obviously, they were best together and I don't think either was as good solo.

Artemis Irvine: No, I agree.

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Craig Brown: I think it was that sense of competition, which became a kind of symbiotic thing.

Artemis Irvine: People talk about the fact that Paul tends to write more ballads or more commercial music, as if that's somehow easier when actually, it is still very hard to write songs that are going to sell really well.

Craig Brown: He had this amazing gift for melody, which is really the basis of music, I think. I can't remember if I put it in the book or not but when John was in New York, in the 1970s, I think Yoko, who was not always as loyal to John as she makes out, said that he hated going to smart hotels [laughter], like The Plaza in New York or somewhere like that. The pianist, thinking to suck up, would immediately play *Yesterday* [laughter]. The pianist would always play a Paul song, thinking they were Lennon and McCartney songs. People have only, quite recently, started making the distinction between the songs by McCartney. Lennon would be really upset by this because basically, lots of other artists covered Paul's songs. I think *Yesterday* has been covered by 2,000 different people. I think it's in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most covered record.

Artemis Irvine: Wow!

Craig Brown: I suppose people have sung *Imagine* a few times but John's songs haven't been covered nearly as much. Maybe that doesn't mean anything but it certainly upset John.

Artemis Irvine: I wondered if we could speak a bit more broadly about what The Beatles were up to in 1963 because I know that, in your book, you really pivot it as a really significant moment in their career. Their ascent towards absolute stardom happens in 1963 and also the fact that the term 'Beatlemania' was coined in that year as well.

Craig Brown: Yes. Basically, they began 1963 in obscurity and playing village halls in The Highlands and sleeping on top of one another in vans in the freezing cold just to try and keep warm and that kind of thing. They ended it as probably the four most famous people in Britain. By February or March 1964, they had become the four most people in the world because they'd cracked America and became suddenly and unbelievably famous. In England, it happened less dramatically than in America. They were on a tour with Helen Shapiro, who was then aged 16 and she was a big star. They started off eighth on the bill and so they'd almost be the opening act and they would play for ten minutes. By the end of the tour, which was only six weeks long, they were number two and poor Helen Shapiro's latest single had only got to 28 or 30. They were on a tour bus with Helen Shapiro, who they got on well with as she was obviously a nice person, and she saw this headline in one of the music papers, 'Is Helen at Has-Been at 16?' A terrible thing. Of course, she was. Actually, having been rude about John before, he was kind to her then and comforted her. It showed how dramatically their success came when it did. They had been playing together since they'd first met in 1957 and had played in one form of band or another. They had been obscure for quite a long time but once fame started to kick in, it really kicked in quickly.

Artemis Irvine: I also find the discourse surrounding the hysteria a really fascinating one. I guess Elvis Presley had inspired that kind of 'female hysteria' from his fans. I guess it's basically a sexual frenzy and that's what I find so interesting about the cultural phenomenon of Beatlemania. You imagine that you're a 14-year-old girl growing up in the '60s and maybe you're not given any particular opportunity to express that you might want to have sex with a boy. It might be seen as still quite taboo and yet here is this band that you can go and see with your friends and you can all just scream because you're so excited by them. It's not socially acceptable because people did write disparagingly about it but it is like an outlet for you. I always really feel

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like that's what is going on underneath all of the screaming is some kind of repressed female sexuality that's looking for an avenue.

Craig Brown: I think it is and girls didn't really scream at The Rolling Stones, who obviously looked more like men. There was something kind of boyish about The Beatles. I think it was probably that idea that you could go so far but only so far with them. That actually wasn't true because they were having a high old time [*laughter*].

Artemis Irvine: Yeah, and you cover that a bit in the early years in Hamburg.

Peter Moore: Hello there, it's Peter. Imagine this, a picture of the four Beatles that no one has ever seen before until this week. Given the enormous and enduring popularity of the Fab Four, I think that's quite a thing but it's what we have for you today on *Travels Through Time*. I've been telling you, in recent weeks, about our partnership with the visual historian Jordan Lloyd. Well, he has colourised a picture of the four smiling Beatles on the night of their very, very first American concert. It catches brilliant details; there's George and Ringo's cigarettes; there's the flashlights of those 1960s cameras; there's this air of bedazzlement written into their faces. You can see that three out of four of them are wearing brand new coats, which is a sign of their new-found wealth. You can check out this brand new image, along with a full range of Jordan's work at ColorGraph.co and where you can buy prints of Jordan's work on subjects from Mark Twain to... well, John Lennon now. They make unique and fabulous presents and so do check out ColorGraph.co.

Artemis Irvine: Shall we move on to your third scene?

Craig Brown: Okay.

Artemis Irvine: What would you like to visit as your third and final scene in 1963?

Craig Brown: I've chosen the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, in November 1963, when Lee Harvey Oswald was up there with his gun and he shot President Kennedy dead. Once again, I'd like to be hiding behind one of the bookshelves, I think. I wouldn't have wanted Lee Harvey Oswald to know I was there [*laughter*]. I've chosen this also because I was becoming aware of the news in 1963. I remember at my first school, which was called Grove House (also near Dorking), we had a very good teacher called Miss Farrow. I remember her teaching us about the JFK assassination and almost made it into a project. She put charts up on the wall which would show the direction the gun was shot at and the car going along. Of course, it became the big news story almost of the 20th century. It's hard to underrate it as a news story and it kept going because of these conspiracy theories. Did Lee Harvey Oswald do it? If he did do it, was he alone? I thought if I was in the Book Depository, I'd be able to see him doing it and see if he was alone. I've always been very interested also in the conspiracies. In a way, it's like when we were talking about when John Lennon beat up the disc jockey and how many different versions there were. They were limitless conspiracy theories, especially with this one of who did it. Even though they all contradict each other, each one has a kind of logic to it. I think you can form any theory from any amount of random information. You can always join the dots together and something will come out. It's like looking at a fire or a cloud and seeing a face in it. There will be a face... or looking at a car and seeing a face. I'm fascinated by that. Recently, there was a man who was interviewed by the Warren Commission about the assassination. Actually, I think it was a later commission. There's the famous Zapruder film where this man took 30 seconds of film of the assassination. He was just a passer-by who happened to have a camera. This has been gone over and over again. Someone on the grassy knoll, which was just beside the President's car

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as it was passing, was known as the 'umbrella man' and the conspiracy theorists really fixated on him. It was a very, very sunny in Dallas and he was the only person carrying an umbrella. As the President's limousine approached, you can see on the film that the umbrella man spins his umbrella from east to west.

Artemis Irvine: So ominous.

Craig Brown: He then sits on the sidewalk. I think there's another photograph of him sitting on the sidewalk next to another man before getting up and then walking towards the Texas School Book Depository. There were a whole lot of people who said, 'Did he fire a dart with a paralysing agent to make the President more of a sitting duck for Lee Harvey Oswald?' or 'Was he acting as a signaller to communicate about firing a second round, if that was necessary?' It was all this kind of stuff. It was even in the Oliver Stone film. In 1978, 15 years after the assassination, a man called Louie Steven Witt came forward. He hadn't even seen these conspiracy theories but he was the man with the umbrella. The reason for this umbrella is just so interesting, I think, because it was completely bizarre. He wanted to taunt President Kennedy because Kennedy's father, Joe Kennedy, had been a great supporter of appeasement before the Second World War and was a great fan of Chamberlain. Chamberlain was always portrayed as carrying an umbrella. So there were always cartoons of Chamberlain and for the anti-appeasers, Chamberlain and his umbrella was always a thing. To taunt Joe Kennedy's son, the President, this man had brought an umbrella and that was why he had it up on a sunny day. That's now completely accepted as the reason but for 15 years, it was a huge conspiracy theory. I just think that's a fascinating sideline.

Artemis Irvine: Do you think there is something unique about that particular news story that inspired so many conspiracy theories? Was it just because it was so shocking to people that somebody as charismatic as JFK could be killed so instantly that they needed to find further ways of explaining or making sense of it?

Craig Brown: Yes. Oswald was arrested pretty quickly and after he was coming from a courtroom or from jail, I can't remember, he was then shot by this man Jack Ruby. You never got the resolution. He was never on trial. He never spoke and no one ever knew why he did it, if he did it or why Jack Ruby had shot him. There were then lots of conspiracy theories, like whether Jack Ruby had been told by, say, the Mafia or Fidel Castro, 'You've got to shoot Oswald so he doesn't speak.' It just extended the conspiracy theories and then, of course, Jack Ruby died of cancer eventually. Kennedy was also the most powerful man in the world and, as you say, very charismatic and it seemed completely unthinkable. Going back to The Beatles, serious people have said that part of the unbelievable success of The Beatles, three months later when they came to America, was because the period of grieving was over and they just wanted something fresh, young, uplifting and optimistic. I think there's a lot to be said for that in terms of The Beatles.

Armetis Irvine: Yeah, definitely. Do you feel like there's anything that links those three events together or are they random?

Craig Brown: I suppose there is a kind of link in terms of thinking about underdogs. Certainly, with the Great Train Robbers and The Beatles, you can see working-class heroes and that was very much a feature of the early '60s. Up to then, the working classes had always either been portrayed as butlers, servants or cheeky chappies, like Cockney comedians. Suddenly, The Beatles didn't go along with any of that. They were just themselves and were happy to be who they were. I suppose you could say the same of the Great Train Robbers as, in a way, they just

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got on with doing their business. I suppose you could say Lee Harvey Oswald was a downtrodden kind of character and he shot the most famous man in the world. I suppose you could link them in fame. These three groups of people became famous. Oswald had had a weird, chequered political past and he had gone to the Soviet Union but he was basically a nutcase. I guess that one of his motivations for shooting Kennedy was the fame that would then accrue to him and obviously has accrued to him. The train robbers didn't want to be famous. They didn't want to be caught but having been caught and then escaped, they quite relished fame. Certainly, Ronnie Biggs relished his fame. He even did a song with the Sex Pistols at one point.

Artemis Irvine: Really? *[Laughter]*.

Craig Brown: Yeah, *[laughter]* he enjoyed his fame.

Artemis Irvine: Just to complete the anti-establishment figure.

Craig Brown: Yeah *[laughter]*. Of course, The Beatles became so famous and certainly enjoyed it up until about 1966 and then I think saw its limitations. I just saw on Twitter, yesterday, huge arguments from Beatles' nerds about who did the bit which goes 'Aaaah' in *A Day in the Life* just before they say 'wake up'. Some people think it was Paul and some people think it was John and these furious arguments go on, even now, about whether it was Paul or John *[laughter]* singing that little bit. It's crazy how obsessive people become about The Beatles.

Artemis Irvine: Hopefully, they will buy your book *[laughter]*. You're allowed to bring one memento with you and I just wanted to ask what memento would you bring?

Craig Brown: I would be tempted, of course, to go to Leith Hill and scour around for another £100,000 *[laughter]*. I suppose those banknotes would now be not legal tender anyway and so maybe I shouldn't have that. I do remember, as a child, searching Leith Hill and thinking I'd find a bag of money.

Artemis Irvine: Yes, I was going to say it seemed almost tantalisingly close. It would feel like writing a historical wrong if you were able to bring it back with you to the present *[laughter]*.

Craig Brown: Yeah, I think that would be a fruitless thing and I'd just get my hands dirty for nothing. I'd have to get something of The Beatles. I'm not a great one for buying manuscripts. I like buying paintings. I don't get first editions or anything like that. Nevertheless, I suppose Paul's words for *Yesterday* would be exciting and they would also be incredibly valuable. I can't remember but some are selling for £750,000, like *Hey Jude*. Maybe it went for even more. Because of Wimpole Street and him composing it there, I'd get *Yesterday* but I probably wouldn't keep it. I'd probably put it up for auction.

Artemis Irvine: Really? *[Laughter]*. Craig, you can't say that!

Craig Brown: *[Laughter]*. No, I know, it's terrible *[laughter]*. The great thing about pop is it's available. The great thing about The Beatles is their music and everyone can hear it. It's an entirely democratic thing with records. You don't even need to buy the record anymore because you can get it online. I think it's silly people buying their electric guitars for £2 million or whatever. There is a doctor I mention in the book, called Dr. Zuk, who bought a tooth of John Lennon which he had had out at the dentist and then given to his housekeeper's daughter, who was a fan. She sold it to Dr. Zuk for £17,000 in 2010. Dr. Zuk said that he was just going to take it around medical schools when he was giving lectures. In fact, recently it has emerged that his

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larger plan was to extract the DNA from the tooth and then advertise for people who thought they might be John Lennon's children. They were going to sue the Lennon/Ono estate and share the profits [laughter].

Artemis Irvine: Oh my gosh! [Laughter].

Craig Brown: So there are these ways that you can turn...

Artemis Irvine: Literally, there's a huge conspiracy behind it [laughter]. I think it would be quite fun as the original lyrics to *Yesterday*, when he first was trying to come up with them, were 'scrambled eggs, oh baby, how I love your legs'.

Craig Brown: Yeah, so maybe I'd prefer those lyrics. Yes, that would be more interesting.

Artemis Irvine: That would be quite fun.

Craig Brown: Yeah, have the ones with 'scrambled eggs'. It's not actually one of my favourite Beatles' songs but it seems inevitable that it was called *Yesterday*. The tune seems to go so perfectly with the words, so there is a melancholy to it. Yes, he did wake up with scrambled eggs on his mind. This is also famous but he realised it was such a good tune, he couldn't believe that he hadn't stolen it from someone. For a long time, he was just ringing around and saying, 'Have you ever heard this tune? Have you heard this tune?' He then realised it was his own.

Artemis Irvine: That must have been so exciting.

Craig Brown: Mmm.

Artemis Irvine: Thank you so much for joining us on *Travels Through Time*. You indulged my 14-year-old Beatle obsessed self a lot.

Craig Brown: [Laughter] No, I think you know more about The Beatles than I do.

[Outro music]

Peter Moore: That was Craig Brown, author of *One, Two, Three, Four: The Beatles in Time*. I enjoyed listening to their chat hugely and I can guarantee that you'll enjoy the book too. It's had phenomenal reviews. Head to tttpodcast.com for more about the book, about the scenes we feature and, best of all, to see Jordan Lloyd's amazing new colourised picture of the four Beatles standing, cigarette in hand, before their first American gig. It catches a vital moment not just in The Beatles' career but also, I think, in 20th-century culture as a whole. It's a terrific piece of work that shows a very young John, Paul, George and Ringo as they would have first been seen by all of those screaming fans. Go and check it out. This is our second week of double-headers and today, we have another episode for you too. It's quite a contrast to 1963. It's with Professor Greg Woolf and he's taking my colleague, Violet Moller, off to visit some of the great cities of the ancient world. You can find that available on our feed right now. Nothing more really for me to add. Thank you very much for listening. We'll be back with more next week. Goodbye.

[1960s music plays]

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