



Former chorister Billy had his first number one as a 20-year-old. Now 80, he has a new single out

BILLY'S BACK

Now 80, legendary Merseybeat star **BILLY J KRAMER** is back with a new album and is to be honoured in Liverpool

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore

Sixty years ago, Billy J. Kramer was one of the Merseybeat legends who led the 1964 British invasion of America, alongside The Beatles, with a string of hits, some written especially for him by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

In that momentous year for British music, Billy toured the US and performed to a television audience of 70 million on the legendary *Ed Sullivan Show*, earning him his own place in rock and roll history.

Now aged 80, he's back in Liverpool reliving his early years, strolling down Mathew Street and visiting old haunts like the Cavern for the video accompanying his new single *Are You With Me Now*. The song forms part of an upcoming album recorded at London's Abbey Road Studios, where Billy recorded his best-loved 60s hits.

'The song pays tribute to John, Paul and all the lads back home, who have done so much for me over the years,' he says, from his home in Chicago. 'It's my turn to honour them.'

Billy's role in the Merseybeat explosion will be formally celebrated next month with a special event at the Liverpool Beatles Museum and the official unveiling of a new sculpture.

Billy's journey began in Bootle, where he grew up in a family of seven siblings and sang in the school choir, performing at choral festivals across Lancashire. Rock and roll soon beckoned and he would check out the 'flashy guitars' when his mother took him to the renowned Rushworth & Dreaper music store.

His career could have taken a very different path as he worked as a trainee maintenance engineer, initially based in Aintree and later at Bank Hall, Bootle.

And while he was an engineer by day, by night he was playing music in the city's clubs and pubs as the Liverpool music scene

exploded. With his pop idol good looks and gold lame suits, he cut a dashing figure.

'It was a very exciting time,' he says. 'There were hundreds of bands. I was doing gigs six, seven nights a week sometimes. On Saturdays, I'd do two different places and at times they used to have an all-night session at the Cavern.'

'How I did it, I don't know, because I was also working on the railway. It was tough. I'd get home from work, clean off quickly, load the van up and go to the gig, set the gear up, do the gig, break it down, go home and have couple of hours sleep. I reached a stage where I had to make a decision one way or the other.'

'I was doing gigs six, seven nights a week'

In two years, he would have become a fully qualified engineer with a guaranteed job for life. The turning point came when Beatles manager Brian Epstein offered him a five-year contract. Impressed by Epstein, he turned down British Railways' offer to continue his training in Crewe and entered music full-time.

'I don't think I would have done it for anybody else but I'd met Brian doing shows and when I came second in the Merseybeat popularity poll. John Lennon had already told him you should check out 'Billy Kramer' as I was at the time. Brian came up with an offer I just couldn't refuse, and I took it.'

'My father was very supportive. He said: "If you don't take your chance, you may end up living with regrets". So, I took the chance and here I am 60 years later!'

Born William Howard Ashton, 'Billy Kramer' added the 'J' in his name at Lennon's suggestion who thought it sounded catchier

and 'more rock and roll'. Paired with Manchester band The Dakotas by Epstein, Billy performed gruelling 16-hour stints at the Star Club in Hamburg where The Beatles had cut their teeth. There he and the Dakotas honed their own take on what became their first single, a cover of The Beatles' *Do You Want To Know A Secret?*

A seasoned live performer, Billy's first experience of recording came at Abbey Road under the supervision of Beatles' producer George Martin. Success was almost instant, with *Do You Want To Know A Secret?* hitting number one in some charts.

'It was amazing,' he says. 'One day I took a train to Manchester to do a TV show, then went back to Liverpool and found loads of kids outside my house, screaming. I had to get the police to get in. It was quite a change overnight to deal with.'

He was on tour in Oxford when Epstein telephoned to tell him he had scored his first number one.

'That's a tough one to follow,' he adds. 'I was very lucky though. I was touring with The Beatles and on my 20th birthday, John Lennon told me he'd written a song for me. It was *Bad To Me*.

'John Lennon sat at the piano and said "I want to play you something, tell me what you think of it". It was a great song. He then he played *I Want To Hold Your Hand*. I asked if I could have that one, but he said they were doing that themselves.'

I'll keep You Satisfied, predominately written by McCartney, hit number four for Billy later that year as Liverpool acts dominated the British charts.

'It was very exciting,' he says. 'There was a great buzz going on before the hits. I was doing shows with Jerry Lee Lewis at the Tower Ballroom in New Brighton and Little Richard. I think it's the most exciting chapter >



The Beatles backstage
with Billy J Kramer.
Photo: Harry Taylor © Dave Robinson

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in rock and roll history. I always felt there was something special about Liverpool, and Liverpool people. We had a great football team, the sense of humour of Liverpool people, the characters I'd met, I always had this feeling something was going to happen.'

After conquering the UK, the Liverpool bands set their sights on America, and once again The Beatles were instrumental in what followed.

'I think rock and roll was fading a bit in America and I had a feeling it needed something special – something like The Beatles,' Billy says. 'They opened the door to America, to everybody from England. There wouldn't be the industry there is today if it wasn't for The Beatles. Even the new people coming along, The Beatles prised open the door and made people pay attention.'

After another UK number one with *Little Children*, further hits followed with *From A Window*, the last of six Lennon/McCartney compositions he recorded, and *Trains and Boats and Planes* before he went solo and started working with other songwriters, including the Bee Gees and Harry Nilsson.

A total of 18 solo singles, some minor hits, followed over the next 20 years, and while many failed to chart, he remains proud of his body of work.

A comeback album, *I Won The Fight*, in 2014 marked his 50th anniversary in the music business. Accompanied by a tour, it was the first album containing many of his

own songs. A candid autobiography followed, revealing his struggles with fame and how he exorcised his demons, got sober and forged a new career in the US. Billy also led the charge to have Brian Epstein inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Now he's back with a new album which again contains some self-penned songs and a cover of John Lennon's solo classic *Jealous Guy*.

'Going back to Abbey Road brought back a lot of very happy memories. Studio Two hasn't changed much over the years, apart from the equipment. The stairs up to the control room are still there. They always were hard

to climb,' he laughs. 'It's iconic. It just has a certain magic to it. Funnily enough, I was a bit nervous about it. It was strange. Going into the room where John and Paul played me those songs. Where I stood when I recorded. It was kind of weird. But it was a good feeling.'

***Are You With Me Now* is available at:**
billyjkramermusic.bandcamp.com/album/are-you-with-me-single.

***An Audience with Billy J. Kramer* takes place at the Liverpool Beatles Museum on Mathew Street on August 26.**
fergusonwebconsultants.co.uk/billyjkramer.



Billy with the sculpture by Andrew Edwards that will be unveiled in Liverpool next month. Photo: Simon Weitzman