

saturday



7-DAY
TV & RADIO
GUIDE
page 23



After Poldark
The literary hits
coming to the small
screen this year 8

review



**Ringo
at 74**

**Exclusive
interview**

the conversation

'I was drunk — those years have absolutely gone. Now I'm healthy'

Ringo Starr admits that he was 'mad' for years after the Beatles split up. Finally he went to rehab — and now he's still touring at 74. Helena de Bertodano meets the iconic drummer

Ringo Starr refuses to dwell on the past. "I'm looking forward / Not looking back," he sings — a touch optimistically — on his new album *Postcards From Paradise*. "What's behind is gone," he explains when we meet. "We can't not have memories of the past but we don't have to live them."

As the drummer of the Beatles, the most influential band in rock history, he's fighting a losing battle — a living reminder that what's behind is not gone. Nearly half a century after the Beatles' last live concert (in August 1966), the fourth Beatle is still going strong, touring with his All-Starr Band and making albums. Later this month, he will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Ohio, the last Beatle to earn a solo spot. "It was Paul's idea," he says, referring to McCartney, the only other surviving Beatle. "I'm just giving him a night out."

'I love this life that I've been given. I still can't believe it sometimes'

At 74, Starr's energy is extraordinary. I meet him at a hotel in Hollywood towards the end of a three-day marathon of US talk shows and interviews. Before even catching sight of him, I can hear his distinctive staccato laugh floating down the corridor. Then he bounds round the corner, all smiles, flashing his trademark peace sign.

"Relax," he tells me, before vanishing with his manager for a meeting elsewhere. He reappears on the dot of the hour we have arranged to meet. "Not very rock 'n' roll," he agrees, greeting me with a hug. He is dressed from head to toe in black, as always, with sunglasses

hiding his eyes. His accent still hails from Liverpool, his home town, but it is overlaid with an American twang — he has had an LA base for many years and now lives here full-time.

Switched on and attentive, he gets down to business. "I've got a new record out," he says, nodding at the CD on the table in case I am tempted to stray off course. The album is a nostalgic, fun collection, the title track stringing together a list of Beatles songs: "It's like I said the night before / I'll love you when I'm 64." It probably won't go down in rock history but the record includes some strong numbers, especially the first track, *Rory and the Hurricanes*, about the band that launched him. Another track, *Island in the Sun*, is about the quest for the perfect island. I assume it is a metaphor but when I ask him if he is still searching, he takes the question at face value: "I'm still checking them out. I love Fiji, I love the Bahamas, I've done all of the Caribbean, it's Turks and Caicos now...I like islands because you can manage islands. Countries are huge."

Figuratively, however, he clearly has found his island in the sun. He is a living rock legend, radiating good health, very happily married to a former Bond girl, Barbara Bach, with children and grandchildren galore. As well as his reputation as one of rock's finest drummers, he has had a relatively successful film career — of a clutch of middling releases in the Seventies and Eighties, the best was probably *That'll Be the Day*, in which he starred opposite David Essex — and is known to at least one generation as the first narrator of *Thomas & Friends*, the TV series based on the Thomas the Tank Engine stories. "I love this life that I've been given," he says.

He once said that his childhood ambition was to become a tramp. "I went way off course. As a kid it seemed like a great idea — you just walk wherever you want, whenever you want. I used to walk around the park with my friends, Davy and Brian. Some days we wouldn't go to school. Since then I've had a couple of houses where I look out and I have my own park. I still can't believe it sometimes."

Born Richard Starkey, he grew up in a rough area of Liverpool. Beatles biographer Bob Spitz described his childhood as "a Dickensian chronicle of misfortune". His father left when he was three and his mother took menial jobs to make ends meet for herself and her only child. At six, he fell into a coma after peritonitis and spent a year in hospital. His mother was told three times that he wouldn't survive the night. Behind at school, he was illiterate until nine. Then at 12, he caught tuberculosis and spent another year in a sanatorium, where he played a rudimentary drum kit in the hospital band, inspiring a love of music that soon defined his life.



FAB FOUR The Beatles in 1967 and, right, Ringo Starr, who has a new album out

After a brief spell working for British Rail, he became an apprentice machinist at a Liverpool equipment manufacturer. "I was in a factory but I dreamt of being a musician," he says.

He joined Rory Storm and The Hurricanes, the subject of the first catchy track on his new album. They were a big deal in Liverpool, bigger in the very early Sixties than "that other band" — Starr's preferred method of referencing The Beatles. Around this time he changed his name to Ringo Starr and started standing in for Pete Best as drummer for The Beatles, eventually supplanting him in 1962 and riding the crest of Beatlemania. "We wanted to be top of Liverpool, maybe top of England. Then Denmark. Then France. And we did the whole of Europe. America was beyond our wildest dreams."

George, Paul and John were a tight-knit trio and it was a while before Ringo became one of the lads. "I was the new boy," he says. "They didn't even tell me that [John] married [Cynthia]."

We meet the day after Cynthia's death and Starr remembers her fondly: "She was a really nice girl. I lived just down the road from John and Cynthia in Weybridge [with his first wife Maureen]. We'd take the kids out — their son Julian, and Zak my

eldest. Everyone thinks we were in this cage, but we would live semi-normal lives. If the locals know you, it's OK. We'd have bonfire night. John would have Julian on his lap and I'd have Zak. Cynthia was a caretaker in many ways. If you were crazy she'd say, 'Come and sit over here' and she'd talk you down."

Starr knows all about crazy. "I was mad. For 20 years. I had breaks in between of not being mad. These days I can be mad but I'm not the Mad Hatter." Looking back at clips from talk shows from the late Seventies, early Eighties, I can see what he means. He comes across as ebullient and slightly manic: "I was drunk," he says of that period. "I didn't notice...Some of those years are absolutely gone."

In 1988 he went into rehab with Barbara, whom he had met on the set of *Caveman* in 1980. He has now become the quintessential Californian, obsessed with health and fitness. "I do live healthily. I'm a vegetarian and I eat a lot of kale and a lot of broccoli. And a lot of berries. It works for me." Bruce Grakal, Starr's lawyer and business manager for the past 42 years, agrees: "I've got older, Ringo's stayed the same." It's true — Starr looks at least two decades younger than he is, his face relatively unlined, brown hair close



cropped, only his stubble betraying the tiniest hint of grey.

He has a reputation for being a bit of a curmudgeon: witness his YouTube video about no longer signing autographs: "I'm warning you with peace and love I have too much to do." But the man I meet is perhaps the most genial person I have ever interviewed. "I can still be grumpy," he assures me. "There's a hundred of us in each of us and I do try every day to have the peace-and-loving and kind-understanding me come out, but sometimes it's the [here he mouths 'F*** you all'] guy comes out. Sometimes you haven't even got out of bed and you're in this terrible mood and it's nothing to do with anything you've done or said, it's just that the liquids in your brain have all gone over to one side. You've just got to get up and get on with it."

In keeping with his determination not to look back, he says he doesn't brood on the

past. "You're not going to sit in bed all day regretting it. I could have been a better father, I could have been better at this and that. I did what I did." I guess you can only do it once, I say. "I believe you do it several times," he replies cryptically. Is he talking about coming back in some other form? "In this form — to deal with the stuff you

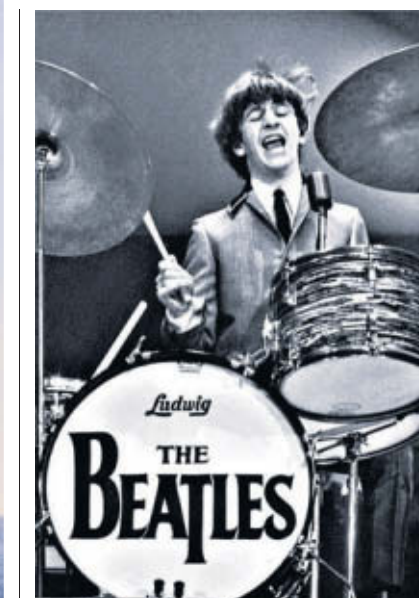
'I eat a lot of kale and a lot of broccoli. And a lot of berries. It works for me'

didn't deal with. That's a belief. We can all have beliefs."

Rolling Stone readers recently named Starr the fifth best drummer of all time. "Well, who could be better than me?" he asks, acting offended. Of the Fab Four, it was Ringo who was often the butt of the

jokes, in part due to his whimsical vocal style on *Yellow Submarine* and *Octopus's Garden*. Today he seems happy to take the flak. Tentatively I bring up Lennon's famous response when he was asked if Starr was the best drummer in the world. "I wasn't even the best drummer in the band," chuckles Starr, stepping in to finish off the quote. "It was a Liverpool joke, we're very good at the one-line retort."

Starr is a master of the dry one-liners himself. When I ask whether he could consider doing anything like McCartney — who recently collaborated with Kanye West and Rihanna on the single *FourFiveSeconds*, he quips: "Sure. But it would have to be with someone much prettier than Rihanna." The different incarnations of



his All-Starr Band — which he has been touring with on and off since 1989 — have included some rock heavyweights, however, including The Who's John Entwistle, drummer Ginger Baker and singer Stevie Nicks.

There is no doubt that The Beatles are still very relevant, but whether they'd have enjoyed the same fame starting out now is another matter. Could they have won *The X Factor*? "Not according to Simon Cowell," Starr says. "I come from another school where you played and did clubs and you worked your way up."

He doesn't want to be drawn on how he will vote in the election: "I've no idea and I'm not telling you because it will be headlines all over England." Although he recently sold his Surrey estate, he says he still feels strong links to England. "It's part of my life."

If Ringo Starr had never found The Beatles — or they'd never found him — what would have happened? "I have a fantasy that I'd still be playing clubs in Liverpool. My passion for the drums is huge."

Starr's son, Zak Starkey, is now a drummer with The Who. "I wanted him to be a palaeontologist because he knew all about dinosaurs. But guess what: he's on the road right now with The Who and he's doing what I did."

But as a de facto session musician, Zak is far less famous than his father. "No one will be this much in the public eye," Starr agrees, referring to himself. "I come from that other band where everything is split down the middle, whereas he is a musician who is doing a job."

These days, he insists, he only lives in the moment. "I'm here on the settee with you right now. Would you ever have thought that? Sitting with Ringo in LA on a settee... on a sunny day. Another sunny day." What's funny about this is that Starr seems to be even more impressed on my behalf than I am. He doesn't do self-deprecation and really, why should he?

Postcards From Paradise is out now on Universal



STAR QUALITY Ringo Starr and his wife, Barbara Bach and, top right, on the drums at a Beatles gig in 1964

16TH - 19TH JULY 2015
LATITUDE
 FESTIVAL
 THE 10TH EDITION
 BACKSTAGE VIDEOS, EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS AND ARTIST UPDATES AT
THETIMES.CO.UK/LATITUDE
 MUSIC, COMEDY, POETRY, DANCE, THEATRE, FILM, ART, CABARET AND MORE!