

## HAM, PETER WILLIAM, ('PETE') (1947 - 1975), musician and songwriter

**Name:** Peter William Ham  
**Date of birth:** 1947  
**Date of death:** 1975  
**Partner:** Beverley Ellis  
**Partner:** Anne Ferguson  
**Child:** Petera Ham  
**Parent:** William Ham  
**Parent:** Catherine Ham (née Tanner)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** musician and songwriter  
**Area of activity:** Music; Poetry; Performing Arts  
**Author:** William Ham Bevan

Pete Ham was born in Swansea on 27 April 1947. He was the youngest child of William Ham (1908-1985), a ship's painter in Swansea docks, and his wife Catherine (née Tanner, 1912-1976), who had worked as a plate opener in the tinplate works. Their first son, William (b. 1935) did not survive infancy. Pete grew up in Gwent Gardens, at the foot of the Townhill estate, with an older brother, John (1937-2015), and a sister, Irene (1943-1991).

While at Gors Junior School, Pete showed a prodigious talent for music, drawing a crowd at impromptu harmonica sessions in the schoolyard. On moving up to Townhill Secondary School, he took to the guitar. Encouraged by John, an adept jazz trumpeter, Pete threw himself into the buoyant Swansea rock music scene. While serving an apprenticeship as a TV and radio engineer, he played in a semi-professional group variously billed as The Panthers, The Black Velvets and The Wild Ones, often opening for big touring acts.

In 1965, the group became The Iveys - after a street near Swansea High Street Station - with a stable line-up of Pete, second guitarist David Jenkins, bassist Ron Griffiths and drummer Mike Gibbins. They accepted an approach by would-be manager Bill Collins, who in 1966 moved them into his house in North London. Two years of gigging, songwriting and recording demos in penurious conditions (and a personnel change, with Liverpoolian Tom Evans replacing Jenkins) paid off when The Iveys were signed by the Beatles' record label, Apple, in July 1968. Pete's early compositions, which had caught the ear of Paul McCartney, were a factor in securing the deal.

The Iveys' initial releases made little impact outside continental Europe and the Far East, but success came when McCartney offered the group his song *Come and Get It*, written for the film *The Magic Christian*. Before the release of the single and its associated album, *Magic Christian Music* (1970), the group changed its name to Badfinger. Ron Griffiths (who had played on both) was replaced by Liverpoolian guitarist Joey Molland, giving the Swansea and Merseyside elements of the group equal weight. On and off stage, Pete's quiet personality contrasted with the exuberance of Evans and Molland.

*Come and Get It* was an international hit. Its authorship encouraged portrayals of Badfinger as an act groomed by the Beatles - something Pete found frustrating - but all subsequent hit singles would be Ham originals. The 1970 album *No Dice* yielded a major worldwide hit, *No Matter What*, credited as a pioneering classic of the 'power pop' genre. Yet more significant was the LP track *Without You*, featuring a chorus by Tom Evans paired with verses Pete had written for his girlfriend, Beverley Ellis. Recorded by Harry Nilsson, the song became a transatlantic number-one, earning Pete a Grammy nomination and two Ivor Novello awards. It remains one of the most covered songs from the 1970s pop canon, and Mariah Carey would return *Without You* to the top of the UK charts in 1994.

Despite mixed contemporary reviews, 1971's *Straight Up* - produced in part by George Harrison - is now widely considered Badfinger's strongest album. The former Beatle's respect for Pete's musicianship was much noted. Breakout single *Day After Day* featured the two playing slide guitar together, and Harrison chose Pete for an acoustic duet of the Beatles' *Here Comes the Sun* at the Concert for Bangladesh in Madison Square Garden, New York, where Badfinger were enlisted as backing musicians. Pete also took part in sessions for Harrison's *All Things Must Pass* and *Living in the Material World* albums, and Ringo Starr's number-one single *It Don't Come Easy*. Unlike bandmates Evans and Molland, he passed on the opportunity to play on John Lennon's *Imagine* LP, instead returning to Swansea for his niece's birthday.

*Baby Blue*, the second single from *Straight Up*, reached the top 20 in the United States, and both songs earned Pete an award from ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers). From here, things began to go seriously wrong. The group had acquired an American manager, Stan Polley - unbeknown to Pete, a fraudster with links to organised crime - who gained control over its finances. As the Beatles' Apple empire unravelled, Polley negotiated a new record deal with Warner Brothers. Albums on both labels appeared within a few months of each other, confusing record buyers.

Neither *Ass* (Apple, 1973) nor *Badfinger* (Warner, 1974) made an impression on the charts. Though recorded under pressure, *Wish You Were Here* (1974) was a vast improvement, receiving excellent reviews and including contributions from Pete that recaptured the energy and melodic drive of his Apple singles.

Pete was a trusting man, and as Stan Polley's grip on his life and livelihood tightened, his loyalty to both band and management served him ill. When Warner Brothers discovered that advances paid to Polley for Badfinger had gone missing, the *Wish You Were Here* album was withdrawn from shops and the group's affairs collapsed into chaos. Pete attempted to leave Badfinger, but felt compelled to return on being told that Warner would not support his bandmates without him. Bob Jackson took Joey Molland's place for a final attempt at an album, *Head First* (1975), which would remain unreleased until 2000. Pete contributed only two songs and a brief instrumental snippet.

During sessions for *Wish You Were Here*, Pete had begun a relationship with Anne Ferguson, and the couple - now expecting a baby - moved into a house in Woking, Surrey. Salary cheques began to bounce, and he slipped further into debt and depression. In the early hours of April 24, 1975, Pete Ham hanged himself in his garage; a suicide note was found nearby, condemning Stan Polley. His ashes were scattered at Swansea Crematorium on 1 May 1975. Pete and Anne's daughter, Petera, was born on 31 May.

Dogged by ongoing disputes and litigation, and haunted by his bandmate's death, Tom Evans took his own life on 19 November 1983. For many years, the suicide of both writers of *Without You* meant Pete's musical legacy was eclipsed by the group's tragic story. But by the turn of the 21st century, his work was receiving public recognition from a new generation of Welsh musicians, among them James Dean Bradfield (Manic Street Preachers), Cerys Matthews (Catatonia) and Gruff Rhys (Super Furry Animals). On 27 April 2013, the City and County of Swansea made Pete Ham the first recipient of a blue plaque to honour eminent citizens. The memorial is to be found at the entrance to Swansea Station on Ivey Place.

## Author

William Ham Bevan

## Sources

Dan Matovina, *Without you: the tragic story of Badfinger* (San Mateo 1997)

*Disc and Music Echo*, *Goldmine* and *Record Collector* magazines

Fan publications: *Badfinger File* and *Better Days*

Family records

Personal communication, John Ham and Irene Ham

## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Pete Ham](#)

## Images

National Portrait Gallery: [Badfinger \(Tom Evans; Mike Gibbins; Pete Ham; Joey Molland\)](#)

## Sound and Film

Week In Week Out, '[Song for a Lost Friend](#)' (BBC Wales, 1987)

[Badfinger - Behind the Music](#) (VH1, 2000)

Without You - the Badfinger Story (BBC Radio Wales, 2008)

[They Sold a Million, 'Badfinger'](#) (BBC Wales, 2014)

## Additional Links

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