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OBITUARY

Nigel Burlinson obituary

Music industry executive who worked out royalties for the Beatles and once gave a penniless Bob Marley £20 to get a hotel room



Burlinson, top left, was in the room when the call came that the Beatles would break up; Bob Marley didn't forget Burlinson's kindness

JOHN FARLEY/COURTESY OF MARTIN LEWIS; DOUGLAS ELBINGER/GETTYIMAGES; GARY MERRIN/KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES

At the height of Beatlemania, it was the job of Nigel Burlinson to keep tally of the astronomical royalties pouring in from the songs written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

When the sum reached £250,000 (equivalent to £6.19 million today) he would write out a cheque, which he then delivered by hand to the Mayfair office of the Beatles' accountant Harry Pinsker ([obituary](#) February 4, 2021).

As the manager of copyrights and licensing at Dick James Music, the Beatles' publisher, Burlinson was self-effacing to a fault. Yet over the years he played a key role in administering not only the Beatles' song catalogue but those of countless other artists, including the Beach Boys, Bob Marley, the Carpenters and Dire Straits.

It was said that he knew more about copyright than anyone else in the music industry, leading to the joke that his full name was Nigel © Burlinson. He went on to develop what became the gold standard in computerised accounting systems for music copyrights, licensing the programme to other publishers. The system he devised remains the foundation for music accounting today.

He was known for his discretion and the artists he worked for came to value his meticulous approach and his rigorous honesty. Among them was Elton John. Contracted to Dick James Music as an unknown songwriter who was still known as Reg Dwight, he was paid a tenner out of the petty cash box by Burlinson at 5pm every Friday as his weekly retainer.

The Beatles were also regular visitors to the offices on the corner of Denmark Street and Charing Cross Road in the heart of London's answer to New York's Tin Pan Alley. Burlinson recalled McCartney dropping by one day in 1967 and writing *Step Inside Love* on the spot in little more than half an hour as the theme tune for Cilla Black's forthcoming TV series.

He was also in the room when James received the news that would lead to the Beatles' break-up. "I was getting him to sign some copyright licence forms when he took a phone call from John Lennon informing him that he had appointed Allen Klein as his financial adviser," Burlinson recalled. "Dick almost fell off his chair. He knew of Klein's reputation [for sharp practice]."

McCartney did too and refused to have anything to do with Klein. The other three Beatles eventually discovered that he was right and sacked Klein, resulting in years of litigation.

In the aftermath of Klein's takeover, James sold his Beatles copyrights to Lew Grade's ATV Music and Burlinson joined Rondor Music Publishing, set up by Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, founders of the A&M record label. As head of copyrights and royalties for the company's UK operation, in 1970 he befriended the young Bob Marley, who was on his first visit to London and had been left stranded and penniless.

"Marley was sitting alone in our offices looking rather lost and out of place," Lance Freed, former president of Rondor, recalled. "While serving him tea and biscuits Nigel learnt that he had no money and planned on sleeping in the park, so he immediately gave him £20 from his own pocket and helped him find a hotel."

That small act of charity paid dividends when Marley subsequently assigned his publishing to Rondor. Shortly before Marley died in 1981, Freed reported that the reggae star had told him that Burlinson's "many kindnesses in those early days" when no one else gave him much notice were the reason he had chosen Rondor as his publisher.

Nigel Burlinson was born in Surrey in 1936 and educated at Farnham Grammar School. At 18 he joined the RAF for National Service. On his discharge in 1957 he took a job in the copyright department of Philips Records and worked for various other record companies and music publishers before he joined James in 1965.

His expertise was in high demand and a 1980 profile in Music Week called him “a backroom boffin, an administrator who knows the importance of getting the nuts and bolts smoothly functioning and knows exactly how to do it”. It also reported that he had an intense dislike of travel and flying and despite the fact that his employer’s headquarters were in Los Angeles, he had only ever visited the city twice.

There was some surprise, therefore, when shortly afterwards he moved to LA, lured by an invitation to run Warner Brothers’ copyright department. He lasted four years in California before he grew homesick and returned to Britain to rejoin Rondor.

He retired to France in the late 1980s with his French-born wife, Maia, after the sudden death of their 11-year-old son Fabian from a weak heart that went undiagnosed. They had married in 1969 and she survives him.

Burlinson later returned to work in a senior role for Warner Chappell Music and then as head of accounting and royalties in Rondor’s Paris office. Such was his knowledge of copyright, licensing and royalties that even after his full retirement, the industry would not let him go and he remained a consultant until the end.

Nigel Burlinson, music industry executive, was born on July 9, 1936. He died after a short illness on January 18, 2023, aged 86

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