

“Helter Skelter”

Lyrics Matter

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What do the Beatles and four defendants charged with conspiracy to commit murder in 1969 have in common? The answer is in this article’s title: “Helter Skelter,” the outgrowth of Paul McCartney’s creative genius, which was conscripted by the infamous Charles Manson to develop cultish beliefs that resulted in a quadruple murder by members of the “Manson Family.” In fact, the protracted courtroom drama in Los Angeles that followed (June 1970 to January 1971) has been notoriously called the “Helter Skelter trial.”

One of the Manson Family’s victims in this murder was the young and beautiful actress Sharon Tate, who was married to film director Roman Polanski and was expecting at the time of the murder in her home. She had played a supporting role in the 1967 movie *Valley of the Dolls*, which portrayed rather cruelly the duplicity and underside of the film industry. Tate was nominated for a Golden Globe Award as the “most promising female newcomer.” The film received highly negative reviews from the critics, yet was the most profitable film in America for seven consecutive weeks.

In November 1968, a controversial alternative rock song was released by the Beatles—arguably the most famous band in history—and with the following lyrics:

When I get to the bottom
I go back to the top of the slide
Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride
’Til I get to the bottom and I see you again

Well do you, don’t you want me to love you
I’m coming down fast but I’m miles above you
Tell me, tell me, tell me, come on tell me the answer
Well, you may be a lover but you ain’t no dancer
....
Look out
Helter-skelter, helter-skelter
Helter-skelter
Look out, ’cause here she comes

With its very loud (if not screeching) vocals and booming, deafening drums, the song “Helter Skelter” had heavy metal lyrics that completely belied the band’s early brand around the world. In its very early years, the Beatles had an almost “apple-pie-and-baseball” image. Paul McCartney, the band member who wrote this song, had wanted to show his vocal critics that the world-renowned quartet could record more than just silly and sentimental love songs, and “Helter Skelter” was born. The song focused on a fairground amusement—a tall spiral slide winding around a tower. In the writer’s mind, the helter-skelter ride symbolized the chaotic rise and fall of the Roman Empire, notwithstanding that the lyrics strongly suggest otherwise.

Although one could write about the growing trend of jurists to refer to the lyrics of popular singers (even on the U.S. Supreme Court, as evidenced by Chief Justice Roberts’s quoting of Bob Dylan), this article takes a much different—and admittedly shocking—path. When I sat down to write this article, I

faced the daunting task of how to *logically* connect an infamous nine-month murder trial with this 1968 song. However, there is no logic when the warped mind of a killer hijacks a song's lyrics to justify his actions. For that reason, this article will take an *illogical* journey in an attempt to explain the motive that led the killer to such horrendous and brutal conduct.

Some Beatles History

I beg your indulgence. Before I go on this exotic and strange journey, let me try to cheer you up with some uplifting news about this gifted band before “Helter Skelter” was released as part of the album called *The Beatles*, also affectionately called the White Album. On February 7, 1964, the United States was again invaded by England. The last time this had happened was in the War of 1812, during which thousands of soldiers from the United Kingdom had set fire to the U.S. Capitol and the White House. However, the 1964 “British Invasion” involved JFK airport, 3,000 screaming fans, no fire, and only four persons, whose names are almost deified by millions of Americans, even today: Paul McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr, whose fingers were blistered from smashing the drums and cymbals while recording “Helter Skelter.” In 1964, the Beatles had landed in the States for the first time—and greatly changed music in America.

The storm of the Beatles invasion began to gather as early as October 1963, when English media started to pay attention to the ever-popular “Fab Four” band, whose numerous albums had been flying off the British and European shelves because fans had been under the spell of “Beatlemania.” That same year, the band's albums were slowly being heard in the United States, and the crossing of the pond was imminent.

The Beatles landed at JFK because they were invited to appear two days later on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, an extremely popular Sunday evening program. In 1963, Ed Sullivan had made a trip to England, during which he was exposed to the burgeoning popularity of the Fab Four. This writer has special memories of sitting on the floor in front of the TV with three older brothers, while our parents sat in their big chairs, sternly telling us boys to “keep quiet” during the show. A sacred Sunday ritual. This show was coveted and the gold standard for entertainers. If you were invited to perform, you were blessed and made. And careers took off if you did well!

The Beatles' February 9, 1963, appearance, which excited this writer (then age seven) and my brothers and parents, drew a massive TV audience of some 73 million—at that time, the largest in the history of the medium. The Fab Four had two sets and played five soppy songs, all of which were antithetical to “Helter Skelter”: “All My Loving,” “Till There Was You,” “She Loves You,” “I Saw Her Standing There,” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand.”

Throughout the sets, the level of screaming and swooning by the fans in the audience (if not in homes) was beyond comprehension to many.

The band made two more appearances (February 16 and 23) on the show. What a month for America! “I Want to Hold Your Hand” topped the singles charts for seven consecutive weeks. The song was pushed to number two by “She Loves You,” which rose to number one in March 1964.

In early April 1964, the Beatles held an astounding 12 positions on the Billboard Top 100. Remarkably, the band held *every* spot in the top five. The five hits in order were “Can't Buy Me Love,” “Twist and Shout,” “She Loves You,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and “Please Please Me.” “Helter Skelter” was on the outskirts of this meteoric rise of Beatles songs. The song ranked 52nd on the all-time Beatles list; yet, we cannot confirm if this song ever secured a spot on the top 100 list. I doubt it. One poll even ranked this song as the Beatles' fourth-worst song.

Thank you for indulging this writer in a walk down memory lane about the Beatles. Let's now continue with our *illogical* journey into the twisted mind of a man who conveniently used the lyrics of “Helter Skelter” to justify a horrific set of murders.

The History of Charles Manson

Before we get to the trial itself, however, it's helpful to understand the path Charles Manson's life took before he became a conspirator in murder. Manson was born in 1934 in Cincinnati, Ohio. His mother (age 15) had significant substance abuse and legal issues, all of which caused her to constantly neglect her son. He was placed in multiple foster, reform, and juvenile delinquency settings because of his scofflaw actions, such as theft, robbery, and probation violations. By age 32, Manson had spent more than half his life in prisons or institutions.

In 1968, after release from prison, Manson landed in San Francisco. There, Manson ingratiated himself into the drug culture and starting grooming (via LSD and nonsensical propaganda) several impressionable, abused, and lonely teenage women into the Manson Family, of which he was the undisputed leader and fountain of truth. He began forming his large cult, whose members sometimes considered him a Christ-like figure. And by the summer of 1968, the Manson Family cult had migrated and found a home at the George Spahn Ranch, which was a former television and movie set in the Chatsworth neighborhood of Los Angeles. Spahn (age 80) allowed Manson and his followers to live at the ranch for free in exchange for work on his chores and allegedly providing “favors” to him of a physical nature.

While at the ranch, Manson's mind—likely fueled by LSD and other drugs—became fixated on the outlandish doomsday theory of an imminent and deadly conflict between the Black and White populations of America. According to this theory, in the near

future, an apocalyptic race war would occur: The smaller Black population would kill everyone in the larger White population, *except for* the Manson Family. The family would wait out the war in an underground city (i.e., an abandoned mine shaft) near the ranch. And after the war ended and his followers emerged from the underground city, Manson would be asked by the Black leaders to be their savior. And Manson, who was a white supremacist, would be their “master.” (Apparently, the illogic of this last bit was missed by Manson’s followers.)

The Manson Family Murders

After listening to the White Album, Manson concluded that “Helter Skelter” (and possibly two other songs) described his bizarre theory. And although Manson was only one of a number of Beatles listeners who placed unjustified meaning in a song’s lyrics, none took their interpretation of the songs to the deadly level Manson did.

The trial was lengthy and bizarre, if not a circus.

Manson believed that to jump-start Helter Skelter, his family needed to kill members of the high society. Such murders would inspire the Black population to revolt and begin the race war with all Whites. So, shortly after midnight on August 9, 1969, four family members (Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, Linda Kasabian, and Patricia Krenwinkel), who were acting at the directions and commands of Manson, entered the home of actress Sharon Tate (age 26), who was over eight months’ pregnant. Months before, Manson had visited this property on several occasions and was familiar with its residents. Manson told Watson to “totally destroy” everyone in the home. The others inside the home with Tate were her celebrity hair stylist (Jay Sebring), her husband Polanski’s friend (Wojciech Frykowski), and the friend’s girlfriend (Abigail Anne Folger—an heiress to the coffee fortune).

When the four conspirators arrived at the Tate/Polanski home, Watson cut the telephone line. Moments later, Watson took the life of Steven Parent, an 18-year-old delivery man who had the misfortune of entering the driveway with his car, in which he was immediately shot four times in the chest and abdomen by Watson. Polanski was in Europe on business.

Watson, Atkins, and Krenwinkel broke into the home, while Kasabian stood by Parent’s car in the driveway as a lookout. Inside the home, Tate, Sebring, Frykowski, and Folger all were

viciously murdered by various forms of stabbing, beating, strangulation, hanging, and shots from a firearm by the three conspirators who entered. The scene inside the home was of senseless and cold-blooded violence. After they murdered the victims inside the home, Atkins wrote “pig” on the front porch in Tate’s blood.

Sadly, the carnage did not end that day. In the late evening of August 9, Manson ordered another set of murders of what he considered high-society persons. While on a drive through a wealthy section of Los Angeles, Manson directed the four conspirators in the Tate mission, plus Leslie Van Houten and Clem Grogan, to commit another murder. Inside the home where supermarket executive Leno LaBianca and his wife Rosemary LaBianca lived, Watson, Van Houten, and Krenwinkel took their lives in the most brutal manner with a bayonet and knives. After the three had committed the murders—with Manson cowardly waiting outside as the leader—Krenwinkel wrote “Death to pigs” on the wall and “Healter [sic] Skelter” on the refrigerator in the victims’ blood.

The Trial

The trial that followed was lengthy and bizarre, if not a circus. Vincent Bugliosi of the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office was the lead prosecutor. He was a trial animal, prosecuting 104 felony jury trials and prevailing with a conviction in 103. In December 1969, he obtained a first-degree murder and conspiracy indictment against Manson, Watson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten for the murders that occurred on August 9, 1969. The voir dire began in June 1970, and a verdict of guilty was returned in January 1971 against all four defendants. (Notably, after the trial, Bugliosi met with Manson for 90 minutes at Manson’s request; evidently, Manson said he had done a “fantastic” job and did not harbor any hard feelings. Something to aspire to?)

The star witness was Linda Kasabian, who was given immunity for her 18 days of testimony (including seven of cross). In closing, Bugliosi argued that Manson, who was relying on the song, was attempting to trigger a “Helter Skelter” with the murders. The attorney for Manson (Irving Kanarek) gave a seven-day closing, which presiding Judge Charles Older, a war hero, belatedly called a “filibuster.” Just before closing arguments in December 1970, Ronald Hughes, who was the attorney for Van Houten, went missing after going on a camping trip. His decomposed body was found in March 1971. He was murdered; however, no one was charged. Some suspect that the late Manson, who died in 2017 at the age of 83, was unhappy with his lawyer skills and had him killed.

So there we are. A song. A deranged man. And a theory to justify violence. “Helter Skelter.” What a story. I wonder if Paul McCartney regrets not writing another silly love song instead of this one. ■