

# Charles Manson: How Cult Leader's Twisted Beatles Obsession Inspired Family Murders

He led his followers to believe songs on the White Album – most notably Paul McCartney's "Helter Skelter" – were a call for a violent race war



Charles Manson convinced his followers that there were subliminal messages in the Beatles' White Album?

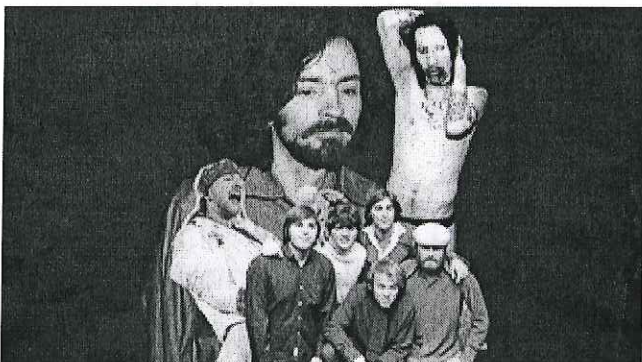
By [Kory Grow](#)

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Charles Manson had an easy explanation for why he ordered the deaths of the family of Leno LaBianca and residents at Sharon Tate's house at the hands of his "Family": "It's the Beatles, the music they're putting out," he told the district attorney who sent him to death row. "These kids listen to this music and pick up the message. It's subliminal."



Nearly half a century has passed since the Manson Family carried out the brutal, stunning Tate-LaBianca murders in August of 1969, and their supposed link to the Beatles remains confounding. The words "Healter [sic] Skelter" had been painted in victims' blood on the LaBiancas' fridge, but the reference's significance did not come to light until the trial. When Charles Manson and his followers faced a judge for the crimes a year later, prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi explained that the motive for the killings came from Manson's twisted misinterpretation of lyrics on the White Album, which was released in November 1968, months before the murders. In Manson's mind, benign songs like "Blackbird," "Piggies" and, most prominently, "Helter Skelter," foretold a bloody, apocalyptic race war. But when the battle never began, he decided to kick-start it with the murders.

"Charles Manson interpreted that 'Helter Skelter' was something to do with the four horsemen of the Apocalypse," McCartney said in the 2000 book *The Beatles Anthology*. "I still don't know what all that stuff is; it's from the Bible, 'Revelations' – I haven't read it so I wouldn't know. But he interpreted the whole thing ... and arrived at having to go out and kill everyone.... It was frightening, because you don't write songs for those reasons."

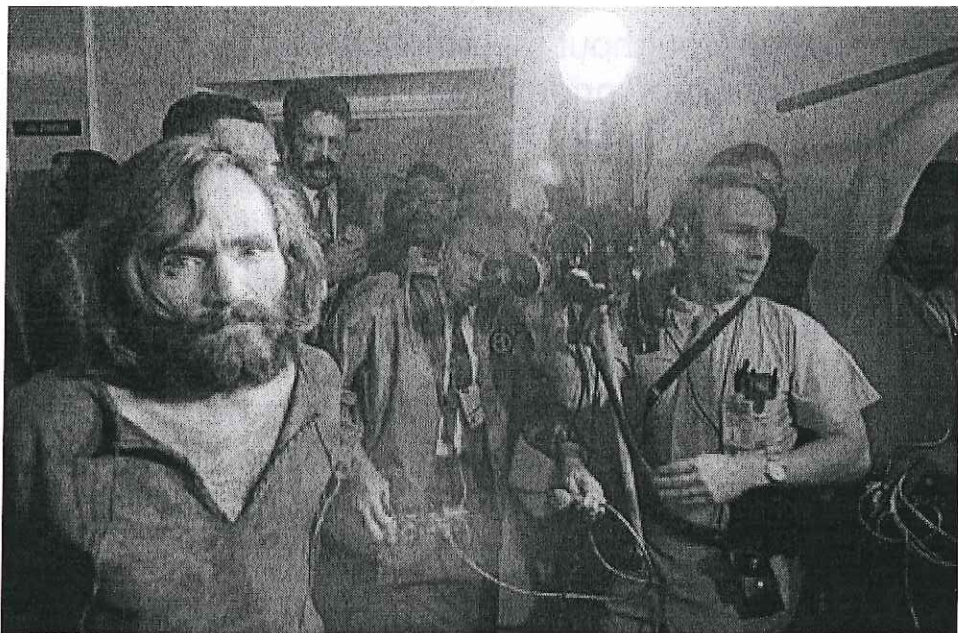
"It has nothing to do with me," John Lennon said in a 1980 *Playboy* interview. "Manson was just an extreme version of the people who came up with the 'Paul is dead' thing or who figured out that the initials to 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' were LSD and concluded I was writing about acid."

"It was upsetting to be associated with something so sleazy as Charles Manson," George Harrison said in *Anthology*.

"I mean, I knew [Tate's husband] Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate and, God, it was a rough time," Ringo Starr said.

Although he would deny being into the Beatles years later ("I am a Bing Crosby fan," he declared in 1985 – despite inmates at a prison Manson stayed at in the early Sixties claiming he was obsessed with the Beatles), Manson discussed the group enough with his followers that his warped reading of the Fab Four's most adventurous album resounded throughout the trial. Bugliosi interviewed several Manson Family members, including those who were not facing criminal charges, and found consistency in their descriptions of his mythology surrounding the White Album and the garbled connections he made between it and the Book of Revelations, which depict end-times.

"This music is bringing on the revolution, the unorganized overthrow of the establishment," Manson told *Rolling Stone* in 1970. "The Beatles know [what's happening] in the sense that the subconscious knows."



Charles Manson as he was being brought into the Los Angeles city jail under suspicion of having masterminded the Tate-LaBianca murders. Bettmann/Getty

"From the beginning, Charlie believed the Beatles' music carried an important message – to us," Manson Family member Paul Watkins wrote in his book, *My Life With Charles Manson*. "He said their album, *The Magical Mystery Tour*, expressed the essence of his own philosophy. Basically, Charlie's trip was to program us all to submit: to give up our egos, which, in a spiritual sense, is a lofty aspiration. As rebels within a materialistic, decadent culture, we could dig it."

Manson discovered the White Album in December 1968, while visiting Los Angeles on a sojourn from the freezing California desert. When he returned to Death Valley on New Year's Eve, he began pressing his entourage for their reactions to the record. "Are you hep to what the Beatles are saying?" Family member Brooks Poston recalled Manson asking him, as reported in Bugliosi's book, *Helter Skelter*. "Helter Skelter is coming down. The Beatles are telling it like it is." Watkins said this was around the time, too, that Manson began using the words "helter skelter" to describe an oncoming racial conflict, "and what it meant was the Negroes were going to come down and rip the cities all apart. ... Before Helter Skelter came along, all Charlie cared about was orgies."

**"It was upsetting to be associated with something so sleazy as Charles Manson," said George Harrison.**

The White Album was soon resonating throughout the Manson Family. Manson had renamed Susan Atkins "Sadie Mae Glutz" prior to the LP's release, but the Beatles' inclusion of the cheeky song "Sexy Sadie" (originally written to the word "Maharishi," referring to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who had allegedly made sexual advances on Mia Farrow) made it seem like he had divined it. He interpreted some lyrics to the love ballad "I Will" – "Your song will fill the air/ Sing it loud so I can hear you" – as telling him to make his own album to spread the message that he was a resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the bizarre "Honey Pie" (McCartney's riff on vaudevillian music from the Twenties) with its reference to a "Hollywood song" reinforced that he was a singing messiah. He also claimed to hear messages that the Beatles were seeking him out in "Don't Pass Me By," "Yer Blues" and *Magical Mystery Tour's* "Blue Jay Way."

The Manson Family claimed to have sent telegrams, written letters and made phone calls to England to invite the Beatles to join them before the race war, but they didn't reach the band. So they worked on Manson's album, which he hoped would be produced by Terry Melcher, the son of Doris Day, who'd worked with the Beach Boys and lived at 10050 Cielo Drive. The recording never came to be, as Melcher severed his ties with Manson and moved out of the Cielo Drive house; Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate moved in shortly thereafter.

All the while, the songs on the White Album meant more and more to Manson. Bugliosi wrote in *Helter Skelter* that "Rocky Raccoon" – a goofy, melodramatic number that began in India with McCartney, Lennon and Donovan making up a cowboy named Rocky Sassoon – was, to Manson, a veiled story of an African-American uprising. (The slur "coon" struck Manson.) "'Rocky's revival' – 're-vival,' it means coming back to life," Manson told *Rolling Stone* in 1970. "The black man is going to come back into power again." And, to Manson, "Happiness Is a Warm Gun," perhaps Lennon's most double-entendre-filled song, meant "the Beatles were telling blackie to get guns and fight whitey," in Bugliosi's words.

Then there were the five songs Manson liked most: "Blackbird," "Piggies," "Revolution 1," "Helter Skelter" and "Revolution 9." Manson's followers would later claim that he had drawn parallels between the last song's title and the ninth chapter of the Book of Revelation, which tells of a hellish bottomless pit opening up in the world, and a plague of anthropomorphic locusts with long hair coming to torture the unfaithful until an angel blows a trumpet to God. Family member Gregg Jakobson said in *Helter Skelter* that Manson drew comparisons between the Bible and "the Beatles' songs, the power that came out of their mouths."

"Blackbird," McCartney's touching, acoustic song supporting black women during the civil rights movement in the U.S., specifically addressed, in Manson's mind, African-Americans viciously fighting the establishment. Watkins told Bugliosi that

Manson "figured the Beatles were programming the black people to get it up, get it on, start doing it," with lyrics like "Blackbird singing in the dead of night/ Take these broken wings and learn to fly ... You were only waiting for this moment to arise." "'Rise' was one of Charlie's big words," Jakobson told the prosecutor, which helped establish Manson's motive because "rise" had been written in blood on the LaBiancas' wall.



Manson became obsessed with the Beatles after hearing their White Album. ZUMAPRESS

"Helter Skelter" was a song that began from a rivalry with Pete Townshend, after the Who guitarist called "I Can See for Miles" one of the wildest recordings ever made in a *Melody Maker* interview. "Just that one little paragraph was enough to inspire me, to make a move," McCartney later said. "So I sat down and wrote 'Helter Skelter' to be the most raucous vocal, the loudest drums, et cetera." He also once described it as "a ridiculous song ... 'cause I like noise." During the trial, Manson said that he'd interpreted the words to mean general chaos; it was obviously an important theme to him as "Helter Skelter" had been written on a door found at Spahn Ranch, one of the Manson Family hideouts. But Family member Poston told Bugliosi that Manson thought it referred to the Family emerging from the bottomless pit referenced in Revelation.

"['Helter Skelter'] means confusion, literally," Manson said in court. "It doesn't mean any war with anyone. It doesn't mean that some people are going to kill other people. ... Helter Skelter is confusion. Confusion is coming down around you fast...."

"Is it a conspiracy that the music is telling the youth to rise up against the establishment because the establishment is rapidly destroying things?" he continued. "The music speaks to you every day, but you are too deaf, dumb and blind to even listen to the music.... It is not my conspiracy. It is not my music. I hear what it relates. It says 'Rise.' It says 'Kill.' Why blame it on me? I didn't write the music."

## To Manson, the lyrics of "Revolution 1" meant that the once-ambivalent Beatles now condoned violent revolution.

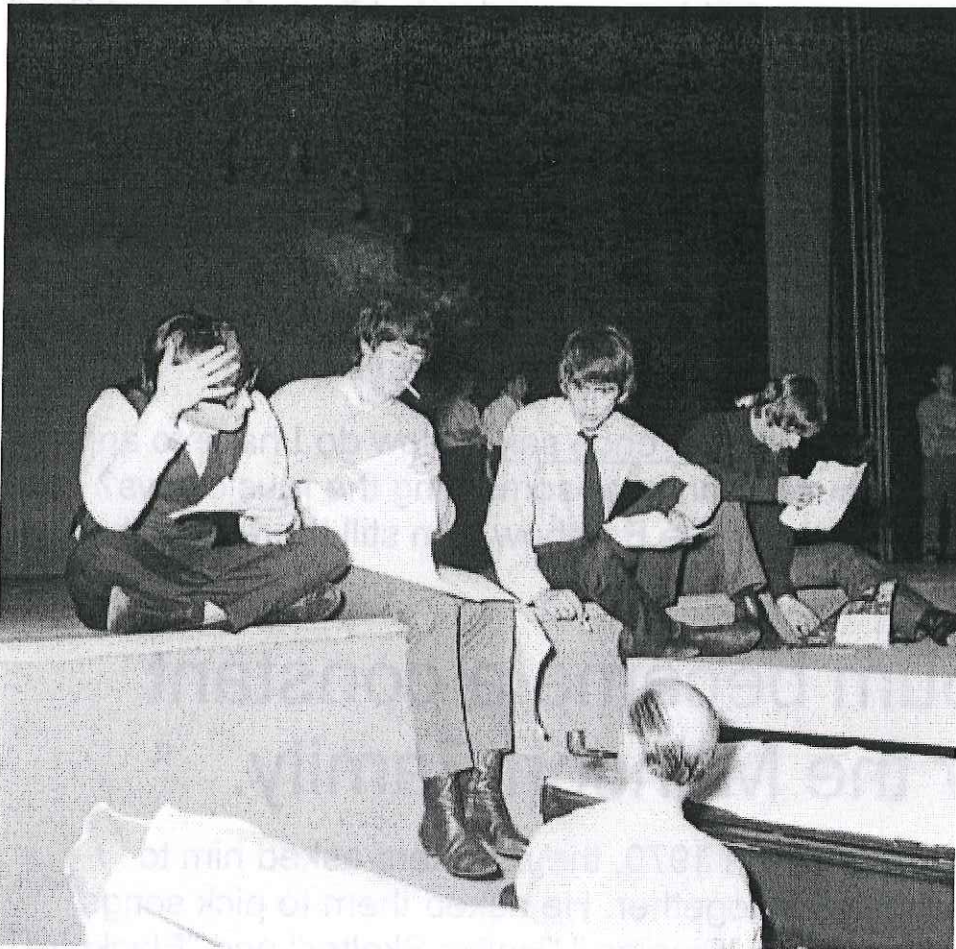
The song's meaning, however, was crystal clear to its writer. "I was using the symbol of a helter skelter [a playground slide] as a ride from the top to the bottom — the rise and fall of the Roman Empire," McCartney once said. "This was the demise, the going down. You could have thought of it as a rather cute title but it's since taken on all sorts of ominous overtones because Manson picked it up as an anthem."

Then there was "Piggies," a playful Harrison takedown of the bourgeoisie, dining out with forks and knives, that he'd started in 1966 and finished during the White Album sessions with Lennon's lyrical addition of "What they need's a damn good whacking." But it meant something different to Manson. "By that, he meant the black man was going to give the piggies, the establishment, a damned good whacking," Jakobson told Bugliosi. Susan Atkins would later write word "pig" in Tate's blood on a door of the Cielo Drive house. The Family also wrote "Death to pigs" in blood on wall of the LaBiancas, whom they killed using forks and knives.

"All that Manson stuff was built around George's song about pigs and Paul's song about an English fairground," Lennon once said. "It has nothing to do with anything, and least of all to do with *me*." But the truth is, Manson also parsed Lennon's two "Revolution" songs on the White Album.

"Revolution 1" is a groove-heavy rocker with some admittedly mixed messages about political revolutions, notably the student uprising in Paris, the Tet Offensive and the global spread of communism from Mao Zedong in China — a fact lost on Manson. Right before the first chorus, Lennon sings, "When you talk about destruction/ Don't you know that you can count me out ... in." "I put in both ['out' and 'in'] because I was not sure," Lennon said. "I didn't want to get killed." To Manson, that meant that the once-ambivalent Beatles now condoned violent revolution. And Lennon's lyric, "We'd all love to see the plan," was, in Manson's

mind, a message that he needed to show them he was capable of being the catalyst. (He seemed to miss the couplet, "But if you want money for people with minds that hate/ All I can tell is brother you have to wait.")



The Beatles in May 1968. Everett Collection

The most prescient "Revolution" to Manson, however, was "Revolution 9," Lennon's eight-plus-minute audial experiment, an avant-garde odyssey built with around 20 sound-effects loops, including samples of Sibelius' Seventh Symphony and part of the orchestral overdub from "A Day in the Life." The Beatle worked on the song with his then-girlfriend, Yoko Ono, and Harrison picked the "nine" in the title because of the numerological meaning it had in his life. "'Revolution 9' was an unconscious picture of what I actually think will happen when it happens, just like a drawing of a revolution," Lennon said in *Anthology*. "It was just abstract, *musique concrète*, loops, people screaming." The New York Times called the track one of the double-LP's "unqualified bummers" and an "aleatory drag."

For Manson, it was the album's peak. He thought, according to Jakobson, that "It was the Beatles' way of telling people what was going to happen; it was their way of making a prophecy; it directly paralleled the Bible's Revelation 9." Manson

reportedly could hear pigs oinking and a man's voice saying "rise" deep in the track's machine-gun fire. In *Helter Skelter*, Bugliosi wrote that even he was struck by the song: "After having listened to it myself, I could easily believe that if ever there were such a conflict, this was probably very much what it would sound like." But to him, it was evidence.

The album became a constant soundtrack for the Manson Family, as they parsed the supposed hidden meanings the songs and how they all fit together into the blood-soaked tableau that was Manson's dubious beatific vision. Watkins claimed that Manson had heard a connection between "Piggies," "Helter Skelter" and "Revolution 9," in a chord that was repeated between the songs – notably around the machine gunning in "Revolution 9." It somehow spoke to Manson.

"Music gives everyone messages," Manson once said. "How do I have to appear like I'm some kind of maniac because I can hear something the music says? When the music says, 'Somewhere over the Rainbow,' I'm still there over the rainbow."

## The White Album became a constant soundtrack for the Manson Family.

When *Rolling Stone* met with Manson in 1970, the reporters asked him to illustrate just how the messages all fit together. He asked them to pick songs from the White Album, and they chose "Piggies," "Helter Skelter" and "Blackbird" – and Manson added "Rocky Raccoon" for good measure. On a piece of paper, he wrote each song title as if it were a column header, and he drew a zigzag under "Helter Skelter" and two markings under "Blackbird," ostensibly to notate bird sounds. "This bottom part is the subconscious," he said. "At the end of each song there is a little tag piece on it, a couple of notes. Or like in 'Piggies' there's 'oink, oink, oink.' Just these couple of sounds. And all these sounds are repeated in 'Revolution 9.' Like in 'Revolution 9,' all these pieces are fitted together and they predict the violent overthrow of the white man. Like you'll hear 'oink, oink,' and then right after that, machine-gun fire: AK-AK-AK-AK-AK-AK!"

Asked if he really thought the Beatles meant revolution, he said, "I think it's a subconscious thing. I don't know whether they did or not. But it's there. It's an association in the subconscious."

It was so outlandish that, as Bugliosi put together his case against Manson and the killers, he realized he needed to take an unusual approach with the jury. "Ordinarily, I try to avoid repetitious testimony in a trial, knowing it can antagonize the jury," he wrote in *Helter Skelter*. "However, Manson's Helter Skelter motive



was so bizarre that I knew if it was expounded by only one witness no juror would ever believe it." By the time the jury deliberated, they had two requests: to visit the murder scenes and to be able to listen to the White Album.

On January 25th, 1971, the jury found Manson and three other defendants guilty. That April, a judge had sentenced him and the others to death, though their sentences were commuted to life in prison when California overturned the death penalty in 1972.



Seven deputies escort Charles Manson from the courtroom after he and three followers were found guilty of seven murders in the Tate-LaBianca slayings. Bettmann/Getty

In subsequent years, "Helter Skelter" – a scrappy deep cut about a slide that might have been otherwise ignored in the Beatles catalogue – has improbably become one of the Fab Four's most frequently covered songs. "This is a song Charles Manson stole from the Beatles," Bono said before U2's *Rattle and Hum* cover. "We're stealing it back." Other artists who have done versions include Aerosmith, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Mötley Crüe, Oasis, White Zombie, Soundgarden, Bon Jovi and the Killers, among others, and even the singer of the song that inspired it – Roger Daltrey – did a version. A hip-hop duo named itself Heltah Skeltah, another group called itself Manson Family and the D.O.C. named an album *Helter Skelter*, and Manson has served as a boogeyman in the lyrics of Ice Cube, Eminem, Lil Wayne, Big Pun and Death Grips, among others. "Helter Skelter" has also served as the title of a video game, a manga book and the titles of several television shows.

Perhaps most surprising, though, is that McCartney began performing the song in 2004 for the first time ever. It has since become a consistent set-list staple, one that he performed at his two Desert Trip concerts last year. One of

McCartney's live recordings of the song was even won a Grammy. (Incidentally, it wasn't the first time the song was nominated for a Grammy: the Bobs' a cappella recording of the tune got a nod in 1984.)

"Bob Dylan thought that the line in 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' was, 'I get high, I get high, I get high,'" McCartney said in *Anthology*, reflecting on "Helter Skelter." "So there had ben some funny little misinterpretations, but they were all harmless and just a bit of a laugh. ... But after all those little interpretations there was finally this horrific interpretation of it all. It all went wrong at that point, but it was nothing to do with us. What can you do?"

**"Helter Skelter" would probably have become a deep cut had it not been for the Manson Family association.**

"It stopped everyone in their tracks, because suddenly all this violence came out in the midst of all this love and peace and psychedelia," Starr said. "It was pretty miserable, actually, and everyone in L.A. felt, 'Oh, God, it can happen to anybody.' Thank God they caught the bugger."

"Another thing I found offensive was that Manson suddenly portrayed the long hair, beard and moustache kind of image, as well as that of a murderer," Harrison said. "Up until then, the long hair and the beard were more to do with not having your hair cut and having a shave – a case of just being a scruff or something."

"I don't know what I thought when it happened," Lennon told *Rolling Stone* in 1970. "A lot of the things he says are true: he is a child of the state, made by us, and he took their children it when nobody else would. Of course, he's cracked all right."

And what of "Piggies" and "Helter Skelter"? "He's barmy, like any other Beatle-kind of fan who reads mysticism into it," Lennon said. "We used to have a laugh about this, that or the other, in a light-hearted way, and some intellectual would read us, some symbolic youth generation wants to see something in it. We also took seriously some parts of the role, but I don't know what 'Helter Skelter' has to do with knifing somebody. I've never listened to the words, properly, it was just a noise."