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An Interview with Joel Gilbert, director of Paul Really is Dead

by Dustin Nelson

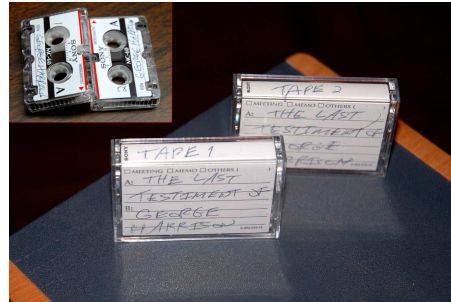
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR



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Being a conspiracy theorist isn't easy. I think there are three main reasons for this: 1. You know you're going to look like a loon. 2. You're probably not right, and some part of you has to know that if you are pursuing a conspiracy theory. 3. You might be right, which means you're trapped in a never-ending cycle of self-doubt and circumstantial celebrations.



While I remain a skeptic, there is something more than eyebrow raising about the conspiracy theories in Joel Gilbert's new documentary *Paul Really is Dead: The Last Confession of George Harrison*. The story goes like so: Gilbert received a package five years after the death of George Harrison containing two cassettes. The package had no return address and there was no note, only a postmark from Britain. On the tapes was the voice of a man claiming to be George Harrison on his deathbed. The voice – it has not been proven that this is or is not Harrison – tells the story of the Beatles and the death of Paul McCartney, the cover-up involving MI5, and how they replaced McCartney with the aid of the British government. He painstakingly outlines the clues hidden in the music and art of the Beatles and why they did what they did.

I had the opportunity to speak to Gilbert by phone about the creation of this film, why he made it, and whether or not he actually believes the voice on the tape is really George Harrison

InDigest: Why make this film the way you did? It seems to me that if this isn't George Harrison on the tapes then none of what the voice says really matters. Yet, you don't dig into whether or not this is Harrison.

Joel Gilbert: The story that was told and the chronology were very compelling. Most Beatles fans today are familiar with various clues like the *Sgt. Pepper's* cover and some of the songs they know containing clues...No one has ever heard an account of the story from beginning to end where the clues are tied together and make sense, as well as how the band reacted when all the clues became public in late '69. When the whole "Paul is Dead" phenomenon went public [the band] came out and denied it. They said all these clues are coincidence. In six months they made one more album and disbanded. As a story it felt very compelling and fascinating whether or not we could tell if it was George Harrison's voice. It was worth putting out as a story that revisits and ties together the whole urban legend that's never been done before.

ID: Can you tell me a little about the structure of the film? The approach seemed to be that you just wanted to present these tapes. You refrain from making any comment on the tapes throughout the film – with the exception of your explanation of how the tapes came to be in your possession. You don't make an effort to validate or disprove anything said on the tapes.

JG: It's presented as a chronological story, in the way they are told [on the tapes]. We do give a little early history of the Beatles. There is quite a bit of historic footage, some of it quite rare. So, it's presented chronologically. Everyone can look at it and see how these clues flow from one to the next. One of the more obviously interesting ones, which no one had ever thought of, is that the Harrison voice cites that the *Sgt. Peppers* cover – in the

"Paul is Dead" mythology – is a funeral for Paul McCartney. All the people are the people that Paul would have wanted at his funeral. They are all standing in front of a freshly dug piece of earth, with Paul's face in yellow flowers, and it says "here lies Paul." Now according to Harrison's voice on the tapes MI5 was helping to arrange the whole event, the imposters and helping to cover it up, because of the fear from her Majesty's government that hundreds or thousands of Beatles fans worldwide might commit suicide if McCartney's death became public. MI5 was still monitoring the situation and they realized that the *Sgt. Peppers* cover was a funeral for McCartney. So they threatened the Beatles, *We realize that you're trying to place clues. No more clues or you're in big trouble.* The very next album was *The White Album*, completely blank with no clues on it. When you put the events of Beatles history together you can see how the clues weave in and out and why they weave in and out. That's what is so fascinating with the chronological approach.

ID: So you decide that doing the story in a chronological fashion illuminates the way these clues fit together. Was it because of that that you decided you weren't going to challenge anything said on the tapes?

JG: There really wasn't time. It's a 95-minute film. I hope 20/20 and Sixty Minutes will do a couple hours on it, investigating different claims and see if they ring true or if they are plausible. We decided because of the breadth of the material that we'd present it in the first person voice of what could be George Harrison to tell the story from an insider's point of view that Paul McCartney perished and there was a cover up. It was not intended as an investigative report as to the validity of these tapes. That's for the next person to do a documentary on. This was to present these tapes to the public and let everybody enjoy revisiting the "Paul is Dead" urban legend and finding out if they think there is something to it



ID: When you received these tapes what did you think? What goes through your head when you get a package labeled "George Harrison's last testament"?

JG: There is a picture of the packaging on our website. [paulreallyisdead.com] The packaging was very impressive. We don't get packages like that every day. Inside there was the tape recorder and all these tapes. It was pretty weird, let's put it that

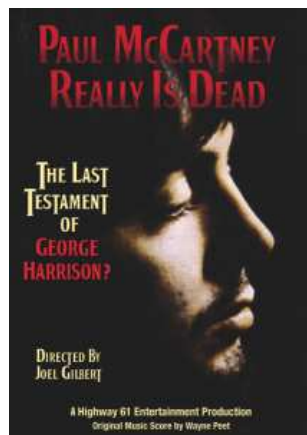
way. We weren't sure if it was a joke or what it was. I sat down and listened to the tapes. I decided to play it for a few people and then we compared it ourselves to George Harrison's voice and it didn't sound that much like Harrison. But we were comparing it to the easily attainable Harrison voice you've heard in interviews from the early 60s with that younger sounding voice and the heavy Liverpoolian accent. At first we thought *what is this? It doesn't really sound like him.* Then we got some tapes off YouTube and other places from the late 90s and he did speak slower and had a deeper voice and didn't have as thick of a Liverpool accent. It matched up quite well. It sounded a lot like him. At the time I was flying around the country interviewing people like Jerry Wexler for the film *Bob Dylan Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years*. I put the tapes aside and thought I'd take a serious look at them once I was done with that production. Now we're into 2006. I had come out with three films on music history and I wanted to do something different so I produced a film called *Farewell Israel*. I got away from the music history stuff to do a more serious history film. I thought it would only take three or four months like the Dylan films did and it ended up taking the better part of a year. Time rolled on. I finally was able to go back and take a serious look at it and it seemed like a good time to make a film on this.

ID: In terms of the tapes getting to you, do you have any notion of why they were sent to you in particular?

JG: We can't say for sure. We have some theories about it. We can't, obviously, trace it because there was no return address. I think it's possible somebody in Harrison's camp – extended family, workers, somebody – chose to send them to us because he had asked someone to get them out of Britain or send them to a company or a media outlet that could publicize the tapes in some way. I think that had they been given to a media outlet in Britain that they could have been suppressed because of stricter British laws, by the Harrison estate. Perhaps the person who sent them might get in some hot water if they stayed in England. I think that whoever sent them wanted to make sure that they didn't stay in England. And the timing is also interesting because they were sent out five years after his death.

ID: More particularly why would someone have sent them to you at Highway 61 Entertainment? I would think Harrison or his estate may have left specific instructions for tapes that would be scrutinized so heavily. He had been in contact with so many media outlets and journalists over the years.

JG: Obviously I don't think Harrison would have been the one who decided where they were sent. Someone else decided where to send them. We are well known, and I am well known, for my documentaries on Bob Dylan. I've done 4 features on Dylan's life and career. Of course you know that Harrison was a huge fan of Dylan, recording some songs with him and recording some Dylan songs, like "If Not For You." A lot of people don't know that it was a Bob Dylan song because George Harrison made it his own. My Bob Dylan documentaries are known to be in depth and honest and go far beyond the typical information that is out there. If you saw *No Direction Home*, the Scorsese film, you didn't learn anything you didn't already know. My films go way beyond the information that is out there. They are an in-depth biography. I'm known for doing special things with music history that no one else does.



ID: And you believe that this is George Harrison?

JG: I feel like it's very possible. I feel that this story is more plausible than the Beatles' story. They say, *Oh, these are just coincidence*. Their denials saying they didn't put these clues in the albums and lyrics are not credible. Either the Beatles were all in on a massive inside joke that Paul was dead for five years or there is something to it. I think this is a theory that is plausible and deserves attention.

ID: In the introduction to the film you mention that there is brand new evidence presented for the "Paul is Dead" theory. What exactly did you uncover that was brand new to these conspiracy theories?

JG: There were a number of clues that we'd never heard of in our research. If you type "Paul McCartney is dead clues" in Google you'd get 75 million hits. There are many websites dedicated to this. We looked at all the existing clues – websites, books – and even clues that we thought were quite a bit of a stretch. There were many clues that were cited by George Harrison in the tapes that were not known anywhere else. By looking at those clues, the ones no one had ever discovered, and how it ties the whole thing together, we corroborated [the conspiracy theory] in a way that's never been done before. It was very exciting.