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Did Paul McCartney die in 1969?

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An astounding rumor swept the music world in 1969: Paul McCartney was dead.

So-called proof that the Beatle had been decapitated in a 1966 car crash came in the form of clues allegedly planted by the surviving Beatles in their songs and album cover art.

You'd think that after countless McCartney solo tours and albums, the cockamamie Paul Is Dead conspiracy theory would not have a single believer outside a mental asylum. But more than 40 years after McCartney asserted he was very much alive in a Life magazine cover story, Los Angeles-based documentary filmmaker Joel Gilbert is attempting to cast doubt on his existence with a DVD, set for Aug. 24 release, called "Paul

McCartney Really Is Dead: The Last Testament of George Harrison.”

“About 10 years ago I became familiar with the Paul is Dead urban legend,” Gilbert said from L.A. “Friends showed me some clues on some of the album covers and I thought it was pretty fascinating. I remember thinking that it can’t all be coincidence. Either it’s a massive inside joke by the Beatles or maybe there’s something to it. But I didn’t really think too much further.”

That is until 2005, when two anonymously-sent audiotapes, purportedly with the voice of the late Harrison, showed up at Gilbert’s office.

Harrison, it is claimed, wanted to come clean about McCartney’s death and the Beatles’ role in its coverup and recorded this testament while he was recovering from a stabbing during a 1999 home invasion. He explains that after Paul died in a car crash, British military intelligence feared that the country’s female teens would commit mass suicide if they learned that the Cutest Beatle was dead.

The fun, if ghoulish element, about watching the DVD is Gilbert’s rat-a-tat assemblage of clues, from lyrics that revealed secret messages when played backward to McCartney sitting in a coffin (actually a steamer trunk) on the cover of the Beatles’ “Yesterday and Today” album. There’s also the sound of a horrific car crash on “Revolution No. 9” as well as what sounds like the repeated phrase “Turn me on dead man.”

You watch as a slew of visual death and mourning images are pointed out and explained. You can’t help but think that some of this is nonsense, but also that the Beatles were up to something.

And who is the man masquerading as Paul in what would undoubtedly be the greatest hoax in the history of mankind?

A surgically altered body double named William Campbell.

Gilbert’s documentary suggests Harrison believed that fake Paul’s wife, Linda Eastman McCartney, knew Campbell was a phony and extorted him into marrying her and putting her in his band Wings. And that John Lennon was killed because he was about to unveil the truth about the massive deception. And that fake Paul’s future ex-wife Heather Mills witnessed the real Paul’s fatal crash.

It all seems not just hard to believe, but laughable. But Gilbert claims his investigation is not a joke.

“The only evidence, really, is Paul claiming to be who he is and having his career,” he said. “We have the Beatles denying a hoax over the years, saying that all the clues were just coincidence and not intentional. I don’t think those denials are very credible when you look at the amount of clues available in backward masking, the song lyrics and all the artwork. And you have little things like Paul telling David Letterman last year that he is actually the imposter. Is it tongue-in-cheek? We don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t a hoax. We feel these tapes we have and this entire story of Paul really dying is a worthy theory that might be true and worth people looking at and considering.”

Q and A with Joel Gilbert

You sat on these tapes of what is supposed to be George Harrison for several years after you got them.

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