PAOLO SORRENTINO IN SEARCH OF *THE GREAT BEAUTY*

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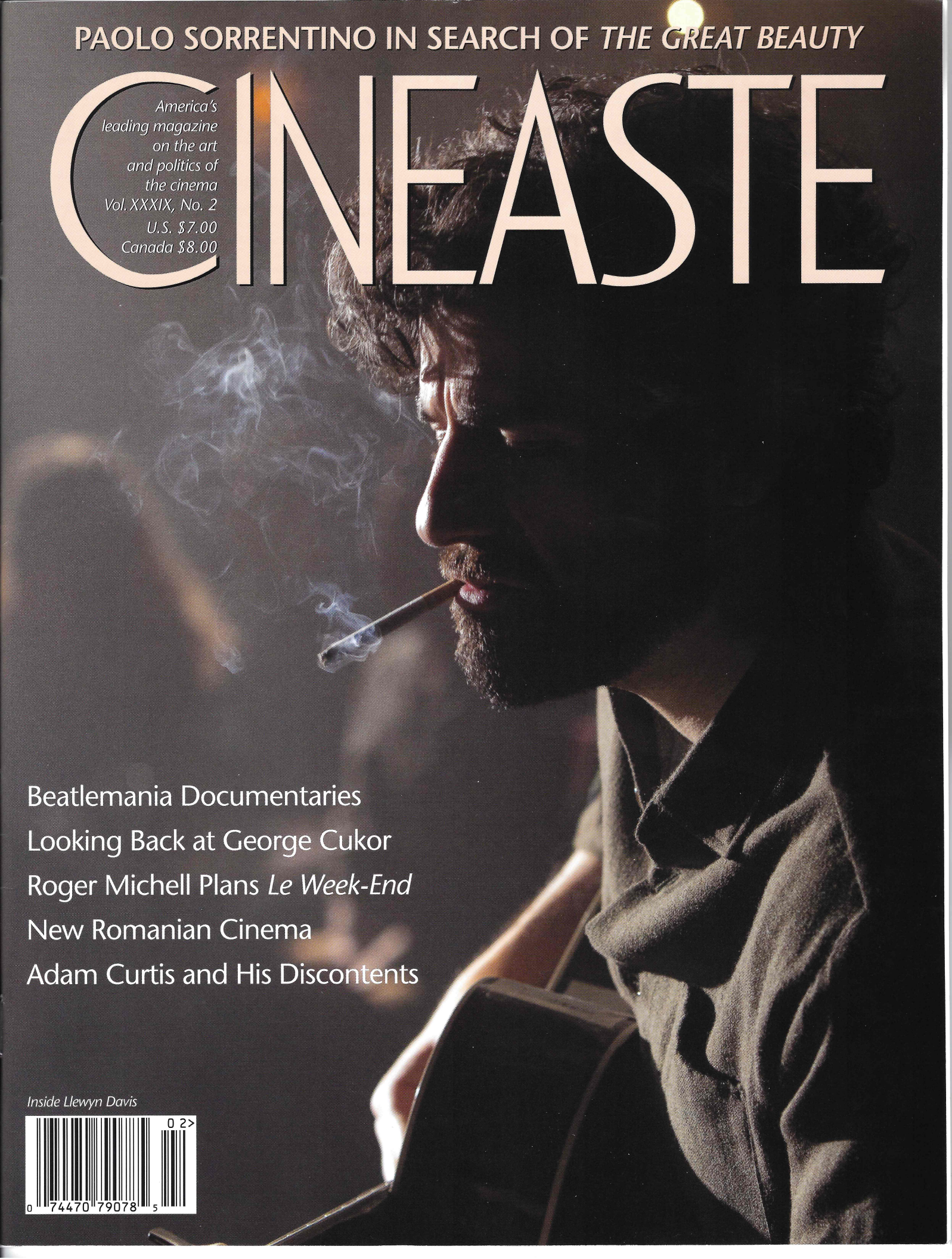

Beatlemania Documentaries

Looking Back at George Cukor

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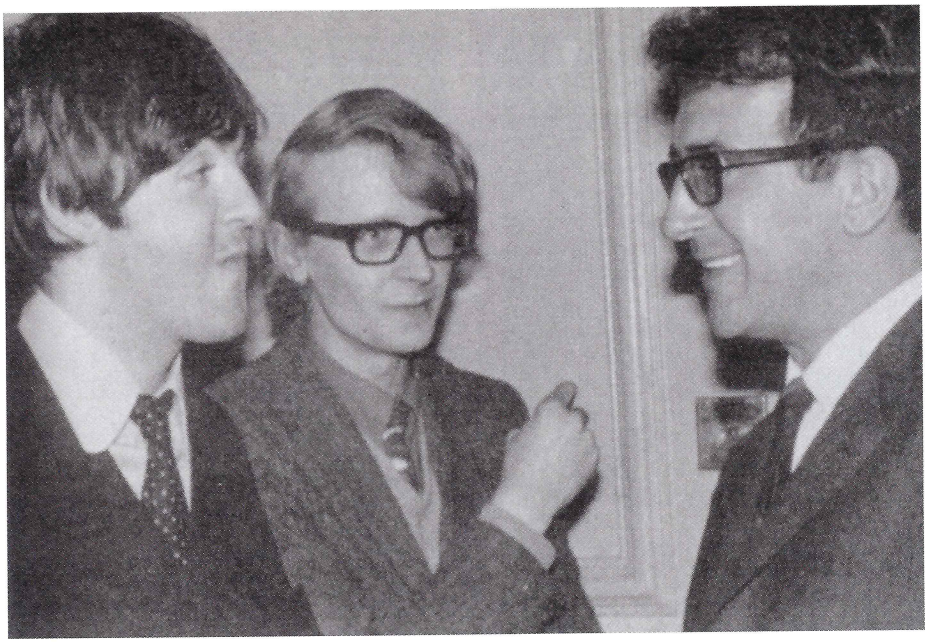
Left to right: Barry Miles, John Dunbar, Marianne Faithfull, Peter Asher, and Paul McCartney in 1965 in a scene from *Going Underground* (photo by Graham Keen).

Going Underground was written and directed by Tom O' Dell for Prism Films, an East London music documentary DVD production company that works on commission and has made five other Beatles films, five on Bob Dylan, and numerous others. It was responsible for *Dawn of the Dead: The Grateful Dead and the Rise of the San Francisco Underground* (2012) and O'Dell's *From Straight to Bizarre: Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, Alice Cooper and L.A.'s Lunatic Fringe* (2012). As their subtitles and two-hours-plus running times suggest, these are serious rock history films that reach beyond the hagiographic-cum-sensationalistic approach of VHI's *Behind the Music* series and its ilk.

An intensive 153 minutes, *Going Underground* traces how the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Aldermaston Marches and the receptivity of young British intellectuals to the American Beat poets—Allen Ginsberg especially—catalyzed the brief flourishing of the London counterculture from 1965 through 1967's Summer of Love. The complex genesis of the movement is soberly described on camera by such key players as Barry Miles, who co-founded its flagship newspaper The *International Times* and ran the avant-garde bookshop Indica, supported by his friend McCartney, who put up shelves, smoothed walls, and designed the wrapping paper; John "Hoppy" Hopkins, Miles's IT partner and co-founder of the UFO Club, which hosted landmark concerts by Pink Floyd and Soft Machine; John Dunbar, who owned Indica with Miles and pop star Peter Asher and ran its basement gallery; record producer and UFO co-founder Joe Boyd; UFO doorman, IT journalist, and Deviants singer Mick Farren; Soft Machine drummer and composer Robert Wyatt; and AMM drummer Eddie Prevost. Analysis is provided by countercultural historian Jonathon Greene, music journalist Mark Paytress, and musician and musicologist Chris Ingham. The affable Miles and the haggard Hopkins are the main scene-setters, but Ingham emerges as the star turn with his emphatic, compelling explications of how McCartney's receptivity to the avant-garde music of John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio, and BBC Radiophonic Workshop experimentalists like Delia Derbyshire fed his own sonic investigations. This was crucial to the metamorphosis of the Beatles' sound, which, beginning with the *Revolver* track "Tomorrow Never Knows" (Lennon's lyrics inspired by his early LSD trips and Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience*), gradually incorporated modality, studio trickery, and general aural weirdness into the band's melodic mainstream pop.

To illustrate this evolutionary shift, the film parses aspects of "Taxman," "Strawberry Fields Forever," the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* songs "Within You, Without You" and "A Day in the Life," as well as the McCartney-driven "The Carnival of Light," the unrhythmic, unmelodic thirteen to fifteen minute sound collage that the Beatles recorded for the Million Volt Light and Sound Rave at the Roundhouse on January 28 and February 4, 1967. Narrator Thomas Arnold (an English actor) authoritatively explains how the Beatles weren't operating in a vacuum, showing the influence of free jazz and contextualizing their experiments alongside those of the Beach Boys, Frank Zappa, the Byrds, the Kinks, and the Who, as well as Pink Floyd and Soft Machine.

McCartney, whose partner was the actress Jane Asher, Peter's sister, gravitated to the underground through living in the Asher family's educated "Peter Pan household on Wimpole Street" and his magpie's attraction to alternative scenes, though Miles claims he was more interested in the sonic possibilities of avant-gardism than its philosophy. Because he was a Beatle, he became the movement's de facto leader in the absence of any other. The cloak fell on him after Hopkins was sentenced to nine months in prison for cannabis possession on June 1, 1967, the day *Sgt. Pepper's* was released. McCartney paid for the advertisement, instigated by drugs policy activist Steve Abrams (whom he'd met through Miles), that appeared in the leading establishment paper *The Times* on July 24 petitioning for the legalization of cannabis; it was galvanized by the heavy drugs-offense sentences that had been meted out to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on June 29 but were quashed a month later.

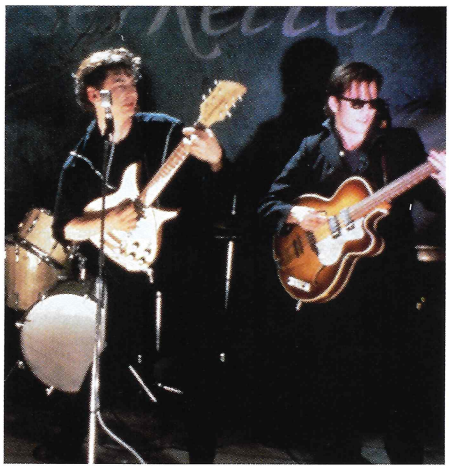


McCartney and Barry Miles meet experimental composer Luciano Berio in *Going Underground*.

That June, McCartney's admission in print and on television that he had dropped acid, annoying Harrison and Lennon, amplified the paradox that the nicest Beatle was heading the revolt. The clip from the contemporary TV interview that opens *Going Underground* reveals that, when it came to articulating the universal appeal of the movement's Dionysian pleasures, he was not a polished spokesman. In the event, Epstein's death in August drew McCartney away from the pinnacle of the counterculture as he assumed the leadership of the Beatles. He attempted to rally his bandmates around *The Magical Mystery Tour* BBC film, which proved a chaotic mishmash of psychedelia, nostalgic British humor, and showbiz satire and earned the Beatles their first critical mauling. Kelly, a characteristically shy passenger amid the raucous shenanigans on the movie's charabanc, observes in *Good Ol' Freda* that it was a failure.

Having isolated himself in a Surrey mansion, depressed, and sapped by drug use, Lennon was a comparatively late arrival at the countercultural feast, but his introduction in November 1966 to the avant-garde performer Yoko Ono at Indica, where he had bought Leary's psychedelic drug manual from Miles, led to the unleashing of his energy, Ingham says. McCartney's dwindling interest and reembrace of pop, though not permanent, created a vacuum at the head of the underground occupied by Lennon. His antiwar activism, infusing of the Beatles' lyrics with acid imagery, and his *musique concrète* experimentation on "Revolution 9," which McCartney wanted to exclude from 1968's *The Beatles* LP, consecrated him as the most radical Beatle, even as he lost interest in being one. Farren observes how Lennon's new stance created schisms in the band. *Going Underground*'s tracking of McCartney's and Lennon's shifting allegiances to the underground cause—LSD opened Harrison to spirituality but not to hippiedom, nothing is learned of Starr—supplies the film with its drama, which devolves on issues of conformity and freedom; so does the detailing of such incidents as the castigation of Pink Floyd as "Pink Finks" after they disassociated themselves from the movement following the Rolling Stones drug busts.

Going Underground remains a predominantly cerebral work. Though visually augmented through an impressive array of archival stills and footage (as is *Good Ol' Freda*), it achieves its highest level of emotion whenever it plays snatches of the layered, electronically charged psychedelic music of the moment, often visually accompanied by swirling light effects. If the film's tracking of the Beatles' evolution and its consequences is its strongest suit, it skimps on exploring the counterculture's political rage, as epitomized by Lennon. It gives only a faint sense of the culture that was being countered and of the Establishment in opposition, neglecting even to mention that Hopkins's sentence (of which he served six months) was draconian and intended to make an example of him. There are no references to internecine strife. O'Dell was presumably briefed not to adopt an attitude or a political bias.



Top to bottom: John Lennon portrayals in *The Hours and Times* (1991); *Backbeat* (1994); *Lennon Naked* (2010); and *Snodgrass* (2013) (photos courtesy of Photofest).

Where *Going Underground* is detached, *Good Ol' Freda* is sentimental. Like O'Dell's film, though, Kelly's narrative of her years in the Beatles' employ is also shaped by transitional junctures in their career, though not musically or socioculturally. She was better placed than most to observe how success changed them. On July 10, 1964, she attended the Beatles' civic reception at the Liverpool Town Hall, invited to it not by her employers but by the Starkeys. When White returns her today to its Corinthian-columned balcony, from which the conquering heroes looked down on 200,000 fans greeting their return to the city, she recalls the pride she felt working for them, but the reflection is haunted by the knowledge that fame was alienating them from their origins. She subsequently mentions the resultant move to the capital, at which point they essentially ceased to be "her boys," and the watershed moment of Epstein's death. As it was McCartney's and Lennon's destinies to become focal points of an uprising, it was hers to stay in Liverpool to look after her ageing father and raise a family of her own. During a TV interview with Kelly conducted when she was winding up the fan club, the reporter asked her what was missing from the atmosphere in the Beatles' camp compared with the early days. By then she was a poised spokesperson, but the answer she gave was ineffably sad: "The closeness."

Good Ol' Freda takes its title from the Beatles' chorused salute to her on the Christmas message they sent to fan club members on a flexi-disc at Christmas 1963. Their fraternal respect for her would never be parlayed into an executive position, however, since music-industry boardrooms in the 1960s were all-male enclaves. So, too, it seems on the strength of *Going Underground*'s roster of interviewees, was the counterculture's leadership—Delia Derbyshire is seen in footage and Cathy Berberian's vocalizing is heard, but no women's opinions or analyses were sought. Kelly's story is augmented by the supportive comments of the Beatles' press officer Tony Barrow, Kinsley, and fellow Liverpool musicians Billy Hatton and Joey Bower. Happily, her unique feminine perspective on those heady times and her dedication to maintaining the foursome's relationship with their public is also endorsed by Angie McCartney (Paul's mettlesome stepmother), daughter Rachel, the abashed but forgiving June Underwood, and the memory of Elsie Starkey, who successfully pressed Epstein to raise Freda's wages. It is about time women are regarded as more than milestones on the long and winding road of Beatles cinema. ■

Distribution Sources:
Good Ol' Freda: www.goodolfreda.com.
Going Underground: MVDvisual, www.MVDb2b.com.