

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Going Underground: Paul McCartney, The Beatles And The UK Counter-Culture

Pride DVD 2013, 153 mins

While it is often assumed that it was John Lennon who gave The Beatles' later work its occasional avant garde twist, this film sets out to prove that Paul McCartney really was the walrus in the group. McCartney's interest in experimental and electronic music developed during a period in London in the mid-1960s when the UK underground was threatening to topple the old order of conformity. Assembled from a collage of well-worn film, news reportage and promotional material dating from the time, this documentary repeats the often told story of the 60s countercultural revolution from a more skewed viewpoint.

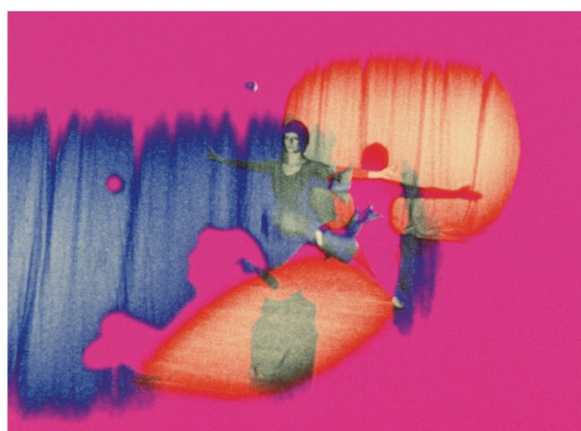
Using McCartney and The Beatles as its basic template, the film outlines the influences that caused the group to come together and then widens its scope to take in more obscure factions. This history is fleshed out by talking heads: either individuals directly involved with events during this period, or writers and scholars on the subject. Central to this are writer Barry Miles and founder of *International Times* and UFO club organiser John 'Hoppy' Hopkins, both of whom were pivotal personalities in the evolution of London's experimental subculture. Miles's association with many of the key writers of the American Beats movement resulted in the opening of his Better Books shop and (with John Dunbar) the Indica Gallery, where John Lennon would famously be introduced to Yoko Ono in 1966.

Before Lennon made contact with the avant garde, however, McCartney was already being guided by Miles to the compositions of Stockhausen and Berio, and Delia Derbyshire's work for the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, all of which, says Miles, "he digested and turned into Beatles music". Another group McCartney was introduced to was AMM, whose first LP for Elektra had been commissioned and released by Joe Boyd. Although McCartney found the group's music interesting, he apparently felt it went on too long, but not everybody shared his opinion – Pink Floyd founder Syd Barrett championed AMM, borrowing guitarist Keith Rowe's method of applying found objects such as ball bearings to his guitar. The inclusion of an interview with AMM drummer Eddie Prévost provides an

insight into his group's contribution hitherto unacknowledged by similar film projects.

Equally uplifting are the clips showing artists like Gustav Metzger and Mark Boyle at work (Boyle is caught on camera preparing his lightshow for Soft Machine), reinforcing the theory that fine art, literature, journalism and music were fusing together into a single powerful movement.

Despite the importance of the Barrett-era Pink Floyd and Soft Machine, however, it is the continuing influence of Beatles songs like the LSD-inspired "Tomorrow Never Knows", "A Day In The Life" and "Revolution 9" that reveals how both McCartney's and Lennon's individual dabblings in the avant garde were eventually responsible for reshaping pop music on a global scale. Edwin Pouncey



Riddles Of The Sphinx (1977) featuring Laura Mulvey (left)

Riddles Of The Sphinx

Laura Mulvey & Peter Wollen (Directors)
BFI DVD + BD 2013, 87 mins

This comprehensive package contains both *Riddles Of The Sphinx* (1977) and *Penthesilea: Queen Of The Amazons* (1974) – the first two of the six films Laura Mulvey made with her then-husband Peter Wollen between the early 1970s and the mid-80s. Since then, both have forged careers in academia. Their collaborations, now rarely screened and infrequently discussed, have receded into obscurity. Released for the first time on DVD, these two fascinating works, whose combination of structural innovation, political commitment and analytical rigour resonates powerfully 40 years on, can now receive the reappraisal they deserve.

Both Mulvey and Wollen started out in the mid- to late 60s as film critics, but soon expanded their ideas into the realms of theory. Mulvey's 1975 manifesto, "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema", proposed a new discourse of feminist cinema and film theory, influenced by post-structuralist semiotics, which *Riddles Of The Sphinx*

went some way towards realising. It pivots on the notion of the Sphinx, principally as it appears in the Oedipus myth, "as both a riddle and a threat" – a metaphor for the difficulties which women face in contemporary patriarchal society, and a symbol of female potential and strength.

Riddles Of The Sphinx utilises a self-reflexive structure, dividing itself into seven disparate though thematically linked chapters. It doubles back on itself in a chiasmic fashion: in the second section Mulvey, sitting at a table, recites a text outlining the film's conceptual premise and its political arguments. In the sixth, 75 minutes later, she sits at the same desk and listens to a recording of her earlier reading. Others comprise blurry handheld footage of the large stone Sphinx that sits on the banks of the Nile; or show female acrobats and jugglers, with the film stock tinted, reversed or overlaid with blocks of colour.

The fourth and longest sequence makes it clear Mulvey and Wollen are as interested in praxis as they are in theory. We're shown a sequence of 13 slow-paced 360 degree

pans through settings in the life of Louise, a London mother. They follow her routine as she raises her daughter, Anna, and works a day job as a switchboard operator. Her thoughts – quotidian worries, free associations and increasingly bold political notions – are expressed in voiceover. A loose narrative is sketched: a friendship with a coworker blossoms, and a feminist identity emerges, born of the challenges of balancing full-time work and childcare, a juggling act which, in London at least, is scarcely any less precarious four decades on.

Riddles Of The Sphinx is presented in a high-quality transfer, and the dual-format package is of the standard one expects from the BFI. The booklet is filled with incisive essays, including one by *The Wire*'s Rob Young on the film's soundtrack, a set of pieces for multitracked synthesizer by Soft Machine's Mike Ratledge. Their spiralling patterns and oscillating pulse rhythms, heavily indebted to Terry Riley, are a pseudo-cosmic and somewhat masculine music ill-suited to a film which levels so exacting a gaze on everyday female experience.

Among the extras are an interview with Mulvey, her audio commentary on *Riddles Of The Sphinx*, and the feature-length *Penthesilea: Queen Of The Amazons*. It also locates gender metaphors in ancient mythology, this time the queen of the Amazons, killed by Achilles in the Trojan War. Three of *Penthesilea*'s five parts use historical references to explore the allegory's different layers: suffragette texts; imagery of Amazon-like women over the centuries, from classical reliefs to *Wonder Woman* comics; and an interpretation of the *Penthesilea* narrative dramatised in mime. The film is notable for its formal daring, in particular its second sequence, a 19 minute Brechtian exegesis delivered to camera by Wollen, who articulates the film's methods and deconstructs previous interpretations of the material as he moves about a holiday villa – the film analysing itself. And, in the final section, watching itself, with an extended shot of a bank of four TV screens, each displaying footage from one of the preceding four parts.

Nick Cain