



Going Underground: Paul McCartney, the Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture

[Paul McCartney](#)

Pride - PGDVD161 (DVD)

Available from [MVD Entertainment Group](#).

A review written for the Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange
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There's an ongoing controversy in the realm of progrock (progressive rock), one that seems incapable of resolution. It's central question regards what LP might really have been the true primogenitor of the genre. Only three are ever creditably cited. Was it The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's*? Was it Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*? Or was it, as I aver, The Moody Blues' *Days of Future Past*. After all, the trio of slabs came out in the same year (1967)—the Moodies LP issuing last, which, as I will make clear in some future essay elsewhere, was beside the point—all were determinedly beyond-the-pale psychedelic and thus avant-garde, and all three bands would wax ever more so as time went on, even the Beatles, who released their all-time masterpiece a little later the same year, *Magical Mystery Tour*. That 'whence-prog?' controversy isn't really touched on in *Going Underground: Paul McCartney, the Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture*, but I present it in order that the reader will understand there's even more to the period and its prime figures than most will credit or understand. Also, the underground scene in the UK and progrock were very intimately entwined back then. That's made quite clear.

This documentary also follows up sideways on the Pride label's earlier intriguing assertion that John Lennon's contributions to the Beatles, while by no means negligible, have been greatly overblown and that Paul McCartney was far more instrumental than has otherwise been credited...and Pride's managed to quite nicely convince me on this (see the *Composing the Beatles' Songbook* review [here](#)). Paul, after all, and not John, was the guy with the more twisted art head. Up until *The White Album* released, Paul was much more pronouncedly a devotee of the surrealist/a-v phenomenon. And it was Paul, not John, who was more responsible for the depth of the *Pepper's* and *Magical* issuances. He was vastly more afloat in that ocean than Lennon. What's historically made us think otherwise has been the usual Hollywood/music industry business/glamour shenanigans and the willingness of the vast lion's share of critics to ironically gulp it all down uncritically and then fashion false legendry after the fact.

Thankfully Robert Christgau-free, *Underground* collects a bunch of characters who were there and involved, intimately enmeshed in the ongoing happening: John Hopkins (co-founder of *IT*, the *International Times*), Mick Farren (Deviants vocalist, *IT* journalist), the inimitable Robert Wyatt (Soft Machine drummer), Joe Boyd (founder of the UFO Club and Pink Floyd producer), Eddie Provost (AMM drummer), and so on. The affair is 2-1/2 hours long, so there's plenty of time to stretch out and dig in, and you get music by Soft Machine, Pink Floyd, AMM, The Beatles, and even some clever bastardizations of Beatles tunes. As shown, the true genesis of the English flip-over into its cultural turmoil in the 60s was fomented in the country's anomie and a new generation's discontent with a traditional killing stodginess now being subverted by the American Beats (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, etc.) and its spawn. The Brits picked up on that and ran it a mile further, as they always do. The other co-founder of the *Independent Times*, Barry Miles, is featured as perhaps the germ seed of it all while still a teen-ager.

And who inspired the Beat writers? The jazzbos of course, that whole Coletrane / Taylor / Ayler / etc. thing, which is prominently emphasized here, Cage, Feldman, Pollock, and others erupted, and New York became the center of the cutting-edge art world. The collision of pop and rock with all this subterranean activity was inevitable, especially with cats like Paul McCartney around. He was living with girlfriend Jane Asher in her family's house. Her brother was Peter Asher of Peter & Gordon, and the Asher adults were highly aesthetic. That environment became McCartney's 'in' to the avant-garde. Before you knew it, he was rescuing the unusual Indica Books and Gallery from collapse, securing the centrality of the avant-garde in England. From there, and through his producer George Martin, the latter a not-so-closeted avant-gardist, Paul rubbed shoulders with lions and lionesses, including Karlheinz Stockhausen and Delia Derbyshire (if you want to see some of the influences on Brian Eno & Co., check both these musicians out, especially the latter).

That, dear reader, hopefully whets your appetite for more, and I'll go no further because one must watch this entire disc in order to appreciate what a bang-up job it does of completely explaining the socio-historic wherefores of the Great British Underground. Especially pay attention to Jonathan Greene, another of the few scribes I'd label as a 'true critic', though everyone this time around does a good job—except perhaps Farren, whose often not entirely intelligible and who sports a set of liver lips as would drive Jagger and Tyler agog with furious envy (more, I'm familiar with his written oeuvre and find his regrettable tome on the Central Intelligence Agency [*The CIA Files: The Secrets of "The Company"*] to be indicative of a not entirely honest or trustworthy mental composure). Before receiving this disc, I'd always been confused about just what the hell had happened during that time period. No American writer was explicating it properly, nor had I located a good Brit scribe on the matter; now, I understand perfectly. I'm

sure there was a good deal more to it than is exposed here—that is, in terms of other historical actors beyond the genesis core—but that would take hours and hours and hours to expound upon. Until someone comes up with a Ken Burns multi-part history, I'm more than happy with this reconciliation of the entire too-short key era.

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