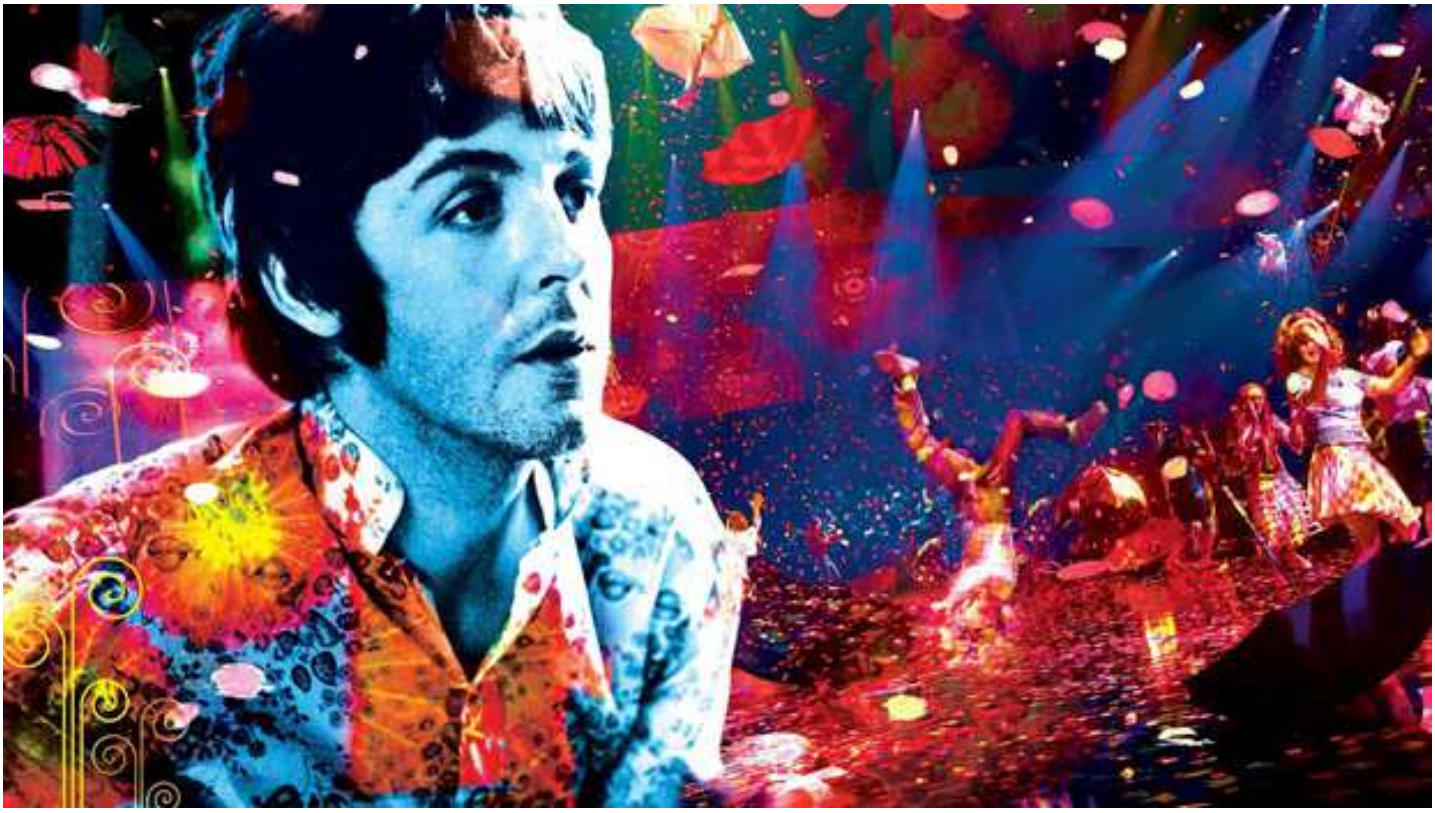
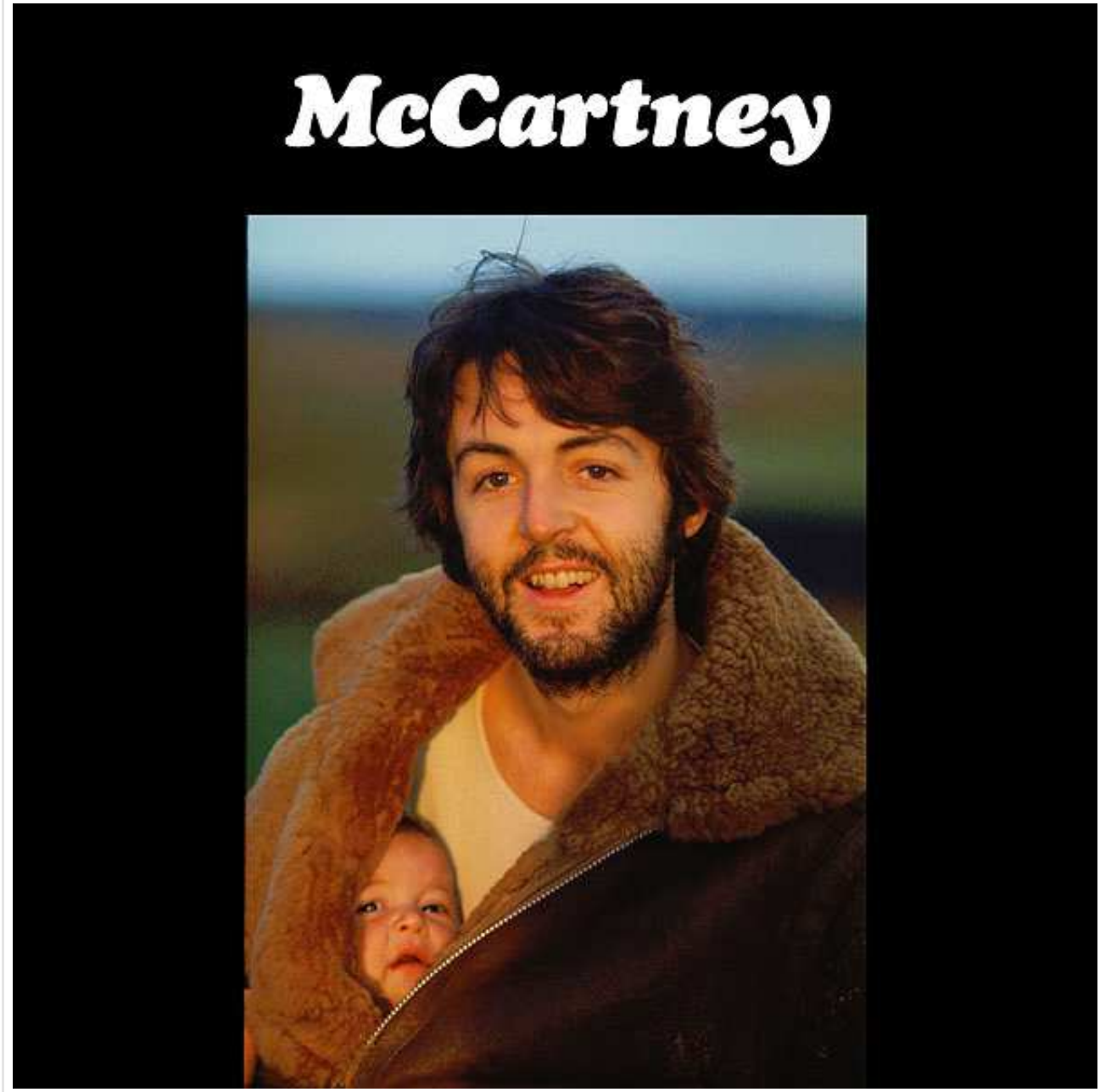


CITC Previews the New Paul McCartney DVD: Going Underground: Paul McCartney, The Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture

By Paul Gleason

Paul McCartney – who's arguably the most beloved and successful popular musician of the second half of the 20th century – has taken a lot of public thrashings.

In 1970, after The Beatles' breakup, McCartney's bandmate and former songwriting partner John Lennon was the first Beatle to throw McCartney under the bus. He famously told *Rolling Stone* magazine that McCartney's first solo album, *McCartney*, was "rubbish," that he and George Harrison were "fed up of being side-men for Paul" during the *Let It Be* sessions, and that after manager Brian Epstein died, McCartney failed in his attempt to lead The Beatles.



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Lennon's ire was so high by 1971 that he invited Harrison to play guitar on the song "How Do You Sleep?," which appeared on the *Imagine* album. Under the (probably correct) impression that McCartney had attacked *him* on the *Ram* album, Lennon penned such lines as "The only thing you done was yesterday / And since you've gone you're just another day."

These lines – which Lennon caustically delivered, backed by Harrison's fiery guitar playing – helped solidify McCartney's reputation, to quote Lester Bangs, as a composer of "Musak" . . . who's "committed to the notion of subject matter as Hanna-Barbera." Bangs goes on to say, "[McCartney's] cuteness can be incredibly annoying at times. If he was a little more gutsy, he might almost be Elton John."

Lennon and McCartney, of course, eventually rediscovered their friendship and occasionally saw each other, but their multitalented wives – Yoko Ono and Linda McCartney – had become replacements as their much-needed creative partners.

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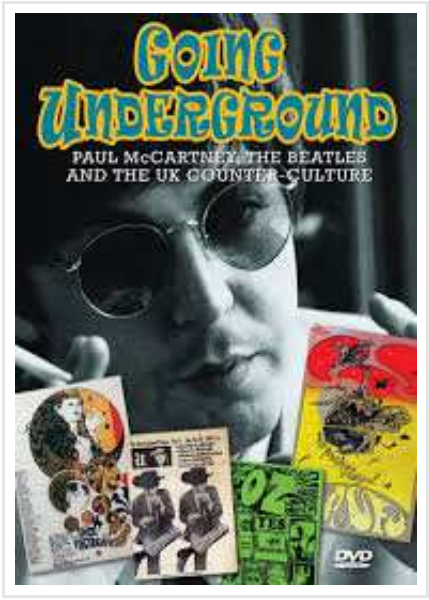
Despite this reconciliation, for a long time after the breakup of The Beatles, McCartney has been a paradox in the infamous court of public opinion. On the one hand, he's a tremendous musician with an incomparable voice, the ability to play any instrument, and a penchant for writing melodies that can't be erased from listeners' brains; on the other hand, he's just a cute guy who writes cute, lightweight songs like "Yesterday" and "Another Day" – and he's gutless to boot.

Thankfully, recent reassessments like Bob Spitz' monumental *The Beatles: The Biography* and Peter Ames Carlin's *Paul McCartney: A Life* have been published, showing without a doubt that McCartney did indeed have guts.

But the forthcoming DVD *Going Underground: Paul McCartney, The Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture* (which comes out on October 1) provides the most in-depth and definitive analysis of *the kind of guts* that McCartney had in the 1960s and continues to have to this day (listen to his electronic outfit The Fireman for evidence).



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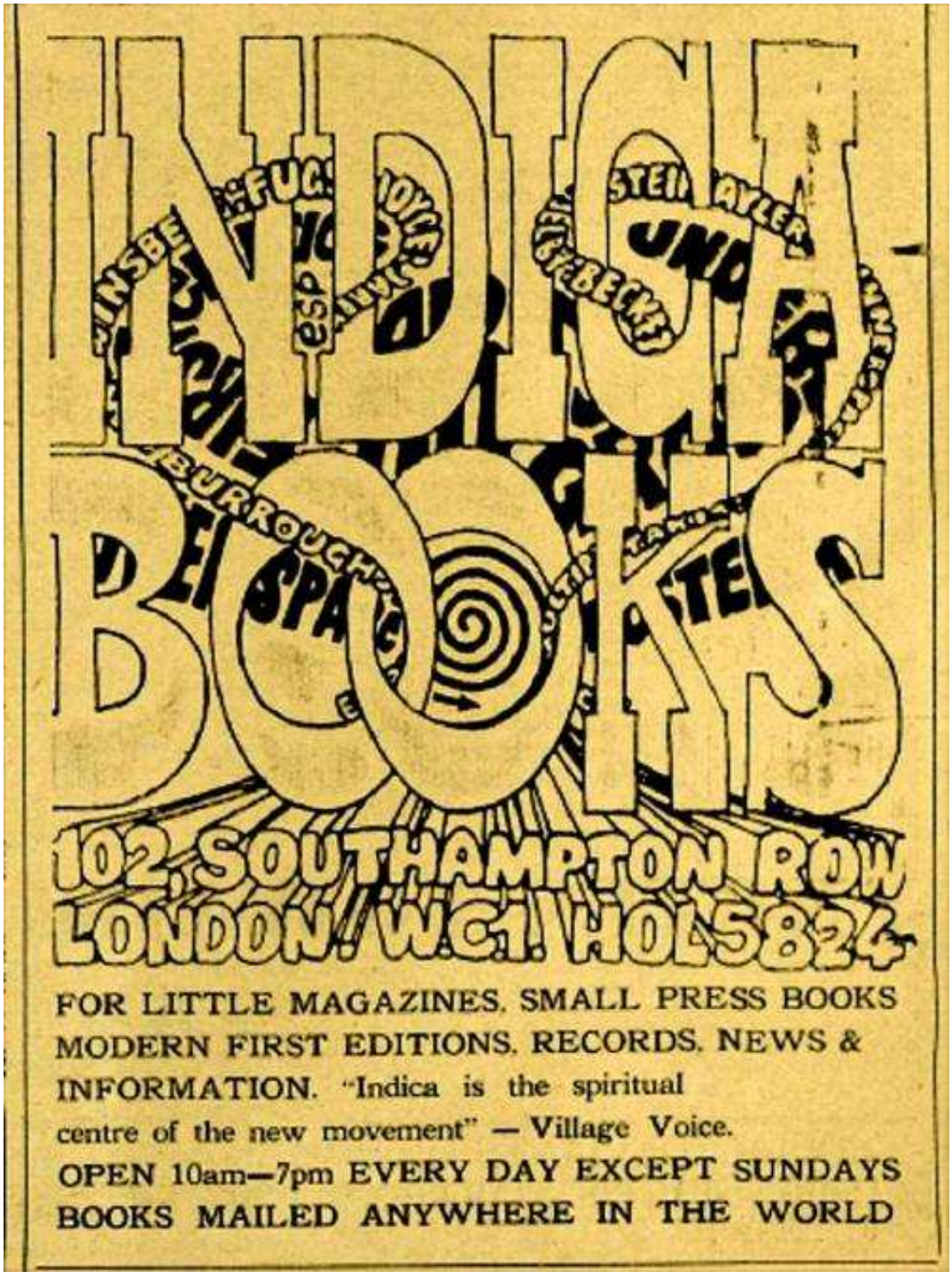
And these guts were decidedly *avant-garde* in nature. Many Beatles fans continue to believe that Lennon was The Beatle most closely affiliated with the avant-garde art that fueled the counter-culture in the UK – and he was, after he met Ono and the two began working together in earnest in 1968 on experimental sound-collage tracks like "Revolution 9" (which appeared on 1968's *The Beatles*) and on the three similarly experimental albums that they made as a duo: 1968's *Unfinished Music No 1: Two Virgins* and 1969's *Unfinished Music No 2: Life with the Lions* and *Wedding Album*. These recordings showed the influence of avant-garde composers such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen (who used chance and tape loops in their music), the aesthetics of the Fluxus movement (of which Ono was a prominent member), and a certain Paul McCartney.

As *Going Underground* delineates, McCartney discovered avant-garde ideas and began experimenting with them as early as 1965, when his fascination with Stockhausen led to him creating a private studio in which he could experiment with tape loops.


(http://caughtinthecarousel.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Unknown-1.jpeg)

McCartney's exposure to the ideas of Stockhausen came through his friendship with John "Hoppy" Hopkins, Joe Boyd, John Dunbar, and Barry Miles. These four men, all of whom are interviewed in *Going Underground*, were involved with publications, bands, bookshops, and clubs that drove the avant-garde and, subsequently, the counter-culture – the *International Times* newspaper, the UFO Club, The Indica Gallery bookshop and art gallery, AMM, The Soft Machine, and Pink Floyd.

Founded by Dunbar and co-owned by Miles, the Indica Gallery was especially important for the development of McCartney's interest in the avant-garde. It was a place that he frequented to see avant-garde art and and read avant-garde literature – such as the work of Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso. He consumed books by LSD guru Timothy Leary, tomes on Eastern religion and philosophy, and loads of marijuana and hashish.



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So it's no accident that McCartney – an endlessly curious musician – tried his hand at making art that reflected what he learned at Indica. Hence, McCartney's above-mentioned creation of tape loops.

In 1966 McCartney brought his avant-garde ideas to The Beatles (and Lennon) and created the looped sound collage that drives "Tomorrow Never Knows" (which appears on 1966's *Revolver*), the title and ideas for which Lennon got from flipping through Leary's LSD-inspired interpretation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Psychedelic Experience*.

McCartney's genius on the Stockhausen-influenced "Tomorrow Never Knows" and on the Cage-influenced "A Day in the Life" (which appears on 1967's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) was to make the avant-garde accessible to the general public through incorporating avant-garde ideas into otherwise traditional pop songs.

In other words, The Beatles were crucial to the development of a mass counter-culture because as the world's most popular and economically successful band, they had the ability and means to create songs of mass appeal that incorporated ideas derived from experimental classical music (tape loops and chance), LSD, Eastern religion, and Indian music. Just listen to the 1967 single "Strawberry Fields Forever" and *Sgt. Pepper* tracks like "Within You Without You" and "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!"

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But, as *Going Underground* points out, The Beatles never became a fleshed-out avant-garde band. The only song that completely abandoned the structure of pop that appeared on a Beatles' album was "Revolution 9" – and McCartney himself was against including this Lennon-led composition on *The Beatles*. His own sound collage – "Carnival of Light" – was created for *The Million Volt Light and Sound Rave*, which was held at the Roundhouse Theatre on January 28 and February 4, 1967, with all four Beatles appearing on the track. But it's never been officially released, despite the existence of a recording.

The bands that performed at the UFO – the club run by Boyd and organized by Hopkins – played true avant-garde music. These bands included AMM and the brilliant The Soft Machine (AMM's Eddie Prevost and The Soft Machine's Robert Wyatt give interviews in *Going Underground*).

The major UFO band, of course, was Pink Floyd, the Syd Barrett-led quartet. Pink Floyd did play short pop songs, such as "Arnold Layne," but their songs tended to begin as long Cage-like improvisational jams and then were re-created in the studio to fit the three-minute radio format.

Barrett's true genius, however, was for leading his bandmates – bassist Roger Waters, keyboardist Rick Wright, and drummer Nick Mason – through feedback-drenched improvisational slabs of psychedelic noise that went on for as long as the band felt like playing them. The stage became a place of experimentation, so *that the experimentation was the performance* – just like a happening from the Fluxus movement or a piece of auto-destructive art by Gustav Metzger (a major influence on The Who's Pete Townshend's guitar smashing). Some of Pink Floyd's experimental energy is captured on their debut album, 1967's *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, and its key avant-garde songs: "Astronomy Domine," "Pow R. Toc H.," and "Interstellar Overdrive."

(http://caughtinthecarousel.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/SydBarrettMickRockvcbnm_thumb.jpg)

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It's no wonder that Boyd argues in *Going Underground* that McCartney and Barrett are the two key figures in the development of the counter-culture in the UK.

But McCartney had to leave the scene because of Epstein's death in 1967 and his assumption of the role of leading the band, his first major project being the experimental television film and EP *Magical Mystery Tour* – and Barrett developed severe mental-health problems that forced him to leave Pink Floyd.

After watching *Going Underground*, I'm left wondering where all the creative energy and experimental spirit of folks like McCartney and Barrett went. It's definitely not in the blues, folk, and country rock that followed in their wake. But is it in the progressive rock of King Crimson and Yes? Or does it show up again in New York in the mid-70s in the music of Ramones, Patti Smith, Television, and Talking Heads? Or has it gone forever?

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McCartney was the last bachelor Beate to leave Central London and was therfore more in tune to what was happening there in the mid sixties .His diverse inetersts in music of all kinds has helped him produce some amazing work of hs own over the years .He has worked with different generations of musicans throughout the years , Elvis Costello being a great example .

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