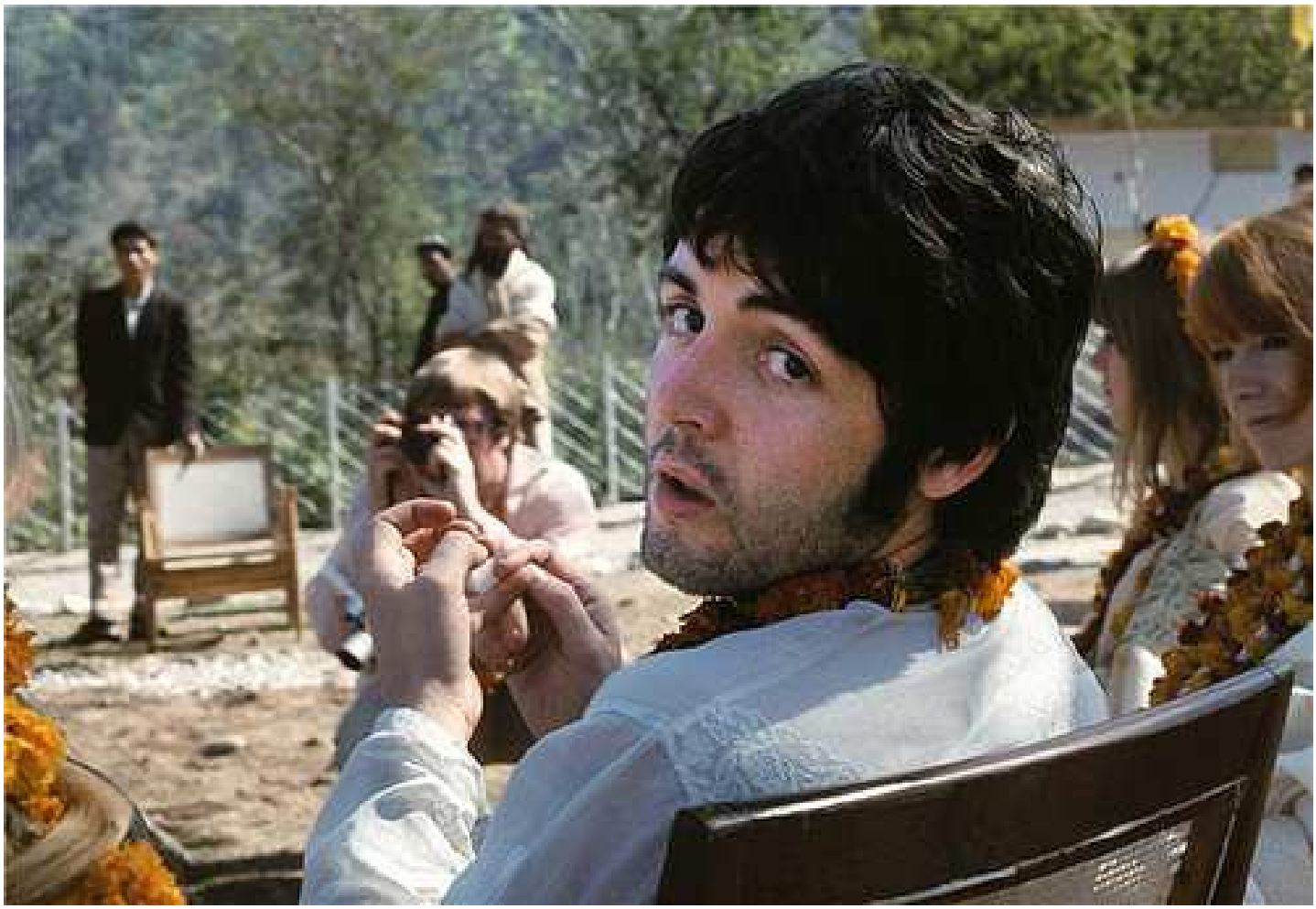

An Interview with Rob Johnstone, the Executive Producer of Going Underground: Paul McCartney, The Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture

By **Paul Gleason (http://caughtinthecarousel.com/author/pgleason/)**

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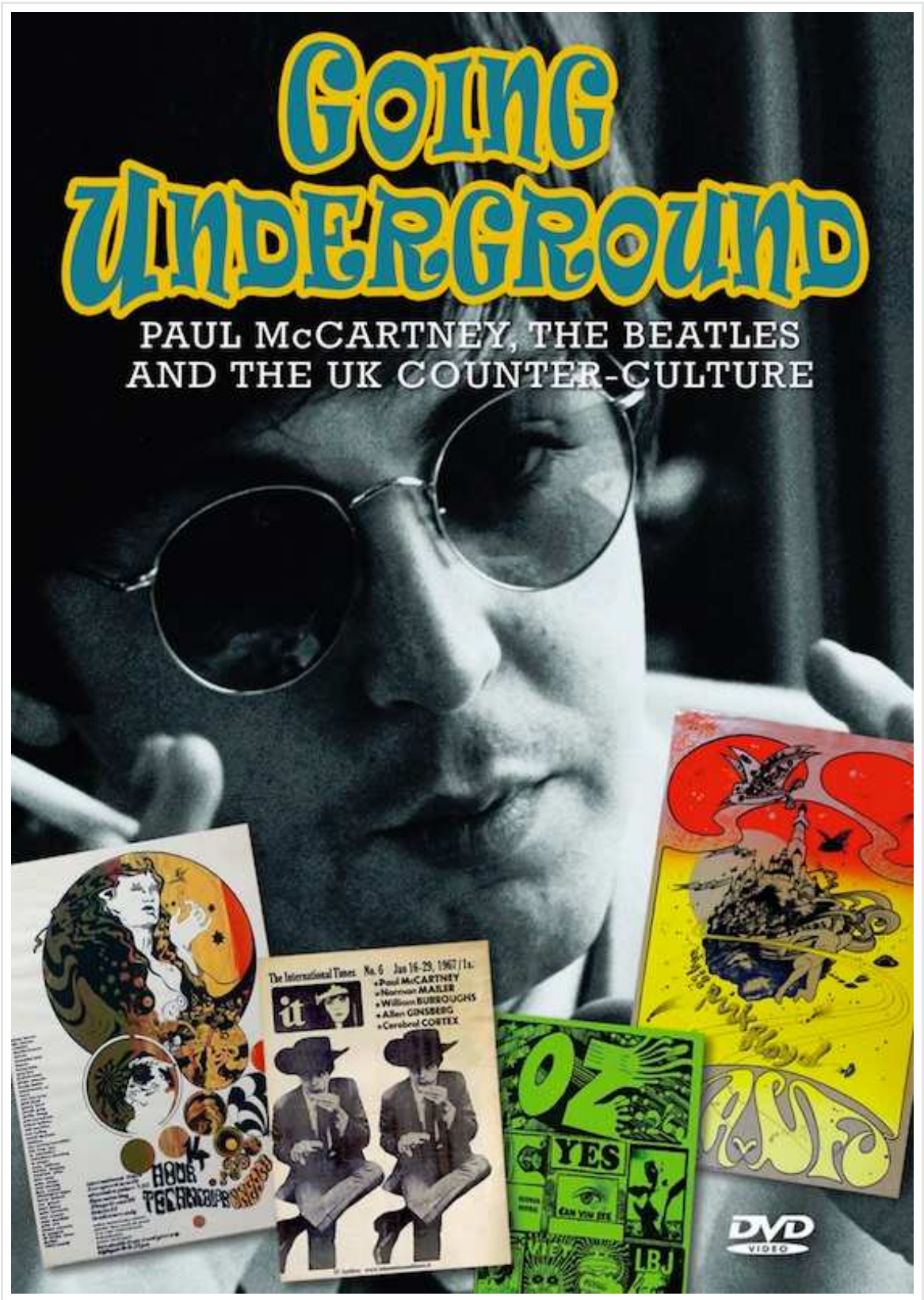
Rob Johnstone has worked as Executive Producer on many in-depth music DVD documentaries, the subjects of which include Mick Jagger, Kraftwerk, Led Zeppelin, Keith Richards, Joy Division, Syd Barrett, AC/DC, Bob Dylan, 2Pac, and Rammstein. And many of these films have appeared as in the acclaimed *Under Review* series.

Now Johnstone has turned his attention to Paul McCartney. His new DVD – *Going Underground: Paul McCartney, The Beatles, and the UK Counter-Culture* – compellingly explores McCartney's involvement and, really, development of the UK counter-culture through his interest in avant-garde music, art, and literature.

The documentary presents McCartney in a new light, one that's sure to challenge viewers' perception of him when they see the DVD, released Oct 1st.



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Johnstone sat down with *Caught in the Carousel* for a thorough and fascinating interview in which he fleshed out the story that he tells in *Going Underground*. He also gave a moving tribute to Mick Farren, who was a member of the influential band The Deviants, a central part of the UK counter-culture, and one of the key interviewees for the film.

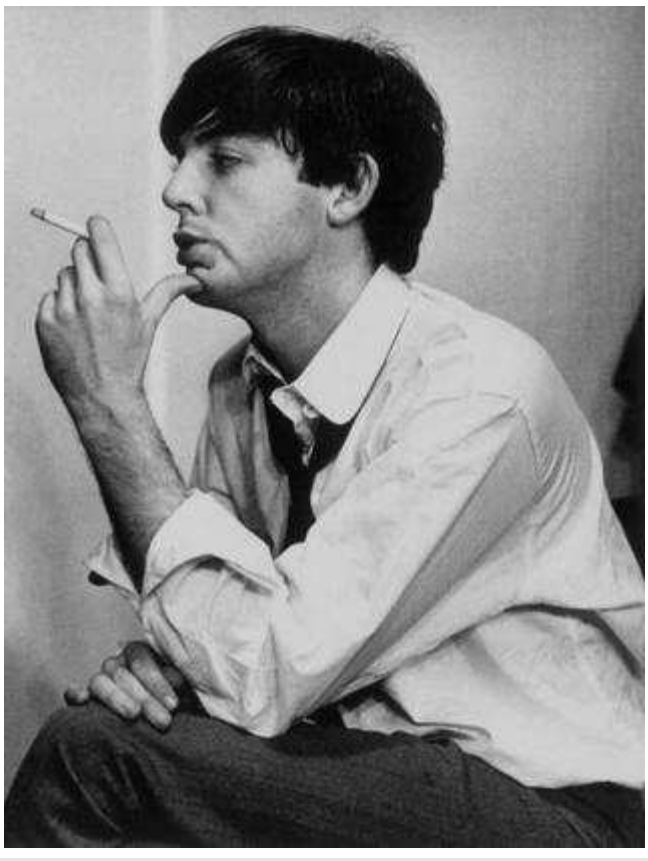
CITC: Why do you feel that *now* is the right time to tell the story of Paul McCartney's involvement in the UK avant-garde scene and counter-culture?

RJ: To be honest the timing of this project was not designed with any great master plan in place but perhaps co-incidentally certain aspects of conspired to come together at this time.

In the first instance, we really were looking to make a film that re-addresses the point that Lennon has historically been the Beatle most readily associated with more intellectual and political pursuits, while Paul was "just a composer of twee pop songs." As this is an entirely flawed point of view – and without wishing to diminish John's contribution to both The Beatles and to popular music generally – we felt a film of this nature could show 'what really happened'

CITC: Why did you choose austerity in the postwar UK as your point of departure?

RJ: In post war Britain, the climate for young people changed entirely. While the same was also true in the USA and other western nations, in the UK there had never been much of a place for those between school-leaving age (then usually at 15 for the majority of the population) and getting married and settling down to a life of hard work and family commitments. Youths started to question this system in the years following the end of the war. Many became politicized as the first proper socialist government took power, and most notably to this story, the creation of CND in 1957 (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) attracted many of the young who had seen firsthand how the effects of a war could near destroy nations and thus felt the need to do all they could to help avoid any such thing happening again. What would more than a decade later become known as the counter-culture most certainly had its roots in the creation of CND, when youths – who at the time were not allowed to vote – could have some political voice by way of demonstrations against political decisions they thought were wrong.



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CITC: The inclusion of the material on the anti-nuclear movement politicizes the material on the avant-garde and counter-culture that follows. Would you discuss the political elements present in Fluxus and/or auto-destructive works that might not appear to be political on the surface?

RJ: The elements that I just noted, while not directly linked to the parts of the UK counter-culture that took an interest in avant-garde ideas, which was at best only a minority of the rank and file, could be seen as the beginnings of politicization of young people, prior to which such people had little voice or indeed for many much interest in political matters, developed strongly throughout the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s - via a higher entry to further education facilities such as universities and art schools, thus political interest among this sector of the population exploded concurrently with the dawning of the counter-culture. Therefore those from this community who were interested in intellectual organizations and ideas such as Fluxus and/or auto-destruction, would attempt to adopt the political ideas therein. But having said this, it should be remembered that The Fluxus movement was, in both Britain, across Europe and in the United States, very much an underground movement known only to academic and intellectual communities and – until 1967 when Yoko Ono arrived in London and became John Lennon's partner – did the movement gain much attention in media other than the most left-field narrowly distributed journals.

CITC: How did bands contemporary to The Beatles – like The Who – incorporate Fluxus and auto-destructive ideas into their music?

RJ: The Who's Pete Townshend bought concepts he had ben exposed to in art school into their music and performances. So Gustav Metzger's concepts of auto-destruction filtered directly into his trashing of stage equipment, while one of the first examples of extended drone in popular music (notably introduced into Fluxus by avant-garde musicians John Cage and later La Monte Young) can be heard in the early Who single "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere."

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CITC: Why did The Beatles take longer than The Who to incorporate avant-garde ideas into their work?

RJ: This is not entirely correct. While The Who could be seen to have had ideas stemming from the avant-garde, it was notoriously Paul McCartney who made the first sound collages that became “Tomorrow Never Knows” – generally accepted as the first avant-garde rock track, and it was recorded two months before Frank Zappa’s *Freak Out!*.

In many respects The Who’s trashing of stage equipment was at least as much the result of teenage frustration and – following what the band and their managers felt was positive audience reactions to such activity – the desire to find a popular niche, as it was a calculation by the group’s one art school attendee Townshend, to add an academic dimension to the group’s image.

CITC: Why do you think that McCartney – until very recently – hasn’t been discussed as The Beatle who brought avant-garde ideas to the band? In other words, from what I’ve seen, John Lennon is still the “avant-garde Beatle” and McCartney is still the “pop craftsman.”

RJ: In early 1966, just six months or so before he met Yoko Ono, John Lennon pronounced, “Avant-garde? That’s French for bullshit.” While Lennon was the only Beatle who attended art school, he was clearly an anti-intellectual prior to his first encounters with Yoko.

(http://caughtinthecarousel.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/sessions-studio-2.jpg)

This is not to say John was not open to certain new ideas – particularly those associated with what was still then a reasonably casual use of narcotics. Indeed, his lyrics for “Tomorrow Never Knows” were inspired by reading Timothy Leary and those of songs like “Strawberry Fields Forever,” while almost certainly composed with the aid of hallucogenic stimulants, were far closer in style to childrens’ writers like Lewis Carroll or the “nonsense poetry” of Edward Lear than they were to anything even vaguely avant-garde. It was however his association with Yoko that spurned him into using the influence of John Cage when composing “Revolution 9” in 1968. But McCartney had been using Cage’s influence for three years by that stage.

What gave Lennon the concept of being the more politically and intellectually motivated Beatle was his tendency – with respect – to "shout louder" than the others about what interested him and what his passions were. So once Yoko had educated and inspired John to appreciate avant-garde ideas – by which time McCartney had all but "moved on" as the British counter-culture was itself fading – the world and his wife knew all about it.

CITC: "Tomorrow Never Knows" is often described as a "John song." But McCartney's contribution really makes the song an innovative piece of music. Would you please describe the avant-garde ideas that he brings to the composition of the song?

RJ: While Lennon essentially "wrote" both the lyrics and the melody, which was mainly restricted to one chord, McCartney introduced into the production the use of tape loops that were being experimented with by a range of American and British mavericks at the time, including Terry Riley, Luciano Berio, and The BBC Radiophonic Workshop. George Martin was keen to incorporate this method into Beatle music, and it is now generally accepted that without the tape loops having been incorporated into the song, it would never have become the pivotal and pioneering track it turned out to be.

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CITC: Would you please do the same for "A Day in the Life"?

RJ: This song differs from "Tomorrow Never Knows" in its compositional structure; as is well documented, Lennon and McCartney wrote different parts of the song with no initial intention of bringing them together as one number. While the lyrics are very "Beatles-esque," moving between news stories (largely Lennon's parts) and youthful memories (McCartney's) the musical structures used are in essence fairly traditional and echo styles from British Music Hall, various Jazz forms, American popular song, and contemporary British rock/pop music. The most avant-garde influence in the song is the orchestral crescendo at the end, which comes directly from the work of John Cage.

CITC: Tell me about the Indica Gallery. What did you learn about the place from the interviews with co-owners Barry Miles and John Dunbar, which appear in the film?

RJ: The Indica Gallery was opened as a forum for left-field contemporary artists to display their works that were often dismissed in London's more traditional art museums. It quickly also became established as a meeting place and hang out for London's counter-culture community. The Gallery grew out of The Indica

bookshop run by Barry Miles, and the gallery was initially set-up in the shop's basement. In early 1966 it took on its own premises after John Dunbar and silent partner Peter Asher became involved.

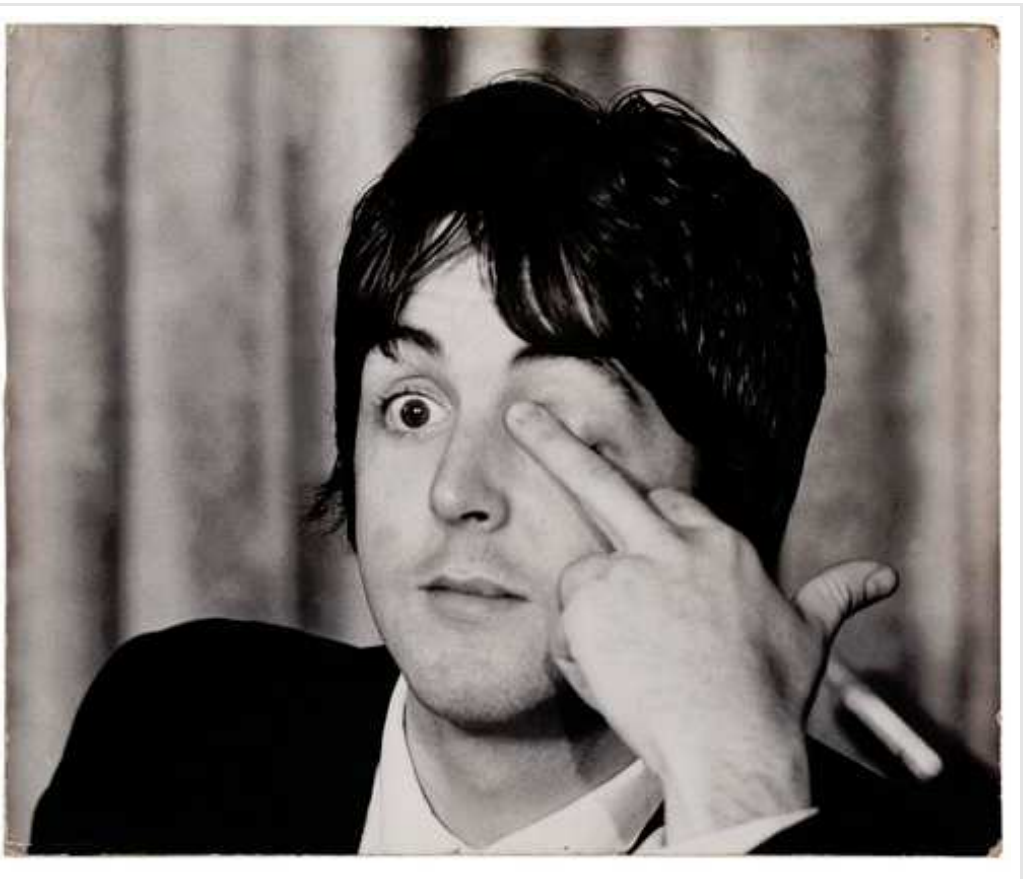
CITC: What did McCartney learn there? Who did he meet?

RJ: The most infamous meeting between a Beatle and A.N. Other at the Indica was of course John Lennon's introduction there to Yoko Ono in November 1966. John Dunbar himself made the introduction, while Yoko had an exhibition of her work on display. The rest of course is history with regards to that story.

While McCartney was hugely supportive – both financially and with his time – in setting up the gallery, and while he certainly mingled there with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and other Beat writers, there appears to be little definitive information in the public domain with regards to important personal meetings he undertook or even chanced upon at this venue. However, it is certain he mingled with many other counter-culture figures at the Indica, but I don't know if this was the venue where he first met many of these people.

CITC: What do you think McCartney took away from reading Beat writers like Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, and Corso?

RJ: McCartney became good friends with William Burroughs; when Burroughs was in London, he would often stay at Paul's house. Burroughs' "cut-up" writing technique, whereby written passages would be literally cut-up with scissors and the paper cuttings placed in a bag and pulled out at random to form new sentences, was adopted by McCartney in the tape segments that would then form his sound collages. This was probably the biggest influence that any of the beat writers had on McCartney. The same technique was later adopted by David Bowie in his lyric writing.



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CITC: Please describe the UFO Club. How were your interviewees Joe Boyd and John "Hoppy" Hopkins involved?

RJ: Both these contributors were revealing and expressive in their descriptions of UFO. Hopefully this comes across in the film. We are of the understanding that at the peak of the counter-culture, when bands like Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, AMM and others would regularly play there, it was a hugely exciting vibrant club that became the hub of the whole movement. Both Boyd and Hoppy were essential to the development of the counter-culture, with both their organizational skills and general understanding of where the scene that was developing before their eyes should go. Their formation of UFO is an excellent example of this foresight and planning, and along with a few others such as Barry Miles and John Dunbar, were near instrumental in bringing about a proper organized movement in London at this time.

CITC: Tell me about Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd. Was Pink Floyd more "experimental" than The Beatles?

RJ: In Pink Floyd's first incarnation – the period of Syd Barrett, UFO, classic singles like "See Emily Play" and "Arnold Layne" and the album *The Piper at the Gates Of Dawn* – there was literally two sides to Floyd. The poppy, almost childlike songs composed by Syd such as "Emily," "Bike," "The Scarecrow," etc. – and then the long psychedelic collages like "Interstellar Overdrive" and "Astronomy Domine." There was no question that this early version of Pink Floyd were a hugely experimental collective. But as such, a nebulous concept is difficult to quantify, for example whether or not Floyd at this time were *more* experimental than The Beatles, is almost impossible to determine. It must ultimately however be considered that, while Floyd remain an influential group, the way The Beatles changed music during their heyday far eclipses that of Pink Floyd, and The Beatles remain, of course, the more influential band.

(http://caughtinthecarousel.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Pink_Floyd_-_all_members.jpg)

CITC: What's your assessment of *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* as a piece of avant-garde pop music?

RJ: Personally, I believe it to be Pink Floyd's finest album, but that is personal choice. It is surely, however, for most fans of pop or rock music, a startling collection and for any artist to release a debut record featuring this kind of originality, unique perspective, and confidence that borders on arrogance, is almost unheard of in the annals of rock's rich tapestry.

CITC: After McCartney left the avant-garde scene to lead The Beatles and Barrett left Pink Floyd, what happened to avant-garde pop music? Where do you see it *surviving*?

RJ: With regards to music, following the demise of avant-garde pop in the UK, it would emerge as a major influence and stimulus for the krautrock bands of the early to mid 1970s, notably within the work of Can, Amon Düül II, and Neu!. It would also make a fleeting appearance in some of David Bowie's 1970s' work, albeit most notably in his Berlin albums, which were themselves much informed by krautrock. Concurrently, although less successfully, it can be heard, too, in some of Brian Eno's 1970s' output.

CITC: What do you want viewers to take away from watching *Going Underground*?

RJ: It's hard to say, but first and foremost an understanding that Paul McCartney was enormously involved – indeed, for a number of years instrumentally so within the Beatles – in the development and experimentation via the input of new and outside specialist circles often unknown ideas and techniques.

It would be fair to say that Paul McCartney is amongst the only people – dead or alive – to have bought avant-garde ideas into the mainstream.

A note from Mr. Johnstone: As a final word and post-script to this interview, I would like to mention that one central contributor to the film, Mick Farren, who often ran the door at the UFO Club; wrote extensively for International Times*; had his own band, The Deviants (who played at the infamous 18 Hour Tecnicolour Dream) and who went on to be a long term contributor to NME in the 1970s, sadly passed away on 27 July 2013 at the tender age of 69, following a fatal heart attack.*

A hugely respected culture and music journalist and author (his autobiography Give The Anarchist A Cigarette *is highly recommended as further reading for anyone who wishes to find out more about London's counter-culture), Mick Farren was as close as any one person came to being the epitome of the entire movement.*

We believe that the fascinating interview Mick provided for this film to be the last he ever undertook.

The directors and producers of this film wish to extend their commiserations to the family and friends of Mick Farren, to whom – since this tragic event occurred – this film has been dedicated

Michael Anthony Farren (RIP), writer, editor, and singer, born 3 September 1943; died 27 July 2013

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