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A Critical Element

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Going Underground



Illuminating Paul McCartney's avant-garde credentials

John Lennon may have ended up with the larger avant-garde cred, but this fascinating 153-minute documentary suggests it was Paul McCartney who first dug into the underground. Combining period footage (including clips of the Beatles, Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, Pink Floyd and Soft Machine) and contemporary interviews with a number of '60s scene-makers, the film demonstrates McCartney's early interest and sponsorship of counterculture art and social activities, and the role he served in bridging the avant-garde into the mainstream. Beatles fans will recognize key moments in the group's career, but may not know the roots of the invention and synthesis that brought "Tomorrow Never Knows" and other icons to fruition. Even lesser known is the role McCartney played in supporting key counterculture activities, such as [Indica Books and Gallery](#), the Long Hair Times (and its successor the [International Times](#)), and the legendary [Million Volt Light and Sound Rave](#).

The story begins with the late-50s emergence of youth culture in the UK, including the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the expressive freedom and bohemian romance of the Beats, the cutting edge jazz of the 1960s, and the growing influence of art school on music. The program gets to the Beatles at the thirty-minute mark, when John Lennon and George Harrison dip their toe in the underground at a birthday party for Allen Ginsburg. Lennon was then living in the suburbs with his first wife and child, and didn't find an immediate resonance with the underground. McCartney, on the other hand, was a bachelor, living in London and being introduced to the works of John Cage by the family of Jane Asher, to Karlheinz Stockhausen and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop by George Martin, and to avant-garde books and art through his association with Indica.

McCartney's intellectual pursuits, and his experiments in a home studio (something that would continue into his post-Beatles solo career) were absorbed by the Beatles, but reiterated to the market in pop song format. The reframing of avant-garde ideas, coupled with the Beatles unprecedented renown, made it seem as if these concepts were drawn from thin air. But as this film documents, there are many antecedents from which McCartney and the Beatles drew, brilliantly recontextualized and then released into the commercial

mainstream. This might seem opportunistic, had the Beatles not completed the loop by feeding back into the underground. By the end of 1966 the Beatles had abandoned touring, Lennon had met Yoko Ono (at a private showing of her work at Indica), and McCartney provided the impetus for both TNK and the [“Carnival of Light”](#) sound collage.

The Beatles continued to slip avant-garde elements into their music, but 1967 turned out to be a year of changes. McCartney’s media appearances gave a more explicit view of his involvement with the underground, but by year’s end, with the death of Brian Epstein, he’d given himself over to running the group’s business. Lennon, on the other hand, had become much more deeply enmeshed with the avant-garde, and expanded its role on Beatles records with Revolution 9. Post-Beatles, Lennon strengthened his ties to political elements of the underground, but the avant-garde influences faded from his solo music. McCartney doubled-down on the mainstream with Wings, but continued to experiment in his solo outings.

McCartney’s role as a bridge between the underground and the commercial mainstream provides the central thesis, but the film’s subtitle is a bit misleading, as McCartney himself does not occupy the majority of the program’s screen time (there are, for example, major segments on Pink Floyd and Soft Machine). The bulk of the continuity is provided by a mix of the era’s scene makers and contemporary musicologists, providing background information that is essential to understanding the avant-garde milieu in which the Beatles developed. No doubt many Beatles fans have already absorbed some or all of this material, but to those who only know the group through their records and publicity, the context for their musical experimentation will be eye opening. [©2013 Hyperbolium]

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