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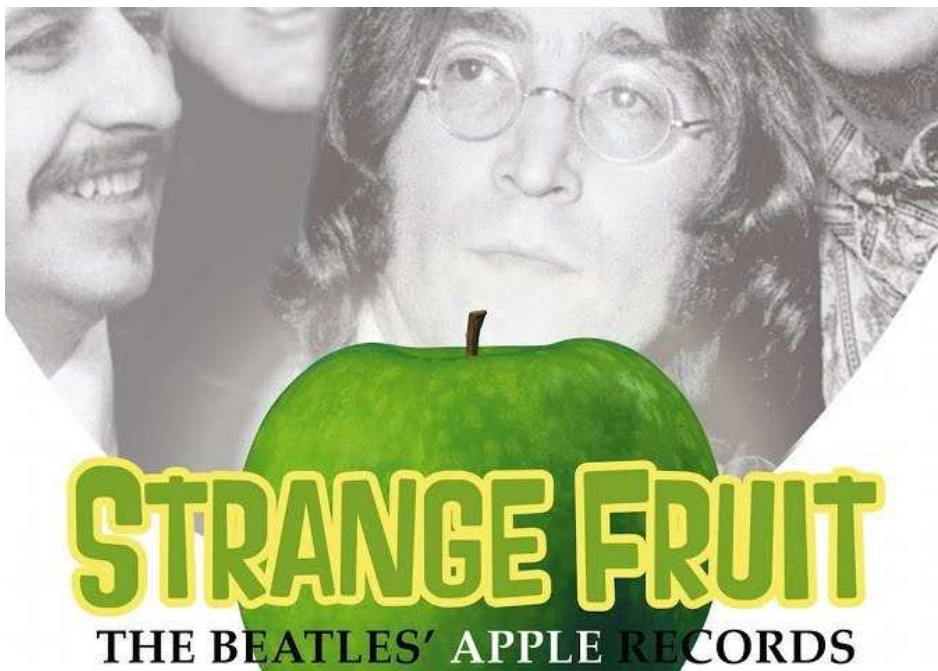
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# Review: 'Strange Fruit' A Solid, Fascinating Look At The Groundbreaking Failure Of The Beatles' Apple Records

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While Radiohead wasn't the first band to break free of the corporate machine and drop an album on their own terms, they were easily the most prominent. And while this was par for the course for underground artists and bands through the '80s and '90s who thrived within a specific independent framework (that was arguably co-opted by the mainstream post-Nirvana, but that's another discussion), the release of *In Rainbows* opened the eyes of acts of similar stature, proving that they didn't need to rely on the expensive machinations and iron clad contracts of a major record label to survive. And in fact, they could sell less records and earn more money by striking it out on their own. Nowadays, if a band isn't founding their own label, they're at least setting up vanity shingles under corporate umbrellas, and taking a stronger say in how they conduct their careers. But all this might not have been possible were it not for The Beatles.

"Strange Fruit -- The Beatles' Apple Records" is a deeply comprehensive account of the Fab Four's attempt to break free from EMI and set up what they dubbed a "Western communism" approach to releasing music and supporting artists. But this was both a pragmatic and idealistic endeavor. At the time it was founded, The Beatles were not only unhappy with their current contract with EMI (who, incidentally, would still own their recordings, even those they released under Apple), the band was facing a crushing tax bill, but if they invested their money in a business venture, a good portion of that burden would be alleviated. That said, they used the opportunity to try and create something truly holistic, with a goal to champion artists that wouldn't ordinarily be sought out by mainstream labels as well as develop a larger cultural imprint through a boutique chain of stores, films, electronics and more.

To say it was a bold move would be an understatement. You have to remember that in 1968, music was essentially entirely a corporate machine from top to bottom, with a handful of major labels controlling manufacturing, publishing, distribution and even what was played on the radio. But, the name of The Beatles has the kind of pull that few artists -- or even companies -- have, and perhaps Apple could have made a bigger impact rather than becoming, ultimately, a curious note in Beatles history. But with the band starting to crumble only a year after the label was founded, and formally dissolving by 1970, it never had the focus or energy of all four members at any one time. And this lack of attention led to a number of artists -- David Bowie, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, Grace Slick -- slipping through the net, signing with other labels and moving on to massive success elsewhere.

But, when they had the right combination of talent and attention, they knew how to score a hit. Paul McCartney and George Harrison were easily the most effusive and energetic folks behind A&R early on. After being tipped to McCartney by Twiggy, who saw her perform on the talent program "Opportunity Knocks," Mary Hopkin became the first star for the label (outside The Beatles) with her single "Those Were The Days"/"Turn Turn Turn" becoming a smash hit, in addition to her full album proper, *Postcard*. McCartney was instrumental in choosing the songs she performed and in producing them, and his magic touch certainly was a big factor in her success. Billy Preston, Jackie Lomax, The Iveys (who would later become Badfinger) and James Taylor (who left after his debut album) also signed in the first year, showing that A&R had a keen eye for talent. But again, the fractious relationship between band members and a naive sense of the business also worked against them.

Apple released their first four singles simultaneously -- The Beatles ("Hey Jude"/"Revolution"), the aforementioned Mary Hopkin disc and efforts from Jackie Lomax and a split by John Foster & Sons Ltd. & Black Dyke Mills Band -- a move which ultimately cannibalized the latter two efforts. In those days -- and even now -- DJs had to be carefully to balance their playlists between labels, so they couldn't play four songs by Apple artists in an hour long show. So, The Beatles would be a "must play," while Hopkin would likely get a spin, leaving the other two artists unpromoted as DJs had to play something else to keep things fair.

And this inexperience (coupled with a slight ignorance) in how to play the marketing game manifested in other ways. By this point in their career, The Beatles had pretty much stopped performing live, and by extension, not much effort was made to give their artists a chance to gain a following on the road, with an emphasis placed mostly on studio recordings and the hope that releases would become hits on the radio. Meanwhile, for the black artists on the label like Billy Preston and Doris Troy, Apple's unfamiliarity with the urban marketplace and how to turn acts like these into crossover sensations also resulted in muted receptions for those singles and discs. And that's not to mention that much more out there acts like Brute Force, modern composer John Tavener and Radha Krishna Temple who were uncommercial out of the gate (though, they did live up to the original spirit and goals of Apple in terms of signing artists that wouldn't get exposure elsewhere). And then there was Allan Klein.

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The infamous and ruthless manager was hired by the band in 1970 (much to the chagrin of Paul McCartney who was outvoted 3-1) to look over The Beatles' finances, and with Apple hemorrhaging money, he drastically cut half the staff in two months, and put a number of projects on hold while everything was sorted out. This led to a handful of acts amicably parting ways; the band forced Allen to let the acts go with no strings attached, something that was unheard of both then and now. The Apple Electronics division along with other shingles under Apple Corp were shuttered, and generally speaking, releases moving forward tended to favor Beatles-affiliated or approved artists only (rather than signings through the label's A&R department). But most importantly, the label's most active member Paul McCartney (who was responsible for some of Apple's biggest hits), furious with the hire of Klein and by John Lennon's wish to contractually dissolve the band, led him to retreat from any involvement. And while Apple continued issuing records, the combination of Klein's contract ending in 1973, and EMI's in 1976, eventually found the label folding without much fanfare.

Though stamped with a warning -- This Film Is Not Sanctioned By Apple Records Or The Beatles -- 'Strange Fruit' is a remarkably comprehensive (running two hours and forty minutes, phew), year-by-year, artist-by-artist, blow-by-blow account of Apple. What it lacks in talking heads, and feedback from people higher up the food chain (only two actual people who worked for Apple are interviewed with none of the famous names from the roster or band participating) it makes up for in detail and knowledge. This is largely provided by Beatles expert Chris Ingham, author and journalist Mark Paytress and Apple biographer Stefan Granados who do an excellent job of contextualizing nearly every move the label made in the course of its history. It makes for a truly fascinating account not just of the inner machinations of the label, but also of a band falling apart at the same time. And the filmmakers (oddly, there is no credited director) find the drama contained within, and boost it with a tremendous wealth of great archival footage, featuring performances, artwork and pretty much anything you might want.

But that's not to say the documentary is perfect. The same few interview subjects, combined with a rigid structural framework, can make watching 'Strange Fruit' feel episodic to the point where it's probably best advised to split up your viewing to keep it from getting too monotonous (even with all the great info that's being provided). One also wishes others at least from the industry of the time would've offered additional context. And we would've loved to at least learn what the Apple Electronics vision was hoping to cook up, and

even more, an exploration of some of the bonkers projects Apple Films put together (Alejandro Jodorowsky's "El Topo" is mentioned briefly, but strangely, Allan Klein effectively sitting on it along with "The Holy Mountain" for over three decades is omitted) would have been nice. And it would've been great to hear a bit more about the person (or persons?) who put together the advertising for the label, much of it which was highly creative, and seemingly ahead of the curve with an approach that still seems quite modern. A lot of it is great to see, and some word on who put it together and what the guiding philosophy behind it was, would've been a nice additional layer.

But those are minor quibbles for a documentary as exhaustive as this. Pleasantly surprising in its detail, "Strange Fruit -- The Beatles' Apple Records" should satisfy the die hard fans of the Beatles, as well as more casual music enthusiasts looking for a balanced, informed account of the last throes of the band and their risky, curious venture of running a label. [B]

"Strange Fruit -- The Beatles' Apple Records" is on DVD today.

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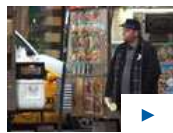
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# 1 COMMENT

SCOTT HARRIGAN | APRIL 25, 2012 2:32 AM

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This film seems like it is worth checking out. The Beatles are such a beloved band, it is interesting to see a film focusing on one of their few abject failures. Aside from giving information on the Beatles, it also has the potential to provide insight in the corporate world of music and the struggle of the artist. This film seems to have a little something for every documentary lover. This is refreshing because there has not been an engaging documentary in a while and music certainly makes for a great subject matter. <http://www.videodetective.com/movies/anvil-the-story-of-anvil/884762>

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