

The Beatles - Strange Fruit: The Beatles' Apple Records

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The Product:

They were the most famous band in the world. Their every move inspired actual shifts in the pop culture dynamic, and a myriad of mimics who wanted to capitalize on their cash cow celebrity. Every album was greeted with childlike wonder, every single soaring straight to the top of the charts. By the time of its release, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* would become endemic of an entire era, the soundtrack to the Summer of Love. So it made sense that The Beatles, eager to spread their artistic wings beyond the three minute pop song (and shelter some of their hard earned dosh) decided to form the boutique label, Apple. With it, they could discover new talent, invest in film production, expand their media reach, and seek out the kind of eccentric forms of expression that stirred their potent pot-fueled imaginations. The story of the idea's rise and dramatic fall is outlined in the excellent documentary **Strange Fruit: The Beatles' Apple Records**. With its attention to detail and all encompassing nature, it's a valuable lesson for any fan of the lads from Liverpool.

The Plot:

Starting from scratch and covering Apple's creation, the death of manager Brian Epstein, and the group's eventual disillusion with the concept, **Strange Fruit** is a cornucopia of conscious nostalgia. While barely touching on *Magical Mystery Tour* (the TV project which provided the germ for the Apple idea), it does cover almost everything done under the iconic label. Beginning with little Mary Hopkin, (whose take on a retrofitted Russian folksong, "Those Were the Days," became a worldwide #1 smash) and breezing through Ravi Shankar, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Billy Preston, and perhaps most importantly, the Iveys (who would later morph into the brilliant Badfinger), we get individual discussions of the behind the scenes machinations and maneuvers among the slowly disintegrating group. Indeed, as Apple was starting, The Beatles were breaking apart. Still, while in the first stages of free fall, the boys managed to champion James Taylor, the solo work of Ronnie Spector, and UK icon Jackie Lomax. Work outside the four person pop group is also discussed. including soundtracks by George Harrison and the notorious output of

John Lennon and his new lady love, Yoko Ono.

The DVD:

One has to give credit to Sexy Intellectual (an awful name, by the way) and its documentary department. Even without specific authorization from the entities they are profiling, they manage to come up with some crackerjack insights. After the brilliant **From Straight To Bizarre: Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and LA's Lunatic Fringe**, expectations for this late career Beatles overview were very high indeed - and this two and a half hour dissertation did not disappoint. Beginning with the band's idea for an elite "artist's friendly" label to the awkward expansion out to fashion, films, and other money-hemorrhaging foolishness, the narrative here covers all the bases. Even better, it then settles in on the individual musicians signed and lets them give their anecdotal evidence of what it was like working 'with' and for the famous Fab Four. Not every story has a happy ending, and for those who know about Apple's initial legacy (not its continuing presence as part of The Beatles post-breakup empire), there is really nothing new here. But for the uninitiated or the casual completist, this is a must-own.

The best moments here come from the individual musicians. Jackie Lomax, looking like a true refugee from the Peace era, spins his sad saga in sage wisdom and wisecracks. Hired on as one of Apple's in-house composers, he became an accidental victim of the public's desire for Beatles inspired product only. Similarly, the story of Hopkin and her surprise hit can't compete with the way in which she was discovered...and later dismissed. The fact that Preston played with the band is emphasized, actually more so than his own solo output, and James Taylor's appearance on the label legitimizes the various arguments about the Beatles being more hands off than on. In fact, aside from Paul (who actively pursued and produced) and George (who explored Apple's surreal side), the band seems to have fallen out of love with the idea as quickly as they formed it. The death of Epstein didn't help (the standard "McCartney as interim megalomaniac" statements arrive on cue) and the eventual arrival of Allen Klein turns everything into a proto-piece of Wall Street corporate interloping.

Yet there is real history here, footnotes in the careers of some of music's most meaningful contributors. The struggle to move from The Iveys to Badfinger finds a massive line-up change and ID issues (were they merely a conduit for the Lennon/McCartney material, or a legitimate hit making machine themselves?) and the eventual collapse of everything except the recording wing gets a bit of the old short shrift. Still, **Strange Fruit** excels because it manages to be both exploitive and respectful, digging for a bit of dirt before relegating said scandal to its place as rumor. As for John, Paul, George, and Ringo, they are set aside, their influence and mentorship mentioned but never given full force or flower. Instead, this is an overview of ego slightly unchecked, of individuals with as much money as motive attempting to change the business dynamic - and succeeding, if only for a short while. Apple may have initially measured its success in hit records and newspaper print, but today it has taken on a more ethereal note. **Strange Fruit** explains why, and provides insight where only innuendo once ruled.

The Video:

Offered in a clean crisp, if cinematically pointless 4:3 aspect ratio, **Strange Fruit** looks pretty damn good on DVD. Sure, the archival material suffers from age and technological issues, but the interviews look pristine and well put together.

Some have a bit too much soft lighting and focus, but overall, the details are prevalent and the contrasts concrete. While a 16:9 presentation would have been much better (the image does stretch well on HD TVs, no matter the OAR), this is still a slick, well put together product.

The Audio:

Since music is not the main reason for this overview, the decision to stick with a standard Dolby Digital Stereo mix is perfectly acceptable. The Q&As come across with crystal clarity and the occasional song or concert segment has a nice amount of bass and treble. And - yes - there are Beatles tracks here, surprise, surprise. In the earlier days of DVD, companies making such unauthorized biographies had to suffer with soundalikes. Here, everyone is represented by their own music, and it makes for a far better - and beefier - presentation.

The Extras:

There are a few goodies to be found in the added content. While the participants are given biographical overviews, the real treat is an interview with Brute Force, the infamous artist who recorded the legendary Apple track "The King of Fuh" (otherwise known as "the Fuh King"...get it?).

Final Thoughts:

Unfortunately, as with all things unauthorized and unapproved by the business associates of the formidable '60s pop icons, Strange Fruit has come under attack. Release dates have been postponed with some outlets promising pre-orders while others have simply stopped advertising the release all together. Some unhappy owners have even mentioned that "newer" versions of the documentary have all the Beatles music and clips removed (for the record, this critic's copy has all that material intact). Flaws and firestorm aside, this is an excellent overview of an often overlooked aspect of the Fab Four's legacy. Easily earning a **Highly Recommended** rating, it's perfect for the purist and novice alike. Today, many artists have their own boutique label. Sadly, few seemed to have learn the lessons taught to them by the biggest band in the history of music - and their own ego-infused folly.

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