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- [TCS Reviews \(http://www.theclevelandsound.com/?cat=7\)](http://www.theclevelandsound.com/?cat=7)
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Beatles Sow Musical Seeds on New DVD (<http://www.theclevelandsound.com/?p=12142>)

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By Pete Roche

The Beatles were already financially secure enough to buy their dreams by 1968, as evinced by psychedelic film vanity project *Magical Mystery Tour*. So when the Inland Revue knocked at the Fab Four offices singing "You Never Give Me Your Money," the Liverpudlian legends—faced with a use-it-or-lose-it proposition—threw two millions pounds into Apple Corps. Ltd.

Initially little more than a tax shelter for the quartet, the Apple conglomerate was the first of many business ventures undertaken by The Beatles and their handlers—who in drug-hazed naiveté (or was it genius?) plied Summer of Love ideals and aspirations to the running of a fledgling company. Perhaps no branch of the new Beatles business was more prominent than the Apple retail store at 94 Baker Street, a Technicolor haven where fans could browse the same boutique aisles haunted by their idols.

Apple also had subdivisions devoted to film and publishing interests, but its most enduring—and *interesting*—gambit was staged at its music studio and distribution center located at 3 Savile Row. Operated under the rubric of what Paul McCartney described as a sort of "western communism," Apple Records was the band's chance to literally pay it forward and give up-and-comers a taste of Beatles glory.



The dream would be short-lived.

The Beatles were already becoming frayed by '68, its members too distracted by their wives, other musician's wives, and the Maharishi to devote significant time to their next album, much less anyone else's. Yet McCartney got his hands dirty early on, and George Harrison's transcendental meditation lessons with the Yogi Mahesh were brought to bear on the office, in the form of Asian and Indian music. But most of Apple's day-to-day hustle was left to old school chum (and Beatles road manager) Neil Aspinall and successor Allen Klein, neither of whom could steer the rudderless enterprise once its foundering fathers went their separate ways

Strange Fruit: The Beatles' Apple Records provides an exhausting analysis of the rise and fall of the extraordinary label, handholding viewers on a journey through Beatles lore from 1968-75. The unauthorized film was meticulously assembled by those clandestine celluloid cobblers at Sexy Intellectual / Chrome Dream, who released similarly engaging titles on Zappa / Beefheart and Alice Cooper a couple years back. And while it features dozens of color and black-and-white Beatles snapshots and archival film clips (of questionable copyright status), it contains no official Beatles music apart from "Penny Lane" and offers no insight from any Beatle, alive or dead. Nevertheless, with its painstakingly researched (and lovingly presented) album profiles and fresh interviews with former Apple artists and insiders, *Strange Fruit* is must-see TV for all Beatles enthusiasts and true top-shelf material for any self-respecting rock and roll musicologist.

The 162-minute (yep, 2.75 hours) epic begins with a recounting of The Beatles' American invasion in 1964 and abrupt retirement from touring to establish context for their founding of their mythical record company. Having dropped the still-influential classics *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*, The Beatles continued stretching their creative muscles in the film world. *Magical Mystery Tour* was a critical flop, but so affluent were Lennon / McCartney by this time that they simply shrugged their shoulders and looked elsewhere for diversion. When they got wind of the "Tax Man"'s intent to siphon The Beatles' coffers, well...launching a signature record label seemed not only natural, but logical.

Apple solicited demo recordings in trade publications—an unprecedented move at the time—and dispatched its own A&R people (including Peter Asher) to scour the globe for talent. An early stipulation that every artist on the roster receive a stamp of approval from at least one Beatle would come back to bite the company, which had to pass on Fleetwood Mac, Yes, and Crosby, Stills & Nash because no Beatles were present to sign them. The Apple offices typically housed more hangers-on than employees at any given time, and looked (and smelled) more like a freshman dormitory than any conventional workplace.

The recruitment of then-heartthrob Jackie Lomax is prefaced by a rundown of his Merseybeat band, The Undertakers, who were discovered by Beatles manager Brian Epstein. Bearing more likeness today to a retired gunslinger than Donovan circa 1970, Lomax shares his disappointment in Apples' mishandling of his nascent career and observes how the label's policy of issuing four titles simultaneously only pitted the artists against one other—if not against The Beatles themselves. Sales of his debut, *Is This What You Want?* were grossly outdistanced by receipts for Mary Hopkin's "Those Were the Days," the record by the 18-year old Welsh McCartney-sponsored chanteuse shipped in the neighborhood of eight million copies.

The keys were tapped for their accessible jangle-pop sound and clean-cut image—but the tag of "Beatles clones" worked against the group, whose Apple signing came with changes in lineup and musical approach. Fronted by Pete Ham and Tom Evans, the band reemerged as Badfinger, whose hit "Come and Get It" came from the pen of none other than Sir Paul himself. Keys founder Ron Griffiths gets misty-eyed recalling the halcyon days and missed opportunities, but Badfinger alumnus Joey Molland is decidedly upbeat discussing the band's chart success ("No Matter What," "Day After Day"). Even the Ham-written castoff "Day After Day" became a monster hit for Harry Nilsson (and, decades later, Mariah Carey). One of the film's most touching moments arrives via Molland's recollection of Ham's acoustic guitar duet with Harrison at the 1972 *Concert for Bangladesh*. Ham (who died in 1972) was in awe to share the stage with his hero but, in Molland's estimation, rose to the occasion with "Here Comes the Sun."

Apple's biggest discovery came in the form of a lanky American singer-songwriter who'd spent some time busking in England. Brought to Beatles' stable by A&R man Peter Asher, guitar-pickin' crooner James Taylor would eventually soar to heights his mentors surely couldn't have imagined. Trouble is, Taylor's first and only Apple release—his eponymous debut—was marred by Asher's own flowery production. While sweeping strings and understated brass were all the rage at the time, the augmentation called attention to itself, detracting from the beauty of Taylor's subtle-yet-masterful song craft. At least The Beatles thought so; Lennon and McCartney gave J.T. their blessings when Warner Bros. stole away the soon-to-be-megastar, and so taken with Taylor's voice was Harrison that he copped "Something in the Way She Moves" for the first verse of his own "Something." Taylor would later remake

a couple of his Apple hits, sans strings, for his gazillion-selling 1976 *Greatest Hits*. So taken with Taylor's voice was Harrison that he copped "Something in the Way She Moves" for the first verse of his own "Something."

Mismanagement also saw Badfinger jumping ship after a couple albums, and the film devotes no small amount of time to a dissection of the group's defection—right down to Peter Corriston's cover art for the 1973 album, *Ass*, whereon a donkey (representing the band) is lured off by a giant carrot in the sky (Warner Bros.). And while Hopkin benefitted from McCartney's tutelage, the songbird quickly tired of being spoon-fed show tunes and standards. Hopkin switched gears for folk album *Earth Song, Ocean Song* before quitting the scene entirely.

Little Richard organist and "Fifth Beatle" Billy Preston (who played on "Get Back") enjoyed modest success on Apple but never morphed into the R&B star the film's commentators presumed he would in the 70s. The charismatic soul singer would instead become a notable sideman, contributing his soulful pipes and funky clavinet bits to later albums by Steve Winwood, Eric Clapton, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Neil Diamond up until his death.

But much of Apples' lasting impact isn't quantifiable. *Strange Fruit* notes how the Beatles brought "world music" to mainstream audiences, pressing albums by sitar guru Ravi Shankar, chant group Radha Krishna Temple, gospel singer Doris Troy, and avant-garde rockers Elephant's Memory (who backed Lennon on the *Sometime in NYC* record). Oh, and then there were those ahead-of-their-time releases from Yoko Ono, whose part in the Beatles breakup is reshaped.

Journalists Chris Ingham (*Rough Guide to the Beatles*), Mark Paytrees (*Mojo, Record Collector*), and Stefan Granados (*Shindig*) double as commentators and narrators, their Apple expertise proving invaluable to an investigation that digs deeper than a History Channel special. Beatle buffs and music aficionados will love (and perhaps loathe) the marathon-length look back at a time when high ideals temporarily bested capitalism. Sanctioned or not, *Strange Fruit* is as good a testament to The Beatles' impact on the record industry as we're likely going to get—a whopping Granny apple of a "rockumentary" that merits watching, even if one must digest it piecemeal. Say, in four separate forty-minute sittings.

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