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Gerald Carlin and Mark Jones

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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"Helter Skelter" and the End of the Sixties

- 1 In late August 1968, within a few days of each other, new singles were released by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The unusual proximity of release dates by the world's two most significant rock bands was echoed by the congruity of the songs' themes: the Stones' "Street Fighting Man" and the Beatles' "Revolution" were both responses to the political unrest and protest which characterised the spring and summer of 1968. Their topicality was obvious and much commented on, even though "Revolution" was ostensibly the B-side to "Hey Jude", and "Street Fighting Man" was only released in the United States. The heightened anxiety in both the mainstream and the counterculture of the period led to polarised assessments of the tracks' political positions, in which they were judged as manifestos promoting action, rather than rock posturing. *Time* magazine contrasted the Stones' call in "Street Fighting Man" for "change, wildness, rebellion against civil authority" with the Beatles' pacific quietude (Anon. 1969). San Francisco underground newspaper the *Berkeley Barb* saw "Revolution" as "a clear unmistakable call for counter-revolution", while "Street Fighting Man" "lives up to its title" (Anon. 1968a). Britain's most politically radical underground publication, *Black Dwarf*, nailed its colours firmly to the Stones' mast:

Now it seems that what was in the past simply an aesthetic preference for the Stones, now emerges as a part of the struggle for the hearts and minds of youth ... Although I've liked the Beatles in the past I hope that they get so fucked up with their money making that they become as obscure as Cliff Richards [sic] and on the debris they leave behind I hope we will see a new pop-group emerge – a "street-fighting" pop-group committed to the movement. (Muldoon 1968)

What the establishment feared and the revolutionaries anticipated in late 1968 was that rock music would imminently become the cultural vanguard of a political revolution. The boundaries between the discourses and praxis of politics and the pop counterculture would be effaced in a utopian imaginary where "the poetry of politics is rock music" (Gleason 1972: 146).

- 2 While an enthusiastic music press, blind to the album's dubious sexual politics, proclaimed that the Rolling Stones' *Beggars Banquet* released in December 1968 "derives its central motive and mood from the theme of "revolution" ... [and] ought to convince us all that the Stones are right" (Landau 1972: 331), *The Beatles* (aka the *White Album*), released only a few weeks earlier, had a more ambivalent reception. There was general agreement amongst reviewers that the album was fundamentally grounded in homage, pastiche and parody. For some, this was a sign of its musical intelligence: Tony Palmer in *The Observer* claimed that "[r]eferences to or quotations from Elvis Presley, Donovan, Little Richard, the Beach Boys, Blind Lemon Jefferson are woven into an aural fabric that has become the Bayeux Tapestry of popular music" (Palmer 1968). Others saw its evasion of contemporaneity as political disengagement: Jon Landau in a *Liberation News Service* dispatch wrote, "The Beatles have used parody on this album precisely because they were afraid of confronting reality. It becomes a mask behind which they can hide from the urgencies of the moment" (Wiener 1995: 65). The album's few ostensibly

The BEATLES

engaged tracks tended to receive short shrift. Having already dismissed "Revolution" when released as a single, the more politically ambivalent "Revolution 1" was largely passed over by reviewers. Similarly, the album's greatest claim to experimentation, "Revolution 9", later described as "the world's most widely distributed avant-garde artefact" (MacDonald 1995: 230), was almost universally despised. Amidst the album's bricolage of musical styles and genres, one track in particular seemed original enough to evade denigration as simple generic refashioning. Tucked away near the end of the third side, sandwiched between the lilting "Sexy Sadie" and George Harrison's low-key "Long, Long, Long", "Helter Skelter" surprised critics by its fusion of a solid rock momentum with whirling chaotic energy. Recognised by *The Times* as "exhaustingly marvellous" (Mann 1987: 154), and moving at "a pace that goes so fast they all only just about keep up with themselves" according to the *New Musical Express*, the only ascertainable meanings of the song were related to its "[f]renetically sexual" energy (Smith 1968: 5). Critics struggled to categorise it, reaching for terms from an emerging discourse which distinguished and defined stratifications of significance between pop and underground music. Nik Cohn in *The New York Times* utilised the neologism "hardrock" (Cohn 1968: 8), and Barry Miles in underground newspaper *IT* called it "probably the heaviest rocker on plastic today" (Miles 1968: 10). While "hard" clearly aligns the track with contemporaneous rock innovators such as Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the term "heavy" has a wider signification, connoting countercultural profundity and relevance (Landy 1971: 101) as well as beginning to be attached to a nascent musical form. For Jann Wenner in *Rolling Stone* "Helter Skelter" was central to his presentation of the Beatles as "sensitive like all others in McLuhanville, they are of course caught up and reflective in their music of what's happening around them, especially the recent scenes they have been through" (Wenner 1968: 13). Caught on the cusp of emergent heavy metal, and with its ambiguously frivolous/ominous "coming down fast" lyric, "Helter Skelter" perhaps seems far more synoptic of the slide from revolutionary optimism to disillusionment and crisis than other, more overtly political, tracks of the period.

- 3 The song's confrontational discordance was intended. Paul McCartney stated that "Helter Skelter" resulted from his reading
a review of a record which said that the group really goes wild with echo and screaming and everything, and I thought "That's a pity, I would have liked to do something like that." Then I heard it and it was nothing like, it was straight and sophisticated. So we did this. I like noise. (Anon. 1968b)¹
- 4 In order to achieve this apparently simple aim, "Helter Skelter" uses a range of musical and technical strategies. The song is in 4/4 time, and after an introductory descending riff on guitar, mirrored by an ascending vocal, the basic rhythm of the verse is in the root chord of E major, but the force with which the open bottom E string is hit at the start of each bar causes it to bend and raise its pitch almost a semitone – a dissonant position between E and F. This sustained droning power chord is a key ingredient in the overdriven feel of "Helter Skelter", and it exists in tension with the bluesy major root chord. The chord sequence in the verse moves to a flattened position III (G, in the key of E major) and finally moves to position IV (A) in an ascending pentatonic scale, which creates a further tension between a hard rock and a blues structure, as the "turn" or resolving V chord position (B) that features in blues and rock and roll is absent. The guitar in the chorus, which has a much "cleaner" rock-attack sound than the guitar(s) in the grungy verses, follows a major key rock and roll boogie A5 A5 A6 A6 for a bar

with a descent down the scale from a flattened A7 position for the second bar, repeating this climb and fast descent in E, returning to A, and finally ending on the root E major chord. In utilising the boogie riff the chorus alludes to rock and roll (specifically Chuck Berry) rather than the blues or hard rock, but again there is no position V chord which would "resolve" a conventional blues or rock and roll stylisation. Despite the major root chord and the rock and roll allusions of the chorus, the song remains in pentatonic mode and suggests minor keys, giving the song a frustrated, contained or "primitive" feel. This is intensified by the one instrument which stands out and drives "Helter Skelter" forward: the bass. It has a gnarled timbre, is mixed to the fore and is characterised by a lot of treble and percussive attack – probably achieved by striking hard with a plectrum and at times forcing the strings to slap back onto the frets. It is played fast (always more strikes of a note than beats in a bar) and takes on something like the role of a second (or third) rhythm guitar or even a basic lead instrument – frequently dropping down to D to allow a hammer-on or slides to the root E note for example and moving between octave notes towards the end. The vocal delivery is cranked up and erratic and, again, exists in a strained relation to the smoothly precise "pop" sound of the backing vocals. Stylistically, the song is a hybrid, gesturing towards several genres simultaneously. The musical irresolutions of the song are finally manifested in its sequence of phased discordant endings, in which the song rejects obvious and acceptable forms of closure, returning repeatedly until it eventually collapses in exhaustion. Despite the manic energy which sustains the body of the track, nearly half of its duration is taken up by its increasingly entropic ending.

- 5 The abrasive "heaviness" and unevenness of "Helter Skelter" probably contributed to its early unpopularity with Beatles fans. In a 1971 poll in *The Village Voice* it was identified as the fourth least favourite Beatles track – "Revolution 9" topped the list (Schaffner 1978: 217). A contributory factor, though, may have been the notoriety it had accumulated by its bizarre implication in a series of brutal slayings over two days in August 1969. Sharon Tate (film director Roman Polanski's pregnant wife) and six others were murdered in the Hollywood hills by Charles Manson and his "Family" of young, mainly female followers. In 1971 assistant district attorney Vincent Bugliosi convinced a jury that the murders were part of an attempt to bring about an apocalyptic race war, fulfilling a communal mythos derived from Manson's exegesis of "The Book of Revelation", and the Beatles' *White Album*. "Helter Skelter" was apparently the term used by Manson to refer to the impending period of anarchy and social collapse, similar to the Tribulation in millenarian Christianity. "Healter [sic] Skelter" appeared written in a victim's blood at one of the murder sites, and it was later also found painted on a door at the Spahn ranch near Los Angeles where the Family were living when the murders were committed. This connection would prove crucial in the prosecution's case against Manson and the Family, and thus "Helter Skelter" has become inextricably associated with the Manson murders. This was reinforced by the publication of Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* in 1974, frequently claimed to be the best-selling work in the true crime genre, and its subsequent highly successful television adaptation in 1976. The latter would prompt the re-release of the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" as a single – originally conceived as an A-side to capitalise on the broadcast of the miniseries, it was relegated to a B-side when its tastefulness was questioned (Stannard 1983: 150).

- 6 The Manson murders have become an iconic marker of the "end of the 1960s" – one of a series of events which are popularly considered to close the decade (*Witness* 1994), along with the violence at the Altamont Free Concert in December 1969 (Russell 2009) and the break-up of the Beatles in 1970 (Gitlin 1993: 429). While historians more generally utilise a variety of political and economic phenomena—including dissent and its suppression (*ibid.*: 407–19), developments in the Vietnam war (Burner 1996: 217–24), changes in governments (Kaiser 1988: 245–53, Sandbrook 2006: 741–7) and the oil crisis (Cairncross and Cairncross 1992)—in the popular memorialisation of this period of cultural revolution and mass mediatisation, it is pop culture which is mined for historiographic symbolism. The more salient and immediate relationship between these events and the end of the 1960s, though, is the wedge they drove at the time between mainstream popular culture and the political counterculture. After the Manson Family murders and the violence at Altamont, the supposed communal project that united pop aristocracy, the underground, and the radical left, suddenly evaporated. The counterculture, particularly in America, was fatally divided over its assessment of the Manson Family. In 1969, the newly formed Weathermen, the extremist vanguard of the new-left Students for a Democratic Society, embraced Manson as society's victim and a revolutionary hero (Barber 2008: 209–11). This celebratory rhetoric disturbed and appalled much of the rest of the counterculture. While historians might balk at the idea that Manson contributed to the end of the "1960s", it is undeniable that he catalysed the splintering of the decade's countercultural coalition.

A Hard Rock Classic

- 7 The dispersal and depletion of the 1960s' radical energies was manifest in the diverging musical landscape of the early 1970s. Rock, considered in the late 1960s the soundtrack to the liberatory struggle, "turned out to be a by-way in the development of twentieth-century popular music, rather than, as we thought at the time, any kind of mass-cultural revolution" (Frith 1988: 1). The diversity of styles and genres on the Beatles' *White Album* proved to be a prophetic index of early 1970s pluralistic musical trajectories. The Rolling Stones continued to plough an increasingly lucrative hard rock furrow, and carried in their wake a plethora of novitiates similarly exploiting the commercial potential of rock posturing's rebellious heritage. One of the most successful of these has proved to be Aerosmith, dismissed in their early career as Rolling Stones clones, who have covered songs by the Beatles, Kinks and Yardbirds, and might best be located as American inheritors of the "British invasion" (Campbell and Brody 2008: 33). These covers, the earliest being "Helter Skelter" which the band has performed live regularly since 1976, mark a musical and cultural continuity with the 1960s rock scene. Aerosmith's "Helter Skelter" is very close to the Beatles', remaining faithful to the rhythm and featuring a lead guitar solo and fills which are almost note-for-note renditions of the original. Apparently minor differences include the rhythm guitar's more regularised and faster rock attack, a simplification of the chorus's rock and roll boogie, and two dramatically punched bass-drum-guitar punctuations on the first and third beats of the final chorus when the song's title is vocalised. Together with a vocal performance featuring the high-pitched posturing characteristic of stadium rock, and the absence of the disconcertingly melodic backing vocals in the Beatles' version, these nuanced modifications subtly transform "Helter Skelter" into a rock standard. Early

Aerosmith's notoriously derivative stage demeanour, aping the Rolling Stones and sounding like Status Quo (Charone 1976), signals an attempt to fuse the fractured musical landscape of the early 1970s. Performing "Helter Skelter" in the style of the Stones effaces the rift in the counterculture that the Beatles and Rolling Stones had symbolised in 1968, effectively replacing political engagement with rock heritage.

- 8 Aerosmith's recording of "Helter Skelter", during the *Toys in the Attic* sessions in 1975, is the earliest recorded cover that we have been able to trace, though it was not released until 1991. The first to be issued was by Diamond Reo, a hard rock group from Pittsburgh, on their 1976 album, *Dirty Diamonds*. Here, the song becomes a frame for lead guitar display, featuring wailing guitar fills and an extended solo, continuing the song's progression towards hard rock standard. Diamond Reo were identified in *Billboard's* review of *Dirty Diamonds* as "uncompromising hard rock along the lines of a Led Zeppelin or Bad Company" (Anon. 1976). Also unmistakably "good pre-punk heavy rock" (Field 1978) is the next released cover, by Don Harrison on *Not Far from Free* (1977); he had previously worked with members of Creedence Clearwater Revival in the Don Harrison Band. This association of "Helter Skelter" with the various types of hard rock prevalent in the 1970s American music industry was reinforced by the next North American cover, by Canadian singer Dianne Heatherington, which was recorded in 1978 but not released until 1980, on *Heatherington Rocks*. Heatherington had previously worked with members of the Guess Who, a band which also later spawned Bachman-Turner Overdrive. As might be expected from their musical associations, both Harrison's and Heatherington's versions of "Helter Skelter" can be squarely placed in the "AOR" ("Adult Oriented Rock" or "Album Oriented Radio") genre, partaking in particular of the epic rock treatment that Led Zeppelin had made a central aspect of the format. Both covers are more blues based than Aerosmith's and Diamond Reo's, slowing the song down and making the dominant key E minor. In Harrison's version the verses contain an octaval pulse between bottom and top E twice in each bar, until the final bar of each verse line, where a double hammer-on from D to E occurs on the last two beats. This gives the song a ponderous progression; combined with strings which accompany the rhythmic pulse and its expansive arrangement it recalls Led Zeppelin's then recently released "Kashmir" (*Physical Graffiti* 1975). Also drawing heavily on a Led Zeppelin blues rock formula, Dianne Heatherington's "Helter Skelter" foregrounds a dampened chug on the rhythm guitar which is punctuated on the last two beats of the final bar of each verse line by a shrill string bend to top E. The rhythm is regularised, but the vocal is drawn out, improvisational and highly eroticised; Heatherington goes so far as to modify the lyrics, repeatedly demanding "Give me helter skelter, baby" during the extended orgiastic lead out, making the song unambiguously and wholly sexual. Though sung by a woman, this "Helter Skelter" is easily aligned with late-1970s' "cock rock", the hedonistic inheritor of 1960s sexual permissiveness after it had been drained of its ostensible liberatory agenda (Frith 1983: 240–43).

Manson's Looming Figure: Goth Covers and Shlock Horror

- 9 A somewhat different US 1970s is evidenced by the only other American version of "Helter Skelter" that has emerged from the period, by the short-lived Detroit punk band, the Ramrods. Part of a live medley from 1977 with the Who's "My Generation"

and the Stooges' "Search and Destroy", "Helter Skelter" is retrospectively inserted into a genealogy of youth rebellion and punk attitude (*Gimme Some Action* 2004). While US punk looked to "buried productions of a few cult prophets" from the 1960s for inspiration (Marcus 1997: 39), and acknowledged their genealogical roots (McNeil and McCain 1997: 3–104), punk in the UK was more musically nihilistic. At Siouxsie and the Banshees' first gig in 1976 they performed only covers, including "The Lord's Prayer", "taking the piss out of all the things we hated", asking each other "What would you like to throw in as a shock tactic? What can we mutilate and destroy?" (Savage 1991: 220). By the time their first album *The Scream* was released in 1978, the only cover which remained was "Helter Skelter". The Banshees' adaptation is a radical destruction and reconstruction of the song which strips away its blues and rock and roll elements, turning it into a basic garage punk track, albeit with a gothically menacing extended opening. It starts with a regular but very slow isolated bass note in A, subsequently joined by a trebly dissonant guitar riff. When the vocal eventually begins, it is similarly slow and deadpan, accompanied by discordant guitar riffs which speed up through the major chord sequence A-B-C-D. The body of the song is faster than the original, and coloured by guitar vamping in major keys around the root A chord of the verse. Where the original moves to a flattened position III, the Banshees move to an E for the third line of the verse – the resolving position V, which is sustained for four bars, then slides down through E^b to D and finally returns to the A root, signalling a much straighter rock I-IV-V stylisation. The chorus is introduced by a climb from A to D, the rock and roll boogie is replaced by straight chords and the accompanying run-down in the major scale is vocalised la-la-la-la-la-la-la on a single G note, with the refrain "helter Skelter" being chanted rather than sung, and again moving to chord position V for the final phrases.

- 10 The Banshees drain away the subtle allusions to rock structure that characterise the Beatles' carefully crafted original, and expose the almost banal bare chord architecture that underlies the song. Their "Helter Skelter" resembles one of the offhand rockers that the Beatles may have performed and McCartney may have written in 1963. Its refusal to engage with the pretensions of late-1960s rock reflects punk's recognition of the self-delusions of countercultural politics – "never trust a hippie" (Reid 1987: 103). The bleak energy that builds in the Banshees' version, and its disdainfully abrupt ending on the line "then I stop", is in stark contrast to the artfully phased coda of the original, and is the parodic antithesis of the indulgent climaxes of the American hard rock covers of the 1970s. The dry cynicism displayed by the Banshees in ending the interminable "Helter Skelter" by simply stopping presents an asymmetrical counterpoint to their version's protracted, ominous and discordant opening. The instrumental first 50 seconds of the song invoke a gothic nightmare which acknowledges the song's murderous accretions: indeed, in live performance Siouxsie has been known to dedicate the song to Roman Polanski (Baddeley 1999: 178). In this reference to the dark finale of the 1960s, the Banshees were signalling an emerging fascination with Manson amongst elements of the underground avant-garde on both sides of the Atlantic, exemplified in particular by Throbbing Gristle (Ford 1999: 6.30–6.33) and Boyd Rice (Schreck 1988: 125). The ambivalent Family-fixation demonstrated by select punks, provocateurs and poseurs – sometimes revelling in extremity, sometimes utilising Manson to critique the countercultural project *in toto* – is displayed in the Banshees' "Helter Skelter", which combines existential threat with a parodic dismissal of 1960s rock.

- 11 In the United States, most rock music remained wedded to its 1960s legacies. While Black Flag would exploit Manson iconography for its shock value, naming their 1981 tour "Creepy Crawl" after the Family's recreational housebreaking (Tonooka 2011: 75–6), mainstream American covers of "Helter Skelter" seemed unable or unwilling to follow the informed example of the Banshees. Pat Benatar's 1981 version, on *Precious Time*, treads faithfully through the song, even incorporating the original's overdriven E-F semitonal bend into its rhythm section, duplicating the backing vocals, and following the blueprint of the brief guitar solo. The song tidies the Beatles' phased ending with a chorus of well-defined descending guitar riffs, contributing to the smooth power pop production qualities of the whole. Wilfully ignoring the song's cultural accretions, and the original's countercultural context, Benatar's "Helter Skelter" is rendered palatable – suitable for the corporate 1980s' commodification of the 1960s. Hers was the first commercially successful rock rendition; from the evidence of official and bootleg live recordings, Benatar performed the song regularly at the time she recorded it, and it has since reappeared on several of her "best of" compilations. Even more successful in appropriating "Helter Skelter" as their own were Mötley Crüe, who released the song as a promotional 12-inch single and on the album *Shout at the Devil* in 1983. Subsequently re-appearing on several of the band's live and compilation albums, it has also been "re-covered" on a Mötley Crüe tribute album, and the score for their version presented in a "hair metal" songbook (Anon. 2001). Recasting the song in the mould of heavy metal, Mötley Crüe join the Banshees in being the only artists to have successfully prised the song away from the Beatles.
- 12 Although Mötley Crüe's structural departures from the original are limited, they are enough to complete the generic transformation of the song through hard rock and into heavy metal. This recasting is apparent from the outset, where midway through an extended introduction of eight bars the chorused guitar is accompanied by a single heavy pulse on the bass guitar and drum every first and third beat. The song is grounded on a fast, dampened power chord guitar chug in E, but a squealing note bend to top B is introduced in the first verse, recurring intermittently throughout the song, and the final beat of each second bar of the verse is an abrupt and precise power chord in flattened III position (G). Such features produce a machined, tightened rhythm and structure, removing all suggestions of the expansive blues feel of the original and its standard rock versions. The position III G chord contains a chugging riff and is held for four bars as opposed to the original's two, and the position IV A chord is stifled in order to foreground the vocals and drums before a return to the root E chord and the squeal of the recurring high B lead guitar note. The chorus follows the same boogie and declining run of the original, but on the last note the fast opening riff of the introduction is abruptly reintroduced for two bars, obliterating the final "yeah", and the next verse starts immediately afterwards – this eruption of the introductory guitar riff becomes a feature of the chorus throughout the song, even in its final repetitions, reigning in any potential expansion. The guitar break is prefaced by four bars of drum and vocals which usher in a "shredding" 10-bar solo featuring hammer-ons, pull-offs, bends and runs which segue straight into the repeated introductory guitar and drum riff. What in the Beatles' version is the last appearance of the chorus before the extended, uneven outro, becomes here the first of three sharply defined repetitions, with the brief feedback of the concluding single chord the only allusion to the original's frame-breaking terminus. Just before the final chord Vince Neil screams "comin' down on you", followed by "it's helter skelter", menacingly whispered over feedback.

- 13 In ex-Deep Purple vocalist Ian Gillan's version, recorded around the same time as Mötley Crüe's cover, it is the opening eerie fairground sounds which produce the track's uncanny resonance. The main body of the two versions share several key features, including the move to a flattened III position during the verse, though in Gillan's the punctuating chords are delayed and rendered on keyboards. These methods of tightening and clarifying the song are typical of the performative and production approaches in heavy metal covers of "Helter Skelter", of which there are many – including versions by Vow Wow, Trouble, Bon Jovi, Soundgarden, Joe Lynn Turner, Dimension Zero, Celtic Frost, Carnivore, Spite Extreme Wing, Sunday Fury and Caliban. The song has, perhaps, become something of a heavy metal exhibition piece; each revisiting of the track reinscribes the original – as some critics have claimed – as a metal ur-text (Blake 1997: 143). The covers achieve this by recasting the song using specific generic techniques which foreground its energy and attack, but which work to efface the original's nuanced references to its musical antecedents. This is characteristic of heavy metal, which seems to wish to concrete over its own musicological pre-history, to destroy its roots in the blues and rock and roll. Heavy metal takes a scorched earth approach to musical history, proclaiming 1969 or 1970 to be, in effect, year zero (Weinstein 1998: 143).
- 14 This musical breach is a reflection of the near-simultaneous collapse in the countercultural project. Heavy metal is typically characterised as a nihilistic response to the failures and revealed elitism of the 1960s' radicals (Weinstein 2000: 18). Black Sabbath's Ozzy Osbourne recalled the band's beginnings in the late 1960s: "we lived in a dreary, polluted, dismal town and we were angry about it. For us the whole hippy thing was bullshit. The only flower you saw in Aston was on a gravestone. So we thought, let's scare the whole fucking planet with music" (Cope 2010: 30). However, while much of heavy metal's atmosphere of menace derives from its aural dissonance and aggression – the annihilation of the transcendent promise of 1960s' rock – its theatre of horrors, combining violence, madness and the occult, is rooted in elements of the earlier decade's popular and exploitation culture. The "dark" 1960s – gore films, bad trips and Satanism – was never entirely dispelled by the enlightenment ideals of the counterculture, and they would flourish in the 1970s *mélange* of paranoia and camp (Lachman 2001). A key and continuing figure in this resurgence of the sinister 1960s was Manson, tabloid bogeyman and the subject of numerous pulp treatments in various media. In popular music, Manson is a commonplace reference in songs across a range of genres: in rap, he provides a benchmark for homicidal achievement; alternative and industrial artists typically recapitulate details of the Family saga; heavy metal songs use Manson to invoke the devil or to herald the apocalypse.
- 15 Such an invocation occurs at the menacingly whispered end of Mötley Crüe's "Helter Skelter", in which the Los Angeles heavy metal band implicitly realign the song with the murders committed in its name. Manson's cultural cache continued to rise throughout the 1980s, which saw a marked increase in songs about the Family and the murders, and a series of high profile television interviews which contributed raw audio for numerous subsequent samplers (Bugliosi 1994: 651). With Manson's ever increasing profile, reinflected covers of "Helter Skelter" began to proliferate. Hüsker Dü's "alternative" version from 1986 is structurally faithful, but its maniacal vocalisations and frenetic instrumentation give it the character of a crime scene recording; its dangerous immediacy binds it to its near contemporary Mansonic artefact "Death

Valley '69" by Sonic Youth. Also in 1986, "deathrock" band Mighty Sphincter released a pounding horrorshow "Helter Skelter"; its appearance on the album *The New Manson Family*, a collection of hardcore punk murder songs and pastiche horror clichés, made its associations transparent. Again in 1986, Secession's synth-gothic version ends with a sample from the Manson Family chorus of "I'll Never Say Never to Always", a track from Charles Manson's *Lie*. It was becoming impossible to cover "Helter Skelter" without Manson's shadow falling over its performance or reception; in the battle for the legacy of the 1960s countercultural project, "Helter Skelter" had become ammunition for the sceptics.

Recovering "Helter Skelter"

- 16 It was this cultural repositioning of "Helter Skelter" which must have prompted U2's intervention at the opening of *Rattle and Hum* in 1988 when Bono famously introduced their live cover with the announcement, "This is a song Charles Manson stole from the Beatles. We're stealing it back." What follows is an imitative and somewhat insipid cover, lacking any recognisable U2 signature elements such as the Edge's guitar harmonics and layered delay, or the band's characteristic atmospheric expansiveness. *Rattle and Hum*, apparently a musical road trip into the roots of American music, is actually fixated on the late 1960s, the brief period when rock and revolution seemed to fuse. Quotes from the Rolling Stones, Van Morrison's Them and Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock supplement the album's two covers – "Helter Skelter" and a version of "All Along the Watchtower" which retains Hendrix's rearrangement of Dylan's song but loses his articulate guitar passages. These two songs have arguably become emblematic of the dark side of the 1960s – played over clips of iconic 1960s events and images, as they frequently are, they inevitably darken them, evoking violence and degeneration rather than revolution and liberation. U2's versions of both apparently attempt to remove these accreted associations by reinserting them into the vocabulary and canon of "classic rock". In taking back "Helter Skelter", U2 are attempting to negate Manson's appropriation of the song and its subsequent Mansonian reinterpretations; for U2 the song exits in a late-1960s depoliticised rockutopia.
- 17 Immediately following U2's undertaking to remove "Helter Skelter" from its contextual contaminations, the original was sampled back into the late-1980s mediatised morass by Negativland in "Helter Stupid". This 18-minute long sampled montage – redolent of, and briefly sampling from, "Revolution 9" – splices elements including the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" and an interview with Manson with numerous contemporaneous fragments from a sensationalist and superficial media landscape. *Helter Stupid* is part of Negativland's assault on a gullible culture which is in thrall to fundamentalist religion and lurid headlines. Less analytical, and more exhibitionist, is the same year's "Worlock" by Skinny Puppy, which samples Manson singing lyrics from "Helter Skelter" over a fragment of the Beatles' guitar introduction. Charles Manson exerted an unusual fascination over the industrial music scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Post-punk band Cabaret Voltaire used several Manson interview samples on their 1985 album *The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*; My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult sampled Family member Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme on "After the Flesh"; but the most Manson-obsessed of the electro-industrial bands is Electric Hellfire Club, with several songs about the Family and the murders amongst their eclectically macabre output. Closer to

heavy metal is Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral*, recorded in the house on Cielo Drive in which Sharon Tate and her guests were murdered, and featuring several oblique references to the killings and to the "White Album" (Udo 2002: 209–10). The video for the earlier "Gave Up" was filmed in the house, again with arcane references to its history as a crime scene, and featured Trent Reznor's new signing, Marilyn Manson. While the latter's appellation is itself a sardonic critique of the American media's obsession with celebrities and murder, Reznor's cryptic allusions to the Manson Family, refracted through veiled references to significant tracks on the "White Album", work to augment Manson's mystique. The metonymic chain that leads to the end of the 1960s, through "Helter Skelter", Cielo Drive and Manson, is used here to symbolise the protagonist of *The Downward Spiral*'s psychodrama. While Manson is not explicitly evoked as an iconic representation of the murderous conclusion to the counterculture, the album does cement the identification between "Helter Skelter" and the Manson murders, and does so in order to turn the complex and highly politicised late 1960s into a metaphor for individualised trauma and victimhood.

- 18 In contrast to the cryptic invocation of Manson by Nine Inch Nails, industrial metal contemporaries White Zombie, and their founder Rob Zombie, have consistently advertised their Mansonian interests, expressed through song titles, sampling and imagery (Udo 2002: 163); the conjunction of "Helter Skelter" with the Manson murders would reach an apogee with their live performances of the song in the early 1990s. White Zombie's version seems to draw on the heavy metal signatures established by Mötley Crüe, featuring a heavy drum beat in an extended introduction, and an abrupt move to a flattened III position on the final beat of each second bar of the verse. In common with the other heavy metal covers, the musical historiography of the original is overwritten; but White Zombie go further in firmly attaching "Helter Skelter" to its Mansonian mythography. This "Helter Skelter" partakes of heavy metal's *grand guignol* traits, which, spliced with Zombie's fascination with 1960s exploitation cinema, transforms epoch-ending murders into the material of schlock horror movies. The legacy of the 1960s counterculture would be refigured not in terms of its radical politics but through the display of its deracinated image.
- 19 Throughout the 1990s "Helter Skelter" mutated and proliferated, as dozens of artists seemed to challenge U2's late-1980s bid to impose a singular and secure performance style on the song. While White Zombie attempted to exploit and intensify its sinister aura, for a plethora of other artists the song and its associations were material for ironic refashioning. Generic adaptations included jazz and rock instrumentals (Heavy Tuba, Mika Yoshida, Gamalon, Alice Donut), swing (Honk, Wail and Moan), psycho/rockabilly (Mad Mongols, the Ubangis), international punk (Idora, SexA, Mamá Ladilla), indie and goth (That Petrol Emotion, Rosetta Stone), bluegrass (Armchair Radicals), funk (Hoo Doo Soul Band), rap/metal (Urban Dance Squad), lounge (Necro Tonz), chamber pop (Lamé Gold) and stoner comedy (David Peel and the Lower East Side). Amidst the torrent of 1990s versions – which has accelerated in subsequent years – what seems to be absent is "straight" rock covers of "Helter Skelter". Apart from bootlegged live performances by Trouble and Bon Jovi, and a handful of releases by tribute bands, only Skrew's 1997 recording approximates a rendition respectful of its rock origins; even here, though, several false starts and an incongruous piano accompaniment add a layer of frame-breaking irony. Detached from the rock moment

of the late 1960s, it is no longer inevitable that "Helter Skelter" signifies its originary contexts and countercultural conflicts.

- 20 "Helter Skelter" exhibits an unusual musicological hybridity which has allowed its mutation into a wide range of generically diverse covers.² In 2009 alone, there were at least 20 versions legitimately released, and a simple YouTube search will reveal numerous further amateur realisations, in addition to live performances, talent show broadcasts and mash-ups. Largely cut free from its unfortunate associations, as well as from its position at the apex of countercultural rock, it now requires an act of wilful provocation to reinvoke the auratic power of "Helter Skelter". Bonemachine's 2003 recording dispels any ambiguity by subtitling their cover – an 18-minute ambient industrial track, with a short looped guitar sample from the original – "A Tribute to C. Manson". When taken with the appearance of other tracks by the artist behind Bonemachine on a tribute album to the Chilean neo-Nazi philosopher Miguel Serrano, this is a reminder of Manson's continuing appeal to extremist ideologues, and an indication of the often overlooked roots of contemporary white nationalism in 1960s libertarianism. Manson also continues to exert a morbid fascination for those exploring the violent depths of contemporary urban society. Underground rapper MF Grimm's "Karma" namechecks Manson, along with notorious Mafia hitman Roy Demeo, over a looped sample of the rhythm guitar track from "Helter Skelter". Only when mixed with the potency of Manson's name can "Helter Skelter" still signal the authentic paranoia of the millenarian 1960s.
- 21 Paul McCartney's "Helter Skelter", however, has had a different fate to Charles Manson's. McCartney began playing "Helter Skelter" live for the first time in 2004, performing it at Glastonbury that year, and at the Live 8 concert in 2005; it continues to feature in his live set. In 2011 his performance on the 2009 live album *Good Evening New York City* won the Grammy for Best Solo Rock Vocal. The song now seems free from its historical taint, exorcised of its demons through McCartney's reclamation, and the marker of his rocker credentials. McCartney's performances are acts of radical forgetting, though the song's deviant frisson must still be present for many listeners. After over 40 years in which "Helter Skelter" has variously signalled the failure of the 1960s, a hard rock heritage, metallic origins, schlock horror and apocalyptic race war, it now communicates an institutionally respectable radical chic. As the 1960s turn from memory into history, "Helter Skelter" remains one of the few cultural objects which can still summon forth its revolutionary spectre.

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NOTES

1. McCartney later identified the ur-text of "Helter Skelter" as the Who's "I Can See for Miles" (Miles 1997: 487).
2. Details of the many covers of "Helter Skelter" can be found at <http://helterskeltercovers.wordpress.com/>.

ABSTRACTS

In the late sixties rock music was typically seen as an important aspect of the revolutionary counterculture ; but the Beatles' 'White Album' was ambivalently received, amidst allegations of reactionary nostalgia. The song 'Helter Skelter' was difficult to classify at the time; its subsequent associations with cult murderers the Manson Family made it notorious. Largely overlooked for several years, the few early covers usually rendered it as hard rock. Later, more generically diverse and deviant renditions would reinflect the song as a critique of the sixties' countercultural project. Patterns of reclamation and contestation have made covers of the song a telling index of revisionist attitudes to the 1960s and their legacies.

À la fin des années 1960, on considérait le rock comme un aspect important de la contre-culture révolutionnaire. Mais le *White Album* des Beatles fut reçu de façon ambivalente – on l'accusa notamment de nostalgie réactionnaire. La chanson « Helter Skelter » était difficile à catégoriser à l'époque ; le fait qu'on l'associe par la suite avec les meurtres commis par la Famille Manson la rendit tristement célèbre. Les premières reprises du morceau en firent un canon du hard rock naissant, avant que le heavy metal ne prenne la relève. Plus tard, des versions plus éclectiques la détournèrent pour en faire une critique du projet culturel des années 1960, en invoquant la figure menaçante de Charles Manson. D'autres tentèrent plus tard d'exorciser ce spectre maudit, pour la réinscrire dans la grande tradition du rock. Analyser « Helter Skelter » par le prisme ses innombrables reprises, c'est faire l'histoire de l'héritage polémique des années 1960.

INDEX

Geographical index: États-Unis / USA, Grande-Bretagne / Great Britain

Mots-clés: reprise / pastiche / parodie, contre-culture / résistance, adaptation / appropriation / emprunt, mémoire / nostalgie / rétro, exécution / interprétation / technique instrumentale

Keywords: cover version / pastiche / parody, counterculture / resistance, adaptation / appropriation / borrowing, memory / nostalgia / retro, utopia / dystopia

nomsmotscles Aerosmith, Beatles (the), Benatar (Pat), Bonemachine, Diamond Reo, Gillan, MF Grimm, Harrison (Don), Heatherington (Dianne), Hüsker Dü, McCartney (Paul), Mighty Sphincter, Mötley Crüe, Negativland, Nine Inch Nails, Ramrods (the), Rolling Stones (the), Secession, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Skinny Puppy, Skrew, U2, White Zombie

Chronological index: 1960-1969, 1970-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, 2000-2009

Subjects: goth / gothic, indus', art / experimental rock, heavy metal / hard rock, rock music

AUTHORS

GERALD CARLIN

Gerald CARLIN est Senior Lecturer en études anglaises à l'université de Wolverhampton. Sa recherche porte sur de nombreux articles sur le modernisme, la théorie critique et divers aspects de la culture populaire des années 1960.

MARK JONES

Mark JONES est Senior Lecturer en anglais et « Award Leader » pour le Master de Culture Populaire de l'université de Wolverhampton. Sa recherche porte sur le film d'horreur, la science fiction, la pornographie et divers aspects de la culture populaire des années 1960.