

Beyond Bugliosi: the Manson murders revisited

CHAOS

Charles Manson, the CIA and the Secret History of the Sixties

Tom O'Neill (with Dan Piepenbring)

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Hollywood Horrors

In March 1999, as the thirtieth anniversary of the Manson murders approached, Tom O'Neill was assigned by the movie magazine, *Premiere*, to write a feature on how the killing of actress Sharon Tate and her friends had impacted the Hollywood 'community'. O'Neill had never been particularly interested in the Manson business, but the deeper he got into it, the more he realised there was more to it than anyone had previously thought. Paul Krasner, who had covered the Manson trial in 1970 for *The Realist*, warned him early on: 'Be careful Tom. This will take over your life if you let it.' And so it did, for almost twenty years.

In late 1968 Charles Manson and his 'Family', moved to the Spahn ranch, a 55-acre spread in Los Angeles County, California, which had previously been used as a set for filming westerns. On the night of 8 August 1969, Manson sent four members of the Family – Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, Linda Kasabian and Tex Watson – to the mansion home of Sharon Tate and Roman Polanski at 10050 Cielo Drive, Benedict Canyon. Arriving just after midnight, Watson scaled a pole and cut the telephone lines to the house. Kasabian stayed in the car to keep watch, while the other three entered the property. On encountering 18-year old Steven Parent, who had been visiting the caretaker and was sitting in his car, Watson stabbed him and shot him four times, killing him instantly. The shots were unheard by those in the house: Voytek Frykowski, an aspiring Polish filmmaker; Abigail Folger, Frykowski's girlfriend; Jay Sebring, a hairstylist; and the pregnant Sharon Tate (her husband, the film director Roman Polanski, was away, working in Paris). All four of them were tied up, then knifed to death as they begged for mercy. Susan Atkins soaked a towel in Sharon Tate's blood and used it to write 'Pig' on the wall.

The following night at the Spahn Ranch the four killers teamed up with other members of the Family: Clem Grogan, Leslie Van Houten and Charles Manson himself. They piled into a camper van and drove around the suburbs of Los Angeles, looking for another target. Manson chose a house next door to one where he had once lived. Manson, armed with a gun, entered the house and tied up the occupants, chain store entrepreneur Leno LaBianca and his wife Rosemary. Manson then returned to the van and ordered Watson, Van Houten and Krenwinkle to enter the house and knife the couple to death. After killing the couple, Watson carved the word 'War' on Leno's stomach. On the walls, the killers wrote 'Rise', 'Death to pigs' and 'Healter [sic] Skelter' in their victims' blood.

Detectives of the Los Angeles Police Department at first investigated the Cielo murders as a 'drug deal gone awry': Frykowski and Sebring were suspected of involvement in drug-dealing. The LaBianca murders were investigated as a copycat crime, carried out by unconnected criminals. It took nearly four months for the LAPD to arrest and indict Manson and co. for the two murder sprees. O'Neill sets out to prove that the powers-that-be of the LAPD knew early on that Manson and the Family were the murderers; which leads to the disturbing question: why the cover-up?

That the LAPD could have cracked the case very quickly was evident because of another murder that had taken place a couple of weeks earlier. On 25 July, Manson and several accomplices invaded the home of Gary Hinman, a musician associate of Tex Watson. Manson was after a pile of inheritance money to which he believed Hinman had access. Hinman was tied up and Manson severed his ear with a sword. After two days of brutal torture, Manson realised there was no money to be had. But as he was worried that his victim would seek medical treatment and talk to the police, Manson ordered his follower Bobby Beausoleil to kill him. Beausoleil stabbed Hinman to death and used his blood to write 'Political Piggy' on the wall. Hinman's body was discovered by friends on 31 July. All three killing sprees had in common the reference to 'pigs' written on the walls of the victims.

Beausoleil was arrested on 6 August when police found him at the wheel of a station wagon stolen from Hinman's driveway. Even though the murder weapon – a knife – was found in the vehicle, Beausoleil concocted a story that Hinman had been killed by two Black Panther militants. He didn't name his Family accomplices, hoping they would try to come to his

aid and fool the police into thinking that a team of Panthers were still out there, killing people. Manson got the message and carried on killing.

By 10 August the two detectives of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office (LASO) who charged Beausoleil with Hinman's murder knew that Beausoleil had lived with the Family at the Spahn ranch, so they could see that the murders were connected. The LAPD bosses however, refused to consider this.

On 16 August LASO mobilised over a hundred officers, led by a SWAT team, in a raid on the Spahn ranch. LASO had been watching the Family for some weeks, but the raid had nothing to do with murders; they were looking for firearms, drugs and stolen property, which they found aplenty. Given that Manson and several of his followers were also in clear violation of their parole terms, they could have all been jailed there and then. But all were released without charges three days later. Whether by incompetence or otherwise, the police left the Family to carry on murdering. On 26 August Hollywood stuntman Donald Shea was killed because Manson thought he had provided the police with information that led to the 16 August raid (his body was eventually discovered in an excavation at the ranch in 1977). O'Neil contends that the Family carried out other murders, although he has only identified one of them: that of 23-year old Filippo Tenerelli, on 1 October 1969, at Bishop, California.

Incompetent, corrupt or otherwise, the LAPD did have reasons to suspect that Cielo Drive killings were the result of a drug deal. During the four months it took the Los Angeles police to connect Manson with the murders, the media speculated that somehow the hedonists of Hollywood, with their sex-and-drugs lifestyles, had brought disaster onto themselves. A wave of fear and suspicion descended on the fun-loving elite. As O'Neil began his reporting, the first thing he discovered was that virtually none of many A-listed stars who had known Tate and Polanski wanted to talk to him. Initially floored by the wall of silence, O'Neill consulted Peter Bart, former editor of *Variety*, and friend of Polanski, who told him, 'I must confess that that crowd was a little scary . . . an instinctive feeling that everyone was pushing it and things were getting out of control . . . Anyone who underestimates the impact of that event is full of shit . . . just the fact that they're all saying no is fascinating.'

Rock'n'Roll

O'Neil begin to suspect that Manson was more plugged into Hollywood than anyone cared to admit. After all, the Cielo Drive mansion had previously been occupied by Terry Melcher. A successful record producer, Melcher had auditioned Manson in May 1969 for a record deal, having

been introduced to him by Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys. One day in the summer of 1968 Wilson invited Manson followers Ela Jo Bailey and Patricia Krenwinkel back to his mansion. When the two told Manson about their new friend, he turned up at Wilson's home himself, with his guitar and a camper van full of 'his girls'. Melcher, Wilson and songwriter Gregg Jacobson – nicknamed the 'Golden Penetrators' – were welcoming. The Family took over Wilson's house for the summer, supplying drugs and sexual favours while running up massive bills for food, clothes, car repairs and gonorrhoea treatment.

The Golden Penetrators fell under Manson's spell. Dennis Wilson told *Rave* magazine, 'Sometimes the Wizard frightens me. The Wizard is Charlie Manson, who is a friend of mine, who thinks he is God and the devil. He sings, plays and writes poetry and may be another artist for Brother Records [the Beach Boys' label].' Bobby Beausoleil later claimed that Melcher promised to pay Manson \$5,000 for his song *Cease to Exist* (which the Beach Boys recorded as *Cease to Resist*) but then reneged on the deal. In August 1968 Wilson moved house and Manson moved the Family into the Spahn ranch.

O'Neill studied the bestselling book, *Helter Skelter*, by Vincent Bugliosi, lead prosecutor at Manson's trial. Bugliosi's case went as follows. Manson was a huge fan of the Beatles, and believed that the lyrics on the *White Album* were somehow addressed to him personally. Tracks such as 'Helter Skelter' and 'Little Piggies' were taken to mean 'the black man rising up against the white establishment and murdering the entire white race'. The Manson Family would escape *Helter Skelter* by taking refuge in a bottomless pit in the desert ('a place Manson derived from Revelation 9') and breed until he had 144,000 followers to take over the world. To O'Neill, this fable of bat-shit craziness didn't explain anything. Bugliosi himself said in an interview with *Penthouse* in 1976 that he believed while Manson's followers believed his *Helter Skelter* bullshit, Manson did not. In which case, why did he organise the murders and how could he have manipulated his followers into carrying them out?

Bugliosi, as O'Neill was to discover, was corrupt, greedy and (according to his own family) psychotic. Bugliosi feared exposure for having gotten three witnesses to lie on the witness stand to bolster his case (perjury in a murder trial was a very serious offence, possibly carrying a death sentence). O'Neill's encounters with Bugliosi consisted largely of evasions, lies and threats of litigation from him.

O'Neill wondered: could the truth have been that 'a few rich guys had gotten in over their heads with an unstable ex-con [Manson]?' and that

immediately following the Cielo murders, 'the Golden Penetrators realized they hadn't quite washed their hands of Manson?' Dennis Wilson and Greg Jakobson knew that Manson had previously shot Bernard Crowe, a black man he believed to be a Black Panther, (which he wasn't) and killed him (which he hadn't). On 1 July 1969, Tex Watson had ripped-off Crowe in a marijuana deal. After Crowe went to the Spahn ranch and demanded his money back with menaces, Manson planned to kill him. He confronted Crowe at his Hollywood apartment, shot him in the stomach and left him for dead. (Unknown to Manson, Crowe survived and would eventually testify against him in court.) Manson told his followers that he expected armed retaliation from Crowe's supposed Panther associates.

Jacobson, who later testified that he had spoken to Manson 'upward of a hundred times', was familiar with Manson's predictions of a bloody race war which would see rich white people dismembered and hung 'from the ceiling'. Yet, after the victims at Cielo really were carved up and Sharon Tate's body was hung from the ceiling, Jakobson claimed he hadn't connected Manson with the crimes until the police arrested him four months later; this despite the fact that days after the Cielo murders, Manson broke into his house, woke him up, produced a bullet and said 'Tell Dennis [Wilson] there are more where this came from.'

O'Neill realised that to pursue his leads he would need contemporaneous and documented evidence. Interviewing assistant Manson trial prosecutor, Stephen Kay, he learned that 'Manson and Watson attended a party at the Cielo house when Terry [Melcher] and [actress] Candice Bergen lived there'. This suggested firstly, that Melcher had lied about how close to Manson he had been; and secondly, that Manson targeted Cielo because he and Watson knew the layout of the place. Accessing Bugliosi's notes held at the DA's office, O'Neill was amazed to discover that Bugliosi knew that Melcher had visited Manson three times *after* the murders, but had covered it up. The cover-up was made easier by splitting the cases into two different trials: one of Tex Watson for the Hinman murder on the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office (LASO)'s patch and another one for Manson and his associates on the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)'s. When O'Neill managed to get an interview with Melcher he was met by evasions, denials, and threats to sue him and his publisher, *Premiere* magazine.

Manson versus the Black Panthers

Within a year, O'Neill had interviewed 'movie-industry players, friends and relatives of the victims, cops, attorneys, judges, suspects and hangers-on' – over five hundred people in all. One of the central

mysteries was the massive LASO raid on the Spahn ranch, which would never have been approved without surveillance reports. And why, after LASO found stolen property, guns, drugs and underage girls, was Manson, a law-breaking parolee, released? The search warrant and crime report relating to the raid had gone missing. But through his ex-police contacts O'Neill gained back-door access to the LASO records and found the warrant. Manson was the only person identified by name in the document, described as 'leader' of the Family crime ring and 'on Federal Parole for Grand Theft Auto'.

According to ex-LASO detective Preston Guillory, Manson was never arrested 'because our department thought he was going to attack the Black Panthers' (intelligence had revealed Manson's shooting of Bernard Crowe). Guillory told O'Neill: 'I believe there was something bigger Manson was working on. Cause a stir. Blame it on the Panthers . . . Maybe a witting player in someone else's game.' Another interviewee, former assistant District Attorney Lewis Watnick, made the 'educated guess' that 'Manson was an informant'.

O'Neill's shoe-leathering led him – reluctantly at first – to the world of the 'intelligence community'. Of particular interest was Reeve Whitson (1931-94), who served Vincent Bugliosi in the Manson trial as a 'witness wrangler'. Whitson had telephoned Tate's personal photographer, Shahrokh Hatami, at 7 am, 9 August, to tell him of the Cielo murders, ninety minutes *before* Tate's maid arrived at the scene and discovered the carnage. At Bugliosi's behest Whitson threatened Hatami with deportation to Iran – to force him to give false testimony at the trial that he had seen Manson at the property looking for Terry Melcher five months earlier.

Why the lie? According to his associate, Frank Rosenfelt, the former CEO of MGM pictures, Whitson was 'friends with Jay Sebring and Polanski was a buddy of his, and the Beach Boys – and he met Manson through all this'. Another acquaintance (not named) recalled, 'The entire Manson situation, the Black Panther movement and probably other similar movements . . . people were discredited by certain things that, according to Reeve, may have been staged or done by government authorities in order to make them look bad.' Close friends of Whitson believed he had been infiltrating the Family and 'felt bad' about not being able to prevent the murders. Almost everyone who knew Whitson well believed he was working for some branch of the CIA, operating in various parts of the world as an anti-communist penetration agent and fixer. O'Neill writes, 'Once he'd consumed me, I found myself fixating on possibilities that I would've dismissed as insane only months before.'

CHAOS and COINTELPRO

O'Neill decided he needed to research two of most notorious secret-state campaigns to infiltrate, disrupt and discredit the American Left: the CIA's CHAOS, an illegal domestic surveillance program, and the FBI's COINTELPRO. Both of them targeted the Black Panthers. In the summer of 1969, COINTELPRO activities were at their most murderous (arranging assassinations of Panthers by cops or rivals such as the United Slaves Organisation). At this time Manson – a rabid racist – was tooling up with guns and preparing his followers for an attack on Spahn by the Black Panthers.

In August 1967, J Edgar Hoover had reanimated COINTELPRO 'to prevent militant Black Nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability'. The Tate-Polanski house on Cielo Drive had become a gathering place for 'liberal Hollywood' figures such as Mama Cass, Warren Beatty and Jane Fonda – all of whom were reportedly under FBI surveillance. Abigail Folger, one of the Cielo victims, was an outspoken civil rights activist. Hoover's memo says, 'An anonymous letter is being prepared for Bureau approval to be sent to a leader of the PFP [Peace and Freedom Party] in which it is set forth that the BPP [Black Panther Party] has made statements in closed meetings that when armed rebellion comes the whites in the PFP will be lined up against the wall with the rest of the whites.' As O'Neill points out, 'Less than a year after this memo was written, Manson's followers lined up four denizens of liberal Hollywood in Roman Polanski's home and cut them to pieces, leaving slogans in blood to implicate the Black Panthers.'

The Lost Summer of Love

O'Neill next turned his attention to a period of Manson's life which Bugliosi had studiously ignored: the San Francisco 'summer of love' in 1967. Manson was released from prison on parole March 1967, having served seven years for check forgery. His parole supervisor was Roger Smith, who, as a doctoral student at Berkeley School of Criminology, had researched the link between drug use and violence in gangs. He evidently saw Manson as someone who could cast further light on this subject. Smith had the bright idea of sending Manson to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, just as the summer of love was getting underway.

Manson, a brutalised, sociopathic ex-con, took to his new acid-tripping, guitar-strumming, peace-and-love hippie lifestyle immediately. He also built himself a cult. In July 1967 he was given three years' probation for interfering with a police officer's arrest of one of Manson's newly-recruited underage girls. This didn't prevent Smith from filing a

report in which he claimed that 'Mr Manson has made excellent progress' in becoming a respectable citizen. In O'Neill's words, 'The law afforded special privileges to everyone in Manson's orbits'. Smith acted like Manson's personal guardian; he even fostered the baby son Manson had fathered with his follower, Mary Brunner. Smith also kept Susan Atkins out of prison by writing to the court about her sterling character and getting her a probation term instead. Two years later, Atkins stuck a fork into the pregnant Sharon Tate's stomach.

Roger Smith ran an Amphetamine Research Project at the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic (HAFMC). Smith was especially interested in the relationship between amphetamine use and violent gang behaviour. In the course of 1967, the Acid culture of peace-and-love hippiedom gave way to the violent culture of speed-freakery. Significantly, Manson employed excessive LSD tripping and promiscuity to 'program' his cult recruits, but later their drug of choice was speed.

The HAFMC was founded in June 1967 by another 'Smith'. David Smith had conducted experiments on mice with speed and LSD to test their propensity to kill each other in confined spaces. The two Smiths jointly wrote a study of the Manson Family for the *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*, entitled 'The Group Marriage Commune', which was based on four months of 'participant-observer' research at the Family ranch by their young colleague, Alan Rose. Both of the Smiths' research was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which was later found to have been used by the CIA as a front for LSD research. This, of course, sets off – admittedly faint – alarm bells that the HAFMC research had something to do with the CIA's MK-Ultra (mind control) project.

MK-Ultra

These alarm bells go off big time however, when O'Neill brings in Dr Jolyon West – the man who conducted the notorious experiment in which he managed to kill an elephant at Oklahoma City Zoo by overdosing it with LSD. West 'accepted an office at the Haight-Ashbury Clinic from David Smith himself to recruit subjects for LSD research'. More precisely, West was working on the 'induction of abnormal states'.

Jolyon West was the shrink assigned by the Warren Commission in 1965 to psychiatrically examine Jack Ruby, the mobster who slew Lee Harvey Oswald. West examined Ruby alone in his prison cell and emerged to report that had suffered an 'acute psychotic break'. It seems that if Ruby wasn't clinically insane when he murdered Oswald, he certainly was by the time West had finished with him. Subsequently Ruby's testimony to

the Warren Commission only succeeded in making him seem more unhinged.

In a house in the Haight in June 1967, West opened a laboratory disguised as a hippie crash pad, with six unwitting research students who were assigned to lure hippies into the pad for 'observation'. David Smith helped furnish West with clients from his clinic. West died in 1999, leaving a horde of uncatalogued papers at UCLA. O'Neill trawled through them and struck gold. The CIA operational files on its MK-Ultra project had been destroyed by project chief Sidney Gottlieb in 1973.¹ But O'Neill found crucial correspondence between West and Gottlieb. In a letter dated 11 June 1953 (just after MK-Ultra was launched), West wrote to Sidney Gottlieb outlining proposals for a project to use hypnosis and drugs to extract information from unwilling subjects, with subsequent amnesia of the interrogation and 'alteration of the subject's recollection of the information he formerly knew'. He also proposes 'implanting false information' and induction of 'specific mental disorders'. West says that he hopes to create 'couriers' to carry messages secretly embedded in their minds and to study the 'induction of trance-like states by drugs'. Furthermore, he adds (much to Gottlieb's enthusiasm) that the experiments 'must eventually be put to test in practical trials in the field'. O'Neill comments 'All these were the goals of MK-Ultra and they bore a striking resemblance to Manson's accomplishments with his followers more than a decade later.'

Ed Sanders, in his book *The Family*, mentions an ex-US Navy hypnotist and strip club owner, named William Deanyer, who claimed he had taught Manson how to hypnotize. O'Neill managed to track down the late Deanyer's daughter, who told him she'd seen her father teaching Manson hypnosis at his club. When O'Neill discussed the possibility of a link between Manson and West with psychology professor Alan Schefflin, he asked him if the Manson murders might have been an MK-Ultra experiment gone wrong. The professor replied, 'No. An MK-Ultra experiment gone right.'

Tom O'Neil has no illusions that he has 'found the truth' about the Manson murders. He concludes: 'My goal isn't to say what did happen – it's to prove that official story didn't. I've learned to accept the ambiguity.' *CHAOS* is a 500-pager with 60 pages of endnotes. O'Neill gathered so much material that it could have been three times that size. Some of what has been left out will appear in a sequel. His investigations of the

¹ John Marks, author of *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, managed to access the financial records, which had survived intact.

Manson business, for example, led him into the murky world of Sirhan Sirhan and the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968. Meanwhile *CHAOS* is a great read. O'Neill doesn't just present his findings; the book is written as a dramatic, almost Chanderlesque narrative. Many of the key players he interviewed are still alive. And so far none of them have sued him.

David Black is a veteran Lobster contributor. His latest book is Psychedelic Tricksters: A True Secret History of LSD (BPC Publications, London: 2020).