

Helter Skelter

Written by: Lennon-McCartney

Recorded: 18 July; 9, 10 September 1968

Released: 22 November 1968 (UK), 25 November 1968 (US)

Paul McCartney's Helter Skelter was an attempt to create a rock 'n' roll song as loud and dirty as possible. It later became one of The Beatles' most notorious songs, after Charles Manson interpreted it as a symbol for Armageddon. 🎵

The sound, which has been described as a prototype for 1970s heavy metal sounds, was an attempt to outdo The Who; in an interview, Pete Townshend had described their single I Can See For Miles as the group's most extreme sound to date.

"I was in Scotland and I read in Melody Maker that Pete Townshend had said: 'We've just made the raunchiest, loudest, most ridiculous rock 'n' roll record you've ever heard.' I never actually found out what track it was that The Who had made, but that got me going; just hearing him talk about it. So I said to the guys, 'I think we should do a song like that; something really wild.' And I wrote Helter Skelter.

You can hear the voices cracking, and we played it so long and so often that by the end of it you can hear Ringo saying, 'I've got blisters on my fingers'. We just tried to get it louder: 'Can't we make the drums sound louder?' That was really all I wanted to do - to make a very loud, raunchy rock 'n' roll record with The Beatles. And I think it's a pretty good one."

-Paul McCartney in Anthology 🎵

Helter Skelter referred to a fairground ride mainly popular in Britain, in which people could climb the inside of a wooden tower and slide down a spiral ride on the outside.

"I was using the symbol of a helter skelter as a ride from the top to the bottom - the rise and fall of the Roman Empire - and this was the fall, the demise, the going down. You could have thought of it as a rather cute title but it's since taken on all sorts of ominous overtones because Manson picked it up as an anthem, and since then quite a few punk bands have done it because it is a raunchy rocker."

-Paul McCartney in Many Years From Now 🎵

In the Studio

The Beatles' first attempt to record Helter Skelter took place on 18 July 1968. They recorded three takes, lasting 10', 12' and 27' respectively; the last was the longest recording in the group's career.

An edit of take two, lasting 4'38", was included on Anthology 3 in 1996. More of a slow jam than an attempt at a final version, the track is more blues-based and lacks the volume and power of the White Album take. It also features McCartney occasionally singing 'Hell for leather' instead of the title.

"They recorded the long versions of Helter Skelter with live tape echo. Echo would normally be added at remix stage otherwise it can't be altered, but this time they wanted it live. One of the versions developed

into a jam which went into and then back out of a somewhat bizarre version of Blue Moon. The Beatles were jamming away, completely oblivious to the world..."

-Brian Gibson, technical engineer in The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions

A remake of Helter Skelter was begun on 9 September, and completed with some additional overdubs on the following day. The Beatles taped 18 takes, all considerably shorter than the 18 July versions. 🎵

"The version on the album was out of control. They were completely out of their heads that night. But, as usual, a blind eye was turned to what The Beatles did in the studio. Everyone knew what substances they were taking but they were really a law unto themselves in the studio. As long as they didn't do anything too outrageous things were tolerated."

-Brian Gibson in The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions

The 9 September session fulfilled McCartney's desire to create a rock 'n' roll maelstrom. Producer Chris Thomas later recalled George Harrison setting fire to an ashtray and running around the studio with it above his head, in an impression of singer Arthur Brown, while McCartney was recording his vocals. 🎵

"We got the engineers and George Martin to hike up the drum sound and really get it as loud and horrible as it could and we played it and said, 'No, still sounds too safe, it's got to get louder and dirtier.' We tried everything we could to dirty it up and in the end you can hear Ringo say, 'I've got blisters on my fingers!' That wasn't a joke put-on: his hands were actually bleeding at the end of the take, he'd been drumming so ferociously. We did work very hard on that track."

-Paul McCartney in Many Years From Now

The best attempt was the final one, take 21. It featured Lennon on bass guitar and saxophone, The Beatles' assistant Mal Evans on trumpet, two lead guitars, drums, piano, more bass guitar, backing vocals and McCartney's suitably raucous lead vocals.

"Helter Skelter was a track we did in total madness and hysterics in the studio. Sometimes you just had to shake out the jams, and with that song - Paul's bass line and my drums - Paul started screaming and shouting and made it up on the spot."

-Ringo Starr in Anthology

Helter Skelter Lyrics

From The Beatles record The Beatles (AKA The White Album) - 1968

When I get to the bottom I go back to the top of the slide
Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride
Till I get to the bottom and I see you again.

Do, don't you want me to love you
I'm coming down fast but I'm miles above you
Tell me, tell me, tell me, come on tell me the answer
You may be a lover but you ain't no dancer.

Helter skelter, helter skelter
Helter skelter.

Will you, won't you want me to make you
I'm coming down fast but don't let me break you
Tell me, tell me, tell me the answer
You may be a lover but you ain't no dancer.

Look out
Helter skelter, helter skelter
Helter skelter.
Look out 'cause here she comes.

When I get to the bottom I go back to the top of the slide
Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride
Till I get to the bottom and I see you again.

Well do you, don't you want me to love you
I'm coming down fast but don't let me break you
Tell me, tell me, tell me the answer
You may be a lover but you ain't no dancer.

Look out
Helter skelter, helter skelter
Helter skelter.

Look out helter skelter
She's coming down fast.
Yes she is.
Yes she is

Charles Manson and Helter Skelter

One of the darkest aspects of The Beatles' career was the misguided belief, by the psychopathic murderer Charles Manson and his 'Family' of followers, that the group's songs incited violence and depicted armageddon.

Look at the songs: songs sung all over the world by the young love. It ain't nothin' new... It's written in... Revelation, all about the four angels programming the holocaust... the four angels looking for the fifth angel to lead the people into the pit of fire... right out to Death Valley. It's all in black and white, in the White Album - white, so there ain't no mistakin' the color.

-Charles Manson 📄

Charles Milles Manson was born on 12 November 1934. He became leader of the "Manson Family" - a collection of followers - towards the end of the 1960s. 📄 The members of this group carried out a number of murders, which included the killing of film director Roman Polanski's actress wife Sharon Tate, under the instruction of Manson.

It was upsetting. I mean, I knew Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate and - God! - it was a rough time. It stopped everyone in their tracks because suddenly all this violence came out in the midst of all this love and peace and psychedelia. It was pretty miserable, actually, and everyone got really insecure - not just us, not just the rockers, but everyone in LA felt: 'Oh, God, it can happen to anybody.' Thank God they caught the bugger.

-Ringo Starr in Anthology 📄

Manson first heard The Beatles during their first visit to the United States in February 1964. At the time he was serving a prison sentence for attempting to cash a forged US Treasury check. He was taught to play the guitar by a fellow inmate, and quickly became obsessed with The Beatles. 📄

He was released in March 1967 at the age of 32, and in the summer left the San Francisco area with a group of followers in an old school bus. After The Beatles' Magical Mystery Tour was released in November that year, Manson adopted the name to refer to the Family's geographical and psychological movements in the bus. 📄

In later years Manson became inspired by a belief in "Helter Skelter," a term taken from The Beatles' song of the same name, which signified an apocalyptic race war he believed would arise between blacks and whites. As well as the music of The Beatles, Manson's scenario was also inspired by the New Testament's Book of Revelation. 📄

His first known use of the term was at a campfire gathering of the Family on New Year's Eve 1968, at their base at Myers Ranch near California's Death Valley. By February 1969, Helter Skelter had developed into a scenario in which Manson and the Family would create an album which they believed would trigger the conflict and inspire America's white youths to join the Family. He believed that black men, deprived of white women, would commit violent crimes in frustration, resulting in murderous rampages and a swiftly-escalating conflict between racial groups. 📄

Although The Beatles' song Helter Skelter referred to a popular yet harmless funfair slide, for Manson it encapsulated the chaos which he foretold. In the US the term 'helter skelter' was far less well known, yet to Manson, Helter Skelter was a coded prophecy for an apocalyptic race war. He also found references to the imagined apocalypse in a number of other songs, many of which appeared on the White Album. In Manson's mind, The Beatles's songs included a number of coded messages and hidden meanings.

Manson wasn't alone in finding hidden - often non-intended or non-existent - meanings in The Beatles' songs. By 1968 The Beatles had become amused by the often-fanciful interpretations applied to their songs. John Lennon affectionately encouraged such thinking on *Glass Onion*, also on the White Album, and several other songs which referenced previous works by the group. However, they were appalled by the effect that Helter Skelter had upon Manson and his followers.

We used to have a laugh about this, that or the other, in a light-hearted way, and some intellectual would read us, some symbolic youth generation wants to see something in it. We also took seriously some parts of the role, but I don't know what Helter Skelter has to do with knifing someone. I've never listened to it properly, it was just a noise.

-John Lennon in Rolling Stone, 1970 📄

During his murder trial in November 1970, Manson explained his interpretation of Helter Skelter to the court.

"Like, Helter Skelter is a nightclub. Helter Skelter means confusion. Literally. It doesn't mean any war with anyone. It doesn't mean that those people are going to kill other people. It only means what it means. Helter Skelter is confusion. Confusion is coming down fast. If you don't see the confusion coming down fast, you can call it what you wish. It's not my conspiracy. It is not my music. I hear what it relates. It says 'Rise!' It says 'Kill!' Why blame it on me? I didn't write the music. I am not the person who projected it into your social consciousness."

-Charles Manson, November 1970 📄

On 10 January 1969 Manson announced that the Family were to move from the desert into a house in Canoga Park. The canary-yellow house, where the Family temporarily settled to develop their plans for Helter Skelter, was dubbed the Yellow Submarine.

On 27 July a dispute over money arose within the Family. Bobby Beausoleil murdered fellow member Gary Hinman, at Manson's instruction. Afterwards Beausoleil daubed the words "Political piggy" on a wall in Hinman's blood.

Beausoleil was arrested on 6 August. Two days later Manson told the Family that Helter Skelter was to begin. 📄 The following night, 9 August, three members murdered Sharon Tate and four others. One of the killers, Susan Atkins, wrote "Pig" on the front door of the murder scene, 10050 Cielo Drive, in Tate's blood. 📄

The next night three Family members, again acting on Manson's instruction, murdered Leno LaBianca and his wife Rosemary at their Los Feliz home. One of the killers wrote "Rise" and "Death to Pigs" on the walls of the living room, and "Healter [sic] Skelter" on the refrigerator.

Abbey Road was released in September 1969, after the murders took place. By this time the Family were living at a camp in the Death Valley area of California. In October, after the Family had acquired a copy of the album, several members - including Manson - were arrested. 📄

On 25 November police raided the Spahn Ranch used as a base by the Family. They confiscated a door on which was written "Helter Skelter is coming down fast", and the words "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, all good children (go to heaven?)" - the latter words are heard in You Never Give Me Your Money.

While Manson stood trial for the Tate-LaBianca murders in late July 1970, two people were murdered and one injured in an attack on a beach near Santa Barbara, California. A female member of the Family later referred to this incident as "Maxwell's Silver Hammer". 📄

The Beatles and the Bible

"Charles Manson interpreted that Helter Skelter was something to do with the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. I still don't know what all that stuff is; it's from the Bible, Revelation - I haven't read it so I wouldn't know. But he interpreted the whole thing - that we were the four horsemen, Helter Skelter the song - and arrived at having to go out and kill everyone."

-Paul McCartney in Anthology

Manson's theory of Helter Skelter was closely bound to a belief that Revolution 9 was an aural depiction of chapter nine in the book of Revelation in the Bible. He saw The Beatles as embodying various facets of the book.

"And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit."

-Revelation 9, verse 1

This was variously interpreted by Manson as being about Stuart Sutcliffe, or about Manson himself.

"And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit."

And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth; and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power."

-Revelation 9, verse 2-3

Locusts were taken by Manson to represent The Beatles. The reference to scorpions was deemed a reference to Manson, whose zodiac sign was Scorpio, and the rest of the Family. The bottomless pit was representative of the underground city where the Family was meant to retreat while Helter Skelter took place.

*"...and their faces were as the faces of men.
And they had hair as the hair of women..."*

-Revelation 9, verse 7-8

Like Charles Manson, The Beatles - particularly John Lennon and George Harrison, had long hair.

“And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men.”

-Revelation 9, verse 15

The four angels were The Beatles; the "third part of men", in Manson's mind, represented the destruction of white people.

“And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone.”

-Revelation 9, verse 17

Manson thought the 'breastplates of fire' were The Beatles' electric guitars; the 'fire and smoke and brimstone' were the lyrics which he thought would initiate the Helter Skelter scenario.

There were numerous other references from Revelation 9 which Manson saw as anticipating the Helter Skelter scenario. However, these are the only ones directly connected, in his eyes, to The Beatles.

“It's The Beatles, the music they're putting out. They're talking about war. These kids listen to this music and pick up the message. It's subliminal.”

-Charles Manson, 1970