

R.I.P.

Notes on the Paul McCartney Shadow Canon
by Mark Owens

P.I.D.

“Paul is dead.” So claimed the rumors that began circulating in September 1969, that Paul McCartney of the Beatles had been killed in an automobile accident in November 1966 and replaced by “Billy Shears,” a talented impostor look-a-like made to resemble McCartney with the aid of plastic surgery.¹ Clues to the conspiracy, so the story went, were to be found hidden in the album artwork, song lyrics, and back-masked recordings on the *Sgt. Pepper*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, *White Album*, and *Abbey Road* LPs. Originally limited to the underground press and college newspapers, the rumors gained traction when an anonymous caller to DJ Russ Gibb’s radio show on WKNR-FM in Detroit identified only as “Tom” spelled out the death clues on air. Soon, national news outlets picked up on the story, and a brief period of public hysteria took hold, prompting *LIFE* Magazine to send a crew to Scotland to track down McCartney, who was living in seclusion on his private farm. “Paul is still with us,” announced the cover of the November 7, 1969 issue, featuring a black-and-white photograph of McCartney and his family huddled together in the windswept Scottish countryside.² Inside, an article titled “The Magical McCartney Mystery” systematically laid out the supposed evidence, while in a sidebar McCartney himself succinctly dismissed the entire affair, stating, “It is all bloody stupid.”

While perhaps no more than a blip on the larger cultural radar, the Paul Is Dead hoax remains a watershed moment for the history of design and media culture more generally. Never before had the general public paid such close attention to the materials and techniques of designed communications, nor found them the subject of such widespread discussion and debate. Legions of Beatles fans poured over the album artwork, viewing typography in mirrors, scrutinizing the occult symbolism of minute graphic details, and unpacking the significance of the cropping, reproduction, and placement of photographs. So too, the technology of sound recording was subjected to an unprecedented

level of close examination as radio DJs were consulted for technical expertise on the Nightly News and teenagers ran their turntables backwards, listening intently on headphones for evidence of secret messages. How else to interpret this momentary crisis if not as an episode of McLuhanite media panic, in which the counterculture’s questioning of dominant power structures and the air of conspiracy around the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and Martin Luther King, Jr. collided with a general acknowledgment of a new, globalized media landscape? As the first fully mediated rock ‘n’ roll band—endlessly televised, recorded, photographed, and filmed—the Beatles, and particularly Paul, “the cute Beatle,” provided an ideal screen on which to project this matrix of cultural anxieties.

Certainly, the timing couldn’t have been better. Dated to late 1966, Paul’s supposed “death” coincided closely with the publication of Roland Barthes’ essay, “Death of the Author,” which first appeared in the Minimalism issue of *Aspen* magazine in the Fall of 1967, just a few months after the release of *Sgt. Pepper*, the first purported post-Paul release by the Beatles, showcasing an entirely new look and musical direction for the band, packaged in a deluxe gatefold sleeve designed by Peter Blake. It was in the similar context of the literal multimedia experience of *Aspen*, a boxed edition designed by Brian O’Doherty that included essays, phonograph records, and text pieces, that English readers first encountered Barthes’ classic argument for the autonomy of writing and the constitution of the text by the reader. “[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation,” Barthes explained, “but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.”³ By activating the “readers” of the Beatles albums and giving them agency to decipher the “text,” the Paul Is Dead phenomenon would appear to bear out Barthes’ claims on a wider socio-cultural level.

Nevertheless, many of the Paul Is Dead rumors resisted the more radical implications of Barthes’ argument. For, the assumption, repeated again and again, was that the original Paul McCartney had been replaced, and that the death clues had been purposefully planted by the surviving Beatles as a way of exposing their unwilling complicity in a conspiracy

orchestrated by shadowy government and corporate interests. Throughout, the “authorship” of the Beatles records and the singularity of the flesh-and-blood Paul McCartney were never really in question. The *LIFE* Magazine article, with its half-serious overview of the clues and reassuring cover headline, aimed to quell any doubt. Even McCartney’s rebuttal seemed definitive: “Can you spread it around that I am just an ordinary person and I want to live in peace?”⁴ Nevertheless, more than forty years on, the Paul Is Dead rumors have never really gone away, having experienced a temporary resurgence with the tragic murder of John Lennon in 1980 and a renewed life on the Internet in recent years. Beneath the occasional “Paul is dead” joke on *David Letterman* or *Saturday Night Live* persists a degree of uneasy skepticism, an unincorporated kernel of resistance and a feeling that *something* about Paul McCartney eludes full comprehension. In what follows I want to suggest that we might begin to describe this feeling and perhaps even give it a name.

R.P.M.

In a transcript of a lecture published under the title, “R.P.M. The Movement to ‘Reconsider Paul McCartney,’” Ian Svenonius has made a compelling case for Paul’s status as the more avant-garde Beatle.⁵ Against the conventional wisdom that holds John Lennon to be the most “artistic,” “political,” and “radical” member of the Fab Four, Svenonius traces many of the Beatles’ most important innovations to the direct influence of McCartney: the *Sgt. Pepper* “concept album,” the surrealist and verité experiments of the *Magical Mystery Tour* and *Let It Be* films, the bands’ first public admission of LSD use, and the vaudevillian, music hall aesthetic that spawned psychedelia and glam, to name just a few. Lennon, meanwhile, has been lionized for his selfish post-breakup rejection of his former bandmates (“I don’t believe in Beatles, I just believe in me.”) and self-conscious pose as the rebellious outsider, impulses that Svenonius sees as ultimately complicit with capitalist imperatives. Endlessly scapegoated as “lightweight,” Paul’s penchant for melody and showmanship actually facilitated a far-reaching conceptual project, one that would seek to fashion the Beatles into the world’s first “rock’n’roll *Gesamtkunstwerk*.” Considered

radical at the time, Svenonius’ argument has largely been vindicated over the course of the past decade.

Recent books like *The Unknown Paul McCartney* (2002) and Abbey Road studio engineer Geoff Emerick’s memoir, *Here, There and Everywhere* (2007) have gone a long way toward repairing Paul’s tarnished reputation, illuminating his early engagement with the musical avant-garde and the importance of his contribution to the Beatles, particularly in the studio.⁶ Alongside the inevitable passages of hagiography what emerges from these narratives is a portrait of Paul both as an accomplished songwriter and as an inventive, groundbreaking producer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist. From the beginning, Emerick explains, Paul was the most engaged in the technical aspects of recording, often buddying-up to the engineers at Abbey Road and working closely with George Martin on instrumentation and arrangements. In this sense, Paul’s contribution to the Beatles, especially beginning with *Sgt. Pepper*, exceeds the normal kinds of agency one might attribute to membership in a rock’n’roll band: the writing of a given song, the playing of a particular instrument, or the contribution of a specific line of verse, guitar riff, bassline, or drum fill. Instead, McCartney’s influence is *everywhere*. In order to take the full measure of this excess we thus need to look beyond the orthodox touchstones and expected “masterpieces” to a group of lesser-known musical artifacts we might call “The Paul McCartney Shadow Canon.”

P.I.A.

A belated footnote to the Paul Is Dead mystery arrived in 1970 with the release of the self-titled debut LP by Emmitt Rhodes, a singer-songwriter from Los Angeles who had enjoyed moderate success in the late 1960s fronting a band called The Merry Go Round. Coming hard on the heels of the break-up of the Beatles and almost simultaneous with McCartney’s self-titled debut LP, the release of *Emmitt Rhodes* was accompanied by widespread speculation. Whose voice was this? Written, performed, and recorded entirely by Rhodes in his home studio in the L.A. suburb of Hawthorne, by any measure the twelve song album is a pop masterpiece, with distinct echoes of McCartney’s unmistakable melody and vocal style. In a radio interview by telephone on The Barry Richards Show shortly after the

album's release, Rhodes was asked bluntly, "Who are you?" as Richards went on to pose the question, "Has anybody out of Los Angeles ever come up with the idea that it's a long-lost Beatles album? ... There are a lot of record stores around here, people who work in the record stores say that there are clues on the album to the Beatles, to McCartney and the Beatles and things."⁷ Rhodes denied any connection, going on to explain that he had played all of the instruments on the album, recording it over the course of nine months: "I bought a machine and did it in my garage." Clearly enthused, if not entirely convinced, Richards remarked, "I think the album is going to be top ten, whether anybody thinks you are the Beatles, or whatever it is. The album is basically one of the most fantastic things I've ever heard."

Listeners would seem to have agreed, and the album rose to number 29 on the Billboard charts. Eager to build on the success of the debut and its hit single, "Fresh as a Daisy," Rhodes' label, ABC/Dunhill, signed him to a contract to deliver two albums a year. Meanwhile, A&M Records, which had shelved an earlier set of studio recordings by Rhodes, rushed to release a follow-up LP, *The American Dream*, competing with his 1971 sophomore effort, *Mirror*, on record store shelves. Sales of both albums suffered as a result, and, unable to keep pace with his recording contract, Rhodes managed to release only one more album, 1973's *Farewell to Paradise*, before leaving behind the spotlight altogether, continuing to write and record privately. Something of a recluse, Rhodes has long remained a cult figure for fans of sunshine pop, and has only recently emerged from obscurity as the subject of a documentary film, "The One Man Beatles," alongside reports of new recorded material. Still, listening to *Emmit Rhodes* today remains an uncanny, somewhat chilling, experience, especially on tracks like "Live Till You Die." How had the voice of Paul McCartney managed to take up temporary residence in the body of a 20-year-old from Southern California? When asked in the radio interview, "Did you make the album with any intention of sounding like the Beatles?" Rhodes simply replied, "I just wanted to sound as good as I possibly could, and that's just the way it came out."

Clearly, Rhodes' work stands as a high point for rock music of the period, and his *sui generis*, unselfconscious songcraft can only be described as a kind of pure pop genius. Without wanting

to diminish his accomplishment, then, it is worth noting that there are precedents for the kinds of echo effects found on *Emitt Rhodes*. The Beatles themselves sometimes wrote songs to be recorded by other musicians, and with the founding of Apple Records in 1968 the band began to recruit new recording artists for the label, often producing and writing material for them. McCartney's involvement with Apple was limited, but one of his early signings was Mary Hopkin, a Welsh folk singer who had come to his attention when she won a television talent show. McCartney produced her number one single, "Those Were The Days" (Apple 2), and in early 1969 she released "Goodbye" (Apple 10), a song he both wrote and produced. Although never officially released by the band, a demo of Paul singing "Goodbye" exists and has appeared intermittently on bootlegs as a "rare" Beatles track. Whereas Hopkin's single version is a polished, highly produced affair, complete with strings, horns, and multiple vocal overdubs, the demo is much more spare, featuring only acoustic guitar and the melodic line of Paul's vocal. The voice here is clearly, unmistakably McCartney's, although there remains a sense in which it is not entirely *his*. Most noticeably, he sings the demo in a distinct falsetto, certainly not outside his range, but higher than one is used to hearing on similar arrangements like "Blackbird," from the *White Album*.

Consequently, the no-frills demo of "Goodbye" has something of the eerie, treble feel of a folk song recorded in the field, arriving to the listener's ears from another place and time. The lyrics only emphasize this sense of dislocation, framed from the beginning in terms of recollection, repetition, and longing, as the second verse begins, "Songs that lingered on my lips excite me now, and linger on my mind." If there is already a sense that this voice has been heard before, the final verse confirms the suspicion, delivered from a putatively female perspective when McCartney sings the lines, "Far away, my lover sings a lonely song and calls me to his side. Where the sound of lonely drums invites me on, I must be by his side." Who's voice is this if not Hopkin's, or, rather, McCartney simultaneously reproducing and anticipating hers? These lines, with their internal rhymes and image of a song sung from "far away" and "lonely drums" soliciting the singer from a distance offer a version of the Greek Echo myth. The repeated chorus of "Goodbye" suggests as much as the

singer departs but is nevertheless compelled to return, raising the possibility that the voice heard from afar is in fact the sound of a distant echo. Tellingly, when Hopkin came to record her single version of “Goodbye” the “lonely drums” disappeared, as the final verse became, “When the song of loney love invites me on, I must go to his side.” Something, it would appear, had been lost in this particular game of telephone, as the song—both remembered and anticipated, heard and sung—echoes itself, hopelessly confusing the order of priority.⁸

This is how the voice of Paul McCartney works. Throwing his voice, he records a song for Hopkin, echoing her voice with his own in a narrative of remembrance and repetition. Meanwhile, Emmitt Rhodes, tuned in to the same phantom broadcast on the “machine” in his Hawthorne home studio, channels Paul’s voice, out-McCartneying McCartney to create what appears to be a “long-lost Beatles album.” It is no coincidence, I think, that these two artists found a place for McCartney’s voice within and alongside their own. Having mastered a host of recording techniques on his three self-produced albums, Rhodes went on to become a sought-after recording engineer and producer. Hopkin, in turn, would go on to marry legendary producer Tony Visconti, appearing on a number of albums by other artists, including David Bowie’s *Low*. “Paul is alive,” proclaim the doubters who dismiss the death clues as simple coincidence, or at best wishful thinking. Even so, the voice of Paul McCartney—alive and well and living in Scotland—retains its own spectral presence, floating free of the body, divided, doubled, and doppelgangered. For, Rhodes, Hopkin, and, above all, McCartney are artists for whom the voice, far from a guarantee of singular selfhood, is rather a *material* to be reproduced, manipulated and transmitted.

M.P.L.

If, on *Emitt Rhodes* and “Goodbye,” McCartney’s voice thus becomes a kind of floating signifier, how, then, to explain the 1977 instrumental album credited to Percy “Thrills” Thrillington? An orchestral version of Paul and Linda McCartney’s 1971 *Ram* album, *Thrillington* was released to little acclaim and promptly disappeared, remaining a questionable bit of McCartney apocrypha until 1989, when Paul admitted in an interview to having masterminded

the project. Recorded shortly after the release of *Ram*, *Thrillington* was arranged by Richard Hewson, who had also orchestrated “Goodbye” and “Those Were the Days” for Hopkin, as well as songs for the Beatles *Let It Be* album. Approached by McCartney to score an instrumental version of *Ram*, Hewson wrote the arrangements and assembled an orchestra of top-notch studio musicians. Recorded at Abbey Road over the course of just three days, *Thrillington* was produced by McCartney, but he appears nowhere on the record, neither singing nor playing a single instrument. As engineer Tony Clark recalled in the McCartney fan magazine *Good Day Sunshine*, “He was there the entire time, fine tuning it, speaking with the musicians, just being on top of it and making sure the feel is right. He was definitely in charge. Everyone was secure that if there were any decisions to be made, he would make them.”⁹ Pleased with the recordings but caught up in the swirl of activity around the formation of his new band, Wings, McCartney shelved the album until 1977, some six years later.

By this time, Wings had already experienced considerable success, including the hit album *Band on the Run* and a number of world tours—“McCartney Comes Back,” announced the cover of the May 1976 issue of *Time Magazine*—and Paul’s motivations for releasing *Thrillington* at just this moment remain unclear. The pseudonym had been in circulation as early as 1971, when an Irish bandleader named Percy Thrillington was listed as the first signing to Paul’s new company, McCartney Productions, Ltd., or M.P.L. Keen to promote the record while remaining anonymous, in February 1977 Paul and Linda began running small ads in London newspapers detailing the fictional Thrillington’s activities about town. One can only speculate that this publicity ruse represented the McCartney’s response to the recent explosion of the Sex Pistols and punk, then dominating the pages of the British dailies, a kind of haute bourgeois goof on Johnny Rotten. Once released under the M.P.L. imprint in April, *Thrillington* made only passing mention of Paul, who was listed as a “friend” of the band leader in the liner notes, written by one Clint Harrigan, another McCartney pseudonym. The album’s cover design—art directed by Hipgnosis—was even less helpful: a lush illustration by designer Jeff Cummins of a tuxedoed violinist with a ram’s head seated at a music stand.

Perhaps the least ambiguous clue to Paul’s

involvement appeared on the back of the album, a corresponding illustration by Cummins of the ram character from the front cover conducting musicians in the studio, with the face of a figure seated behind the recording console reflected in the glass of the control booth. It is worth pausing over this image for a moment to consider the identity of the mysterious figure manning the boards. In his comments on the album artwork on his website Cummins makes the following unambiguous statement: "Some say the face reflected in glass resembles Paul McCartney. I can categorically reveal it was in fact a guy who called himself Billy Shears."¹⁰ While perhaps easy to dismiss as a joke on the Paul Is Dead rumors, I want to take Cummins at his word. The disembodied visage on the back cover of *Thrillington*—the producer and arranger, "there the entire time" and "definitely in charge," but nevertheless a diffuse, spectral presence—exerts an influence that cannot easily be described. M.P.L. describes this influence, too, a catch-all acronym for a whole range of activities, including not only music releases, but also a vast publishing catalog and film, photography, and music licensing, now operating under the name MPL Communications. Leave it to Cummins, the designer, to give this ghost a proper name.

O.P.D.

"Officially Pronounced Dead." How else to interpret the initials on the black armband worn by Paul McCartney (or should we say Billy Shears?) on the gatefold sleeve of *Sgt. Pepper*, perhaps the most scrutinized album cover of all time? The most recent wave of Paul Is Dead proponents, enabled and spurred on by the ubiquitous, democratic online culture of the Internet, have revived the controversy, moving the discussion from the realm of the artifact to that of the image. No longer content to limit themselves to the tactile immediacy of the albums, a host of competing "Paul Is Dead" and "Paul Is Alive" blogs, discussion boards, and YouTube videos offer detailed facial comparisons, carefully layering, animating, and juxtaposing jpegs of a pre- and post-1966 McCartney. Rare interview and performance clips have also been unearthed, grainy, compressed videos edited and marshaled as evidence for one or another side of the controversy. In a recent essay, "A Thing Like You and Me," Hito Steyerl has discussed this new "objectivity," in

which the digital image becomes not simply a representation of reality, but a material object and a site for participation and new forms of identification and agency—not all of them necessarily benign. "Bruised and damaged, just as everything in history," the image of Paul McCartney has become just such a *thing*, an "object without a subject," as Steyerl would have it.¹¹

Bearing this in mind, perhaps now we might hazard an explanation for the uneasy feeling with which I began. The term "hauntology" has emerged in the past few years as a convenient post-punk shorthand to describe the ghostly effects achieved by producer Martin Hannett on his recordings of Joy Division and the uncanny "unhomesickness" of releases on the Ghost Box label, but the term was first coined by Jacques Derrida over a decade ago in his book *Specters of Marx* to describe a more general condition of contemporary communications technology.¹² A play on words, hauntology is a homonym with ontology, the philosophical study of being and existence, and—crucial for its relevance to design—in Derrida's formulation contemporary forms of haunting are specifically *mediated* phenomena, encapsulated in the act of conjuration and the displacement of the "frontier" between the public and the private:

And if this frontier is being displaced, it is because the medium in which it is instituted, namely the medium of the media themselves (news, the press, tele-communications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity, that which in general determines and assures the spacing of public space, the very possibility of the *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political), this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, hauntology.¹³

As much as they present new ways of thinking about the political domain, Derrida's notions of conjuration and hauntology, tempered by Steyerl's observations, offer an understanding of contemporary media and the construction of the public sphere that can help us to understand the persistence of the Paul Is Dead rumors. Even if one discounts the veracity of the "evidence" raised in the initial moment of media anxiety—backmasking on Beatles albums, hidden messages in cover art, evidence of plastic surgery, the wearing of false noses, etc.—one

still finds McCartney always already doubled, mirrored, and self-haunted, in plain sight and in the most public of ways. Which is just to say that this “undead” sate, “neither living nor dead, present nor absent,” is a condition of mediation as such, a rupture in the public/private divide made possible by common household objects: newspapers, records and magazines, the radio, the phonograph, the television, and the personal computer. It is *this* Paul McCartney, finally, who reaches across to us from the other side. After all, perhaps the central problem of the specter or ghost has always been a question of communication: how do you speak with the dead?



NOTES

1. Although the story itself is a matter of contemporary folklore, see especially R. Gary Patterson, *The Walrus Was Paul: The Great Beatle Death Clues* (New York: Fireside, 1998).
2. John Neary and Dorothy Bacon, “The Magical McCartney Mystery,” *LIFE Magazine*, November 7, 1969, pp. 103–106.
3. Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” *Aspen* 5+6, Fall 1967. Reprinted in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) p. 148.
4. “The Magical McCartney Mystery,” p. 105
5. Ian Svenonius, “R.P.M. The Movement to ‘Reconsider Paul McCartney,’” *Index Magazine* 25, 2000.
6. Ian Peel, *The Unknown Paul McCartney: McCartney and the Avant-Garde* (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2000). Geoff Emerick, *Here There and Everywhere: My Life Recording the Music of the Beatles* (New York: Gotham, 2007).
7. The telephone interview is posted online at: <http://nevergetoutoftheboat.blogspot.com>, and a number of versions are available elsewhere online.
8. The reading of the Echo myth offered here follows from the discussion in Jonathan Goldberg, *Voice Terminal Echo* (London: Methuen, 1986).
9. Matt Hurwitz, “Thrillington,” *Good Day Sunshine Magazine* #78, 1995. http://mcbeatle.de/macca/a/thrillington_gds.html
10. See http://www.jeffcummins.com/musicjc_gallery.php.
11. Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me,” in *Hito Steyerl* (Oslo: Henie Onstad Art Centre, 2010), pp. 60–71.
12. See especially, Mark Fisher, “Unhomesickness.” *k-punk*, September 21, 2005. <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006414.html>.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 62–63.

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