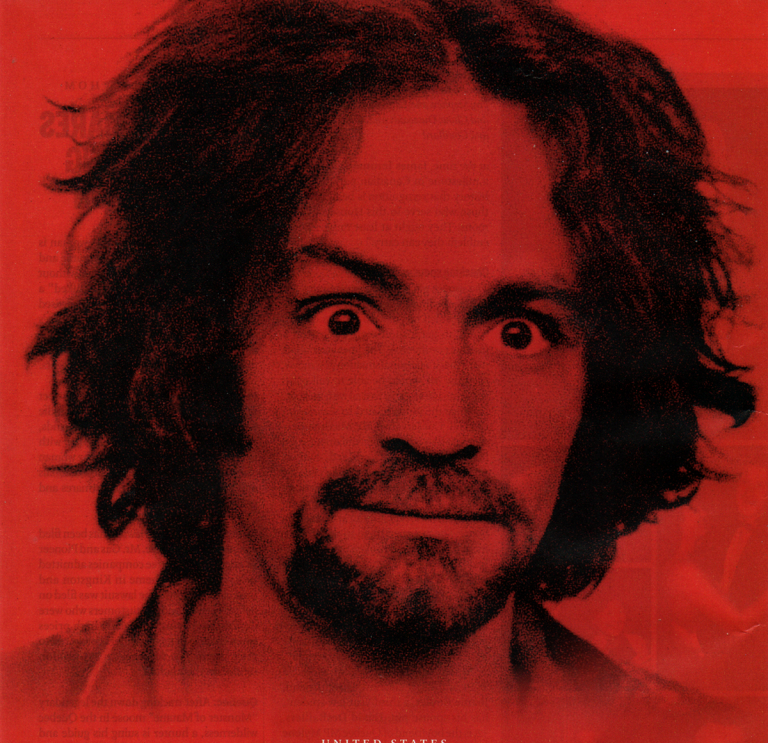


UNITED STATES

The devil inside

The surprising life behind bars of Charles Manson, the world's most notorious cult murderer

EVEN FROM HIS corner cell in the collective consciousness, sealed away and stripped of mystique, the man could press our buttons. Those regularly scheduled parole bids were painful enough. But to watch Charles Manson in his TV interviews—mawkish, snarling and often incomprehensible—was a hallucinatory trip back to the events of August 1969 and the atavistic fears they triggered.

In the years after the Tate and LaBianca bloodbaths, and after the surreal trials of the killers, some of the most influential minds of the 1960s came to regard Manson as the bitter fruit of their permissive time. "This sense that it was possible to go 'too far,' and that many people were doing it—was very much with us in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1969," the essayist Joan Didion later wrote. "I also remember this and I wish I did not: I remember that no one was surprised." Manson, after all, had been at Haight-Ashbury for the Summer of Love. He had recruited his so-called "Family" from its free-loving, free-living young denizens, then sold them on his vision of an apocalyptic race war. Thus did the Manson Family become the bookend to an era—murderers not just of people but of idealism itself.

Today, the husk that is Charles Manson seems unequal to such notoriety. A mug shot released last week, on the occasion of his latest parole hearing, showed once-sharp features snowed in by white whiskers. The burning eyes had clouded; the swastika tattoo had faded into the wrinkles of his forehead. More telling still was his non-appearance at the hearing: Manson's state-appointed lawyer, DeJon Lewis, said the 77-year-old refused even to meet with him to discuss the review, while parole officials released statements indicating Manson is resigned to living out his life in prison. "I'm not like the average inmate," he reportedly told psychologists. "I have spent my life in prison. I have put five people in the grave. I am a very dangerous man."

Time was, Manson might have seized this moment. He would have railed for the TV cameras, rolled his eyes and shifted blame for the atrocities he orchestrated. ("I was never at the scene of any crime," he said smugly during one hearing in 1992. "I never directly told anybody to go anywhere or do anything.") These days, he'd rather stay in his eight-by-10-foot cell, painting, knotting thread into miniature spiders, studying photos taken by the Hubble space telescope. His life has assumed the rhythms of many an institutionalized senior citizen—albeit with more mail. To this day, Manson gets more letters than any other prisoner in the U.S. penal system.

With age comes perspective. He will be 92 years old by his next hearing, and is keenly aware, say acquaintances, that he might not live to see it. He has granted one media interview in the past 20 years, a meandering chat with *Vanity Fair*'s Spanish edition, which he spent most of preaching eco-awareness. Charles Manson, it would seem, is finally finished with the world outside. But is the world finished with him?

NOT NOW, OF course. Not yet. He casts too long a shadow.

Born to a teenage mother, raised by relatives, he'd spent most of his 32 years in reformatories and jails by the spring of 1967, when he washed up in San Francisco and began styling himself as a hippie guru, plunking on a guitar and spouting bits of Scientology he'd picked up behind bars. The following summer, Manson and about 20 mostly female followers headed to the Spahn Movie Ranch, a locale for Hollywood westerns, where his fantastical vision took shape. It centred, famously, on the Beatles' song *Helter Skelter*, whose lyrics Manson believed predicted a racial apocalypse.

Struck by the racial violence gripping American cities, Manson predicted a series of gory, black-on-white murders that would set off retaliatory attacks across the country, which would then trigger a war of annihilation between racist and non-racist whites. The "Family," he said, would wait out the violence in a secret, underground city beneath California's Death Valley, then return to assume control of the country from blacks, who would be incapable of ruling themselves.

But as the months drifted by with no attacks, Manson decided history required a nudge. On Aug. 8, 1969, he directed four acolytes—Susan Atkins, Linda Kasabian, Patricia Krenwinkel and Tex Watson—to 10050 Cielo Dr., a home north of Beverly Hills rented by filmmaker Roman Polanski and his wife, the actress Sharon Tate. There, the group unleashed a massacre, killing not only Tate, who was 8½ months pregnant, but three others staying at the house: Jay Sebring, a hairstylist; Wojciech Frykowski, an aspiring screenwriter; and Abigail Folger, heir to the Folger coffee fortune and Frykowski's lover (Polanski happened to be in London working on a film at the time). A fourth person, 18-year-old Steven Parent, had the misfortune of driving past the scene after visiting a friend in a nearby guesthouse. Watson dispatched him with .22-calibre pistol.

The following night, in Los Feliz, the bloodbath went on. The four Tate killers, along with Manson himself and fellow Family member Leslie Van Houten, descended on the home of grocery magnate Leno LaBianca, and under Manson's orders, woke LaBianca

Massacre: *Tate, 8½ months pregnant, and four others were murdered by Manson's followers on Aug. 8, 1969*

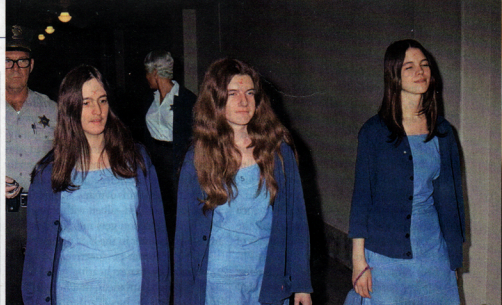
Let down: *Though his crimes sparked paranoia, Manson is finished with the world outside*

and his wife, Rosemary, before tying them up in separate rooms. Watson ran a bayonet into LaBianca 12 times, and carved the word "WAR" into his chest. Krenwinkel, Van Houten and Watson stabbed Rosemary 41 times.

The nature of the crimes, ghastly yet deliberate, shocked American sensibilities. Atkins used Tate's blood to write "PIG" on the victim's front door. LaBianca was found with a meat fork protruding from his body. The words "Healter Skelter" [sic] had been smeared in blood on his refrigerator door.

But the true fascination lay in Manson's apparent capacity to outsource the violence. The following year, the media gave wall-to-wall coverage of the lurid trial of Manson and three of the women. Kasabian, who had struck a plea bargain because she hadn't directly committed any of the murders, described in testimony Manson's near complete control over the group, and the Family's wholesale acceptance of his Helter Skelter prophecy. Atkins, Krenwinkel and Van Houten sought to protect Manson by denying those claims. But their antics during the trial served to reinforce the theory. When Manson carved an "X" in his forehead, symbolically crossing himself out of existence, the other three accused did the same.

It was the first glimpse of doomsday cult behaviour witnessed by a worldwide audience. And not surprisingly, the audience reeled. "To a lot of people, this was completely non-understandable evil, as if the Devil himself had leaked through a crack in the Earth," says Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University professor who studies mass communication and popular culture. Religious dread meshed with fear of '60s counterculture, Thompson adds, when Atkins and Watson revealed that on the nights of the killings members of group were heavily under the influence of LSD and cocaine.



Acolytes: *When Manson carved an 'X' into his forehead, his followers did the same*

"Many people were under the belief that all of the emerging generation of youth was, potentially, going to be their mortal enemy," explains Thompson. "If you were 45 years old at the end of the '60s, and of a certain political persuasion, you saw youth doing very disturbing things. They were leaving home. They were openly consuming illegal narcotics. They were engaging in free love, and worst of all, they were rising up against authority.

"Then someone like Manson comes along and gives a frightening sense of where it could all wind up. There was a real sense of paranoia."

VISUAL STIMULUS IS IN SHORT SUPPLY. A SPIDER IN HIS CELL WILL CAUSE HIM TO FIXATE FOR MONTHS.

PARANOIA, THOUGH, has a short shelf life. And in the long run, Manson couldn't live up to the hype. He and his three co-accused were convicted in early 1971 and sentenced to death. So too was Watson, whom authorities tried separately after extraditing him from his native Texas. Then, a year later, all five sentences were automatically reduced to life in prison because California's top court had issued a decision abolishing the death penalty. Far from going out in a blaze of glory, Charlie Manson was doomed to rot behind bars.

That time has proven useful, though—for the civilized world if not for him. By the late 1970s, researchers and reporters alike were seeking explanations for destructive cults like those of Manson and Jim Jones, or cult-like revolutionary movements like the Symbionese Liberation Army, which in 1974 kidnapped newspaper heiress Patty Hearst. They found at least partial answers in behavioural science. "Charles Manson fit, in retrospect, what would be a recurring profile of cult leaders to come," says Rick Ross, a New Jersey-based consultant and an expert

The long shadow of Charles Manson

After decades in prison, the man who once held deadly control over his 'Family' has become resolved to life behind bars

1969

At 35, Manson had already spent more than 16 years in prisons and detention centres. In August, he tells his followers, "Now is the time for Helter Skelter."

1970

The Tate-LaBianca murder trial begins in July. In November, the defence team rests its case without presenting any evidence or calling a single witness.

1971

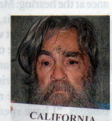
Manson is found guilty and given the death penalty; the California Supreme Court rules it unconstitutional in 1972, and his sentence is reduced to life in prison.

1986

CBS news anchor Charlie Rose interviews Manson at San Quentin prison; Manson tells Rose, "I am love." Rose later wins an Emmy for the segment.

2009

Manson at 74; the swastika on his forehead (which evolved from an "X" that he carved into his head during his murder trial) is fading but still prominent.



2011

Manson has tried for parole 11 times since 1978; April's hearing makes 12 failed bids. He could be denied the chance to reapply for 15 years—at age 92.

GEORGE BIRCH/AP; AP; PREVIOUS SPREAD: AP; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CATTENOLE; TERRY O'NEILL/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; AP

on cults. "An individual who was deeply troubled, megalomaniacal, highly narcissistic and described by mental health professionals as a psychopath. That would be the typical leader of this lethal type of cult."

At the time of the Tate-LaBianca slayings, this would have come as news to anyone outside the psychiatric world. But as more such leaders found their way onto TV newscasts—Jones, David Koresh, Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate—the argot of psychological profiling made its way into the public conversation. In Manson's case, the effect has been to shrink him to size, says Eric Hickey, dean of the California School of Forensic Studies at Alliant International University. "We know a lot more about mass murderers now, and how these things operate," says Hickey, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Murder & Violent Crime*. "Basically, Manson was a coward. He was the kind of guy who had other people do his bidding, and I think he really enjoyed taking advantage of people who were gullible."

What's left is the image of an operator—mentally erratic, physically unimposing and wholly untrustworthy. Twice in the last three years, guards have caught Manson with contraband cellphones, which he'd used to call acquaintances as far away as New Jersey and Florida. He is currently in solitary confinement after prison staff found what appeared to be a homemade weapon in his cell (acquaintances say it was the arm off a broken pair of glasses). More unsettling still is his persistent following—devotees who either believe he is innocent or misunderstood. For that reason, Hickey believes he is best kept behind bars: "It's not that he is physically dangerous, but that he's such an icon. The fear is that his followers would want to recreate him, and that he would inspire them to go out and do more crazy things."

MARLIN MARYNICK, a psychiatric nurse from Regina, harbours no such dread. Four years ago, he struck up a relationship with the prisoner out of professional curiosity, and began visiting him at Corcoran, located about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Their half-dozen meetings—more than 30 hours in total—became the basis for Marynick's 2010 book, *Charles Manson Now*. He is one of the few people outside prison to spend time with Manson in recent years, and the two remain in touch to this day.

Marynick's take on inmate B33920 is not overly sympathetic. Manson could be crude and paranoid during their five-hour-long sessions in a visitor's room, the author tells *Maclean's*: "There are definitely mental health issues there." Yet Marynick's account of Manson's daily life doesn't exactly chill the soul. The convict passes most of his time answering mail, doing thread art or playing guitar in his cluttered cell in the protective housing unit, a wing for prisoners who might come to harm in the general population. He's taken up painting, and has co-founded an ecological movement called ATWA (Air Trees Water Animals, or All The Way Alive). There's a website, run by friends on the outside. But ATWA doesn't offer memberships.

MANSON WILL FORGO HIS LAST PAROLE HEARING. 'HE'S ACCEPTED THIS IS HOW LIFE IS GOING TO BE.'

Solitude has brought out Manson's obsessive side, says Marynick. With no TVs or radios in the unit, visual stimulus is in short supply, and something as simple as a spider taking up residence in his cell will cause him to fixate for months, to the point he can describe every move the creature makes. Guards tell a years-old story of Manson discovering a bird's egg while walking in the exercise yard of his previous institution. He spent the next three weeks carrying the tiny thing in his hand, thinking it might hatch. Prison staff were bemused. But to Marynick, it spoke of Manson's naïveté. "In many ways," says the author, "he's like a 14-year-old."

Still, notoriety matters in prison, and Manson remains the celebrity-in-residence of the protective housing unit's 18-inmate community. An 8x10 autographed photo of him can fetch up to $300 on the Internet; one of his paintings even more. So inmates spend a lot of time cadging signatures from him they can turn into cash for their canteen accounts. Some, desperate for pen pals, have been known to poach addresses from Manson's endless stacks of letters, then write to the correspondents claiming to be "friends of Charlie."

All of which explains why he might prefer to stay inside. Prison offers sustenance, protection, a certain sense of place. Whatever short-lived celebrity he might enjoy after his release would soon give way to reality: he is a decrepit ex-con with no marketable skills, and a lot more people hate him than like him. Marynick, for one, was not surprised when Manson told him about a year ago that he would forgo his 12th, and possibly last, parole hearing. "He's accepted that this is where he's at and this is how life is going to be," says the author. "I think he just wants to be left alone."

Question is, can the world oblige? In 2009, the 40th anniversary of the Tate-LaBianca killings, Manson was flooded with about 1,000 interview requests from media around the globe, adding to the boxes of mail he already receives. The 50th will likely garner just as many. And the end-of-1960s trope lives on—however schooled the public may be in the arcana of cultism. A *Toronto Star* piece on Manson's enduring resonance at the time of the 40th anniversary described the killings as "a generation's defining criminal atrocity."

Visiting hours: *Marynick (left) remains in touch with Manson*

Adding to the ferment, says Robert Thompson, the Syracuse professor, is Manson's mere existence. "So many of our evil characters, whether it's Hitler or schoolyard shooters, kill themselves in the end," he says. "Manson lived and got caught, and now gives us an opportunity to look into the belly of the beast." We can do so, Thompson adds, with the security of knowing he is behind bars, "as if he were a museum piece, or a zoo animal."

Yet even the most horridly fascinating exhibit can't keep our attention forever. Two weeks before Manson's recent parole hearing, Beatles legend Paul McCartney sang *Helter Skelter* during a concert in Zurich. It's been nearly two generations since those ghastly days of August 1969. So it's a good bet that many in the audience never made the connection. By all accounts, Charles Manson would be perfectly okay with that, and the rest of us should be too. **CHARLIE GILLIS**

COURTESY OF MARLIN MARYNICK