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Review of Help!

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Help!

(Capitol, 11.6.2007)

Once upon a time, boys and girls, there were these mopheads from Liverpool. They made these songs that made everybody happy. Then these men in suits said, "There's even more gold in them thar boys." And a movie was begat real fast cause everybody knew they were flashes in the pan. An American expatriate, Richard Lester, was chosen to make it because he had made *It's Trad, Dad!* and knew all about quickly fading musical fads. And behold, *A Hard Day's Night* was a masterpiece, and everybody was very, very happy. And the suits said, "Dick, do it again," and *Help!* was born. It also made people happy, but it is not a masterpiece.

Somewhere in the mysterious East, Clang (Leo McKern) is about to sacrifice a virgin when he discovers the would-be victim has sent the required sacrificial ring to Ringo Starr, famous jewelry fetishist. So Clang, his men, and the lovely Ahme (Eleanor Bron) head for London to get the ring back. Ringo is willing to give it up but can't get it off, so the boys seek the help of Foot (Victor Spinetti), a mad scientist, and Algernon (Roy Kinnear), his bumbling assistant. Unable to remove the ring, Foot decides it can help him rule the world. Hi-jinks ensue.

Help! has many lovely moments. The Beatles arrive at a block of houses and go into separate doors only to enter one long, shared room with a sunken bed, brightly colored walls, vending machines, and a grass carpet, complete with human lawnmower. As they enter, a neighbor (Dandy Nichols) exclaims, "Still the same as they was before they was," one of many wonderful lines by Charles Wood, who wrote five Lester films, and Marc Behm.

In addition to borrowing from the plot of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, *Help!* is meant as an affectionate parody of the James Bond movies. With its colorful costumes and sets and fearless silliness, it resembles many other movies from the mid-sixties, including *Our Man Flint* and any number of Peter Sellers movies, especially *What's New, Pussycat?*, though it has a livelier pace, thanks to Lester.

John Lennon is heard in one of the extras saying *Help!* is a real movie, as opposed to the mockumentary *A Hard Day's Night*. But while the earlier film focuses exclusively on the Beatles, half of *Help!* deals only with the supporting characters. As fine as McKern, Bron, Spinetti, and Kinnear are, they are just not as interesting as the real stars. The movie just isn't as engaging as *A Hard Day's Night*. As Mr. Chuck Berry would say, "Too much monkey business."

Like the Astaire-Rogers musicals, what works consistently are the musical numbers, the rest essentially being filler. Lester talks about how MTV sent him a scroll honoring him as the father of the music video and delivers his standard joke about a blood test, but the songs, all but two shot in different styles, are true forerunners of the familiar music video format. The best are "You're Going to

Lose That Girl,” during a recording session, with cinematographer David Watkin mixing harsh light and shadows, and “Ticket to Ride,” shot at an Austrian ski resort in the wacky manner of Lester’s famous *Running Jumping & Standing Still* collaboration with Sellers.

A second disc offers 57 minutes of extras, including interviews with Lester, Watkin, costume designer Julie Harris, hair stylist Betty Glasgow, Bron, Spinetti, and two stuntmen. While Paul and Ringo are not interviewed, 1965 audio clips from all four Beatles are woven into the extras. Bron, amazingly more attractive now than then, says the Beatles “wanted to act.” Lester praises the work of Watkin, one of the all-time greatest DPs, and his experimentation with color filters. In a sixteen-page booklet, Martin Scorsese admires Watkin’s subdued colors and places Lester and the Beatles in their historical context.

One problem with *Help!* was the musicians’ inability/unwillingness to remember their lines, resulting in a clash with Frankie Howerd, one of those coarse comedians inexplicably beloved by the Brits. Lester decided to cut Howerd’s scene, shown only in stills. Starlet Wendy Richard, another interviewee, did not learn she was no longer in the movie until she was not invited to the premiere.

Especially interesting are the eleven minutes devoted to the restoration of *Help!* Paul Rutan and his team explain and demonstrate their techniques for fixing a badly deteriorated source clearly. Rutan is justified in claiming that *Help!* has never looked so good. One of the highlights of the restoration is Watkin’s use of dark colors against a light background during “Another Girl,” performed on a beach in the Bahamas. For those who weren’t around in 1965, the infectious joy of “Another Girl” and “Ticket to Ride” helps explain what all the fuss was about.—
Michael Adams