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Charles Manson Fifty Years Later Part III: The Trial



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Part III: The Trial

by Mark J. Phillips and Aryn Z. Phillips

The trial of Charles Manson, Linda Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, and Leslie Van Houten on seven counts of murder began on June 15, 1970, at the Hall of Justice in downtown Los Angeles. Jury selection took five weeks. Prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi began his opening statement on July 24th. In it, he summarized the events that had taken place at the Tate and LaBianca residences, gave a history of the Family, and portrayed Manson as its undisputed leader to whom everyone deferred. He briefly described Helter Skelter and Manson's general philosophies on life. He stressed that Manson had ordered the murders, but that Atkins, Krenwinkel and Van Houten had been willing participants in them, as evidenced by the excessive brutality with which the murders were committed. 1

The defense opted to hold its opening statement until after the prosecution had completed its case, so the prosecution began presenting evidence. Over the next twenty-two weeks, Bugliosi called eighty witnesses and introduced 320 exhibits. The star witness was former Family member Linda Kasabian. She testified for a total of seventeen days and gave a detailed account of life with the Family at Spahn Ranch. She made it clear that Manson was in charge and dictated much of daily life, claiming at one point that "the girls worshiped him, just would die to do anything for him." She spoke at length about Manson's feelings on race, his belief in Helter Skelter, and his obsession with the Beatles, and she gave a very precise account of the two nights of murder. Her testimony was truthful, detailed, and consistent, and she sobbed openly when describing the murders and when shown pictures of the victims' bodies. 2

Other witnesses included Family members and neighbors of the victims; Roman Polanski's maid who first discovered the carnage; caretaker William Garretson; cellmates Virginia Graham and Ronnie

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Howard, to whom Atkins had boasted of the murders while in Sybil Brand; eleven-year-old Steven Weiss, who found the discarded gun in his backyard; representatives from the medical examiner-coroner's office and various branches of law enforcement. Testimony also came from several people who had at one time known or been part of the Family, including Straight Satan Danny DeCarlo, former Family member Dianne Lake, and Barbara Hoyt, a Family member who testified despite an attempt by the Family to silence her by feeding her an LSD-laced hamburger. With the help of these witnesses, Bugliosi matched the knives and guns used at the crime scenes to those at Spahn Ranch, connected the bloody clothes found on the hillside to the defendants, verified the fingerprints found at the Tate residence as belonging to Watson and Krenwinkel, and established the whereabouts of the defendants on that fateful August weekend, all of which corroborated Kasabian's testimony. Finally, on Monday, November 13th, the prosecution rested. 3

To the astonishment of all present, attorneys for the defense rested immediately, declining to call any witnesses or present any evidence. Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten instantly stood, shouting that they should be allowed to testify. Judge Older called a conference of the defense attorneys and was advised that they had rested because they feared that their clients, if called to the witness stand, would take full responsibility for the murders in order to save Manson. Judge Older ruled, however, that an accused has a right to testify, and that the three would be allowed to take the stand. Before they were given the opportunity, though, Manson insisted on speaking himself. Older allowed him to make a statement but removed the jury before allowing him to do so.

Manson gave a rambling, incoherent, two-hour speech, highlights of which included the claims that "these children that come at you with knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn't teach them. I just tried to help them stand up." He also insisted, "I may have implied on several occasions to several different people that I may have been Jesus Christ, but I haven't decided yet what I am or who I am." When asked by Older if he wanted to repeat his statement in front of the jury, Manson declined. Returning to the defense table, he told the girls that they no longer had to testify, and they immediately stopped clamoring to do so. With that, the defense again rested. 4 After a brief suspension, followed by closing arguments and jury instruction, the jury retired to deliberate on January 15, 1971. After nine days, it returned to announce that it had found Manson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten guilty on all counts. 5

The guilty verdict was followed by the penalty phase of the trial. After another eight weeks of testimony, the jury deliberated again

and reemerged on March 29th to sentence all four defendants to death. They were immediately taken to prison to await their fates. 6

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In addition to being then the longest criminal trial in American history, the Manson trial was also one of the strangest. Family members held vigil outside the courthouse for the duration of the trial, waiting, as one young woman phrased it, for their “father to get out of jail.”⁷ They passed out flyers and shouted at passersby. Manson behaved bizarrely the entire time. On the first day, he arrived at the courthouse having carved an “X” into his forehead, and his followers outside explained that he had “X’d himself from your world” (he later turned the X into a swastika).⁸ He constantly interrupted witnesses and made wild outbursts to the judge, jury, and spectators, making proclamations like “you’re going to destruction, that’s where you’re going” and “it’s your judgment day, not mine.” He also threatened people, claiming that he “had a little system of [his] own” and that someone should cut Older’s head off. Manson once lunged at Older, brandishing a sharpened pencil, and another time he threw paper clips at Older. As the evidence accumulated and a guilty verdict seemed imminent, Manson tried to smuggle a hacksaw blade into his cell and attempted to bribe a bailiff to help him escape. Older constantly had him removed from the courtroom and placed in a side room where he could hear but not interrupt the proceedings.

The girls were equally outrageous. They made protestations, and on one occasion stood up together and started chanting in Latin. Atkins once tried to grab a knife off the evidence table. Another time she kicked a deputy in the leg and grabbed notes from the prosecution table, tearing them in half. They also copied Manson’s actions. When they saw the X carved on his forehead, they did the same to theirs. During the penalty phase, Manson shaved his head and the girls followed suit. When he was removed from the courtroom, they often were not far behind.⁹

It was clear to all involved that the Family had no reservations about using violence or following through on the threats they made. Bugliosi began getting hang-up phone calls at home, even after he changed his unlisted phone number. He was often followed by Family members when he left the courthouse. One day during testimony, Manson turned to a bailiff and told him that he was “going to have Bugliosi and the judge killed.” In response, Bugliosi had an intercom system installed in his home that would instantly connect him to the nearest police station and had a bodyguard accompany him for the remainder of the trial.¹⁰ Judge Older had a driver-bodyguard and twenty-four-hour security at his home and wore a revolver under his robes.¹¹

As it turned out, they may have been right to take precautions. Ronald Hughes, Van Houten’s lawyer, had been particularly opposed to letting her take the stand. She had only been present at the LaBianca residence, so she was only charged with two counts of murder rather than seven, and she thus had the most to lose if she sacrificed herself for Manson. After the defense rested, Older granted a ten-day recess in which the attorneys were to prepare their closing arguments. Hughes reportedly planned to use this time to go camping and work on his argument from Sespe Creek in Los Padres National Forest, just outside of Los Angeles. When the trial resumed, Hughes had vanished. No one could locate him or had seen or heard from him within the past few days. When he failed to appear again the next day, Older assigned Van Houten’s defense to another attorney, Maxwell Keith, and granted his request for a three-week extension so that he could familiarize himself with the case before closing arguments began. Many, including attorney Fitzgerald, speculated that Hughes was dead. Weeks later, Hughes’ body was found in Sespe Creek. Unfortunately, determining a cause of death was impossible because his body had been submerged underwater for so long.¹² Since there was no evidence of foul play, there was no investigation. However, one of the Family members allegedly said later that “Hughes was the first of the retaliation murders.”¹³

The trial of Manson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten was among the most ardently followed and highly publicized trials of all time, and there were several reasons for this widespread interest. First, it fed off the fascination many Americans had with hippie life and counterculture, from the drugs to the communal living to the kinds of people who partook in them. It also allowed those who were antagonistic towards this lifestyle to voice their concerns and apprehension. Although Manson never claimed to be a hippie, nor did he espouse much of the hippie creed, which preached peace over violence, many identified him as one. Critics felt that the murders were the dark consequence of going against established and mainstream living.

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Deputy District Attorney Vincent Bugliosi arrives at a Los Angeles courtroom; to present the opening argument in the trial of Charles Manson and three others for the slayings of actress Sharon Tate and six others in Los Angeles.

Photo by Wally Fong, July 24, 1970, AP/WideWorld

Second, the case exuded celebrity. At every turn there was a nationally identifiable name —Polanski and Tate to be sure, but also the Beach Boys, Doris Day, and Candace Bergen. While incarcerated, Atkins had boasted that the Family had a death list that included Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Tom Jones, Steve McQueen, and Frank Sinatra.

More, the crimes perpetrated by Manson and his followers were some of the scariest in recent memory, perhaps in the last century. They were gruesome and excessive, the victims killed within the supposed safety of their own homes and chosen at random. Seemingly anyone could be next. The Family members, both those standing trial and those holding vigil out on the street, were odd and creepy. They had vacant expressions, spouted

nonsense to passersby, and seemed to have no remorse for what had happened. Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten often smiled, sang, laughed, and joked with reporters and spectators when led in and out of trial. 14 They were so young and innocent looking, yet capable of such violence and terror. Even with defendants imprisoned, there were countless other Family members out on the streets, apparently capable of the same callous, unfeeling violence and constantly being quoted as saying things like “there’s a revolution coming, very soon,” and “you are next, all of you.” 15 Americans were terrified.

On top of everything else, there was Manson, a terrifying character who apparently could warp the minds of America’s youth and convince them to kill for him. So afraid were people of Manson that the case is usually referred to as “the Manson case” rather than “the Tate case” or “the LaBianca case” or any other victim, as most cases are.

The press capitalized on this widespread fascination. The story was simply everywhere. Coverage surpassed that of all previous murder cases, other than the Lindbergh kidnapping and the assassination of President Kennedy, and had begun instantly. 16 Having monitored police scanners, reporters were already gathered outside the Tate residence when the first police cars arrived, shouting questions as officers came and went; “Is Sharon dead?” “Were they murdered?” The first Associated Press story went out before the names of the victims were even known. 17

With little concrete information, reporters published stories brimming with rumors and untruths. Some claimed that Sharon Tate’s baby had been cut out of her abdomen. Others claimed that the towel thrown over Jay Sebring’s face was a Ku Klux Klan hood. 18 One investigator made the mistake of saying to a reporter that the killings “seemed ritualistic” and the story that ran in the Los Angeles Times was headlined “Ritualistic Slayings: Sharon Tate, Four Others Murdered.” 19 Papers published long, detailed accounts of the victims’ lives, noting Roman Polanski’s penchant for violence in his movies. 20 Often, the implication was that these celebrities, with their high living and noconsequence attitudes, had brought their deaths upon themselves. The LaBianca killings got similar coverage, capturing headlines and television banners on Monday morning. “Second Ritual Killings Here,” cried page one of the August 11 Los Angeles Times. 21

When Manson and his Family were identified as suspects months later, the press was rekindled. The LAPD held a press conference on December 1st to announce the issuance of arrest warrants for Watson, Krenwinkel, and Kasabian, and over two hundred reporters representing publications and news stations from all over the world were in attendance. 22 Afterwards, coverage focused mostly on Manson and his strange followers: their customs, their lifestyle, their history. No detail, if strange and shocking enough, was irrelevant. The press was so ubiquitous that it often beat out investigators when trying to get a story. It was a reporter, attempting to identify the unknown victim in the white Rambler at the Tate residence, who wrote down the car’s license plate number, checked it at the DMV, and traced it to Steven Parent. Similarly, it was a news camera crew, trying to recreate the events of that night for its viewers, that found the bloody clothes on the hillside. The gun was identified when young Steven Weiss’s father heard about the gun as described in the Los Angeles Times and realized that it matched the one his son had found in the backyard. 23

Knowing that the publicity would continue at this level throughout the trial, the jury was immediately sequestered and remained so for the duration of the trial. At 225 days, it was longer than any jury had been sequestered before. 24 The case snagged newspaper headlines nationwide on the first day and every day in which there was dramatic or noteworthy testimony. Some stories were accurate. Others were rumor-filled. In early

August, President Nixon, commenting on the case, declared Manson guilty, and his statement was so widely published that the windows of the bus that shuttled the jury back and forth from the courthouse to their hotel had to be blacked out to keep them from seeing the headlines of papers on display at newsstands and being read on the streets. 25

After being sentenced to death, Charles Manson was sent to the state prison at San Quentin to await execution. Family members attempted to free him, engaging in a gun battle with police as part of a scheme to hijack a commercial airplane and kill a passenger every hour until he was released. They were unsuccessful, but two of his followers, including original Family member Mary Brunner, were convicted and sent to prison. 26

In prison, Manson remained as outrageous as he had been at his trial, a consistent disciplinary problem, acting up and threatening staff. He never apologized or showed remorse. He continued to give interviews that shocked and frightened. In 1988, he told journalist Geraldo Rivera, "I'm going to kill as many of you as I can. I'm going to pile you up to the sky."

But, on February 18, 1972, the California Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty in *People v. Anderson*, finding capital punishment "impermissibly cruel." This decision worked retroactively, commuting all upcoming executions to life in prison and Manson escaped execution. 27 He was transferred to several different facilities before being sent to Corcoran State Prison in 1989, where remained until his death in 2017.

The same Supreme Court decision that spared Manson spared Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten. All three were transferred to the California Institute for Women at Frontera, where they have remained. Van Houten appealed for and received a new trial in 1976 in light of the mid-trial disappearance of her attorney, Ronald Hughes, but was convicted again. All three women have renounced Manson and expressed deep remorse over what they have done. They have been exemplary prisoners at Frontera, taking their hearings seriously, but none of them received parole. 28 Atkins died of brain cancer in 2009 at age 61. 29 Krenwinkel and Van Houten are still alive.

After being granted immunity, Kasabian returned to New Hampshire, where she took on an assumed name and disappeared. She spent years living in hiding until 2009, when a documentary film crew found her living poverty-stricken in a trailer park. 30

Tex Watson was finally extradited and tried separately. He was convicted of all counts on October 12, 1971, and sentenced to death but, like the others, his sentence was commuted to life in prison. 31 He is serving out his sentence at Mule Creek State Prison, where he has been ordained as a minister, claiming to have experienced a religious awakening. 32

While Manson continued to attract twisted admirers even from his cell, the Family dissipated. As the Manson saga came to an end, though, America's obsession with it did not. There is something about the case that continues to captivate. Bugliosi's book on the trial sold seven million copies and was dramatized for television in both 1976 and 2004. When it aired, the 1976 version was the most watched made-for-television movie in history. 33 A 1994 ABC special on the case received the highest ratings ever garnered for a network magazine show debut. 34 More than any

other murderer, Charles Manson has become part of our cultural consciousness, a reference that everyone recognizes and understands whether or not they were alive to experience his trial. As one journalist writing on the 40th anniversary of the murders phrased it, Manson "remains a household name synonymous with evil, hatred, even the devil." 35



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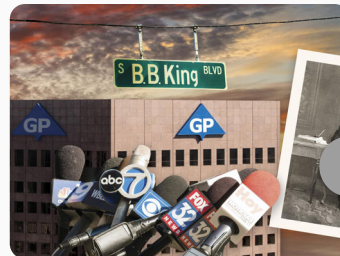
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