

# THE BEATLES

# HELP!

*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Directed by Richard Lester. Produced by Walter Shenson. Screenplay by Marc Behm and Charles Wood from a story by Marc Behm. Cinematography by David Watkin. Original Music by the Beatles. Musical Director; Ken Thorn. Edited by John Victor Smith. Costumes: Julie Harris. Special Effects: Cliff Richardson.

Cinematic length: 92 Minutes. Distributed by United Artists. Company: Walter Shenson Films. Cinematic release July 1965: First DVD release 2007. Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

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Written Without Prejudice

## *Cast*

- John Lennon Paul McCartney George Harrison Ringo Starr
- Eleanor Bron as Ahme
- Leo McKern as Clang
- John Bluthal as Bhuta
- Patrick Cargill as Superintendent Gluck
- Victor Spinetti as Foot
- Roy Kinnear as Algernon
- Alfie Bass as Doorman
- Warren Mitchell as Abdul
- Peter Copley as Jeweler
- Durra as Belly Dancer
- Mal Evans as the Channel Swimmer

## Songs and Music

The Beatles album *Help!* was not the soundtrack to the film which contained the ten songs listed below. Six other songs appear on the cd and instrumental bits of 'A Hard Days Night' and several excerpts from classics appeared in the film. These included Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture and Rossini's 'The Barber of Seville.' Even those Beatles songs which were in the film were often excerpts or incomplete.



- "Help!"
- "You're Going to Lose That Girl"
- "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away"
- "Ticket to Ride"
- "I Need You"
- "The Night Before"
- "Another Girl"
- "She's a Woman"
- "I'm Happy Just to Dance with You"
- "You Can't Do That"

## Review

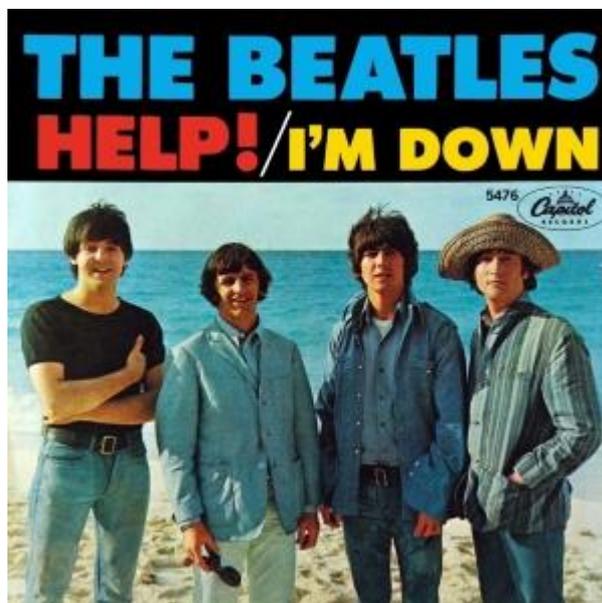
The critics were generally negative about *Help!* Complaints were along the lines that it was contrived, commercial and lacked a centre. The plot also got a blasting for being clichéd, nonsensical and ridiculous. Disappointment when compared to the previous year's Beatles film *A Hard Day's Night* was frequently expressed.

In response now some critics need to delight in the obviously ridiculous and there were things in *Help!* that were better than in *A Hard Day's Night*. In that first film the 1960s revolution was heralded. The blend of the Liverpool sound, the emerging sixties youth culture and the Beatles themselves with their pithy satiric humour heralded that change. However their first film depicted all those new characteristics against the dreary backdrop of post war English city life. Many film characters who crossed paths and ideas with the Beatles embodied that dreariness with their scramble for money, intense ambition and humourlessness. These characters went against everything that the Beatles represented. Filming this in black and white only emphasised the dreariness. Fortunately the Beatles wit, spontaneity, energy and great songs gave a contrast and so they saved the film. *A Hard Day's Night* was almost plotless; disjointed segments showed the problems the Beatles had in putting on a concert. There could be no tension or surprises watching *A Hard Day's Night* as they would obviously overcome the obstacles and perform.

In contrast *Help!* was wisely filmed in colour and in a variety of exotic and colourful locations; a Hindu Temple, Salisbury Plain, Austria's Alps and the Caribbean. Even when the locales were in London they were colourful and strange - including the supposed interior of Buckingham Palace! Actually it was a loaned out palace from a peer. Also in contrast to *A Hard Day's Night* was the total unpredictability of the delightfully silly plot – and that is a compliment. As a director Richard Lester always had the opinion that too many films lost their audience appeal due to their predictability and in *Help!* he avoids this by continually steering his film into unexpected locales and situations and tosses in jokes, music and songs we don't expect. Several famous classics gets a few bars in a Beatles film.

Before its title cards the film starts seriously by conjuring up the sinister and esoteric world of the thuggee cult about to sacrifice before a statue of Kali. The gigantic statue, the sombre devotees and their chants, the high priest invoking the sacred ways, the cavernous setting, all work well. The world of Hollywood's 1930s film *Gunga Din*, Kipling and all those films and books of exotic esoteric, sinister India have been conjured up – to be dispensed with. The beautiful sacrificial victim is found not to be wearing the sacred ring and

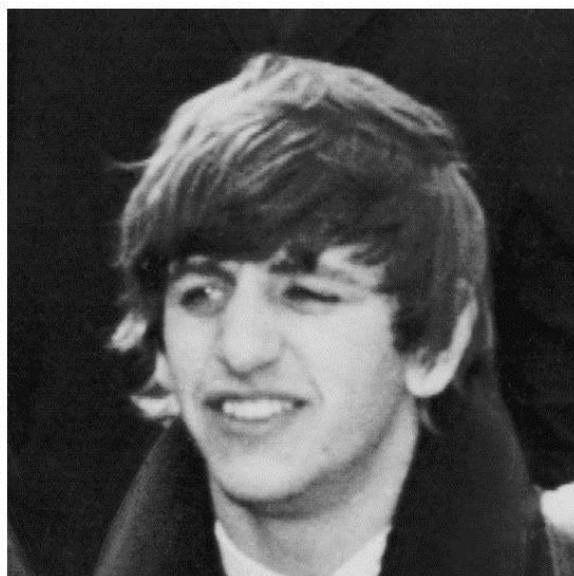
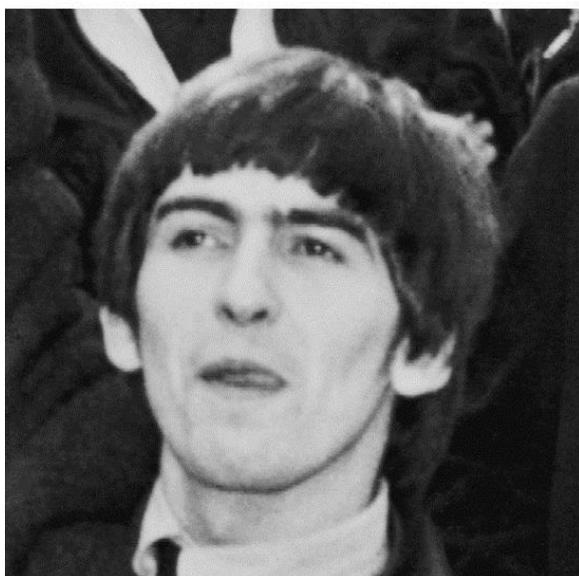
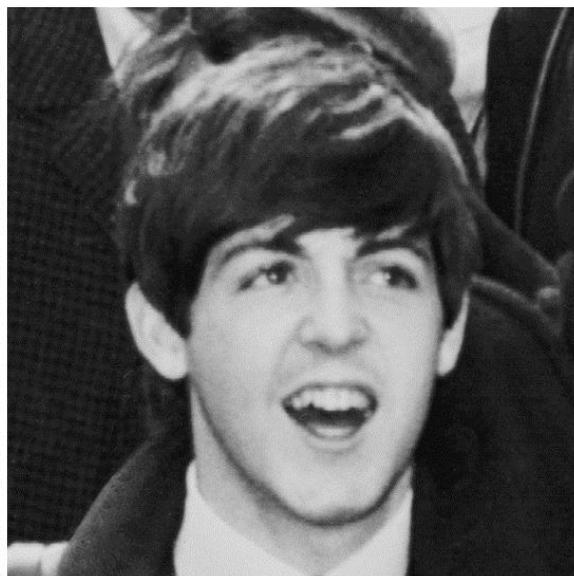
suddenly the mood changes. Where is the ring? In answer the devotees start showing a reel of the Beatles and the sacrificial victim screams in delight “Ringo!” That word and her facial expression say it all about her reasons, end the old view of India and mark the start of the film’s exuberant mischief as the title song and title cards raidly pour forth exuberantly.

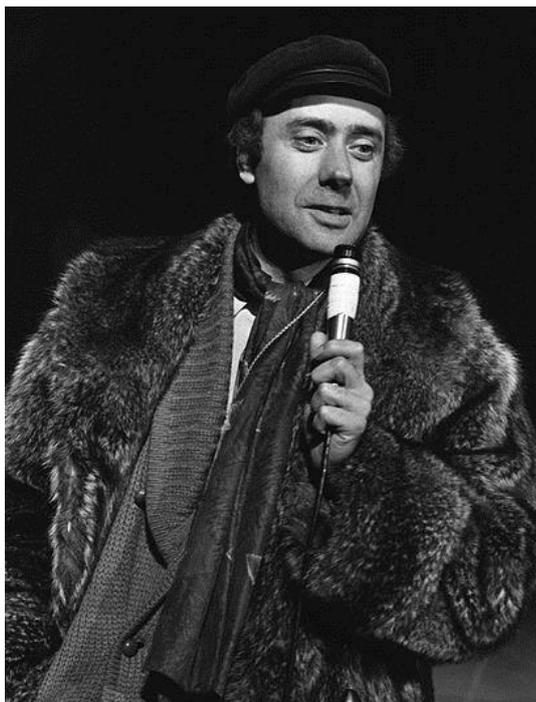


Clang and his cultists have to get the ring to get it off Ringo’s finger. The idea that sinister Indian or Asian thugs go to England to track down a sacred jewel or precious object is at least as old as the Wilkie Collins novel *The Moonstone* (1868). The idea was also later taken up by Arthur Conan Doyle and then by Agatha Christie. Mercifully in *Help!* the cultists are not sinister, but comic bumbler motivated by assorted absurd ideas for stealing back the ring, which has a use by date for return before the wearer becomes the next sacrificial victim. Despite everybody’s intentions, to restore order especially those of the fearful Ringo, he misses that use by date and the cultists intend to kill him. To make the situation even more absurd, a megalomaniac scientist (Victor Spinetti) becomes obsessed with the ring and also chases after it. His increasingly vexed maniac performance add to the frenetic atmosphere, while dissident cultist Ahme (Eleanor Bron) adds to the confusion the more she tries to resolve it.

The ring is a maguffin on which Lester hangs his plot, in itself just a loose line to hang jokes, slapstick scenes and songs on. The Beatles songs have absolutely nothing to do with the plot, which is wise. Apart from their intrinsic merits the songs serve to slow down the frenetic pace, the rapid fire jokes and the absurd situations, all of which would otherwise be exhausting, for even a teenage audience.

The absurdities are quite fun as they pile up. The way that the Beatles do not know they are being followed by the cultists and unwittingly sabotage their ridiculous subterfuges to get the ring off Ringo's finger becomes even funnier when Ringo desperately wants the ring removed and his efforts fail. Even an escaped tiger gets in the act. He corners Ringo in a cellar after Ringo's beer glass turns out to be a trapdoor lever. Fortunately the tiger can be calmed by whistling Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy.' Finally the wonderfully anarchic beach battle between Beatles, cultists, police and bystanders ends the film without the usual restoration of order, but with more confusion.



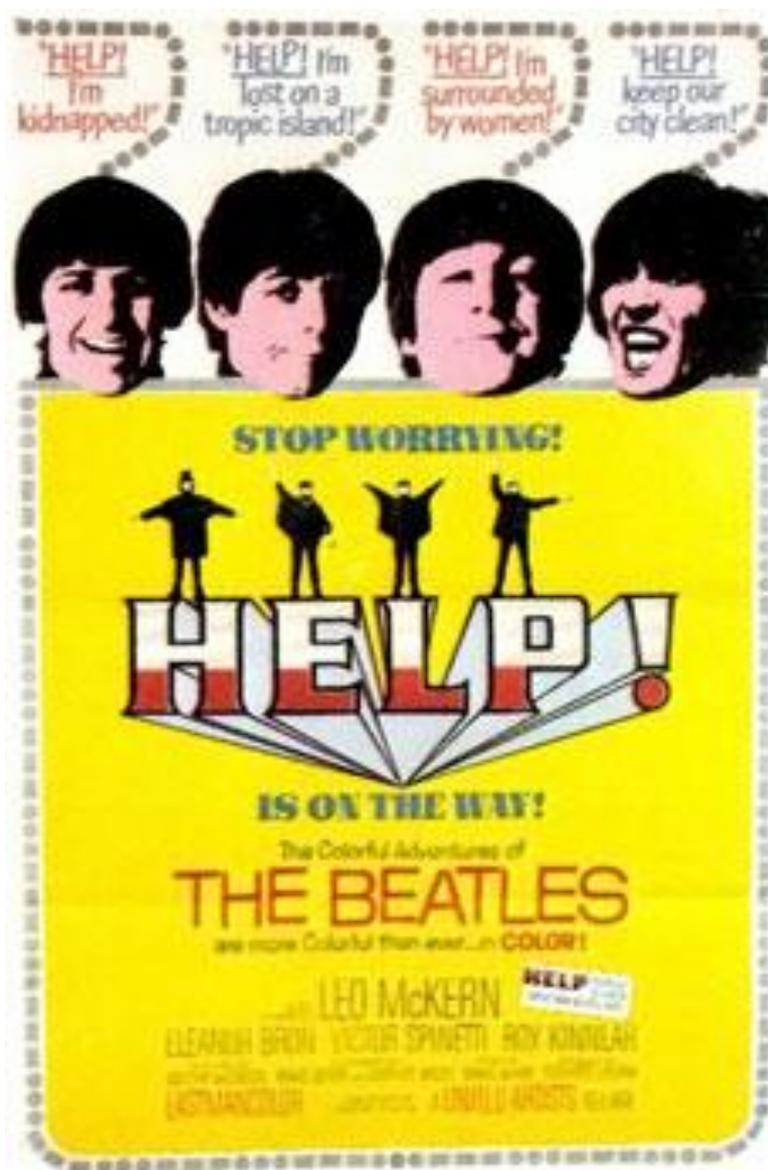


*Sixties studio shots of cast members Leo McKern, Victor Spinetti Eleanor Bron and Roy Kinnear*

Now for the negatives. After seeing this film three times, from my mid-teens to my sixties the jokes that were initially funny are still funny, but no grain of subtlety, depth or sophistication has emerged yet. Only two sequences, the

Austrian skiing where Lester encouraged the Beatles who had never skied before in their lives to try it and the grand, mad finale have any spontaneity. In *A Hard Day's Night* Lester wisely let the Beatles be themselves: in *Help!* they are actors and they are not good ones. They may be called John, Paul, George and Ringo but they are more characters reading scripted lines than Beatles being themselves. John Lennon said they felt like extras in their own movie.

Some jokes fall flat because they are under-rehearsed or seem to be read off boards. John Lennon said he made minimal contributions and Richard Lester was in charge, it was his film. Some Beatles admitted to being stoned on marijuana for most of the filming. Some of the lower level supporting cast and extras are also essentially cartoon characters with the acting abilities of primary school children. Perhaps it is foolish to look for solutions to those things in what is really a glorified sixties style Punch and Judy show with music. Take it that way and enjoy.





*Richard Lester (1932-)*