

RUMOURS

1969. Paul is Dead. The signs (I memorized them):

He walks barefoot across Abbey Road.

His back is turned on the rear sleeve of Sgt. Pepper.

He wears a black rose on a white formal jacket (Magical Mystery Tour).

He is the Walrus and walrus is Greek for corpse.

If Revolution Number 9 is played backward, John is heard murmuring, "Turn me on, dead man."

Robert tells me if you hold the cover of Magical Mystery Tour in front of a mirror the letters in the title can be read as numbers. Dial these numbers on the telephone and one is put through to London. To Ringo, the conciliatory Beatle.

I try this code from a public phone in our college dormitory. All it costs me is fifteen cents. I stand there, staring straight ahead at a pocked, scribbled on bulletin board as a telephone rings in London, seven hours away -- it must be ten o'clock at night there.

An accented voice, English as a black taxicab, answers:

"Yes?"

Perhaps it is Ringo's butler.

"Is Ringo Starr in?"

"Certainly not!"

It's closer than I ever thought I'd get.

LEAVE TO ENTER FOR SIX MONTHS/EMPLOYMENT PROHIBITED

It had been raining in London but the rain was over. The sky was overcast and bright. English accents, pale complexions and a hawk nose on the customs officer's face. Signs warning of unattended parcels, bombs and rabies.

We followed the crowd to ground transport. Robert dragged his fingers through his hair and blinked.

"This way."

I staggered along with my duffel. Crowds crossed in front and behind us. We found a covered platform and an idling bus, surfaces of tinted glass, chrome and dark, polished paint the color of dry red wine. The cool, petrol-saturated air woke me up. We waited in line. "Queued up." Robert climbed on board and I followed, settling uneasily in a high-backed padded seat. A built-in ashtray on the armrest had been taped shut. Quickly, the bus filled with Sikhs, cowboys, college students, soldiers, business executives, nuns, fashion models, Japanese shutterbugs and a pair of black leather toughs.

I slept, briefly, dreaming my bed was black smoke.

A ROOM OF OUR OWN

Somebody back in Chicago tipped Robert to a cheap hotel near the Gloucester Road tube stop. We rode an open-top elevator up through a heavy perfume of carcinogenic grit to reach the street -- crowded rows of cafes, shops and bars. Bricks and whitewash, tissues from a fruitstand blowing round the ankles of passers-by.

Robert bought an issue of Time Out at a newsstand, flipping pages as we walked. "Movies, concerts, exhibits, yeah, yeah," he muttered. "Yes. Here it is. The Beatles Tour."

We strode past a black castiron fence, a small lot tangled with trees, vines and shrubs. Dogshit on the sidewalk. Black taxis rumbled by on our left.

The hotel was called The Atlantic. We walked by without seeing it, doubled back and entered beneath a cracked portico. Inside, the building had been patched over and refitted so many times it was difficult to determine its heritage. Whipped Edwardian, I called it.

An East Indian family attended the desk: mother in the morning, father all day, sisters in the early evening after school and brother through the night. Grandmother, in shawl and drooping sari, served bacon and eggs from 7 until 8:30 each morning in a basement diningroom decorated with blanched color photos torn from Indian tourist calendars.

Our room was like a file folder. There was space for two single beds set end to end against one wall. A washstand and

box closet made it a squeeze. One of us had to crouch on his bed to let the other pass by.

The room's best feature was a tall window that opened on to the front portico roof. At night it was possible to climb out and sit there, as if on a battlement, smoking and watching traffic circle. We bought a bottle of cheap whisky, set it and a couple of tumblers on the damp tar. London started soaking in.

Two other rooms were on our floor. Both were occupied by an improbably large number of Muslim women. They covered themselves in black drapery, hid their faces behind black lace masks with sharp beaks covering their noses. At least a dozen of them congregated on the landing, sitting on the floor in front of the door to our room. They screamed when they saw us, rising like a flock of starlings, bumping walls and slamming doors to get out of our sight.

Robert and I stood in the trough that was our living space -- me looking out at the London skyline, Robert staring at the back of my head.

JET LAG

It is after midnight. Robert and I lie on our beds like cadavers. Traffic noise and the scent of coal are carried on an elevated breeze through our cracked windowpane. The women in black whisper in the hall. A couple in the room above us make violent love for over an hour.

THE BEATLES TOUR

The Beatles tour started outside the Green Park tube stop, across the street from the Ritz Hotel. It was a black and gray London morning with a dog toothed wind.

We handed over our money to the tour guide, a chopped blonde American woman in her twenties who introduced herself as Marisa. Marisa told us she was an actress. The Beatles tour was one of those things actresses trying for a toehold in London do to survive. Marisa grew up in Cincinnati. Her older brother, she said, was a Beatles fan; Marisa confided that until she started giving these tours her favorite recording artist was Harry Connick, Jr.

"It's the Beatles' story I find fascinating," said Marisa. "The more I learn about them the more incredible they seem. Someday someone will make a movie about them -- like Oliver Stone did about Jim Morrison. I'd love to play George's wife, Patti Boyd. Eric Clapton wrote Layla about her. And she divorced George and married Eric. See what I mean?"

Robert complimented Marisa on her accent. She did not sound like she was from Cincinnati.

"I better not," she shuddered.

The rest of our party included five middle-aged Japanese men wearing nylon golfing windbreakers in a variety of neon shades plus a man and woman we guessed were German. The German man wore a silver earring and his companion had a butterfly tattooed on the back of her hand. Germans and Japanese alike

were laden with cameras. Robert and I had our hands in our pockets.

Marisa dutifully noted sites where boutiques, pubs and nightclubs frequented by the Beatles once flourished. We paused in front of vacant lots and remodeled storefronts. A certain melancholy began setting in. The lostness of a time when the sight of young men with hair over their collars and narrow-cut trousers was enough to discombobulate several generations was plain. In those days a rock band, a new album, a friendship could change your life.

We peered up the stairwell at EMI where the Beatles leaned over the bannister for the Please Please Me cover. Four of the Japanese assumed the original pose and had their extra man snap them. Then he took Ringo's place and had his picture taken.

As the Japanese smiled down at us the German woman shivered, lit a cigarette and surprised us muttering in husky English: "Sex Pistols had their picture taken here too."

On to Abbey Road. Robert and I bringing up the rear. Marisa pointed out the garage where John had his paisley Rolls Royce serviced; the apartment where Doctor Robert dosed George with his first LSD. At the recording studio, more pictures as the Japanese contingent posed in frozen groups of four on the zebra crosswalk the Beatles used for the cover of their last masterwork. One man, wearing an orange windbreaker, took off his shoes and socks and, eyes beseeching, held them out for me to hold so he could play Paul's part. His companions laughed and shook their heads: Too cold, too cold.

"Beatlemaniac!" grunted one.

Marisa explained apologetically that, at one time, the studio opened itself to tours like ours but that this was no longer possible. I glanced at Robert. He was looking up, at what? Treetops, the studio roof where John once spent a night on acid, the clouds that stuffed the sky like great wads of dirty cotton?

"We are now," Marisa caught her breath, "in St. John's Wood. Here, on Cavendish Avenue, is the townhouse still owned by Beatle Paul."

Grass grew between bricks that served as sidewalk. We gathered in a whispering cluster across the road. A fine brick house for a banker, lawyer or diplomat. Three storeys high with two windows on the ground floor, three on the second and three more on the third. The ground floor was painted white, above that the bricks were left their natural umber hue. A brickwall with a double gate protected the yard which would have been shaded in summer by a giant oak standing by the carpark. We could see the front door. It was black with a brass knob.

"Worth 40,000 pounds when he bought it in 1966, the house is worth ten times that now," Marisa informed us. "The night he first brought Linda Eastman here he sat in that bedroom window there," she pointed, "and played the guitar for the crowd of girls who regularly waited outside the house. He played the song Blackbird."

"Does he still live here?" inquired the German woman.

Marisa seemed not to hear.

"Yes," said Robert. The German woman glanced at him, mouth slack and nodded. The Japanese murmured. A woman walking a Corgi on a black patent leather leash stepped around us into the street, never making eye contact.

"Girls, at the height of Beatlemania, used to climb in the house through its bathroom window in the back, prompting Paul to write the song, She Came In Through the Bathroom Window. Jane Asher lived here with Paul in the '60s. Of course, Jane Asher left the house when Paul married Linda Eastman on March 12, 1969. They spend very little time here now, preferring their farm in Scotland."

Marisa began leading the group away. I followed but stopped when I realized Robert was fixed to his spot. "What is it?"

"There's someone in there," he said.

"Gentlemen?" called Marisa. The faces of our fellow tourists turned in our direction.

"We're going back the way we came," I told them. "Thanks."

Robert held his head up like a gun dog. "Coming out."

I followed his gaze to the front door of Paul McCartney's house. What if it was him? What if Robert had lied to me and he was out to get him? What if Paul treated us like teeny boppers? Invited us in? I stepped backward against the spears of a wrought iron fence.

The black door opened.

A young dark-haired woman came out, watching her feet. Not too young. Robert or I might have asked her out to dinner

had we the opportunity or, given that this was London, the cash. Not unattractive. She wore a knee-length sheepskin coat, went quickly down the steps and turned in the direction of Abbey Road.

We watched her go. Two men trapped behind the Invisible Shield Against Tooth Decay.

"His daughter," whispered Robert.

The rest of our group was half a block away. Also watching. The Japanese, every one of them, were smiling appreciatively.

STUDIO 2

The Beatles began recording at Abbey Road in 1962. In those days recording engineers and other studio technicians wore white lab coats. It became the Beatles' natural habitat as George Martin made it a hybrid home and laboratory for them.

A photograph was taken of a Beatles session in Studio 2 in 1965. From the camera's vantage point we see one end of this large room. Walls are insulated with towering white panels. A section of the chevron-patterned parquet floor is covered with oriental rugs. A round clock high up on the wall facing us reads 11:40.

Ringo and his drumkit are wedged in the corner. George stands scratching his head. John, in shirtsleeves, vest and Michael Caine glasses, rests on his Rickenbacker guitar. Paul sits on a chair with his bass across his knees.

Electric lights hang from the ceiling like insomniac angels.

POPULAR CULTURE BITES AND DIES

An oversized book of photographs in a shop on Charing Cross Road: guided missiles, jumbo jets, highrise office buildings made of tinted glass and steel, parkinglots overgrown with weeds, deserted swimming pools. The introduction, printed in a bold and slanting black typeface, asserts that corporate mass culture has driven out popular culture. We're more spiritually isolated than ever, hooked to the monitors in our homes, waiting for the Next Big Thing.