



Charles Manson - American criminal and cult leader

Charles Manson (born November 12, 1934, Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.—died November 19, 2017, Kern County, California) was an American criminal and cult leader whose followers carried out several notorious murders. Their most famous victim was actress Sharon Tate, wife of film director Roman Polanski, who was killed in her Los Angeles home along with four others on August 8–9, 1969. The following night Leno and Rosemary LaBianca were also murdered. Manson and his followers were found guilty in 1971; that year he was also convicted of two other murders. Manson and the Family became a haunting and enduring presence in American culture, inspiring a wide array of books—including the best-selling *Helter Skelter* (1974)—as well as numerous films and documentaries. The interest continued even after Manson's death in 2017.

## Early life

Manson was born to a 16-year-old girl named Ada Kathleen Maddox and a man he would never know; his biological father is believed to be Colonel Walker Henderson Scott, Sr. ("Colonel" was a given name and not a military rank). While Maddox was pregnant, she married William Manson; the couple divorced after several years. In 1939 Maddox and her brother, both of whom were heavy drinkers, robbed a man. They both were sentenced to prison, and Charles Manson was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in West Virginia. In 1942 Maddox was released, and mother and son were reunited.

The family soon moved to Indiana, and in 1943 Maddox remarried. Manson became increasingly troublesome, and in 1947 Maddox attempted to have her son placed in foster care. He was ultimately sent to a boy's home for delinquents. Manson ran away several times, and in 1948 he robbed a grocery store in Indianapolis. After being caught, he was sent to a juvenile reformatory, but he escaped later that year. Over the next several years he committed various crimes—petty larceny, armed robbery, burglary, and auto theft—and was sentenced to a series of reformatories.

In 1951 Manson, then 16 years old, staged another successful escape and was eventually caught in Idaho. Because he had driven a stolen car over state lines, he was charged with a federal crime. He was imprisoned in various federal reformatories, and in 1952 he reportedly raped another inmate at knifepoint. Manson continued to commit various offenses, but a stretch of good behavior resulted in his early release in 1954.

Manson began moving around the country while continuing to commit crimes, mostly stealing cars. From 1956 to 1958 he was imprisoned at Terminal Island in California. After being paroled, Manson subsequently began a pimp, and in 1960 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for violating probation concerning an earlier check-forging charge.

## The Family

Following his release in 1967, Manson moved to San Francisco, where he attracted a small but devoted group of followers—many of whom were female—from among the city's bohemian youth culture. That year he became the leader of the "Family," a communal religious cult dedicated to studying and implementing his eccentric religious teachings, which were drawn from science fiction as well as the occult and fringe psychology. He preached the coming of an apocalyptic race war that would devastate the United States and leave the Family in a position of dominant power. Manson called the war "Helter Skelter," which was based on the title of a Beatles' song. Manson also encouraged the use of LSD, which some believed helped him control his followers.

The Family eventually relocated to Los Angeles. In 1968 Manson became friends with Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys. Manson had learned to play the guitar while in prison and had dreams of becoming a singer-songwriter. The Beach Boys later recorded one of his songs ("Cease to Exist"), though Wilson is credited for the tune after changing the lyrics and title ("Never Learn Not to Love"). For a time, the Family lived at Wilson's rented house, but he eventually moved out after becoming wary of Manson. In August 1968 the Family relocated to Spahn Ranch, a run-down film set.

## Tate-LaBianca murders

During this time, the Family reportedly made money by stealing cars, selling drugs, and engaging in prostitution. The group was also prone to violence. In late July 1969 several Family members, notably Bobby Beausoleil and Susan Atkins, tortured and killed Gary Hinman on the orders of Manson, who believed Hinman had inherited money. Before leaving, Beausoleil used Hinman's blood to write "Political Piggy" on the wall. Beausoleil was caught on August 6 when police found him in Hinman's car with a bloody knife.

More murders followed days later. On August 8, 1969, Manson ordered his follower Charles "Tex" Watson to go to 10050 Cielo Drive with several other cult members and kill everyone there "as gruesome[ly] as you can." Manson was familiar with the house because its previous tenant, music producer Terry Melcher, had earlier considered and then decided against giving Manson a recording contract.

*Known Murder Victims: Gary Hinman, Sharon Tate, Jay Sebring, Wojciech Frykowski, Abigail Folger, Steven Parent, Rosemary LaBianca, Leno LaBianca, Donald ("Shorty) Shea.*

Watson drove to the estate with Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, and Linda Kasabian. In the driveway they encountered a car driven by Steven Parent, an 18-year-old who had been visiting the estate's caretaker in the guest house. Watson fatally shot Parent before he, Atkins, and Krenwinkel broke into the main house, leaving Kasabian to stay at the gate as a lookout. Four people were in the home: actress Sharon Tate; celebrity hairstylist Jay Sebring, a close friend of Tate's; Wojciech Frykowski, a friend of Roman Polanski, Tate's husband; and Frykowski's girlfriend, coffee heiress Abigail Folger. Manson's followers gathered them in the living room, and Tate and Sebring were linked by ropes tied around their necks. Sebring was shot and stabbed to death. Frykowski and Folger managed to flee the house, but they were both chased down and killed. Tate was then fatally stabbed. As they left, Atkins used Tate's blood to write the word "PIG" on the front door.

On August 10, Manson took Watson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Kasabian as well as Leslie Van Houten and Steven "Clem" Grogan in search of more people to murder. Manson selected the Los Angeles home of grocery store executive Leno LaBianca and his wife, Rosemary. After Manson and Watson tied the couple up and robbed them, Manson left with Atkins, Kasabian, and Grogan. Watson, Van Houten, and Krenwinkel remained and, acting on orders from Manson, stabbed the couple to death with a bayonet and knife. The word "WAR" was carved into Leno LaBianca's stomach. Manson's followers also left words "Rise" and "Death to Pigs"—written in blood on the walls, and "Healter [sic] Skelter" was on the refrigerator door.

Later in August Manson and other Family members killed Donald ("Shorty") Shea, a stuntman. Shea was a friend of George Spahn, the owner of Spahn Ranch, and he lived on the property. Tensions increased after Manson became aware that Shea was involved in a plan to kick the Family off the ranch. In addition, Manson was said to be opposed to Shea's marriage to a Black woman. Acting on Manson's orders, Grogan and Bruce Davis bludgeoned and stabbed Shea to death; Watson was also believed to be involved in the attack, but he was never charged. Shea's decomposed body was found in 1977 after Davis provided authorities with a map of the burial site.

The Tate-LaBianca murders created a panic in Los Angeles, especially given their horrific nature. Frykowski had been stabbed more than 50 times and shot twice, while Rosemary LaBianca had sustained 41 stab wounds. Investigators initially failed to make the connection between the two murder scenes, with detectives convinced that a drug transaction was the likely motive for the Tate murders. However, in October 1969 various members of the Manson cult were arrested at Spahn Ranch, accused of stealing vehicles and burning equipment. One of those arrested implicated Atkins in the Hinman murder, and Atkins, while jailed, boasted to cellmates of the Tate murders. By year's end, all of the killers had been arrested.

The trial, which combined the Tate and LaBianca murders, began in June 1970. Kasabian, who had been granted immunity, was the main prosecution witness. Despite frequent disruptions, Manson and his followers were found guilty in 1971. Later that year there was a second trial, for the murders of Hinman and Shea, and Manson and his followers were again convicted. He was sentenced to death in both trials, but, following the abolition of capital punishment in California in 1972, his sentences were commuted to life in prison. He became eligible for parole in 1978 but was denied then as well as in numerous subsequent hearings. Manson died of natural causes in 2017.

Prosecutors claimed that Manson had hoped the Tate-LaBianca murders would incite a race war. However, that motive was challenged in later years. Some believe that the murders were an attempt to free Beausoleil. By staging copycat murders, Manson wanted authorities to think Hinman's killer was still on the loose. Another theory claimed that Manson wanted to scare Melcher, whom he believed had reneged on several promises.

### **Wives and children**

In 1955 Manson married Rosalie Jean Willis, and they had a son, Charles Manson, Jr. (He later changed his name to Jay White and died by suicide in 1993.) The couple divorced while Manson was in prison. In 1959 Manson reportedly wed Leona Rae Musser (also called "Candy Stevens"). They had a son, Charles Luther Manson, before divorcing some three years later. In 1968 Manson had a third son, Valentine Michael Manson, with Mary Theresa Brunner, one of the first members of the Family. The younger Manson was later adopted by Brunner's parents and raised under the name Michael Brunner.

### **Films and books**

The murders inspired numerous books and movies, both documentary and fiction. In addition to *Helter Skelter*, which was cowritten by the prosecutor of the murder trial, books included the biography *Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson* (2013) by Jeff Guinn, and *Member of the Family: My Story of Charles Manson, Life Inside His Cult, and the Darkness That Ended the Sixties* (2017) by Dianne Lake, a former member of Manson's Family.

Film and television adaptations include *Helter Skelter* (1976) and Quentin Tarantino's fictional *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* (2019) and the documentaries *Manson Speaks: Inside the Mind of a Madman* (2017), *Inside the Manson Cult: The Lost Tapes* (2018), Errol Morris's *CHAOS: The Manson Murders* (2025), and the 2020 miniseries *Helter Skelter: An American Myth*.