

HELP! Great Britain, 1965. Dir. Richard Lester. 90 mins.

Is it a road movie or a music video? Is it closer to Hollywood comedies like *The Road to Singapore* (1940), which featured songs by Bing Crosby, jokes by Bob Hope, and romance with Dorothy Lamour? Or is it closer to the videos of ABBA and Madonna in the early days of MTV, the 24/7 cable network launched in 1981? Like the Hollywood films, it has a plot (of sorts) and professional actors – *The Road to Singapore* co-starred Anthony Quinn (*Union Pacific*, 1939; *Zorba the Greek*, 1964), *Help!* featured Leo McKern (*The Mouse that Roared*, 1959; *Rumpole of the Bailey*, 1992). Like MTV, it has color, graphics, and lots of clever camera effects – the last by the experienced Cliff Richardson (*The African Queen*, 1951; *Lawrence of Arabia*, 1962).

The Beatles' first film, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), is often said to be the cross-over point between the two genres: the film that “set out the basic visual vocabulary of today's music videos” (Wikipedia). But it was in black and white. Their second film, *Help!*, was made by the same director on a bigger budget. Unfortunately, it seems to have received less real effort from the Fab Four themselves. After two years of international acclaim, they seem to have settled into the image of the innocent boy band that their handlers said the fans wanted. (The married Beatles pretend to be single, and all have single beds in the modish rowhouse they share in Middlesex – actually a series of connected houses that reflect each Beatle's personality.) The main theme is that the famous have to elude their adorers and exploiters, who could be hard to distinguish. There were also the critics, whose numbers swelled when the outspoken John Lennon repeatedly said that the band was “now more popular than Jesus.”

The plot is simple. Because he can never have enough jewelry, Ringo accepts a large ring from a foreign fan, not knowing that people will do almost anything to get hold of it. On the one hand, there are Eastern devotees of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death, who need the ring for their ritual. (“I don't want to knock anyone's religion,” says George as he makes a hasty exit, “but ...”) On the other hand, there are Western scientists seeking to ring for its remarkable powers. (“He's out to rule the world if he can get a government grant,” says the mad scientist's assistant.) Unfortunately, the ring is too tight to come off Ringo's finger, and the finger has at least sentimental value. Unable to find proper assistance from British authorities, our lads have no choice but to keep on touring. As locations switch from Stonehenge to Buckingham Palace and from the Austrian Alps to the Bahamas, they keep encountering mayhem on a level for which the *1812 Overture* seems only appropriate. As in last week's film, *Diva*, the two sets of pursuers know nothing of each other's motives, and the ensuing confusion only serves to prolong the chase.

As the Beatles travel, Ringo has a new set of groupies, including the cult leader Clang (Leo McKern), his fashion-conscious and not entirely loyal assistant Ahme (Eleanor Bron) as well as the British scientist with a craving for American gadgetry (Vincent Spinelli). One hardly knows whom to root for. The boys have more songs to sing, but the cult has quite a stage prepared for them. The flowers and incense seem a strange premonition of things to come for the Beatles, who broke up not long after their 1968 retreat to study Transcendental Meditation in Rishikesh, India. However, there is an anticipation of future glory when the lads briefly disguise themselves briefly as something that looks rather like Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

The Beatles sing seven songs in all, covering the A side of their 1965 LP *Help!* The songs are upbeat and keep the show moving. There are no wistful ballads like “If I Fell” in *A Hard Day’s Night*, the haunting “Yesterday” having been left to the album’s B side. But if you listen to the lyrics, you may sense a certain disconnect between the upbeat rhythms and the sometimes dark themes. The title song seems at first a call for help in the face of bodily harm, yet the message sounds more like a cry of depression: “Help me if you can; I’m feeling down, / And I do appreciate you being round. / Help me get my feet back on the ground. / Won’t you please help me?” The other songs treat subjects like sexual rivalry (“You’re Going to Lose That Girl”), cohabitation (“Ticket to Ride”), lies (“The Night Before”), infidelity (“Another Girl”) and desertion (“You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” and “I Need You”).



Tourists Paul and Ringo check directions to the sacrificial altar

Like the ring of the Niebelungen in medieval legend, the ring of Kali is a symbol of power that requires sacrifice. The closing credits also suggest a similarity to the diamond in *The Pink Panther* (1963). Literary critics would call the ring a metonymy, or substitution of an attribution for a thing: as a jock is a metonymy of an athlete, the ring is a metonymy for the Beatles’ drummer and for the whole band by extension. The quest for Ringo’s ring is a search for the power of Beatlemania (a term coined by the *Times* of London shortly before their first appearance on American television, in 1964). All the lads are targets in the game – which sometimes looks like an early version of paintball – yet none is a target. The real goal is the ring. Although it has different meanings for Easterners and Westerners, power is power and people are power-hungry.

Timing is almost everything for a musician, especially a drummer, and also for a road movie. *Help!* succeeds because the director has an exquisite sense of timing and gets us to a happy ending as surely as each of the rather formulaic songs does. There are silly moments in the film and some clowning that almost seems improvised, as though the camera weren’t running. But is there much sense of wasted footage here, compared, say, to *Madonna Live: Drowned World Tour* (2001)? You be the judge.

Tom Willard  
Department of English