

AFTER PAUL McCARTNEY is a one-person performance piece written by David Hoppe. The piece was performed by actor Rob Johansen at the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, at Butler University and at the Indiana Repertory Theatre. The text featured here is a cutting from the longer piece. Inquiries regarding rights and production of AFTER PAUL McCARTNEY should be addressed to davidhoppe6@gmail.com. To read more about David Hoppe, and to download an extensive sampling of his writing, please go to www.davidhoppewriter.com.

AFTER PAUL McCARTNEY

(a cutting from the one-person play, AFTER PAUL McCARTNEY)

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I.

“You look the same...”

Robert stood on my front porch, squinting through the screen door. *Did I look the same?* I ran a fast shuffle trying to suss what my long lost friend meant: Maybe he was being ironic – *no one* stays the same. Or satiric – I’ve lost hair, gained crow’s feet; this might be Robert’s way of saying we were friends in spite of appearances. Senility couldn’t be ruled out – maybe Robert’s memory was gone.

He stepped into the house. I noticed the creases at the corners of his eyes. We laughed and, in the entryway, embraced. A big dog of a hug. Robert dropped his duffel on the floor, said, “Your directions were impeccable.”

A creative writing teacher at the college Robert and I attended told me: “Characters in fiction must act from desperation. If a middle class guy [like me] was going to be interesting, he must have a brush with death.

A coronary or cancer.

“If he wasn’t stricken with disease, a broken heart: divorce, infidelity, the death of a child.

“At the very least he ought to be drug addicted, schizophrenic, suicidal or homosexual.

“Qualities like these, [my teacher said] might justify the drastic action or sense of inevitability that propel narrative.”

I gave up trying to write fiction.

I quit the rock band I played in with Robert.

Then I graduated from college, married Catherine Johnson and became a father to a beautiful boy, Joshua.

We moved to Indianapolis where I found a job I didn't hate.

With the help of my folks we bought a prairie-style house. We learned to garden and rake the leaves of a towering sycamore that grew in our front yard.

Robert became a master interpreter of the Lennon-McCartney songbook. When he sang those songs it was like hearing them for the first time.

“Josh, this is your Uncle Robert.”

I watched as Catherine introduced our son to his long lost godfather. I was touched by Josh's grace and Robert's humility. Later we lit candles, drank wine and shambled through dinner. Robert making light of himself as a way of avoiding telling us too much about what was going on in his life.

Catherine seemed charmed, enjoying Robert more than I'd expected. Josh was happy, too – no one worried over whether it was time for bed.

This was the scene I'd pictured when I told Catherine I wanted Robert for Josh's godfather. Good stories with a whiff of burgundy and tobacco smoke. I hoped a kid might tease out Robert's gentler side. I thought Robert might like this. My mistake. Tripped by my liberalism again. Years before it was fashionable to slag liberals, Robert let me have it:

“You think everybody's the same. If they don't like something you like, you think all they need is a little more education, the right teacher, a lucky break.”

After Josh went to bed Catherine brought out the brandy. All three of us smoked Robert's cigarettes until none were left.

2.

So Robert and I walked to the 7/11 and bought him another pack.

The street was lined with parked cars. The moon shone through the branches of bare trees.

Robert said: “Paul McCartney thought – no, Paul didn’t think, he *knew* – he and John would reconcile one day. It was impossible for Paul to believe otherwise. He loved John like a brother – more than a brother. John was his muse. His conscience.

“And so Paul could walk away from the Beatles. He could spend the ‘70s toying with Wings, proving he could build a hit machine all by himself. He could fuck off indefinitely because his heart was certain he and John would come together again.”

Robert stuck a Camel in his mouth and offered me the pack. I took one.

“I’m not saying Paul wanted to resurrect the Beatles,” said Robert. “I doubt he wanted to write with Lennon the way they did in the early days. He wanted his brother back. I think he wanted to sing with John. He couldn’t sing like that with anybody else – and my guess is he believed John would come around to feeling the same way. To go on living and denying themselves each other was...inconceivable. Then John was killed.

“So Paul tries a series of collaborations: Stevie Wonder, Elvis Costello, Michael Jackson. Some are embarrassing. Others more or less successful. But even when they show promise, McCartney pulls back. He doesn’t devote a full album to any partnership.

“And where George and even Ringo associate with their peers in the rock aristocracy, McCartney sticks with younger players, hired hands.”

We stood in the middle of a block. The front porches and amber lights of Midwestern bungalows were lined up alongside us. Television beams played on the inner surfaces of picture windows. A dog started barking in someone’s backyard.

Robert told me he was going to England. “Soon as possible.” He was going to try and find Paul.

I asked him how – he said he didn’t know exactly: “There’s no way you can plan something like this. It’s like writing a poem or a song.”

But he’d done his research.

He said: “I think I know where to find him.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to try and find Paul. If I can spend some time with him I think I can...I think I can help him.”

I started laughing. Not forcing it. Laughing. Robert took this in stride.

“I’ll sing with him. Come with me. I’d appreciate your company. Even if we never find Paul – I mean, the trip will be interesting, right? Anybody can go on vacation but how often do you get to go on a mission? Philip, I know you love that music as much as I do. I haven’t asked anybody else to go with me – and I won’t.”

I told Robert he might have a better chance by himself.

“Alone? “Now it was Robert laughing. “A better chance of fucking up you mean. Look, I recognize how weird what I’m suggesting sounds. All the people who keep art outside their lives -- who simply use it as wallpaper – people who have never been changed by art, who don’t want art to change them – cannot get this. If I’m alone over there I’ll begin second guessing myself. It’ll get too weird, even for me.”

Robert was talking about an offering. He wanted to thank Paul – and he wanted Paul to trust him.

“I owe him that much, said Robert. Don’t you?”

3.

Robert began this project thinking if he could sing with Paul there could be an epiphany. Paul might reinvent his art. You’re forgiven for thinking Robert figured to profit from this encounter. Believe me, he didn’t see it that way.

But it wasn’t long before Robert saw the negative space in his picture of Paul. As important to Paul as music was friendship. Without John’s friendship Paul could easily have been selling sheet music in Brian Epstein’s shop, playing piano and singing standards on Saturday nights in a workingman’s club. He might have been like Robert.

Paul couldn’t make good music without John’s friendship. At any rate he couldn’t make art. Not because John was the genius to Paul’s craftsman. No, because Paul discovered music and friendship at virtually the same time.

Teenage boys can fall in love and there is nothing queer about it. No one is lonelier than the teenage boy. No one needs a kindred spirit more. If, by chance, two teenage boys are able to get through each other’s fortresses of cool, crack the ice of doubt and paranoia, the bond runs deep.

Boys never talk about these things. Not Paul and John. Not me and Robert.

4.

Paul McCartney played Eddie Cochran's 20 Flight Rock on John Lennon's guitar. Before long they were on stage together making a dream come true.

John found Yoko and became a man. Paul found Linda. Then fatherhood. Wings. A chain of Number One records. John was killed.

Robert realized you don't get to Paul through music alone. He'd get further with McCartney by talking about kids or schools or dogs. Robert knew practically nothing about these things.

He called me.

In high school Robert kept an electric guitar under his bed in a slim, gray case. It was a red and white Stratocaster, the first electric guitar I ever held in my hands. He asked me if I knew how to play.

"Some."

Robert inserted the jack into his practice amp. I saw the tiny red light glowing. His chair creaked as he lowered his head and struck the opening chord to A Hard Day's Night.

Then his Mom yelling: "Robert!! You'll crack the plaster!" Both of us laughing. My hand on my chest: I could feel that -- here!

5.

Here's a story I loved the first time I heard it. I still do. Jay Berlin told it to me. Jay lived in a college house with Robert and me our sophomore year. Now he's a child psychologist near Washington, D.C. The story goes like this:

A singer matching Robert's description performed at a wedding in northern Virginia. The groom was a friend from Chicago. He insisted that Robert perform at the reception and the bride's parents, wealthy horse breeders, paid for Robert to fly out for the weekend. What the groom wanted and what Robert provided were Beatles songs. A full set.

Robert did not know that Paul and Linda McCartney were friends of the bride's parents. He was not told they were invited to the celebration.

McCartney placed himself discreetly at the back during Robert's set. He reportedly enjoyed the performance. When Robert was finished, Paul made his way up to him and said either, "Great material, "

or,

"I'm glad *somebody* remembers the words to that lot."

"Jay," I said. "This actually happened?"

6.

I could not sleep on the jet Robert and I took to England.

Even with lights out I sat there dry eyed, smelling warm plastic and gray water.

Robert lay back against his tilted seat, hands clasped over his solar plexus. He snored like a contented husband. When I told him I was going with him after Paul McCartney he sounded relieved. Then he asked what Catherine thought. He sounded surprised when I told him she wasn't against the idea.

"She doesn't think I'm another Mark David Chapman?"

Sitting above the black Atlantic Ocean, trembling slightly from the caffeine in my extremities, I *did* ponder the extent of our harmlessness. In a world saturated and shaped by celebrity images and the rituals of stardom, what is crazier? To go through life quietly soaking it all up, pretending these things don't really matter – or to reach through the screen, to try marrying imagination and everyday existence?

Mark David Chapman. I hesitate to speak his name. To admit he's impressed himself inside my skull. Life for him was images and symbols. He made himself the end of John Lennon's life by shooting four bullets in John's back.

Robert wants to sing with Paul McCartney. This, I thought, is different. It is impossible. Which makes it okay.

7.

It had been raining in London but the rain was over.

The sky was overcast and bright. Signs were posted warning of unattended parcels, bombs and rabies. "Leave to enter for six months/Employment prohibited." We followed the crowd to ground transport.

A covered platform, an idling bus. The cool, petrol-saturated air woke me up. Robert climbed on board and I followed, settling uneasily in a high-backed seat. Quickly, the bus filled with Sikhs, cowboys, college students, businessmen, and nuns. I slept, briefly, dreaming my bed was black smoke.

8.

Our hotel was called The Atlantic. We walked by without seeing it at first, doubled back and entered beneath a cracked portico. An East Indian family attended the desk: mother in the morning, father all day, sisters after school and brother through the night. Grandmother, in shawl and drooping sari, served bacon, eggs and fried tomatoes from 7 until 8:30 each morning in a basement dining room, decorated with faded color photos torn from Indian tourist calendars.

Our room was like a file folder. Two single beds were set end-to-end against one wall. There was a washstand and box closet. One of us had to crouch on his bed to let the other pass. The room's best feature was a tall window. Robert and I stood in the trough that was our living space – Robert looking out at the London skyline, me staring at the back of Robert's head.

That first night we lay in our beds like cadavers. Traffic noise and the scent of coal wafted through our cracked windowpane. A couple above us made violent love.

9.

The next day we took the Beatles Tour of London. It started outside the Green Park tube stop, across the street from the Ritz Hotel. We handed our money over to the tour guide, a blonde American woman in her twenties who introduced herself as Marisa.

Marisa told us she was an actress. "The Beatles tour (she said) is one of those things actresses trying for a toehold in London do to survive." Marisa grew up in Cincinnati. She confided that until she started giving these tours her favorite recording artist was Barbra Streisand.

But it was the Beatles' story Marisa found fascinating. "I'd love to play the part of George's wife, Patti Boyd. Eric Clapton wrote Layla about Patti, who divorced George and married Eric."

The rest of our party included five middle-aged Japanese men wearing nylon windbreakers in a variety of neon colors, plus a man and woman we guessed were German. The German man wore a silver earring and the woman had a butterfly tattooed on the back of her hand. Germans and Japanese alike were laden with cameras. Robert and I kept our hands in our pockets.

Marisa 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 set in. A time when the sight of young men with long hair and drainpipe trousers was enough to discombobulate the general public was gone forever.

In those days, a rock band, a new record album, could change your life.

We peered up the stairwell at EMI where the Beatles leaned over the banister for the Please Please Me cover. Four of the Japanese assumed the original pose and had their extra man take their picture. As they smiled down at us the German woman shivered, lit a cigarette and surprised us, muttering in husky English: “The Sex Pistols had their picture taken here, too.”

“On to Abbey Road...” Marisa pointed out the garage “where John kept his paisley Rolls Royce; the apartment where Doctor Robert dosed George and John for the first time with LSD.”

At the recording studio, more pictures as the Japanese posed in a frozen group 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!”

“We are now [Marisa caught her breath] in St. John’s Wood. Here, on Cavendish Avenue, is the townhouse still owned by Beatle Paul.”

It was a fine brick house, fit for a banker, lawyer, diplomat. We gathered in a whispering cluster across the road. A brick wall with a double gate protected the yard. 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 and played the guitar for the crowd of girls who regularly waited outside the house. He played the song, Blackbird.”

The German woman inquired: “Does Paul still live here?”

“Yes,” said Robert.

10.

At dusk, we returned to Paul’s neighborhood. On our way we stopped in a pub called the Hoop and Toy. Robert got a ballpoint pen and scrap of notepaper from the barman. Wiping the tabletop dry with his sleeve, he wrote:

“Mr. McCartney:

I am a fellow musician who has traveled here in the hope of meeting you, so that I might express some sense of the pleasure and indebtedness I feel for your music. I have, as a solo artist, presented cover versions of over 40 Beatles tunes. I consider it a privilege to perform this music. I try to do you justice without simulating or replicating your sound. Since I am in England, I wanted to convey this message...”

Robert printed in a small, precise hand, paying attention to keeping each line level across the page.

Paul McCartney’s house looked like it had been painted by Magritte. Lights glowing behind drawn curtains made the night seem brighter. Robert went forward to knock at the gate.

I followed, trying not to hurry. The gate was equipped with a squawk box. There were nine numbered buttons on a square pad with one button that was round and red. Robert pressed the red button. He put his mouth near the speaker and called:

“Hello?”

I waited behind him, certain we were being videotaped on closed-circuit TV.

“Hello?”

The speaker crackled and popped. An educated young woman’s voice came out of the box, sounding as if it was being filtered through pebbles and clay.

“I would like to leave a message for Mr. McCartney.”

I glanced up and down the street. There were no pedestrians. The woman's voice asked us: "Drop the message through the gate." But the ground was wet. The paper Robert had written on would be soaked.

"I'm sorry," said Robert, speaking more loudly than I thought was necessary – it was as if he was wearing headphones – "it is not dry enough out here for me to do that."

Lights came on. We could feel their heat. A large, perfectly bald circus strongman appeared on the other side of the gate. He wore a pink turtleneck and pressed blue jeans. He came halfway to us, stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"Paul's not home. He's hardly ever home."

The strongman's face was darkened by lights glaring behind his skull. He told Robert:

"Set the note down and leave it. I will pick it up."

A siren sounded in the distance.

II.

The strongman was true to his word. After he lifted the note from the brackish puddle on Paul McCartney's garden path, Robert and I went walking. We walked for a long time, oblivious to where we were or how far we were going. The night was moist and cool. But for our feeling thwarted, it would have been a pleasant jaunt.

We eventually found ourselves on a narrow sidestreet near Leicester Square. The bulbous red and blue lights of strip clubs and porn shops. Robert and I walked like commandoes, turning sideways to snake through knots of meaty, marinated men. On this street, resourcefulness looked like violence.

You often hear how civilized London is. If civilized means safe, walking around London at night is certainly safer than walking at night in L.A., New York or even the Chicago suburbs. A pedestrian in the States can be shot dead for a million reasons, which is the same thing as saying, shit happens. Americans are blunt.

The English seem to have sharpened their mean streak on a finer stone. If the American bad guy is a gun, the Brit is a razor.

Pain and glee are bonded on certain after hours London streets. Here are passageways for sodomites and slashers. There are dark stains everywhere. John Lennon might have wound up in a neighborhood like this. He found rock'n'roll instead.

Robert stepped into a narrow storefront. PARADISE was spelled out in blue neon above the entry. Admission cost 2 pounds 50.

The money bought us a chance to browse through a predictably sordid selection of shrink-wrapped magazines. Robert began flipping through the vast array of fetishes on offer. The cashier, a rat-faced woman with unwashed hair the color of violets, sat on a wooden stool, reading Karl Marx.

I went down the row to Robert. He was staring intently at a naked woman wearing a diving mask and oxygen tanks. "I'm getting out of here," I whispered.

"Okay. I'll meet you back at the room."

"I'm beat."

"I'll try not to wake you."

12.

Robert slept until noon. I bought newspapers and drank coffee. The Times was full of politics I couldn't comprehend.

I bought a copy of The Sun: Half naked babes!

The Royal Family in a snit.

Elton John ("Too Fat to Have AIDS!").

A woman whose Corgi ate the chrome off her Mini.

And, on Page 12, Linda McCartney's recipe for Vegetarian Meatloaf.

"A filling meal for a hard day's night. After trekking across the rugged moors near their Scottish retreat, Macca and lovely Linda enjoy their loaf baked golden brown and piping hot!"

When I got back to the room, I showed Robert Linda's recipe for vegetarian meatloaf and told him I was going to British Rail to get us tickets for Edinburgh.

“The Highlands!” I cried. “That’s where we’ll find him!”