

## The Holes in Helter Skelter

### Moorehouse Moves In

As my trust in Bugliosi faltered, I kept revisiting *Helter Skelter*, turning its pages in search of some detail that felt forced or wrong—especially where Terry Melcher was concerned. One day, a few sentences jumped out at me:

After Terry Melcher had moved out of the [Cielo Drive] residence, but before the Polanskis had moved in, Gregg Jakobson had arranged for *a Dean Moorehouse* to stay there for a brief period. During this time Tex Watson had visited Moorehouse at least three, and possibly as many as six, times.

Emphasis mine. Something about that offhand phrasing—“a Dean Moorehouse”—raised a red flag for me.

This was the only time Moorehouse was mentioned in the book. He had been a peripheral member of the Family. A wavering Protestant minister, insurance salesman, and married father of

three, he was living in San Jose when he first encountered Manson, in 1967, when the ex-con was fresh out of federal prison and hitchhiking. Moorehouse pulled over to give him a lift, which turned into an invitation to dinner, which blossomed into a friendship of sorts. Moorehouse, who'd strayed from his ministry and was himself on probation for a forgery charge, was searching for something new and was eager to discuss spirituality; Manson was eager to ogle Moorehouse's fifteen-year-old daughter, Ruth Ann.

Before long, Manson absconded with Ruth Ann on a trip up the California coast, prompting her mother to report her to the police as a runaway. Dean Moorehouse had left the marriage by then—he'd fallen under the spell of the sixties and grown a long white beard. By March 1968, he was in trouble with the law again, facing an arrest for contributing to the delinquency of a minor; police had found him when they raided a home in search of marijuana. Soon afterward, he was arrested again, this time for selling LSD. The legend is that Manson persuaded him to try it for the first time, after which he renounced his earthly possessions.

Moorehouse kept chasing his daughter, who'd remained with the Family; Manson had rechristened her "Ouisch." When Moorehouse followed them to Dennis Wilson's house in Pacific Palisades, Manson kneeled and kissed his feet, launching a charm offensive that effectively ended the conflict. Increasingly sympathetic to the Family's philosophies, Moorehouse moved into the back cabin and lived there rent-free in exchange for maintaining the landscaping. Manson had converted a onetime Christian minister.

But when had Moorehouse taken up residence in the Cielo home? Melcher had told me he had no memory of it. Bugliosi wrote that it was after Melcher moved out, meaning in January 1969.

I found Moorehouse in the phone book and gave him a call. He was friendly, though spacey. Now seventy-nine, he was living in northern California under the name "Baba," which Manson had

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given him. He'd had more than four hundred LSD trips between 1967 and 1972. "When I talk to you, I'm talking to myself," he explained. "When you talk to me, you're talking to yourself."

Be that as it may, he had a sharp recall for his time with Manson, and what he told me didn't vindicate Melcher or Bugliosi in the slightest. It was impossible that he'd moved into the Cielo house in January 1969, for one simple reason: he'd gone to prison then.

Moorehouse had been arrested on a drug charge in Ukiah, California. In the midst of his time with the Family, he had to head back north for his trial. "They convicted me in December of '68," he said. "I was due back there at the end of December for sentencing, and then on January 3 they hauled me off to Vacaville," a correctional facility.

Moorehouse said he'd really lived at Cielo "off and on" throughout the summer of '68, when Melcher lived there. "Terry was a good friend," he explained, "and when I first met him at Dennis's, he said, 'If it's okay with you I'll send my chauffeur down one of these days and have you come up to my house.'" Melcher "took me in and showed me a bedroom and said, 'This is your bedroom, you can stay here anytime that you want.'" So I was staying there off and on, whenever I felt like it." He also confirmed a detail from Ed Sanders's *The Family*: that Melcher had let him borrow his Jaguar for the long drive to Ukiah. "I drove the Jaguar up there with Tex Watson," he said. Melcher "gave it to me to use on this trip and he gave me his credit card to use for gas and anything that happened to the car."

I asked Moorehouse for written proof of his time in prison. With his permission, I got a copy of his parole record from the state of California. It showed that he entered the prison system on January 2, 1969.

So Bugliosi's timeline was wrong, and Melcher had lied to me. I felt I had to talk to Melcher about this, though I knew it'd anger

him—he might cut me off afterward. Still, I called him up and laid out the evidence as gingerly as I could. Melcher wasn't having it. He stuck to the story as Bugliosi had told it in *Helter Skelter* and promptly got rid of me.

Not long after, I got a disturbing call from Rudi Altobelli, sounding more upset and angry than I'd ever heard him. He'd been in touch with Melcher for the first time in many years. Their conversations had left him feeling out of the loop. In Altobelli's eyes, the Golden Penetrators—Jakobson, Wilson, Melcher—had always known that Manson had spent time up at the house. But they were too scared to say it on the stand. That task fell to Altobelli, who now felt he'd been pressured into talking about it under oath without understanding the full story.

Once they'd started talking again, Altobelli asked Melcher about Dean Moorehouse, with my reporting in mind. Melcher had snapped, saying he was going to call Bugliosi. "Vince was supposed to take care of all that," he said, "and now it's all resurfacing."

### **Melcher's Lies**

Stephen Kay of the Los Angeles DA's office told me to call another longtime employee there, Sandi Gibbons. She might be sympathetic to my aims. Before she worked for the DA, Gibbons had been a journalist, and her coverage of the Manson trial left her deeply skeptical of Bugliosi and his motives. She became one of several reporters who believed that Bugliosi was corrupt, arrogant, vain, even crazy; later, when he pursued elected office, she wrote a number of stories detailing his misconduct as a prosecutor.

I took Gibbons out to lunch and found her impressively forthright. Soft-spoken and direct, she was certain that Bugliosi had covered up for Terry Melcher during the trial. The two must have made some kind of deal: you testify to this and I'll keep you out of that. She also confirmed that Bugliosi had stolen a bunch of the

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DA's files for his book, knowing full well that it was illegal to remove them. It bothered her that he was always portrayed as upstanding and aboveboard—he was a snake. She could still recall the sight of a vein throbbing in his temple—if I ever saw that vein, she warned me, it meant that Bugliosi was about to blow his stack.

Once I'd earned her trust, she agreed to show me the DA's Manson file. I could make photocopies of anything I wanted, though she would have to supervise me as I went through everything. She was under no obligation to show me any of these documents—and, though she never said it, I was under the impression that my visits weren't exactly authorized.

Gibbons led me through the labyrinth of the DA's office and unlocked a storage room. Long, narrow, and windowless, the room accommodated a row of cabinets with barely enough space for the two chairs that Gibbons and I carried in. I leafed through endless folders containing police reports, interview notes, investigation summaries, chronologies, photographs, rap sheets, mug shots, suspect lists—and, best of all, a half dozen or more faded legal pads of Bugliosi's interviews with his most prized witnesses. I made notes and set aside any documents I wanted to copy—Gibbons had to clear them, but she approved everything at a glance. Several times she called my attention to folders that had nothing in them, telling me that Bugliosi or Bill Nelson had removed their contents. I spent hours in that room, returning four times in the next few weeks and several more times in the ensuing years.

On my third visit I struck gold: a long yellow legal pad with pages of notes scrawled in black ink, much of it crossed through but still legible. It was an interview of one of Bugliosi's key witnesses, Danny DeCarlo, who testified for eight consecutive days, often under blistering cross-examination. A biker from Venice in a gang called the Straight Satans, DeCarlo began staying at the Spahn Ranch in the spring of '69. He and his associates provided a degree of security that endeared him to Manson, who'd grown paranoid

## Chaos

and embattled. DeCarlo's father was in the firearms business and, although Danny was never a full-fledged member of the Family, he soon ran their arsenal, a cache of weapons that grew to include a submachine gun. In exchange, he and the other bikers got access to drugs and the Family's girls. His testimony did a lot of heavy lifting for Bugliosi. He detailed Manson's plan to ignite the Helter Skelter race war; he outlined the ways Manson dominated his followers; and he identified the weapons used in the murders.

In the crossed-out sections of Bugliosi's notes, to my astonishment, DeCarlo described three visits by Terry Melcher to the Manson Family—*after* the murders.

I read them, reread them, and reread them again. I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. I took scrupulous, word-for-word notes, in case Gibbons looked too closely at the flagged pages and realized that they completely upended one of the most important cases in her office's history. Luckily, she let me photocopy them without a second glance.

At home, I looked again. I hadn't imagined it. In an interview on February 11, 1970, DeCarlo described Melcher's two visits to the Spahn Ranch in late August and early September, 1969, and his third visit to the Barker Ranch—more than two hundred miles away—in mid-September.

According to Bugliosi's notes, DeCarlo didn't approach Melcher on any of these occasions, so he didn't know what Melcher and Manson discussed—but he was certain, each time, that it was Melcher he saw. Bugliosi's notes on the two visits to the Spahn Ranch read:

[DeCarlo] released 72 hours after the bust on 8-16-69. Went back to Venice for a few days & then went back to [Spahn] ranch. Week or week & a half later, went up to Barker with Tex & Bruce Davis in a flatbed truck. Manson & 4 or 5 girls left at same time in a car. Rest of family stayed at Spahn. Between time that Danny returned to the Ranch

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& time he left for Barker, definitely saw Melcher out at [Spahn] ranch. Heard girls say, "Terry's coming, Terry's coming." Melcher drove up in a Metro truck . . . by himself. Melcher stayed for 3 or 4 hours.

3 or 4 days later, saw Melcher in his same truck.

Then he writes of the third visit, which occurred in the canyon passageway to the Family's hideouts in Death Valley:

1½ weeks later saw Melcher with Gypsy & Brenda at bottom of Golar Wash near Ballarat, sitting in a car with the girls. DeCarlo was with Sadie, Tex, Manson, Bruce & Dennis (w[itness]'s child) on foot. All of them got in Melcher's car, everyone in the car. (Brenda had been the driver. Melcher only a passenger. Everyone called Melcher "Terry[.]") Charlie took over the driver's seat & drove to Ridgecrest & picked up a 1959 Buick. DeCarlo & rest then drove off leaving Melcher, Manson & Brenda in the car they had. That's the last time W[itness] saw Melcher.

I cross-referenced this with the trial transcripts, which I'd photocopied at the California Court of Appeals. Pulling Melcher's testimony from my filing cabinet, I saw that at the grand jury hearing in December 1969, Bugliosi had asked him whether he ever saw Manson after his May 1969 visit to the Spahn Ranch. "No, I didn't," Melcher replied under oath.

During the trial, Bugliosi asked him again: "After this second occasion that you went to the Spahn Ranch, which was a couple of days after May 18, 1969, did you ever see Mr. Manson thereafter?"

"No," Melcher said—again under oath.

Next he was cross-examined by the defense's Paul Fitzgerald: "Do you recall the last time you saw Charles Manson?"

"Yeah, just a few days after May 18 . . . at the ranch."

Three different times on the stand, always as a witness for Bugliosi, Melcher lied about not seeing Manson after May 1969. Next, I pulled out Danny DeCarlo's testimony to see if Bugliosi had ever asked him about Melcher. It never happened.

This was a stunner, never before revealed. Without DeCarlo's testimony, Bugliosi said he might never have gotten his convictions. Only Linda Kasabian, the member of the Family who testified in exchange for immunity, spent more time on the stand.

Clearly, this was information Bugliosi didn't want before the jury. But why? Was it simply because any postmurder visits by Melcher undermined the Helter Skelter motive? Bugliosi argued that Manson chose the Cielo house to "instill fear" in Melcher, as Susan Atkins said. But if Melcher were with Manson *after* the murders, where was the fear? And, most important: What were these additional meetings about? Maybe Melcher knew that the Family was behind the murders but, for some reason, believed he was safe. Was this the secret Bugliosi was hiding, and, if so, to whose benefit?

As I read the DA's file more carefully, I found that every single thing DeCarlo and Bugliosi had discussed that day was later repeated by DeCarlo on the witness stand—*except* the descriptions of Melcher's visits after the murders. In his notes, Bugliosi had crossed out all of these references.

The defense should have received a copy of the DeCarlo interview. Bugliosi was legally required to turn over all his evidence to the other side.

As soon as I could, I scheduled a lunch with the defense's Paul Fitzgerald, to see if he knew anything about this. We met at his favorite dim sum restaurant downtown, near the courthouse. Fitzgerald, an ex-boxer who was legendary in L.A. legal circles, was his usual animated self: loud, vulgar, slapping the table to make his points, already into his second martini before the first course arrived.

Wasting no time, I showed him the documents I'd copied at the DA's, trying not to sway his reaction. His mouth dropped open. "This

is Vince Bugliosi's handwriting," he said. "I never saw this before! Obviously [they] didn't want to put on this evidence." Fitzgerald and the defense team had paid a lot of attention to DeCarlo, thinking he might be an asset to them. "He was not a member of the Family, had a good relationship with truth, lived at the ranch, was an outsider—pretty straightforward guy in most ways, credible. I liked him. He didn't embellish anything, told it the way it was."

That made this document all the more legitimate, in Fitzgerald's eyes, and more sensational. "I'm very shocked." He argued that Bugliosi, who was "extremely deceitful" and "the robot he claimed his defendants were," had written "a script for the entire trial," getting witnesses to agree to his narrative in advance.

I was relieved by Fitzgerald's astonishment—it convinced me that I wasn't overreacting here. Wanting to eliminate any possible doubt, I tried for months to find Danny DeCarlo himself, but he seemed to have vanished. I did eventually track down a girlfriend of his, who told me that she'd gotten my interview request to him—he lived mainly in Mexico these days, she said. I never heard back from him.

I felt it was becoming nearly impossible to deny that Bugliosi had manipulated some of his witnesses—or that he'd conspired with at least two of his principals to conceal the facts of the case and shore up his motive. If Melcher and DeCarlo were tainted—and if Melcher had committed outright perjury, suborned by Bugliosi—then the veracity of the prosecutor's entire case, including the extraordinary hippie/race-war motive that made him a bestselling author, was called into question.

### **"The Guy Is Psychotic"**

As one of the biggest bands in the world, the Beach Boys employed a retinue of managers, roadies, engineers, and gofers—I wondered