

The First Two Pages: “Me & Magdalena” by James D.F. Hannah
From *Daydream Believer: Crime Stories Inspired by the Songs of the Monkees*,
Edited by Lawrence Allan and Michelle Kubitz (Shotgun Honey Books)

An Essay by James D.F. Hannah

Just to be clear: I have no idea what I’m doing.

I don’t only mean in writing, but we’re talking about writing here, and I most definitely mean writing.

You see, when Larry Allan and Shelley Kubitz asked if I’d contribute a story to *Daydream Believer: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Monkees*, I immediately picked “Me & Magdalena,” from the Monkees’ 2016 album *Good Times!* It’s a beautiful, elegiac song, by turns wistful and nostalgic and mournful.

But I’m not exactly a Monkees super-fan. My interest in the Monkees is really their place as a cultural artifact—a network-created musical act, custom-built to capitalize on the popularity of the Beatles.

Friction existed almost from the beginning between band members and music executives as the band members wanted some form of creative control, and the suits wanted them to shut up and sing. When the show became a success, and the music exploded on the radio, the band chose to push back. They demanded to play their own instruments and to write their own songs. They wanted the chance to be the thing no one in charge had expected: A real band.

And for a while, they were. Then, as with all fads, the novelty of the “Pre-Fab Four” died. The show was cancelled, and it didn’t take long for the Monkees to go their separate ways, only to be revitalized nearly twenty years later in reruns and find a second wave of popularity they sustained for decades.

In the long run, the Monkees won the fight. They got to be a real band.

The story of the Monkees is, in a way, the battle between art and commerce. Not that the Monkees were stretching the craft, but they did want to exercise their own voices in their music. To not be defined through the words of others.

Any artist will tell you, this push for freedom can come with a cost, and it felt like a thread I wanted to explore.

But we’ve gotten this far and still haven’t really talked about the story “Me & Magdalena,” have we? Or why I decided to shape the story as an oral history of a Monkees-esque made-for-TV band called The Water Foul.

Because like I said earlier, I don’t know what I’m doing. I had no reason or excuse to go for an oral history except I’m a huge fan of the format and it felt right. Andy Warhol said everyone will be famous for 15 minutes; now, everyone gets an oral history. From Studs Turkel chronicling the Great Depression and World War II to explorations of ’70s punk rock, *Saturday Night Live*, *The O.C.*, and the Super Bowl episode of *Friends*, the oral history is a quick cut/multi-POV way to tell a story in both the micro and the macro. It also leans into the great truism from

movie producer Robert Evans: “There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. And no one is lying. Memories shared serve each differently.”

So what about an oral history of a made-for-TV pop band similar to the Monkees?

Okay, great. But this is still for a crime anthology. Show me the crime.

Well, one of the great myths of pop culture is that Charles Manson auditioned for The Monkees. (False: Manson was both in prison at the time and already 30, so he would have been too old.) But Manson did later briefly insinuate himself with Dennis Wilson, drummer for The Beach Boys—to the point that the Beach Boys recorded one of his songs.

I couldn’t top how Tarantino handled the summer of 1969 in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, but I could create my own alternate history, and my own version of Charles Manson with Earl Thomas Sweeney. I had to ask myself, how does a character like that affect a band, where every member has different motivations and reactions around their fame?

I didn’t have a clue. All I knew was I wanted the story to be funny; there are gags about grind-house movies and Sam Elliott auditioning for the *Water Fowl*, references to writer friends, and later an extended New Journalism joke and an appearance by Joseph Wambaugh. The plan—such as there ever was one—was for

a big tonal shift about midway through. I describe it hopefully as “it’s funny, it’s funny, it’s funny—and then a serial killer shows up.”

(During edits Larry asked me if I could have found a way to make writing the story more difficult, and honestly, not without learning a new language.)

At the end of the first two pages, I still had no clue where the story was going. My only hope was to keep following these voices to the end. I was surprised by where it landed, and I hope readers are also.

The First Two Pages of “Me & Magdalena”

From *Variety*, July 21, 1987

Headline: “RERUNS RENEW POPULARITY FOR MADE-FOR-TV BAND”

“Nearly twenty years after leaving the air under a veil of scandal and controversy, the made-for-TV pop band The Water Foul are finding a second act thanks to MTV excavating the series from the vaults. With the show’s subsequent success in reruns, the band has found a fresh generation of fans, with a new album and a tour in talks.

“Created to exploit the popularity of real-life bands such as The Beatles, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and, of course, Gerry and the Pacemakers, The Water Foul centered a popular sitcom and recorded one of the most acclaimed albums of the 60s before a series of scandals led to the show’s cancellation. What followed, including the death of the series’ star producer and the show’s connection to one of L.A.’s most infamous serial killers, signaled the end of an era, tarnished the show’s legacy, and pushed it into obscurity—until now.”

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From “Duck and Cover: An Oral History of The Water Foul”

Entertainment Weekly, March 19, 1996

“*We were never meant to be a real band*”

September 8, 1965:

The ad read “New Series Seeks Rock Musicians For Acting Roles. Looking For Boys 17-23. BE ENTHUSIASTIC! DON'T BE HIGH ON DOPE! Must come down to interview.”

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Interview with Allen Campbell, creator of THE WATER FOUL
By Jess Calkins

Allen Campbell had already found success scripting for crime series such as JOHNNY MIDNIGHT and CAIN'S HUNDRED when he happened into a showing of The Beatles' A HARD DAY'S NIGHT after his first choice—the grind-house classic THE FLESH EATERS—was sold out.

“To be honest, the Beatles weren’t my thing—I was more of a Vic Damone guy myself—but their energy was infectious, and the girls in the theater, they went nuts about them,” Campbell said. “Later I was at Musso & Frank and somewhere into the third Scotch and soda it hit me, there was a TV version of this. And I knew it would sell because the Hollywood motto is 'Always find where the money is.'”

Campbell sold the idea of a situational comedy based around four musicians to Little World—owned and run by legendary comedienne-turned-producer Shelly Little, best known for her show “Shelly’s Place.” Little was starring at the time in a follow-up, “Shell’s Bells,” while also running the production company, making her one of the most successful and powerful women in Hollywood.

“Shelly saw dollar signs when I pitched the idea,” Campbell said. “She was even less ‘hip’ or ‘with it’ than I was, but she knew how to make money, I’ll give her that.”

The ad for open auditions ran in all of the Hollywood trades, with 437 young men showing up on the day to audition.

“We had (Jack) Nicholson show up, when he was still working for Corman,” Campbell said. “He was going bald already, and girls weren’t going to be into that. Sam Elliott read for a part. Frank Zappa came close. He was funny but we weren’t sure he had the musical chops.”

Producers ultimately selected four young men to become The Water Foul:

- Danny Garrett, a rising star of the British stage, who would be the resident heartthrob;
- Pete Moskowitz, an aspiring stand-up comedian whose early act echoed the freewheeling style of Lenny Bruce;

- James Reilly, a singer-songwriter with ties to the Greenwich Village folk scene; and
- Tony Browne, a Juilliard-trained classical pianist known for the top hat he wore throughout the series' run.

“The boys made it easy to assign personalities,” Campbell said. “Danny was the cute one, Pete the funny one, James the weird one, and Tony the serious one. We had to make a few changes; someone in Corporate decided ‘Moskowitz was a little ... *ethnic* for the South, so we switched it to ‘Taylor.’”

When asked about the long-standing urban legend that Earl Thomas Sweeney auditioned for the show, Campbell declined to comment.

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James D.F. Hannah is the Shamus Award-winning and Anthony Award-nominated author of the Henry Malone novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Best American Mystery and Suspense* (2022 and 2025), *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Vautrin*, *Rock and a Hard Place*, *Dark Yonder*, and *Shotgun Honey* as well as the anthologies *Eight Very Bad Nights*, *Playing Games*, and *Under the Thumb*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where all the bourbon is.