

# USELESS

did Operation CHAOS really end?  
reclaiming power over your power  
music i've been into lately

**#1 zine**

# CHAOS

**reflections on the book by  
Tom O'Neill**

CHAOS is a trip. It's about 500 pages of the author, Tom O'Neill, getting closer and closer to some fundamental Truths, while simultaneously losing touch with reality. O'Neill started reporting as a magazine assignment some 20 years ago, looking for a unique angle on one of the most told and re-told stories in American history: The Manson family murders. What he found wasn't so much a new angle as a new reality of sorts, and CHAOS documents his long, slow descent into the dark matter that separates legitimate conspiracy and insanity.

The story we've heard in *Helter Skelter*—of a uniquely evil individual leading a cult to murder—ignores context in favor of a neat, linear narrative of one historically demented individual. It's easy to understand, and it puts a face on evil.

CHAOS does a good job of showing how such a simple story fails us. There are dozens of characters in Manson's life who played some role in making him who he was. This is not to say they were evil, but that "evil" is complicated, and can result from an unfortunate chain of incompetence and naivete.

I'm going to quickly introduce a few of these side characters—including things that didn't happen as well as things that did—before eventually trying to piece it all together in a way O'Neill either couldn't or wouldn't.

## WHAT HAPPENED

Vincent Bugliosi led the prosecution in the Manson family trials, and wrote what's

commonly regarded as the definitive accounting of the Manson family murders. I've never read it myself, but supposedly *Helter Skelter* claims that Manson brainwashed his followers into thinking there was an impending race war... which they could incite through their own violence before hiding out in a cave under the desert, and eventually emerge to a more perfect union once it was all over.

So this is where O'Neill started his research: reading the book, talking to Bugliosi, finding some puzzling inconsistencies and bizarre conclusions, and then getting threatened by Bugliosi for pressing the issue. I'll leave it there.

It was bizarre to hear that *Helter Skelter* spent so little time exploring what sure seems to be Charles Manson's formative year. Some background is helpful here.

### The Two Smiths

David Smith was a Ph D student at UC-Berkeley, studying the effect of drugs on groups of rodents. David also spent some time volunteering with a "community anarchist" group called The Diggers, which provided food, housing, and medical aid to runaways in the Bay Area.

As the story goes, David foresaw a huge migration and gentrification of young folks moving into San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district in the mid-60s, though he also knew the area lacked affordable medical resources. Being a proper gentleman who thinks health care is a human right, he took inspiration from The Diggers, left his studies, and opened the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic (HAFMC).

The HAFMC was staffed largely by volunteers and treated hundreds of patients a day—bad trips, overdoses, STDs, malnourishment, therapy... The office vibes also fit the neighborhood—they encouraged loitering, exam rooms were painted

wavy colors, one of them wallpapered with peace signs and swirls and naked people and whatnot.

But it wasn't without its controversy. Despite being an inspiration, The Diggers' founder, Emmett Grogan, was skeptical. Here's a quote: "Just because no one was made to pay a fee when they were there, didn't make it a free clinic," he wrote. "On the contrary, the patients were treated as 'research subjects' and the facility was used to support whatever medical innovations were new and appropriate to the agency."

And he had a point! One of the ways the HAFMC was able to be free was that it received private and federal grants to conduct drug research.

David Smith wasn't the lone paid professional at the HAFMC, and the other one worth highlighting here is Roger Smith (no relation). Roger was a doctoral candidate from Berkeley who studied criminology, more specifically the link between drugs and gang violence.

Roger also worked, for a very brief time, as a parole officer. He was actually participating in a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health called the San Francisco Project, which was an experimental parole program to determine whether the different number of cases a PO has might affect recidivism rates of parolees. Apparently Roger Smith started the study with 40 parolees, and by the end of the year he had only one: Charles Manson. In 1967 he brought Manson with him to Haight-Ashbury.

Together at HAFMC, the Smiths worked on a study titled Amphetamine Research Project (ARP). We can get an idea what that was about from its title. We also know this study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), though there isn't much documentation to tell us more. The Smiths blame this on the normal erosion of time and told O'Neill not to read into it. Two of their coworkers remember it differently, and promised O'Neill that the ARP files were burglarized from the HAFMC shortly after Manson's arrest.

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### The CIA

I want to keep this an approachable length, so I'll quickly just outline two separate CIA programs that may or may not allegedly play a factor in this story: MK-ULTRA and Operation CHAOS.

MK-Ultra's umbrella goal was "to influence human behavior"—it was a direct response to seeing American soldiers go to Korea to fight communism and came back a different person. Some got captured and suddenly admitted to spraying illegal biological weapons. Others were coming home with more sympathetic views of communism than when they left. The new CIA Director Allen Dulles assumed this had to be some kind of brainwashing, and empowered Sydney Gottlieb to create a sprawling research arm that drugged thousands of people—some knowingly, some not—trying to find the ultimate truth serum or brainwashing cocktail. Most of this research was also pushed out through foundations, hospitals, prisons, and various shell companies—of course including the National Institute of Mental Health.

Operation CHAOS was a domestic espionage project from 1967 to 1974 whose goal was to investigate counterculture and protest groups and try to dig up the foreign influence that was driving it. It acted sort of like the FBI's COINTELPRO, and they collaborated on some efforts to track Americans abroad.

These programs were so secret that when Allen Dulles left as CIA Director in late 1961, his



successor was supposedly never briefed on what Gottlieb was up to. When Gottlieb retired in 72 or 72, the project effectively retired with him. Amidst the Watergate scandal, he got paranoid and ordered all documents be destroyed. The only reason we know about these programs is he forgot to destroy 16,000 pages of documents in a separate warehouse, and Seymour Hersh found them.

Hersh reported these programs in The New York Times. Three government investigations followed, including Gerald Ford's Rockefeller Commission and congress' Church Committee, but there's still a ton that we'll just never know.

This is a problem for some who've read CHAOS and felt let down by the lack of a clean and clear conclusion. Like most conspiracies, there's no smoking gun at the end. Personally I prefer it this way, because I think it's a more honest representation of how these things work. Gottlieb was not playing Manson like a marionette. That was a side effect of sorts. I think a more accurate telling is that Gottlieb saw a volatile situation and injected a little chaos in the form of prescription amphetamines and psychedelics. Seems simple, understandable even. I can't help but wonder if there was something else going on.

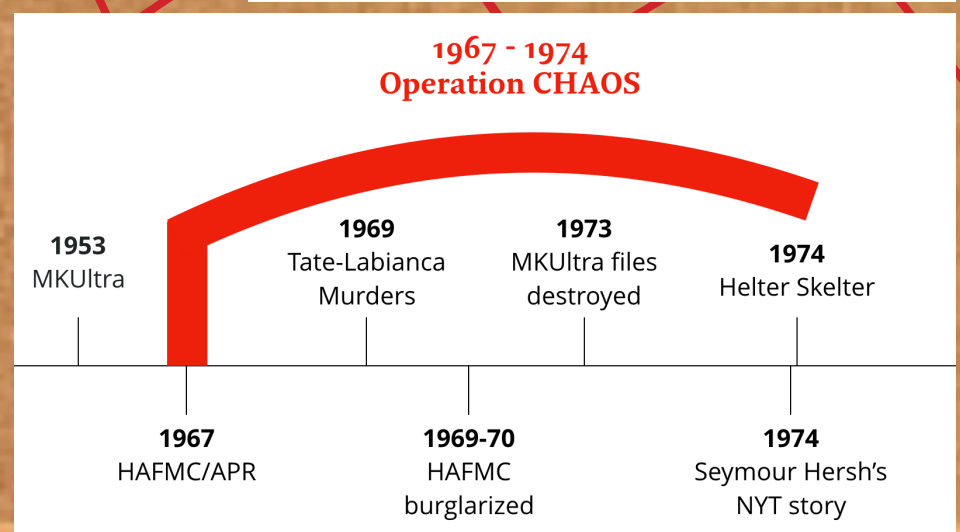
## QUICK TIMELINE

I think there's something else going on here, which you can start to understand if

you revisit the timeline...

- HAFMC opened in **1967**, participating in the ARP and pumping drugs into the Haight-Ashbury district, including Manson.
- In **1968**, Manson moves his family to the Spahn Ranch and becomes obsessed with the Beatles' "Helter Skelter."
- In **July 1969**, Gary Hinman is murdered in his home.
- In **August 1969**, Sharon Tate and four others were murdered in her home on Cielo Drive.
- In **October 1969**, Manson and several others are arrested for unrelated charges, and Susan Atkins brags about the murders to cell mate.
- In **July 1970**, Manson is found guilty and sentenced to death. Sometime that year, the ARP files are stolen from the HAFMC.
- In **1973**, Sydney Gottlieb orders all files related to MKUltra to be destroyed.
- In **1974**, Seymour Hersh publishes his bombshell story in the New York Times, exposing the CIA mind control experiments based on files that were mistakenly leftover from the previous year's purge.
- That same year, Vincent Bugliosi publishes Helter Skelter, his novel-length accounting of the Manson family murders, and his theory behind them.
- That same year, Operation CHAOS officially ends.

...Or does it? Stay with me for a moment.



## ENGAGE BLACKPILL

Operation CHAOS' original charter was to uncover foreign influence on domestic leftist protest groups.

Failing to find any of that, they succeeded in their overarching goal: undermining and discrediting these leftist groups, making them seem crazy, replacing happy images of loving comrades with gruesome scenes of unrecognizable violence.

You see, my theory here is that Operation CHAOS never really ended, it just transitioned, outsourcing their dirty work to private parties like Bugliosi, who can be more effective because they're somehow less accountable and even more shameless.

This whole apparatus still exists today—pill mills, militarized police states, astro-turfed activists, and hack journalists from Project Veritas to The New York Times all working in concert to divide us along race and class lines and undermine our efforts for a more peaceful, more generous, more just, and more humane society. American rags won't even print Seymour Hersh anymore! This system actively undermines anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-war movements with propaganda about "pragmatism." They work to further atomize our society, and create aliens and monsters where once there was neighbors, classmates, humans.

Because regardless of how much of this was deliberate and how much was an incident of chaotic forces, here's the story that the CIA doesn't want you to know:

Charles Manson was born in a broken home to a mother who was struggling with alcohol, substance abuse, and poverty. She spent a chunk of Charles' childhood behind bars. Charles got caught up in similar trouble—often skipping school, running away from home, robbing stores, stealing cars; and continued to get into trouble in prison, several times appearing close to getting parole but then doing something—like pulling knives and raping other inmates—to have it denied. The prisons just reinforced the only things he knew: they were cold, violent, and

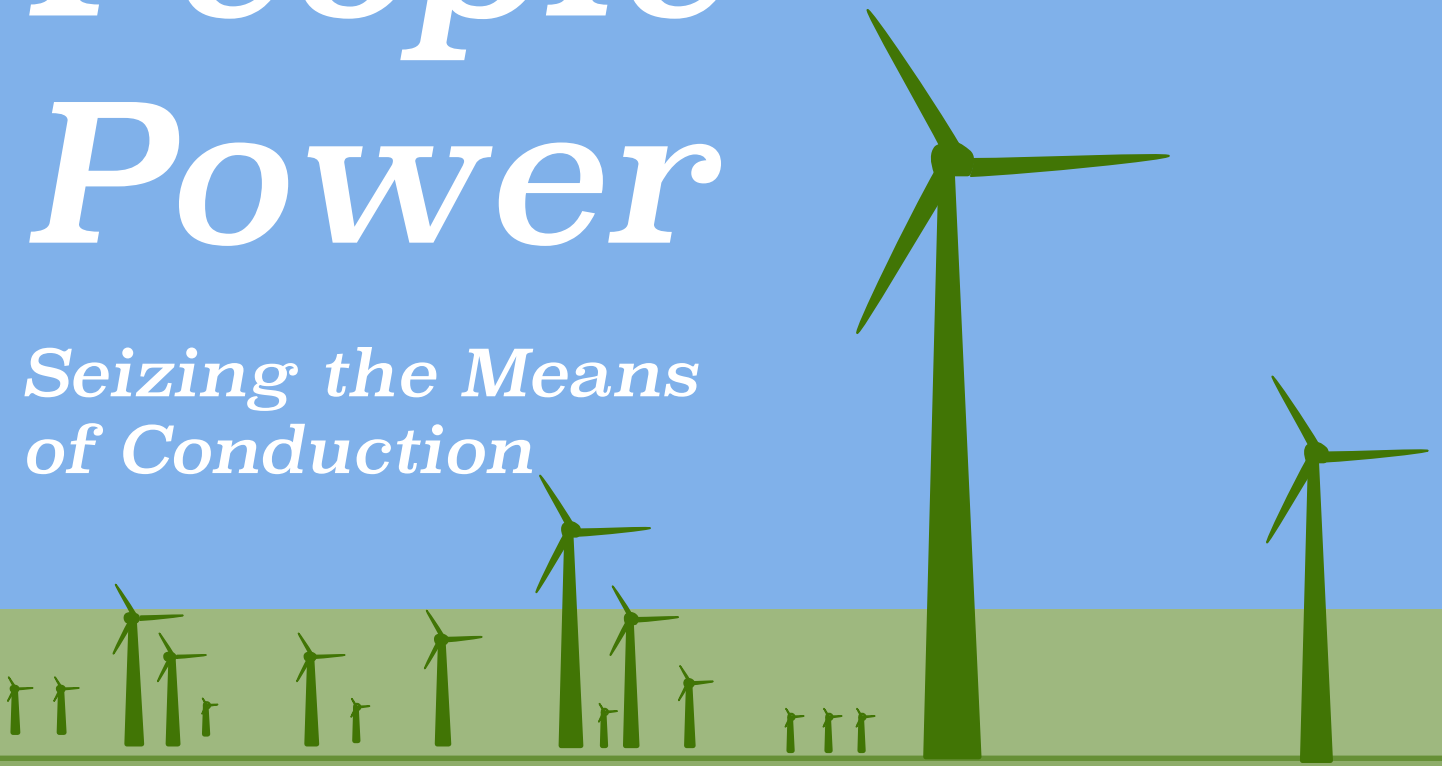
ruthless. And when he finally got out, instead of getting the education, therapy, prescriptions, and love he needed, he was put in an experimental program where his parole officer pumped him full of drugs that had already shown in a lab to create violent and antisocial behaviors. And we were all horrified and surprised when he didn't come out behaving like everyone else.

Throughout all of human history, we've never had so *much*. And yet every year, millions of children around the world are forced to go without—without education, proper nutrition, stable housing, or health care. There are millions of people who lack the basic shelter, warmth, and support they need to live happy, healthy, and thriving lives. If somehow they do persevere, each one of them is one botched science experiment from becoming something unrecognizable—victims of the war on drugs, prison industrial complex, military industrial complex, an economic system that makes them work multiple jobs to make ends meet, or something much, much worse. They're squeezed tighter and tighter from multiple sides until eventually, predictably, they break. That's the bleak reality of such a atomized, polarized, unequal society.

But my intention with this essay is not to sound bleak. What I'm hoping to get across here is that this is a man-made problem, and the solution can be just as simple. Imagine a governmental program that instead of distributing cocaine and LSD, distributed affordable housing, health care, public education, and nutrition. What you'll find is a similarly asymmetrical outcome, because these folks don't *just* avoid becoming the next Charles Manson. They become something totally different—someone who knows love and acceptance, and feels worthy of both.

# People Power

## *Seizing the Means of Conduction*



I'm going to tell you about the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and a vision for a world that creates prosperity for all rather than profits for some.

Created by FDR's New Deal to improve the quality of life in the Tennessee Valley region, the TVA has provided affordable, renewable energy to the region for ~9 decades. Without an obligation to pay profits to shareholders, they've also found the budget to innovate fertilizers and farming techniques, and even build out the skeleton of a regional library system so that this knowledge could be made available to everyone. They can do all this and more because, as a state-owned enterprise, their success is measured only by their impact on people's lives. So here's another example: responding to science and public pressure, they began developing clean and renewable coal alternatives \*in the 1960s\*.

Contrast that with the alternatives, which are not just polluting at unsustainable rates. We endure Chicago winters where ComEd shuts off poor people's heat and

summers of forest fires and blackouts all across California because PG&E would rather pay off their shareholders than invest in maintaining their infrastructure.

We're sold a dirty bill of goods that's labeled "public," which in this context means only that the state has oversight over certain aspects. This oversight is largely toothless, and in some ways works against our interests—if a company can't raise rates, they have little incentive to pay for investments in maintenance or new technologies that would stretch their budget. And of course public-private partnerships go in the other direction as well: power companies like ComEd pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for local lobbyists to push policies that favor their interests.

It all adds up to a reality where most Americans' experience with power companies is a matter of scraping together funds just pay rich people to poison the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the political system that's meant to protect us. We're powerless against a company shutting off the heat if we default



on a payment, opening the door for landlords to literally kick us out.

To me, TVA is a reminder that a better world is possible, and the tools for achieving it are all around us. All it takes is wielding a different kind of energy and translating it into a different kind of power.

Take, for example, Bernie Sanders' Green New Deal plan. As president, Bernie would expand the TVA while also expanding four more Power Marketing Administrations (and build a fifth) so the entire country can escape this public-private boondoggle and fulfill TVA's slogan: Electricity For All.

"For All" means more than just Americans too. Bernie's GND plan also includes massive funding increases to the Global Climate Fund to combat the fact that the most acute harms of climate change happen in areas that can least afford to protect themselves. Even more, when Bernie's state-owned enterprises continue innovating renewable energy technologies, he will donate them to the global south so that they can grow and prosper without the harmful side effects that the global north caused in our rise. Contrast this with the capitalist candidates' approach—in which we go from extracting resources to extracting capital, leaving people in a perpetual cycle of poverty.

More locally, Chicago DSA is running a similarly inspired campaign in Democratize ComEd (DemComEd). ComEd's contract with the city expires this December, and DemComEd is working to convince the city not to renew the contract, and instead buy up their assets and municipalize the grid.

By most calculations, this purchase would pay for itself. As a reminder, ComEd took home \$200 million in profits last year for providing a basic utility. Some of this money went to building out green technology, though a lot of it also went to paying off shareholders and lobbyists. If we want to take the challenge of our climate crisis seriously, we can't afford to skim anything off the top.

Imagine what Chicago could do with an extra \$200 million in a year. We could continue investing in green technology, and also subsidizing poor households' bills, improving insulation in our public schools and office buildings, and serving as an exam-

ple the rest of the world can follow.

When I joined the campaign, one of the first confusions I had was around language. The campaign is called Democratize ComEd, but the decision in December is whether or not to municipalize ComEd. I wasn't clear on the distinction, and understanding it was a process of enlightenment.

Municipalization means the city controls it—we'd be passing the reins from the leaders of ComEd to the leaders in City Hall, who's free to appoint whichever lobbyists continue the revolving door.

Democratization means the people control it. After achieving municipalization, DemComEd would continue to organize and fight till we win an elected board that's accountable for running the utility in the public's interest. Once that's in place, the DemComEd movement's work can finally begin: we can organize and fight for a healthier, safer, better future for the world—but for once we'd be bringing the resources and the leverage of the whole city behind us. The struggle never ends, and it's better this way.

For more information you can send me a DM, or visit your local library.

# PUBLIC UTILITIES *under* PUBLIC CONTROL



DEMOCRATIC  
SOCIALISTS  
of AMERICA



# Songs: What I'm Into Now



One of my favorite albums from 2019 was **Strange Ranger's** [Remembering the Rockets](#), but I've spent a lot of 2020 so far revisiting [Rot Forever](#), the first LP they put out back when they went by **Sioux Falls**.

It's a lot more raw than the newer stuff, both in its angst and in how closely it resembles its source material. "Dom" sounds like it could've been an early draft of "Adam's Song," and I'd believe you if you told me "Your Name's Not Ned" is actually a Built to Spill cover. There are at least a dozen more moments scattered throughout the album that sound more like ripoffs than tributes, but it doesn't bother me so much because it's so dang catchy and charming. They play with an energy that reminds of Desaparecidos, even when they're trying to pull off lines like "All my friends are getting old / Seattle lost the Super Bowl."

I guess it helps to know this band would go on to make an album like *Remembering the Rockets*; but just like I enjoy the bands that inspired them, I've found a lot to enjoy in their own formative moments.



**Beach Bunny's** new album, *Honey Moon*, is a perfect blend of power-pop-punk that I don't think I've gone more than 12 hours without re-listening to.



**Punter** play a kind of melodic hardcore that I can't quite put my finger on. Based out of Melbourne, they play some pretty straightforward snotty punk rock, exactly like the

mix of oi and street punk I was getting real into around 18 years old—but then they throw in backing vocal harmonies alongside these gigantic distorted guitar hooks, and the effect is so much bigger than the sum of its parts.

I learned about Punter from Tom Breihan's new monthly hardcore column at Stereogum, [Let the Roundup Begin](#), which also highlighted great albums from [Frail Hands](#) (screamo) and [Chubby and the Gang](#) (street-punk), but nothing I've heard so far in 2020 has caught my ear and stayed in it quite like Punter's Demo. Maybe you haven't been filled with as much anxious energy as I've been, but I suspect the hooks and harmonies will give this some crossover appeal.





A new **Drug Church** single, "[Bliss Out](#)," caused me to revisit their 2018 album *Cheer* this month, and it was a revelation. Coincidentally or not (whom can say), it shares a lot of the same vibes as Punter's demo. Even if it doesn't feel as rushed, the songs share a similar snotty, anti-capitalist, and triumphant tone that makes me feel like I'm 19 years old and ready to run through a brick wall.

[Cheer](#) isn't quite the blitzkrieg of Punter, but it's maybe something you could get away with calling post-hardcore. I'm thinking of a comparable band being like Fiddlehead or Touche Amore, and Drug Church's hooks similarly seem to swirl around a vocalist who can't

necessarily reach a wide range but still carries a commanding presence through sheer force of will. But if we move past aesthetics, a lot of these songs honestly sound a lot like classic Les Savy Fav.

What really sets apart *Cheer* for me was the way it uses its aggression to ease you into something more comforting. Even when a song like "Unlicensed Hall Monitor" starts out with a pretty heavy and immediate riff punctuating their hatred of "a born asshole," they tap the brakes about 2/3rds of the way through for a reflective outro paced by vocalist Patrick Kindlon repeating, "but man it makes me sick to sing this." The whole album is full of lyrics operating at a distance like this. Kindlon's overarching message is definitely angry and anti-capitalist, but he takes time to flesh out more poignant and humane portraits of late capitalism.

I've gotta assume I'm doing an awful lot of projecting here, but the effect it's had on me is channeling anti-capitalist rage into something inflamed with a shared humanity. I suspect Kindlon has thought through this stuff as well, as he's one of the more driven and interesting voices in hardcore (in addition to this band, he also sings in Self Defense Family, hosts a podcast about hardcore called *Axe to Grind*, and makes popular comic books). He's a pretty fascinating guy, and if you want to learn more you can read a really great interview with him from [September 2018 in Vice](#).

I have no idea why it took me a year and a half to get caught up in this stuff, honestly.



**Kvelertak** is my favorite metal band, and their new album, *Splid*, is another instant classic.

Follow along with all my favorites with the [2020 <3 Spotify playlist](#).

**Thank you  
for reading**

**USELESS**

**#1 zine**