The Strange, Twisted History of 10050 Cielo Drive, the House Where Sharon Tate Was Murdered

The full story of 10050 Cielo Drive is featured in season 2, episode 3 of House Beautiful's haunted house podcast, Dark House. Listen to the episode here.

A storybook beginning

From the time it was built in 1941, the home at 10050 Cielo Drive was the perfect escape for Hollywood's biggest stars. Perched high on a plateau at the end of a long, winding drive in Benedict Canyon, guarded by a gated driveway, and set back amongst the trees, the country cottage-inspired farmhouse designed by architect Robert Byrd was private and picturesque. From the wood paneling and stone exterior, split-rail fence, and large paned windows to the beamed ceilings with exposed rafters, stone fireplaces, and living room hayloft, the 3,200 square-foot home exemplified Byrd's signature rustic aesthetic inside and out. Even with its in-ground pool, 2,000 square-foot guest house, and separate garage, the expansive property exuded a distinct charm that could be described as nothing short of a fairytale.

Following a long line of celebrity tenants who called 10050 Cielo Drive home before them, actress Candice Bergen and her boyfriend, music producer Terry Melcher, rented the home for a period of time in the 1960s. Writing about her time there

A bedroom inside 10050 Cielo Drive as photographed in October 1969.

Paris Match Archive/Getty Images

in the 1984 memoir *Knock Wood*, Bergen called the house "perfect" and lamented about its idyllic setting, saying:

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"There was a cartoon-like perfection about it: You waited to find Bambi drinking from the pool, Thumper dozing in the flowers, to hear the dwarfs whistling home at the end of the day. It was a fairy-tale place, that house on the hill, a Never-Never Land far from the real world where nothing could go wrong."

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Storybook imagery aside, Terry Melcher's time as a tenant of 10050 Cielo Drive marked the beginning of the home's tragic end, for it was while living at this house that Melcher was introduced to ex-con-turned-aspiring-musician Charles Manson, and the property's fate was sealed.

A series of unfortunate events

A successful record producer and prominent member of Hollywood's "It" crowd at the time, Melcher crossed paths with Manson and his band of followers, known as the

“Family,” in 1968. Melcher himself met Manson through his friend and client Dennis Wilson, drummer of The Beach Boys, who allowed the Manson Family to stay with him rent-free for several months that spring. Like Wilson and many others who became acquainted with the Family, Melcher found Manson’s power over his followers to be oddly fascinating but, while this intrigue led the producer to entertain several “auditions” with Manson, it was never enough to take him seriously as an artist. In denying him a record deal, Melcher secured himself a place on the cult leader's bad side.

This snub came as trouble was already brewing for Manson, who, following a string of crimes including a bad drug deal and a robbery-turned-homicide, had become immensely paranoid and desperate for cash. The compounding emotions reached a boiling point on August 8, 1969, when Manson sent four of his followers—Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwikel, and Linda Kasabian—to the house

charles manson and terry melcher

Top: Charles Manson, accused leader of a hippie cult charged with the Tate-LaBianca murders, leaves court after deferring a plea on the murder charges. Bottom: Terry Melcher attends the Los Angeles County grand jury probe into the Sharon Tate murder case.

at 10050 Cielo Drive and ordered them to kill everyone they found there.

Bettman Archive

A dark night

While Manson knew that Melcher no longer lived on Cielo Drive, experts familiar with the case suspect that he targeted the home in part because it represented the industry he felt rejected by. Indeed, its new tenants were among the Hollywood elite: After Bergen and Melcher moved out, 10050 was rented to Roman Polanski, a young, Polish director (he has since been largely ousted by Hollywood and fled the U.S. when allegations of sexual assault were brought against him in 1977), and his wife Sharon Tate, a beautiful, up-and-coming actress.

sharon tate and roman polanski

Left: Sharon Tate and Roman Polanski photographed at their wedding in 1969. Right: Actress Sharon Tate

On the evening of August 8th, a 26-year-old Tate was eight months pregnant at home while Polanski was away working in Europe. Several friends were staying the night with her: coffee heiress Abigail Folger; Folger's boyfriend, screenwriter Voytek Frykowski; and Tate's ex-boyfriend and friend, celebrity hairstylist Jay

photographed wearing a light blue blouse, circa 1965.

Left: Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images, Right: Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images

Sebring. In the early morning hours of August 9th, the Manson Family members broke into 10050 Cielo Drive and murdered Tate and her unborn baby, her three guests, and 18-year-old Steven Parent, who they encountered as he was leaving the property after a random visit to Will Garretson, the 19-year-old caretaker staying in the guest house. The next morning, Garretson was the only person police found alive when they arrived at the gruesome scene that, less than an hour earlier, had sent Tate's housekeeper, Winifred Chapman, running from the house, screaming "murder, death, bodies, blood!"

A harrowing scene

The following night, Manson and his Family went to the Los Feliz home of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca and murdered the couple in a similarly brutal fashion, but media coverage and public attention were overwhelmingly focused on the inexplicable massacre at 10050 Cielo Drive. Amid the mass hysteria exacerbated by sensational headlines and non-stop news reports, one writer's description of the house days after the murder painted the picture of a place frozen in time.

Life magazine sent journalist Thomas Thompson and

photographer Julian Wasser to accompany Polanski as he returned to his home for the first time since August 9th. Making note of the eerie scene, Thompson wrote:

10050 cielo drive

Top: Investigators take the body of Sharon Tate from 10050 Cielo Drive, the home she was renting with husband Roman Polanski. Bottom: Police stand guard in front of the main house on August 10th, 1969.

Top: AP Photo, Bottom: Photo Archive: Bettmann Archive

> *"He walked into his yard, past the fake wishing well with the stone doves and squirrels perched on the rim, past the beds of marigolds and daisies dying from a fortnight of inattention...He walked around to the rustic swimming pool, now crowded with leaves and debris, the floats and air mattresses silently bumping into each other as a soft breeze stirred the water."*

His survey inside the home was equally as unsettling.

> *"In front of the beige velvet couch were the two major smears of blood, the one where hair stylist Jay Sebring fell next to the crumpled zebra rug, the other where Sharon Tate, stabbed a dozen times, slashed so brutally that murder became atrocity, collapsed and died in a*

> *jumble of oddities – a yellow candle stub, a teach-yourself-Japanese instruction kit, a mauve bedroom slipper, a book on natural childbirth."*

The article, titled "A Tragic Trip to the House on the Hill" and published on August 29, 1969, included a photo of Polanski on the home's porch, where blood remained on the stone threshold and the word "PIG," which had been written on the white farmhouse door, was faded but still visible. The now-infamous shot captured the director in mourning and a house now marked—literally and figuratively—by tragedy.

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The trouble with stigmatized properties

While the director continued to grieve the loss of his wife, child, and friends, the home's owner Rudi Altobelli—who bought 10050 Cielo Drive in 1963 for $86,000—had a homecoming of his own. Upon returning to Los Angeles, Altobelli sued Polanski and *Life* for $650,000 (plus an additional $198,000 for Polanski alone), claiming that the photos were taken without his permission and damaged the resale value of the property. After receiving a sarcastic letter in response to a repair bill he allegedly sent to Tate's parents, Altobelli next filed a $480,000 lawsuit against the late actress's estate for damages incurred to the property during the murder as well as "embarrassment, humiliation,

emotional, and mental distress." Unsurprisingly, the court sided largely with the victim's family, awarding Altobelli a fractional sum of $4,350.

Regardless of the court's opinion, the horrific crime *did* impact the resale value of the home. Without new tenants, Altobelli moved into the home himself and lived there for the next 20 years, allegedly listing the property several times along the way to no avail. In September, 1988, the house hit the market at $1.99 million and was finally sold that November to an investor named John Prell for $1.6 million. Prell owned the home for less than two years before it sold again in March 1991 to another investor, Alvin Weintraub, for $2.25 million. A year after purchasing it, Weintraub listed the infamous home "as is" for $4.95 million. The attempted sale was unsuccessful and the investor ultimately bulldozed the original house, but not before renting it out to one last celebrity tenant.

An inescapable past

In need of a space big enough to construct an in-home recording studio, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails rented 10050 Cielo Drive for a reported $11,000 per month in 1992. According to Reznor's accounts of his time there, the after-effects of that one August night were still palpable throughout the home some 23 years later. The musician described feeling an overwhelming sense of fear on his first

night at the house, saying:

> *"I walked in the place at night and everything was dark, and I was like, 'Holy Jesus that's where it happened.' Scary. I jumped a mile at every sound—even if it was an owl. I woke up in the middle of the night and there was a coyote looking in the window at me. I thought, 'I'm not gonna make it.'"*

Though this initial fear eventually subsided, an intangible dark cloud remained. "After about a month I realized that if there's any vibe up there at all, it's one of sadness," Reznor said. Energetic shift or not, the home's reputation had become inescapable. Once a private sanctuary to the stars, the house had been relegated to something of a tourist attraction, regularly drawing onlookers to its gates. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Reznor told the outlet, "Sometimes I'd come home and find bouquets of dead roses and lit candles in the front gate. It was really eerie." Having bared witness to the bizarre phenomenon, he wondered, "Who were they leaving the shrines for—Tate or Manson?"

But the fascination around the house's place in American history got to Reznor eventually, too. When he moved out in December 1993, he took the front door with him, later reinstalling it at the funeral home-turned-recording studio that served as headquarters for his record label in New

10050 cielo drive exterior pool

The pool and stone patio just off the main bedroom at 10050 Cielo as photographed in October 1969.

Paris Match Archive/Getty Images

Orleans. Strange as this souvenir was, it's easier to understand the final tenant's desire to preserve a small piece of the infamous home when considering the fact that just a few weeks later the house would cease to exist. (Editor's note: Manson pun not intended.)

The rebuilding years

10050 Cielo Drive was torn down in 1994 and replaced by an 18,000-square-foot Mediterranean-style spec house nicknamed "Villa Bella." The 9-bedroom, 13-bathroom megamansion was Weintraub's attempt to rid the property of stigma once and for all—he even changed the address to 10066 Cielo Drive for good measure. "We went to great pains to get rid of everything. There's no house, no dirt, no blade of grass remotely connected to Sharon Tate," the investor told *Los Angeles Magazine*. But despite his best efforts—and claims that "98 percent of the people don't give a damn" about its history—the titanic home struggled to sell. In fact, it sat on the market for more than three years, dropping in price from $12 million to $7.7 million by

December 1999, until it was finally purchased for $6,375,000 in January 2000.

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The new owner, *Full House* creator Jeff Franklin, fell in love with the privacy and incredible views the plot was once known for and imagined its potential as a resort-like retreat high above the city. He hired architects Richard Landry and Todd Riley to bring his vision, inspired by trips to Japan, China, Bali, and Thailand, to life. When the renovations were complete, the laundry list of over-the-top details included a 16-car underground garage, 9 bedrooms, 18 bathrooms, six bars, five aquariums (including a 20-foot shark tank), and an Elvis museum. The backyard featured even more extravagant additions, like the 75-yard, tropical-themed pool with three waterfalls, two hot tubs, a 35-foot water slide, a swim-up bar, private grotto, koi pond, and a lazy river.

Having commissioned his dream home, an impenetrable palace that could trick even the keenest of Los Angeles natives into thinking they'd been transported somewhere else in the world, it may seem that Franklin was able to restore the 3.6-acre property to its former Hollywood hideout glory. Yet, traces of its history still linger.

Replacing Robert Byrd's country cottage-inspired

farmhouse with a mansion more than five times its size didn't deter tourists from venturing out to the site where it once stood. Just ask Scott Michaels, whose former Manson-themed tour through Los Angeles brought sightseers to Cielo Drive by the busload for years. Among those drawn to the house by their fascination with the infamous murder case, there are those whose morbid curiosity takes them one step further to ask: Is reputation the only thing haunting it?

10066 cielo drive

The new home at 10066 Cielo Drive (formerly 10050 Cielo Drive) is photographed from a distance on August 7, 2019.

Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images

A haunting reputation

Previous owner Altobelli would likely say no. Reflecting on his return to the home in 1969 he told ABC's 20/20, "When I came back to that property, I felt safe, secure, loved and beauty..." Reznor has flat out said it's not, though a closer look into his experiences recording in the house seem to suggest otherwise.

In author Gavin Baddeley's *Dissecting Marilyn Manson*, the Nine Inch Nails singer is quoted as saying, "It's not like

spooky ghosts fucking with you or anything—although we did have a million electrical disturbances. Things that shouldn't have happened did happen. Eventually, we'd just joke about it: 'Oh, Sharon must be here. The fucking tape machine just shut down.'"

Controversial musician Marilyn Manson, whose debut album *Portrait of an American Family* was also recorded at 10050 Cielo Drive, agreed with Reznor, saying "It wasn't exactly a haunted house. No rattling chains or anything, but it did bring across some darkness on the record." But according to Baddeley, the peculiar technical issues persisted. During the recording session for a song called "Wrapped in Plastic," a sample of Charles Manson saying 'Why are the kids doin' what they're doin', why did the child reach out and kill his mom and dad?' kept "erupting inexplicably onto the tapes."

Decades after the house had been knocked down and rebuilt, the odd phenomenon has continued to be reported, even beyond the home's gates. On the 50th Anniversary of the murders, Scott Michaels was driving up Cielo Drive when his van, a vehicle he maintained every 45 days per California State Law, spontaneously caught fire as if "for no reason at all." While this could certainly have been an unfortunate coincidence, Michaels says he had been warned by several psychics not to go up there that day.

What's more, Micheals had visited the demolition site back

in 1994 and managed to procure a few pieces of flagstone from the fireplace. Prior to opening his first museum, Michaels kept the pieces of flagstone and countless other macabre artifacts in his home. During this time, Michaels recalls seeing a "shadow of a person" standing in his bedroom doorway at night on two separate occasions. "I have friends that are psychic and they'd come over and go straight to my laundry room, which is just next to my bedroom. And that's where this box of rocks from the Tate house was," he shared in a recent episode of *House Beautiful's* podcast, Dark House.

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He's not the only person to report such a ghostly encounter, either: David Oman, who purchased a plot of land just 150 feet from 10050 Cielo Drive in 1999, has been experiencing paranormal activity since before the construction of his house was even complete. One contractor was so spooked, in fact, that he refused to return to the house for six weeks. Oman himself claims to have started seeing apparitions in his home as early as 2004 and believes the spirits of Sharon Tate and Jay Sebring to be frequent visitors. While their spiritual presence can't exactly be confirmed, paranormal experts agree the house *is* a hotbed for paranormal activity, dubbing it "The Mount Everest of haunted houses" and "The Disneyland for the Dead."

This probably isn't enough to convince neighbor Jeff Franklin, though. Upon putting the Cielo Estate up for sale in January 2022, the television producer told the *Wall Street Journal* that the property's connection to the Manson murders was "irrelevant," calling it "ancient history" and adding that "It's had absolutely no impact on my life whatsoever." Eight months later, the property has yet to find a buyer. As of today, it's still up for grabs, currently listed for just under $70 million.

Curious to hear more about 10050 Cielo Drive? Listen to this week's episode of our haunted house podcast series, Dark House, for exclusive ghost stories and insights into the home's twisted history.