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Let’s face facts: the vacant, cross-eyed stare that lasers out of Charlie Manson mug shots is far more unsettling than any masked stalker or gore effect could ever hope to be. Thus Manson, notorious 1960s hippie prophet, murder-cult leader and Beatles obsessive, has been a reliable go-to bogeyman for many a horror filmmaker.

His image has haunted screens as the subject of a dozen documentaries and fictional retellings over the past 40 years. Like Billy the Kid and John Dillinger, he has become an icon of American crime culture whose story is destined to be told and retold down through the ages. Writer/director Reginald Harkema’s new film LESLIE, MY NAME IS EVIL (opening today in Canada) takes a fresh approach to the familiar tale by choosing to focus on Leslie Van Houten (played by Kristen Hager), a Manson “family” member caught in a hypnotic spiral of drugs, folk music and random killing excursions.

LESLIE’s plotting is straightforward, starting the audience off with a brief glimpse of our antiheroine’s all-American teen years. It then follows her activities as they move from shaking pompoms on sidelines to dropping acid on communes with Charlie, and finally to plunging kitchen knives into helpless strangers with the rest of the “family.” A second story, running parallel to Leslie’s, features young couple Perry (Gregory Smith) and Dorothy (Kristin Adams). Their interests include singing hymns in church, obeying their parents’ wishes and supporting the escalating war in Vietnam. The two plot threads eventually intertwine as Perry becomes a figure in the sensational Manson murder trial and is soon confronted with his own hidden desires.

Since LESLIE, MY NAME IS EVIL is concerned with the Manson saga for the most part, one might assume that it would wash the screen red in exploitative glory, as earlier films on the subject have done. Even the title encourages this assumption, sounding like it fell right off a drive-in theater marquee. Instead, the low-key LESLIE turns out to be an absorbing character study, emphasizing themes of seduction (Manson is compared to both Jesus and Dracula) and hypocrisy, as perpetrated by both Manson and the pro-military Christian establishment of the day. No art-house bore, the movie is tightly edited and unspools at a steady pace, but be warned that it offers little in the way of tension and action setpieces. All mayhem is confined to a brief reenactment of the LaBianca home invasion and one bloody, psychedelic dream sequence.

On the visual side, LESLIE succeeds in recreating the ’60s on an obviously stingy budget, and the seeding in of stock footage from that era (including some disturbing Vietnam casualty shots) is particularly evocative. The movie stumbles a bit with its uneven performances; Hager does well as Leslie, but Perry and Dorothy are played broadly for comedic effect and come off as stiff Norman Rockwell caricatures. Congratulations, however, must be reserved for Ryan Robbins’ portrayal of Manson. If ever a part encouraged manic Nicolas-Cage-on-Red-Bull overacting, Charlie is definitely that role, but Robbins demonstrates just the right balance of energy and restraint. His Manson feels as incipiently dangerous as a fallen beehive, but he never seems like he’s trying to hijack the movie to get there.

Ultimately, this film won’t satisfy viewers hungry for jump-scares or slashing scenes, but for those willing to chew over a layered and thoughtful look at what primed a typical suburban girl to kill on behalf of a gibberish-spouting lunatic, LESLIE, MY NAME IS EVIL is a mouthful.

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