George Harrison's Spiritual Life
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BIOGRAPHY

# George Harrison's Spiritual Life

## The Beatles went from super stardom to India, Swami Vivekandanda, Paramahamsa Yogananda, Maharishi's TM and Lord Krishna

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In 1966, George Harrison, lead guitarist of the most popular rock group ever, the Beatles, said, "The people of India have a tremendous spiritual strength which I don't think is found elsewhere. The spirit of the people, the beauty, the goodness--that's what I've been trying to learn about."

In 1969, devotees from the London Radha Krishna temple invited me to take part in an album of mantras and prayers that George Harrison was producing at Apple Studios. Meeting him for the first time, I was struck by his humility, by his understated humor, and by his excitement over the music we had gathered to make. Recording these ancient songs was his way of letting people know "there's more to life than boogying, " as he put it. At that time, the Beatles were dissolving, but George's solo career was growing, thanks in large measure to his daily meditations and yoga practice.

It may be difficult for someone who didn't grow up in the sixties to understand the significance of a Beatle's committing to India's spiritual teachings. A large percentage of baby boomers, as the generation born after World War II were called, took their cues about beliefs, behavior and politics, as well as wardrobe and hairstyle, from what the Beatles did and sang. If Americans had any impression of Hinduism at all, it was usually distorted by British missionary prejudice. By publicly declaring his appreciation for yoga, meditation, karma, dharma, reincarnation and other concepts identified with India, George helped reverse nearly three hundred

years of anti-Hindu ignorance and bias.

There was a trajectory to George's spiritual life, which began and ended with music. In 1966, he met maestro Ravi Shankar and thrilled to the sound of a sitar, to the lull of its sympathetic strings and the way it could stretch a single note to imitate the yearning of a heart in love. Later that year, George continued his sitar lessons in Srinagar, an extended village at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains surrounded by fields of golden saffron flowers. In this idyllic setting he practiced music and spent hours reading about India's ancient teachings. As a boy, George had been an indifferent student, but during that visit he was rarely without a book in his hands, including Swami Vivekananda's Raja Yoga and Paramahansa Yogananda's Autobiography of a Yogi.

What he learned of India's spiritual culture amazed him. Unlike institutional religions that barely tolerate one another, here was a world view that encompassed everyone and everything. All living beings are eternal souls, part and parcel of God, the texts declared. Our job is to manifest that divinity. This, the Hindu tradition said, is Sanatana Dharma, the eternal religion, which dwells in all beings. "Through Hinduism I feel a better person, " he told a reporter. "I just get happier and happier."

John, Paul and Ringo were his closest friends, and in 1968 he induced his fellow Beatles and their partners to join him and his then wife, model Patty Boyd, on a retreat to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram in Rishikesh. The Beatles' days in Rishikesh consisted of a casual breakfast, morning meditation classes until lunch, leisure time in the afternoons, and sometimes as many as three more hours of meditation in the evenings. George and his friends found their creative energies heightened in the peaceful atmosphere of the retreat. In Rishikesh, the Beatles composed more than forty songs. Many were recorded on the White Album, and others would appear on their final LP, Abbey Road. They all appreciated their time in India, but it was George who took away a lasting impression that this was his real life's work, to go deeper into India's millennial teachings and realize his eternal relationship with the Divine.

Returning to London, he met disciples of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder-acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. George identified with the American devotees, young people his own age, who had rejected materialism for higher ground. In their company, George began to chant the Hare

Krishna mantra daily and to read the Bhagavad Gita.

Signs of George's devotion to yoga and meditation filled his home. Incense sweetened the air. A small altar sat on the mantle of the fireplace. Pictures of favorite teachers and paintings of Deities from India's scriptures decorated the walls: Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune; elephant-headed Ganesh; Krishna playing with his friends in the cowherd village of Vrindavan. George found Indian theology exciting and sensual, filled with meditative music, tasty food, fabulous stories of eternal worlds, and all the satisfactions a newcomer to the spiritual journey could ever hope to find.

Producing records with spiritual messages provided an ideal way for him to make use of his musical skills and his influence with the record industry. In 1970, he released "My Sweet Lord, " inspired by the Edwin Hawkins Singers' "Oh Happy Day, " a gospel classic that featured a chorus repeating the song's title over and over. George wrote a choral line using the word "Hallelujah " as the refrain, and then switched mid-way to the phrase "Hare Krishna."

George's spiritual journey was not an easy one. His wife Patty left him, in large measure because his commitment to God grew stronger than his commitment to their partnership. Fans derided him for taking his faith onstage and exhorting them to "Chant Krishna! Jesus! Buddha!" when it was rock and roll they wanted. The press was occasionally cruel in its judgment of his post-Beatles music. And for a while, some bad habits from his rocker days--in particular alcohol and drugs--returned to haunt him.

On visits to Los Angeles, George spent time at the Self-Realization Fellowship estate in Encinitas, overlooking the Pacific Ocean and only three miles from Ravi Shankar's home. Ravi had met SRF founder Yogananda in the 1930s and had given his first US concert at the Encinitas retreat in 1957. The organization strictly honored its members' privacy, a privilege George appreciated after the notoriety of his affiliation with Krishna devotees. The quiet ambience of the Encinitas estate and the organization's focus on achieving heightened awareness through Kriya Yoga had a calming effect.

In later years, George retreated from his pop celebrity into the life of a humble

gardener. He took great pleasure in tilling the earth, in planting jasmine bushes, in freeing a magnolia tree from wild brambles, and bringing his neglected Friar Park grounds back to a state of beauty.

In April 1996, he flew to Madras, South India, to record an album of traditional Indian songs and mantras with Ravi Shankar. George considered "Chants of India " one of his most important works, as it allowed listeners to "listen to something that has its roots in the transcendental & beyond intellect. If you let yourself be free & it can have a positive effect."

George never stopped making music or trying to send a spiritual message out into the world. But these callings seemed less urgent to him in his later years than they had as a young man. He once described himself as someone who had climbed to the top of the material world, then looked over to find that there was much more on the other side. There, on the other side of the material mountain, was the call of his eternal self and his relationship with the Divine.

George's life started in music and ended in music. In Los Angeles, surrounded by family and friends and the chanting of God's holy names, his soul left its body on November 29, 2001.

His son Dhani said, "You know, I read a letter from him to his mother that he wrote when he was twenty-four. He was on tour or someplace when he wrote it. It basically says, 'I want to be self-realized. I want to find God. I'm not interested in material things, this world, fame--I'm going for the real goal. And I hope you don't worry about me, mum.' He wrote that when he was twenty-four! And that was basically the philosophy that he had up until the day he died."

Joshua M. Greene is an author, filmmaker and communications consultant specializing in issues of faith. this article is drawn from his new book, here comes the sun: the spiritual and musical journey of George Harrison, www.herecomesthesunbook.com