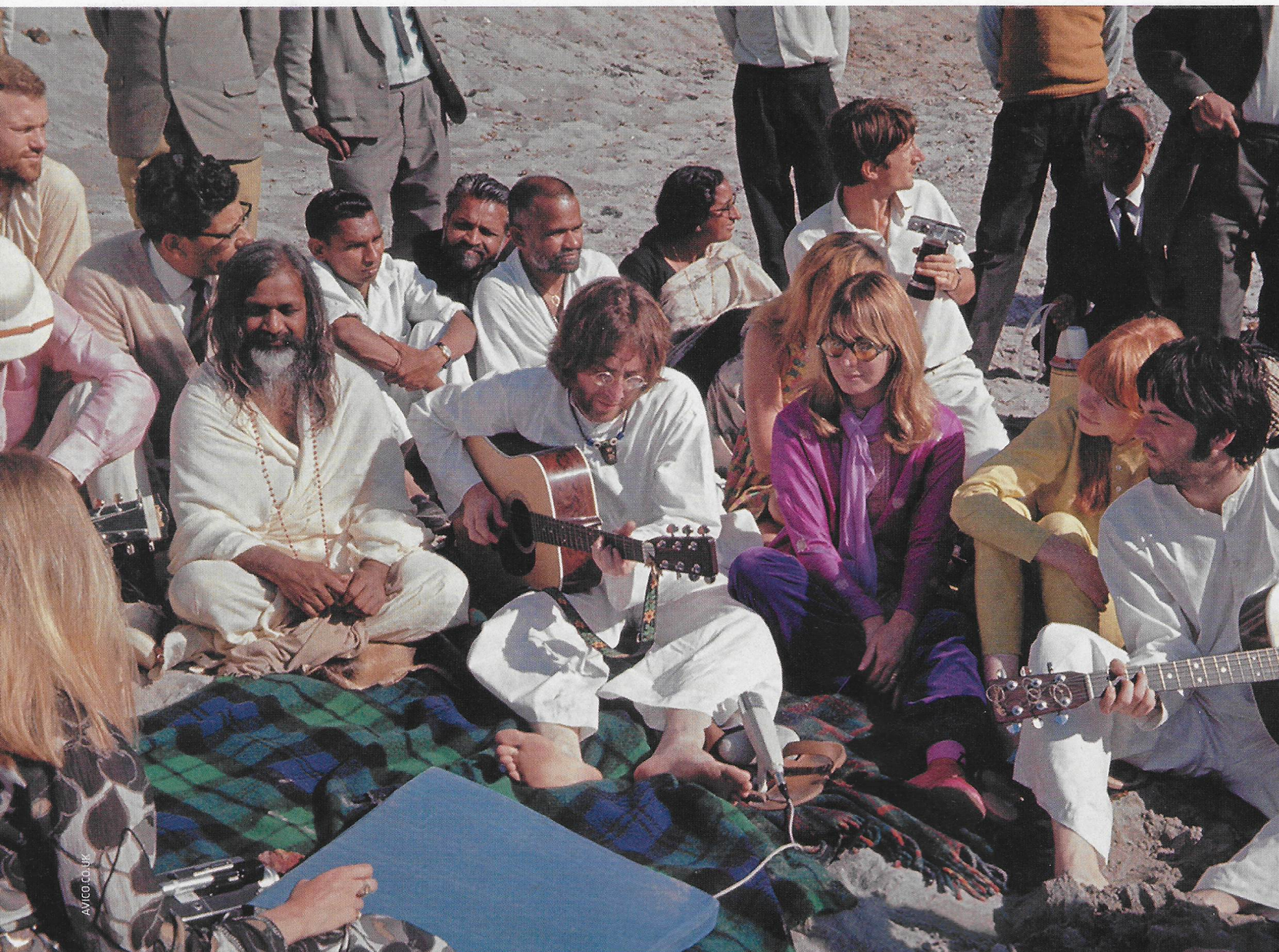


NOW WE'RE 64



# THE BEATLES IN INDIA



John Lennon and Paul McCartney play (and record) a song with their acoustic guitars for Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

BY JOHN "JAY JAY" FRENCH

**S**ociologists will, at some point, create a timeline of world events that will show how The Beatles were both affected and reflected back to us, by them.

Sure, there was the John F. Kennedy assassination and the weird timing of The Beatles' arrival in the U.S. The pop music British Invasion that altered popular music, the international space race, the Vietnam war and the results that created the anti-war, peace and love movement, the psychedelic drug culture, which altered perceptions of all the senses, and the explosion of the baby-boom generation that added the fuel of commercial expansion and the connectivity of the international youth culture.

It seemed that, at every step, The Beatles were there to observe and chronicle everything, whether by a confluence of extraordinary coincidence or by some kind of spiritually divine design.

This is the prism by which the new documentary *The Beatles in India* needs to be seen through — hot on the heels of the *Get Back/Let It Be* eight-hour documentary. In my mind, it's a companion piece that fills in the time from the death of Brian Epstein in August 1967 and takes us through the making of the band's 1968 self-titled studio effort better known as the White Album.

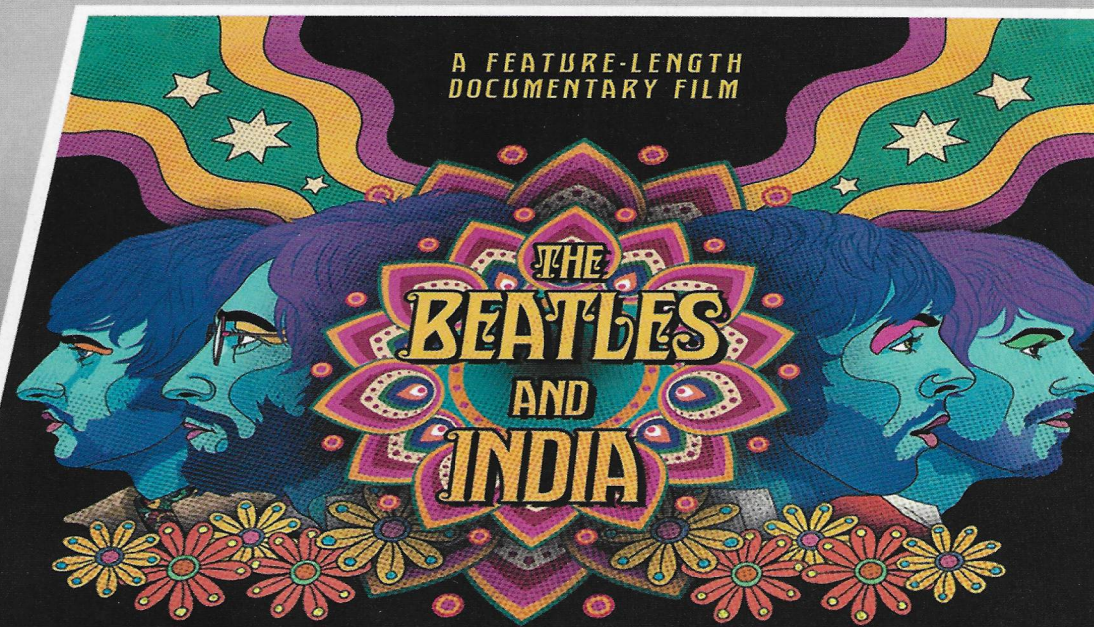
Understanding The Beatles' trip to Rishikesh and its consequences pretty much tells you how the band dealt with Epstein's death, and how the artistry and creation of some of the songs on the White Album were created. It also shows that, as artists, the creation of music was a constant and kept the band sane.

It should also be noted that The Beatles first went to India in July 1966, after they made the movie *Help!* (none of which was shot in India), which depicted Indians,

according to the Indian author Ajoy Bose (*Across the Universe*), "inappropriately and lived up to all the stereotypes about India." Furthermore, *Help!* was originally called *Eight Arms to Hold You*, which was a reference to the Hindu God Kali.

It was in the restaurant scene in *Help!* (shot at Twickenham studios in London) where George Harrison first picked up the sitar, which was being played by the restaurant band.

The feature-length documentary film *The Beatles In India* was directed by Ajoy Bose and produced by Reynold D'Silva. A 19-song companion album, *The Beatles and India: Songs Inspired by the Film*, features interpretations of The Beatles songbook by Indian artists and is available on Silva Screen Records.



A FEATURE-LENGTH  
DOCUMENTARY FILM

# THE BEATLES AND INDIA

AN ENDURING LOVE AFFAIR

RENOIR PICTURES PRESENTS A SILVA SCREEN PRODUCTION  
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SILVA  
SCREEN  
RECORDS

SONGS OF THE BEATLES BY INDIAN ARTISTS INSPIRED BY THIS FILM IS AVAILABLE ON SILVA SCREEN RECORDS  
ORIGINAL FILM SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE ON SILVA SCREEN RECORDS

It was Harrison who became fascinated by Indian music, and through that portal — and later his relationship with Ravi Shankar and then to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi — he was trying to understand how and why he was famous. Early on, Harrison seemed to recoil from fame. But Harrison's fame was not the "normal fame." Not that fame *is* normal, but The Beatles' fame was in another league; it was a fame so strong and bright that its ability to destroy oneself (unless you were incredibly grounded) could be an unintended consequence.

The movie begins with a historical perspective on the history of Britain's control of India and the importance of how anything that happened in Britain was meaningful to the cultural development of India.

Sure, The Beatles and their music created a hysteria in many countries, and India was no different. The difference here is that, until we see a documentary of how their music and image changed the youth culture specifically of Sweden, Germany, Norway, Australia, Greece, Turkey, Finland, Iceland, Spain, New Zealand, Russia, China, Mexico, all of the sub-sahara continent and South America, etc., we can only imagine how all the different pop-music scenes changed. In this documentary, you see all the images and music changes that occurred in real time and why The Beatles had such an outsized influence on Indian youth culture.

After all the remarkable press following the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, as well as the first live broadcast (to an estimated audience of over 150 million people) on June 25, 1967, The Beatles now towered over the entire pop-culture landscape. One would expect (and need) the guiding hand of a trusted manager more than ever, but as fate would have it, Epstein died on August 27, just a few days after they first heard Maharishi speak in London.

There is a stunning TV news interview with John Lennon and Harrison from August 27 just as they were told that Epstein was found dead. Lennon appeared in a state of shock and at his most vulnerable. When the reporter asked him, "Where would you be today without Mr. Epstein?" Lennon replied (totally in a daze), "I don't know." To me, as someone who has read so much on this band and hung on words and timelines of each

member, this little snippet was among the most striking things I ever heard Lennon say.

The Maharishi was now a de facto adviser — just when the band needed it most. Timing, as they say, is everything.

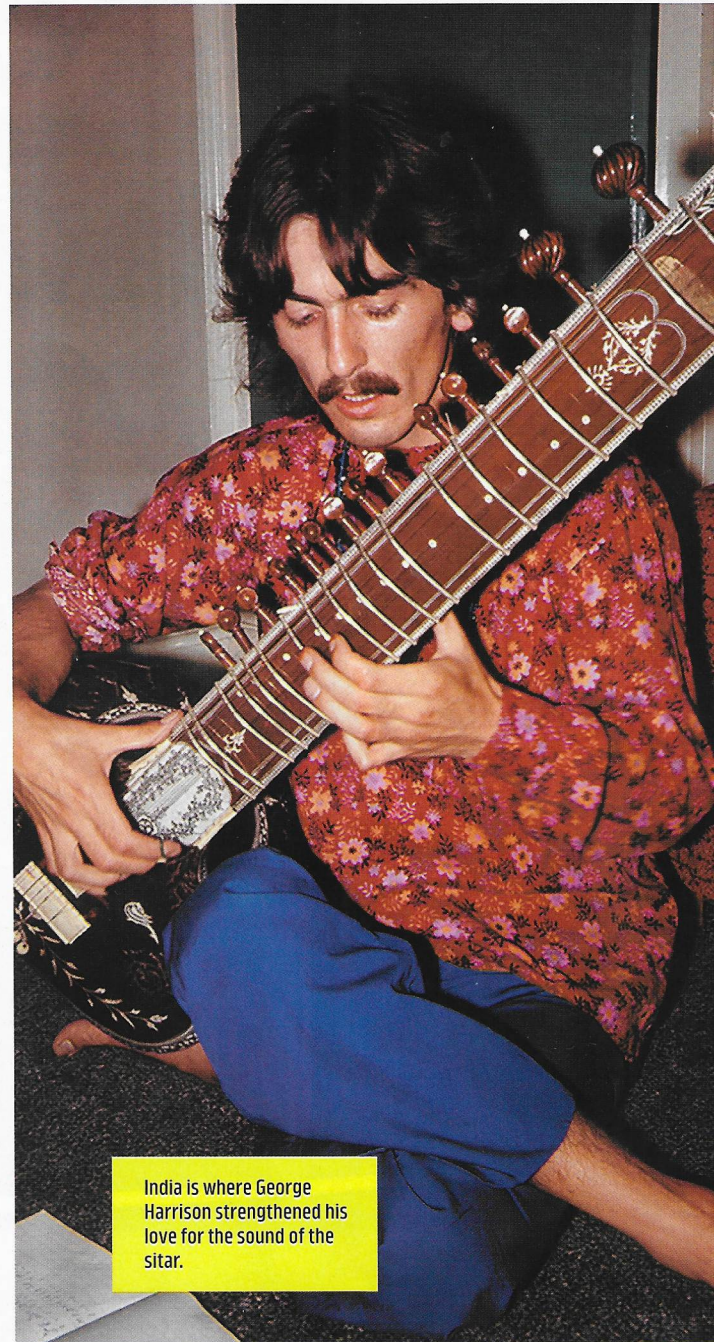
The Beatles were always a very small and closed shop of family, friends and associates. Their trip to Rishikesh was no different. The trip consisted of the band members and all the wives and girlfriends: John and Cynthia Lennon, Ringo and Maureen Starr, George Harrison and Pattie Boyd (and Pattie's sister Jenny), Paul McCartney and Jane Asher, Donovan (who had a crush on Jenny and, by the way, was the muse for Donovan's hit single "Jennifer Juniper"), Mike Love (yes, The Beatles and The Beach Boys were friends and friendly rivals, but Love became a disciple of the Maharishi several months before The Beatles went to the ashram in February 1968).

As the movie progresses, one cannot escape the fact that there were three very important forces at play when The Beatles made the journey to the ashram, which also included a six-hour car ride from the airport.

One was the band's outsized fame; the second, the band's search for greater meaning to help explain their own (some would say almost mystical) phenomenon of creation; and third, the addition of psychedelic drugs that would further amplify the already unexplainable.

The connection of Harrison to Shankar is also explained in the documentary. One of Shankar's musical disciples, Vinay Bharat-Ram, observed "What drew George to Ravi Shankar defies logic."

The day-to-day habits of all the visitors



India is where George Harrison strengthened his love for the sound of the sitar.

to the ashram is covered, and there are many interviews giving the pros and cons of the act of Transcendental Meditation. Some of it is quite funny and unexpected in its cynicism.

As the band members leave the ashram at various times for various reasons, it reminds me of the *Let It Be/Get Back* mov-



Jai guru deva, om! The Beatles and guests sit with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi for a photo op.

in which Harrison leaves — or is it Starr (oops, no, that was during the recording of the White Album). It seems that at some point, the tolerance of any band member to any situation is very individualized and of course magnified under the gaze of The Beatles' microscope.

The subtext to the nearly two-month Rishikesh/ashram experience really had to do with the questionable motives of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Was he really a great spiritual conduit and adviser or simply just another con man who was using his connection to The Beatles as a way to line his own pockets? The documentary is unflinching in providing us with a lot of the facts.

Add one more juicy bit about the involvement of "Magic" Alex Mardas, Lennon's close friend and supposed electronics guru who was given hundreds of thousands of pounds (by Lennon) to build a state-of-the-art recording studio in the basement of the Apple building on Savile Row. To Mardas, the Maharishi

was certainly a con man who was possibly taking Lennon away from his own control. That's right, you have two possible con artists having influence during the time of The Beatles' "great spiritual awakening" (my words).

What Mardas did was to persuade Lennon that the Maharishi was not only a huckster but a sexual predator. To Lennon, that was reason enough to write a song about him. The song title was changed to "Sexy Sadie" at the insistence of Harrison because, even though Harrison began to doubt the true intentions of the Maharishi, there was no proof at that point.

Originally, "Sexy Sadie" started like this:

*Maharishi, what have you done?  
You made a fool of everyone  
You made a fool of everyone  
Maharishi, what have you done?*

You can fill in all the dots. Needless to say, accusations could have led to a law-

suit, and the song title was changed. This is but one example of all the songs written while at the ashram.

There are many great new interviews with some of the staff members, musicians and local Indian music store owners who are still alive, as well as authors and newspaper writers.

Pattie Boyd talks extensively but not on camera.

There are no new interviews from Starr or McCartney, however. The historical consequences of The Beatles in India cannot be understated. The movie adds yet another very important dimension to their story, one that needed to be told.

Given the controversies and contradictory feelings of the band members at the time following their departure from the ashram that did make the press, it was Lennon's final words at the closing of the movie that says all you need to know: "One of the happiest times in my life was when I was in India!"

Jai guru deva, om. ●