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# The Inner Light: The Beatles, India, Gurus, and the Legacy

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## Main Points

The Beatles' "road to India" is mostly navigated by George Harrison

John Lennon was also enthusiastic, Paul somewhat, Ringo not so much

Harrison's "road to India" can be divided into two kinds of influence:

Musical influences—the actual sounds and structures of Indian music

Philosophical and spiritual influences—elements that influence lyrics and lifestyle

The musical influences begin in April 1965, become focused in fall 1966, and extend to mid 1968

The philosophical influences begin in late 1966 and continue through the rest of Harrison's life

Note: Harrison began using LSD in the spring of 1965 and discontinued in August 1967

Songs by other Beatles, Lennon especially, also reflect Indian influences

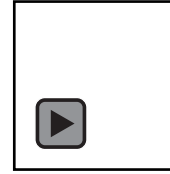
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## The Three “Indian” songs of George Harrison

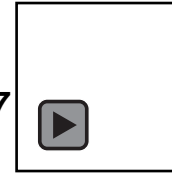
“Love You To”

recorded April 1966, released on *Revolver*, August 1966



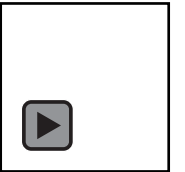
“Within You Without You”

recorded March, April 1967, released on *Sgt Pepper*, June 1967



“The Inner Light”

recorded January, February 1968, released as b-side to “Lady Madonna,” March 1968



## Three Aspects of “Indian” characteristics

Use of some aspect of Indian philosophy or spirituality in the lyrics

Use of Indian musical instruments

Use of Indian musical features (rhythmic patterns, drone, texture, melodic elements)

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## Musical Influences

Ravi Shankar is principal influence on Harrison, though he does not enter the picture until mid 1966

April 1965: Beatles film restaurant scene for *Help!* Harrison falls in love with the sitar, buys one cheap

Summer 1965: Beatles in LA hear about Shankar from McGuinn, Crosby (meet Elvis, discuss Yogananda)

October 1965: “Norwegian Wood” recorded, released in December on *Rubber Soul*. Harrison meets Ayana Angati (Asian Music Circle), attends concerts of Indian music, probably takes some sitar lessons

April 1966: “Love You To” recorded, released in August on *Revolver*.

July (or June) 1966: Harrison meets Shankar, takes two lessons (now has a professional sitar)

Fall 1966: Harrison travels to India to study sitar with Shankar

March, April 1967: “Within You Without You” recorded, released in June on *Sgt Pepper*

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# Ravi Shankar

Born 1920 (Benares), died 2012 (San Diego)

First worked as a dancer for his brother's group

Turned to sitar in 1938, music director of All India Radio, 1949-56, first toured the US in 1956

Along with Ali Akbar Khan (sarod; 1922-2009), played a central role in bringing North Indian (Hindustani) classical music to the West

Met Paramahansa Yogananda in the 1930s, kept a close relationship with SRF throughout the rest of his life; he was an “ardent devotee” of Anandamayi Ma, who is celebrated in Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*

By the time Shankar met Harrison in 1966, he was an important musical figure in his own right



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## Philosophical and Spiritual Influences

January 1964: Sculptor David Wynne tried unsuccessfully to get the Beatles interested in TM

March 1965: Beatles meet Swami Vishnu-Devananda, receive *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*

Summer 1965: Harrison hears about Yogananda during Elvis visit (Larry Geller) but is not much interested

+Summer and Fall 1966: Harrison studies Vivekananda and Yogananda

Summer 1967: Harrison and Lennon chant Hare Krishna mantra on LSD for hours in Greece

+August 1967: Beatles attend lecture and retreat with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

+ Early 1968: Beatles go to Rishikesh for extended (mostly) stay, break with Mahesh in April

+December 1968: Harrison begins relationship with ISKCON (“Hare Krishnas”)

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## Four Key Spiritual Influences for Harrison

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) “The first yogi I ever read, who really influenced me, was called Vivekananda.”

Visited US in 1893 (Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago)

Established Vedanta Society, first in New York (1894) and then in California

Harrison read *Raja Yoga*, an introduction to meditation, introduction and commentary on Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutras*

In discussing his 1969 song, “I Me Mine,” Harrison writes: “Swami Vivekananda says: ‘Each soul is potentially divine, the goal is to manifest that divinity.’ We have to realize that we are potentially divine and then manifest that divinity.”

“If there is a God we must see Him, if there is a soul, we must perceive it; otherwise it is better not to believe. It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite.”

On miracles: “What once happened can happen always.”

“Yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these perceptions.”

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Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

“The moment I looked at that picture of Yogananda on the front of the book, his eyes went right through me and zapped me, and to this day I have been under the spell of Yogananda. It’s a fantastic great truth.”

Arrived in the US in 1920 (International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals in Boston)

Founded Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) in 1920; headquarters in Los Angeles in 1925

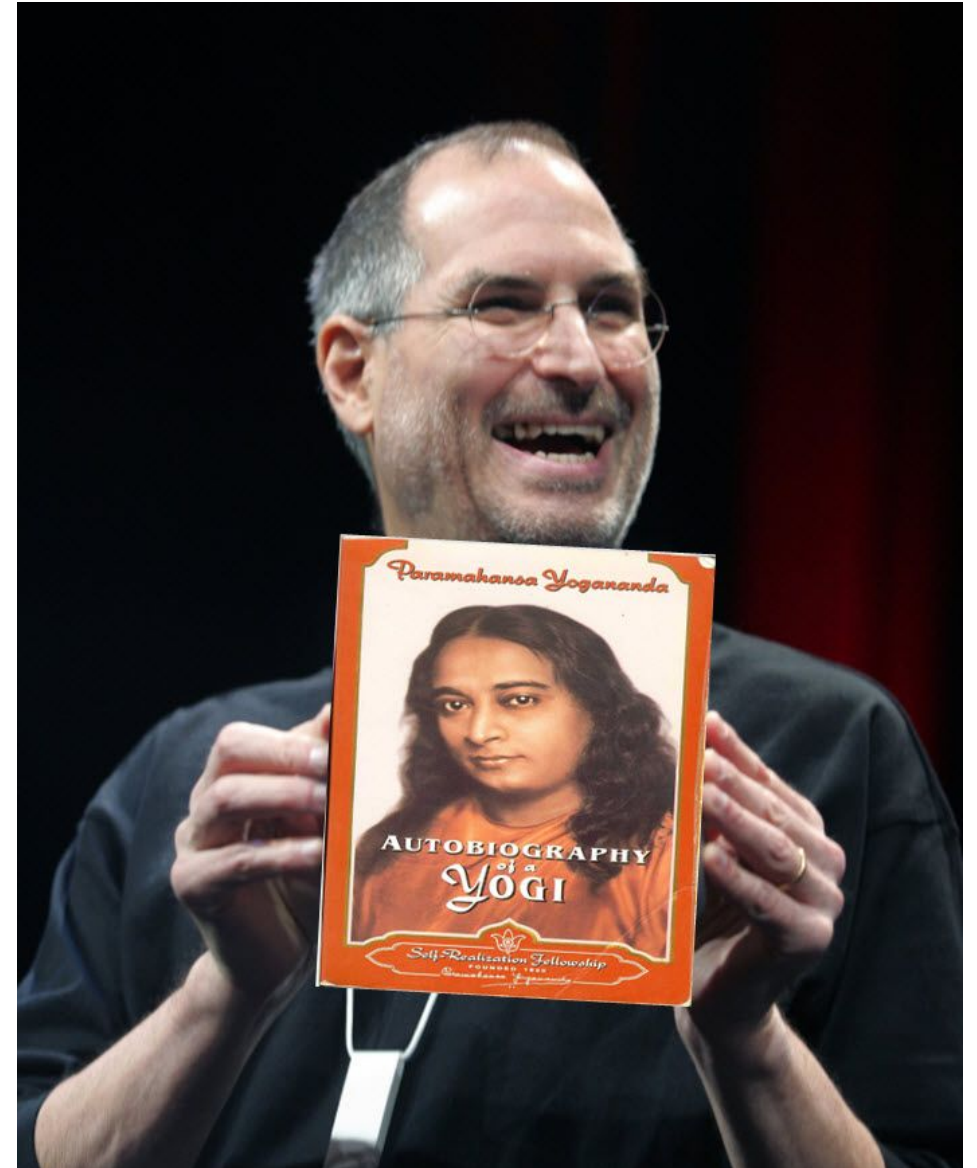
Harrison read *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946)

Philip Goldberg: the book contains 132 miraculous occurrences, taking up roughly 44 percent of the book,  
Title page epigraph: “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe” (John 4:48)

Kriya yoga: “A yogi who faithfully practices the technique is gradually freed from karma or the lawful chain of cause-effect equilibriums.”

Sounds great—but how do I learn to meditate?!

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Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008)

“I was actually after a mantra. I had got to the point where I thought I would like to meditate.”

Introduced Transcendental Meditation “TM” in 1955; first world tour in 1958

George on Rishikesh experience: “I went on a meditation course, where the object was to meditate deeper and deeper and deeper for longer periods of time. The goal is really to plug into the divine energy and to raise your state of consciousness and tune in to subtler states of consciousness.”

John on George: “The way George is going, he will be flying on a magic carpet by the time he is 40.”

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896-1977)

Founded International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York in 1965 (at age 69)

London branch opened in late 1968

“Awaiting for You All”: By chanting the name of the Lord and you’ll be free/  
the Lord is awaiting on you all to awaken and see

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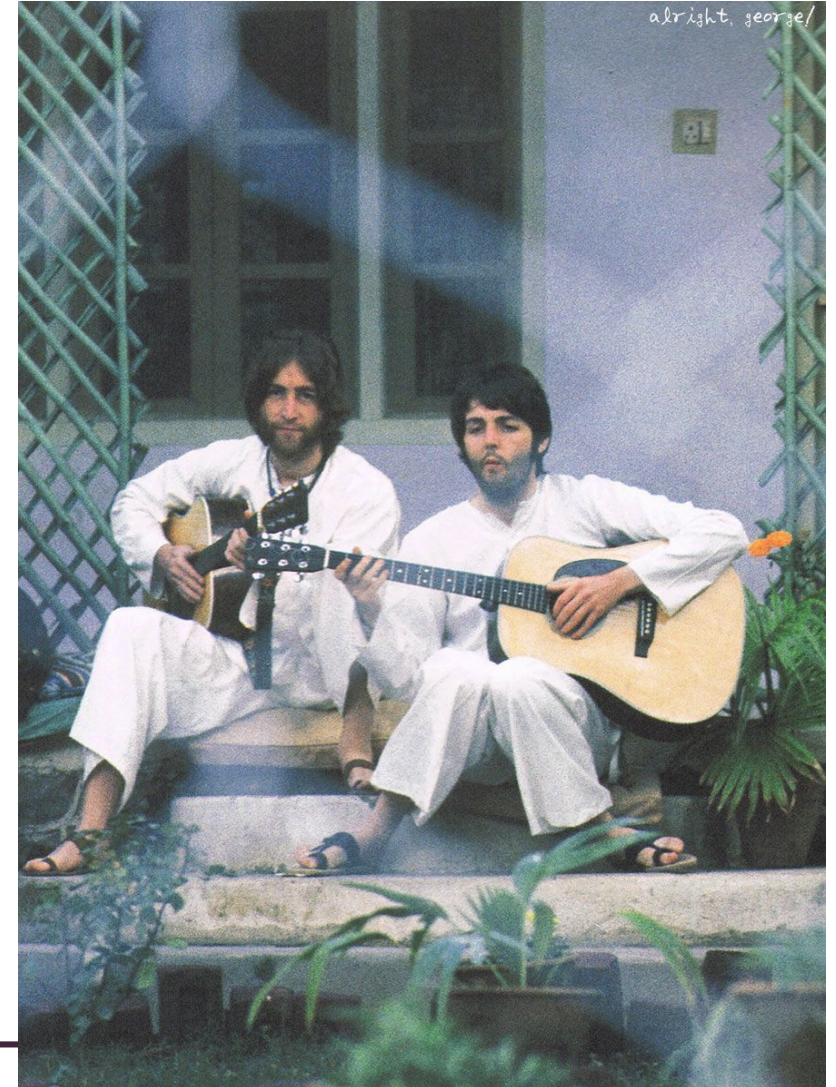
## Some Songs by Other Beatles That Reflect Indian Influences

Lennon:

- “Norwegian Wood” (sitar)
- “The Word” (lyrics)
- “Rain” (drone)
- “Tomorrow Never Knows” (lyrics, instruments, drone)
- “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (instrument)

McCartney:

- “Taxman” (sitar-like guitar solo on George’s song)
- “Getting Better” (instrument)
- “Fool on the Hill” (lyrics)



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## The Legacy of the Beatles' Indian Adventures (partial list)

### The 1970s

Yes, The Moody Blues [Mahavishnu Orchestra, John Coltrane, Shankar]

### The 1990s

Kula Shaker, "Govinda" (sung in Sanskrit), "Tattva"

"Krishnacore" punk (Shelter, 108), ISKCON

Beastie Boys, "Shambala" and "Bodhisattva Vow," Tibetan Buddhist chants, *Ill Communication*

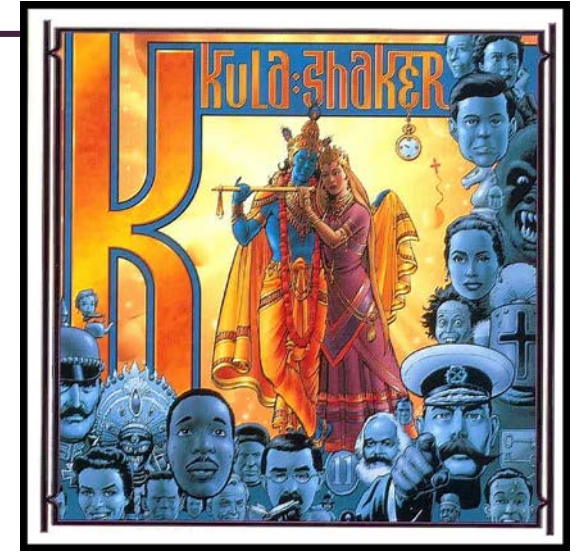
Madonna, "Shanti/Ashtangi (Sanskrit)," *Ray of Light*

Contemporary Kirtan (echoes of Radha-Krsna Temple from 1969-70)

Jai Uttal, Krishna Das, Dave Stringer (Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*, Neem Karoli Baba)

Devotional singing of mantras in Sanskrit blending traditional Indian sounds with pop

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