

George Harrison

By Ashley Kahn

IN A NOT-SO-DISTANT, BLACK-AND-WHITE AGE, WE CLAPPED and screamed as four dark-haired lads from Liverpool ascended the dizzying ladder of gain and glory we now expect all our rock stars to climb. They got the hits and the headlines; got the money and the movie roles; got the cars, gorgeous girlfriends and wives. Then one of them – the youngest Beatle – reached one rung higher and got religion.

Or a deep spirituality, to be accurate. Today, when the name of one deity or another is so easily dropped in award speeches and CD liner notes, public acknowledgment of the divine can seem a rote exercise. When George Harrison began exploring spiritual matters, however, this seemingly trend-setting act derived from his eyes-wide, questioning nature. And it was that nature that ultimately lashed Harrison's musical career to a spiritual pursuit.

"Why are we here? Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? That to me became the only important thing in my life," is how Harrison described his epiphany. "Everything else is secondary."

Beyond Harrison's estimable musical contributions in and out of the Beatles, there is much to commend his induction as a solo artist into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame: coining a vocabulary of blues licks, rockabilly riffs and twelve-string guitar that still shapes guitarists. Introducing exotic instruments and foreign sounds into the rock-song format. Composing universal tunes of devotion and deep emotion (Frank Sinatra hailed "Something" as the greatest love song of all time). Generating classic recordings from creative friendships with a litany of legends: Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Phil

Spector, Billy Preston, Leon Russell, Jeff Lynne, Roy Orbison, Tom Petty. Pioneering the concept of rock-for-relief with the landmark Concert for Bangla Desh, years before Live Aid set a trend.

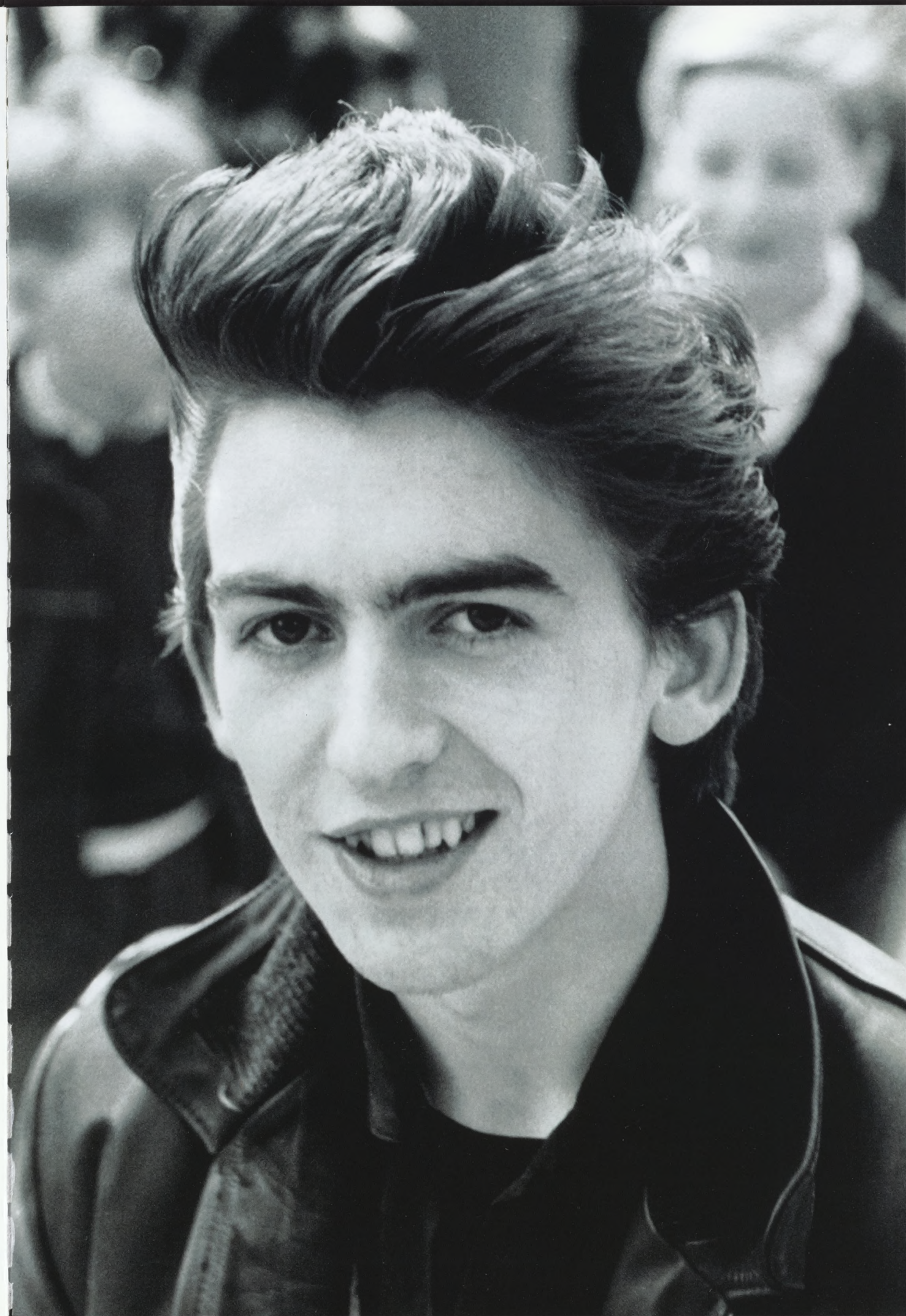
But Harrison's turn from the world without to that within – adding a spiritual dimension to his music, then his life in total – proved his defining characteristic. As legend has it, it all began by chance (Harrison's belief in karma might argue an alternative explanation), in as improbable a scene as any written for a Beatles film.

It was the summer of 1965, and Beatlemania was in full swing. While the band was filming *Help!* on the streets of London, a traveling swami appeared out of the blue, approached Harrison and handed him a book on the Indian Vedanta religion. By October, inspired to teach himself to play a "crummy sitar," the guitarist added a raga-ish lilt to "Norwegian Wood." A few months later, he met "this little fella with this obscure instrument [that] led me into such depths."

Sitar maestro Ravi Shankar took on Harrison as a student, an association that would grow and endure. The acolyte drove himself with the same bloody-fingered focus that had propelled his guitar lessons as a youth, and he was soon smitten by all things Indian. Interviewed in Bombay that December, Harrison became the first Beatle to discuss religion since Lennon's "more popular than Jesus" gaffe, stating he found more meaning in Indian belief systems than in Christianity.

What affected Harrison went beyond mere infatuation with an exotic religion. "It may sound strange . . . but the thing is the difference over [there] is that their







Harrison was soon smitten by all things Indian

religion is every second and every minute of their lives and – it is *them*.”

Harrison’s conversion proved rapid, musically traceable from the material complaint of “Taxman” to the spiritual focus of “Within You, Without You.” Yet to many, Harrison was still part of a shared infatuation with Eastern roads to devotion. An entire generation was vibrating on the same wavelength by the close of the sixties, searching for and sampling new ways of worship.

But in the wink of a cosmic eye, the spirit of the sixties – and the Beatles – began to dissemble. The various members had long been involved with their own projects: Harrison’s

Wonderwall soundtrack becoming the first solo recording by a Beatle in 1968, followed by the 1969 single by the Radha Krishna Temple, “Hare Krishna Mantra.”

“All things must pass” – Harrison’s philosophical take on life, the era and the breakup of the Beatles – became the title of his 1970 magnum opus, a three-disc outpouring of joy (“I Dig Love”) and personal frustration (“Wah-Wah”), spiritual yearning (“What Is Life”) and priority (“My Sweet Lord”). It stands deservedly as Harrison’s most effective self-portrait, with its iconic image of the solitary ex-Beatle surrounded by chuckling gnomes lounging on his lawn.

In one grand gesture, Harrison established a solo career and an identity as a spiritual absolutist, holding to the inner focus of the sixties, ceding control to a higher power in all matters: rock, riches, even romance. “When you love a woman, it’s the god in her that you see,” he later explained. “The only complete love is for God.”

During the seventies, Harrison wove his philosophy into a series of albums that sprouted charting singles, which focused on spiritual commitment and offered social comment

On the set of ‘A Hard Day’s Night,’ 1964

or wry self-reflection. Hits like "Give Me Love (Give Me Peace on Earth)," "You," "Dark Horse" (a sly reference to his critical status as the Beatle least likely to achieve success), "Ding Dong, Ding Dong" (Harrison's yuletide plea for truth) and "This Song" (written in reference to a copyright-infringement lawsuit brought on by "My Sweet Lord") eventually led him to establish his own record imprint, Dark Horse. Driven to produce music of reach and import, the man who vilified Maya – the material world – could not help but become a major player in it.

Such irony was amplified during the seventies by side projects that pushed Harrison's solo star higher. He arranged the historic Concert for Bangla Desh – both the performance and the album – in 1971, calling on old friends (Dylan, Clapton, Ringo) to perform familiar material, then coheadlined a national tour with Shankar. Harrison, who had established a London center for serious Krishna worship, also poured money into projects that made light of his foibles: an early video for "This Song" that spoofed his copyright lawsuit; Eric Idle's 1978 send-up of the Beatles legend, *The Rutles*; the Monty Python life-of-Christ parody, *Life of Brian*.

If one image captures the unpredictable energy and unlikely associations of that age, consider a curious photo taken at the White House in 1974. Between Billy Preston and a bemused President Gerald Ford stands George Harrison caught midgesture, shoulders scrunched and arms akimbo like a vaudeville performer. One can't miss the big button pinned to the lapel of Harrison's plaid jacket, with the young, beaming face of Sathya Sai Baba, a self-professed Indian prophet. The photo captures Harrison's effort to make it all work together – the gurus and celebrity and comedy and rock & roll – a public balancing act he never shied away from.

Harrison's own words reveal that he was well aware of his role and its effect. He was open about his spirituality but not a proselytizer. "You've got to experience the answers for yourself," he said. He never lost his distrust of group doctrine or dogma, Eastern or Western: "It's the organization of religion that turns me off a bit." He cherry-picked guidance from a variety of teachers: Vedanta hagiography from Baba, meditation from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a flexibility of approach from Krishna leader Prabhupada.

Through the eighties, Harrison continued to serve not two but three masters: his spiritual convictions, his love for rock & roll and a new passion – cinema. Handmade Films, his production company, brought to the screen a number of independent titles (many with Harrison-penned songs on the soundtracks): *Time Bandits*, *The Missionary*, *Mona Lisa*, A

With Eric Clapton, Concert for Bangla Desh



"Music is one of the strongest things around"

Private Function, *Withnail & I* and the Madonna–Sean Penn vehicle *Shanghai Surprise*.

In 1981, Harrison responded to John Lennon's murder (Harrison himself faced an attack almost twenty years later) by uniting with Paul and Ringo. Together they recorded "All Those Years Ago," which reached Number Two in 1981. In 1985, Harrison participated in a Carl Perkins salute in London. In 1987, he entered the U.S. charts – the first time in almost fifteen years – with the single "Got My Mind Set on You."

Harrison sped into 1988: He assumed the persona of "Nelson Wilbury" and cofounded the Traveling Wilburys with an all-star, multigenerational lineup including Orbison, Dylan, Lynne and Petty. With Lynne's help, Harrison notched his fifteenth Top Forty hit, "When We Was Fab." He offhandedly accepted induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as one-fourth of the Fabs: "I don't have much to say, 'cause I'm the quiet Beatle."

That same year, Harrison confessed to having tempered the outer flames of an inner fire: "I keep it to myself unless somebody asks me about it. But I still feel the same way I felt back in the sixties. . . . I'm still involved, but it's something which is more like a thing you do inside yourself. You don't actually do it in the road."

In fact, as the nineties arrived, the road began to see less and less of Harrison. He managed a 1991 tour of Japan with Clapton, a Royal Albert Hall concert and an appearance at Dylan's Thirtieth Anniversary Concert in '92. But Harrison was ultimately drawn more to Friar Park, his beloved home and gardens in Henley-on-Thames, England. "I'm really quite simple. . . . I plant flowers and watch them grow," is how Harrison summed up his life. "I don't go out to clubs and parties. I stay at home and watch the river flow."

The remainder of the decade saw Harrison resurfacing to assist with the *Beatles Anthology* series and, in 1997, to help Shankar promote his autobiography and new album. Together, they appeared on the VH1 special *George and Ravi Shankar: Yin and Yang*. George – with coaxing – performed an eerily prescient, unplugged version of "All Things Must Pass."



Jeff Lynne, Bob Dylan and Harrison (from left): Three-fifths of the Traveling Wilburys



Left: With wife Olivia and son Dhani in 1987. Right: Harrison and ukelele, 1992

Harrison left behind an indelible legacy: fifteen Top Forty hits; as many best-selling albums; memorable films, TV shows and sound-

tracks; and countless awards and honors including the very first *Billboard* Century Award, in 1992. Yet his greatest and most enduring contribution may well be the most subtle: a marked spiritual openness, a persistent willingness among music makers to allow mere popular songs to loudly proclaim spiritual belief or plumb a deep inner focus. For Harrison, music making – of any style, on any instrument – was an inherently spiritual act, with a duty to question and a potential to enlighten. “Music is a divine art for God perception,” he defined it. “I mean, music is one of the strongest things around.”

Krishna consciousness holds that Harrison’s fifty-eight-year life was merely one turn in a very long cycle of reincarnation. For all the music, love and laughter he engendered while balancing stardom and spirituality, Harrison should attain not only a more-evolved level but a good rest, as well. The undisturbed life of rural repose he so cherished might again be his, finding him one rung higher on the karmic ladder, kicking back like some smiling garden gnome.

At the outset of 2001, there were rumors and incomplete reports – images of an emaciated Harrison, last-ditch efforts to battle cancer in Switzerland and New York City, sad farewells to his surviving band mates in Los Angeles – and by the end of the year, they had tragically become the final details of another Beatle’s life. “Love one another” was his last message.

“A Lucky Grain of Dirt”

Ben Fong-Torres on clashing with Harrison like a tuxedo with white socks

George Harrison accounts for one of my most vivid memories – and for one of the toughest stories I ever had to write for *Rolling Stone*.

First, the memory: I saw the Beatles’ last concert, on August 29, 1966, at Candlestick Park in San Francisco.

The whole band played second base. That’s where the stage was set up. I was a Beatlemaniac, thrilled to have gotten into the ballpark, and I’ll always remember George as the man in white. Socks, that is. In every other way, the band was uniform, in tight-fitting green jackets and slacks. But George, the so-called quiet Beatle, had found a way to stand out.

And then there was that tough story. It was late 1974; Harrison, now on his own, the Beatles having disbanded, was on his first solo tour. I was, by then, a writer and editor at *Rolling Stone*, and although I was still a big fan of John-Paul-George-Ringo, Harrison and I clashed like a tuxedo and, well, white socks.

On his tour, Harrison pointedly disavowed his Beatle past, damn his fans. He wanted them to listen to his friend Ravi Shankar’s music, and so he gave a large portion of his concert over to Shankar’s Indian orchestra. When he deigned to perform Beatles songs or hits of his own, he changed lyrics, so that it was “In my life, I love God more,” and his guitar no longer gently wept, but smiled. He sang those lyrics in a voice strained from working too hard at too many rehearsals. The negative reviews poured in, not only from newspaper critics but from his inner circle and from some fans, as well.

After I’d followed him through several cities, we met between concerts at the Forum in Los Angeles, where he’d stubbornly held his ground. I asked what he had to say to those fans who’d paid \$9.50 – then a top price for concert tickets – and wanted at least a taste of “Beatle George.”

Harrison leaned forward:

“Well, why do they want to see if there is a Beatle George? I don’t say I’m Beatle George.”

“Well, one of the things you don’t control . . .”

“I do control . . .”

“ . . . is how the audience feels about you. The conceptions . . .”

“Okay, but I certainly am going to control my own concept of me,” he said. “Gandhi says create and preserve the image of your choice. The image of my choice is not Beatle George. If they want to do that, they can go and see Wings, then. . . I’d rather try to uphold something I believe in than destroy something I don’t believe in. Because it’s a waste of time.”

In the end he said, “My life belongs to me.” He quickly corrected himself. “My life belongs to the Lord Krishna, and there’s me dog collar to prove it. I’m just a dog, and I’m led around by me collar by Krishna. . . I’m the servant of the servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna.”

He was lucky, he said, “to be a grain of dirt in creation. That’s how I feel. Never been so humble in all my life. And I feel great.”

In my article, I quoted Harrison in full, and I reported his serenading me with a bit of Monty Python’s hilarious “Lumberjack Song,” which he sang to make the point that, as he paraphrased Billy Preston, “I ain’t tryin’ to be your hero.” He only ever wanted to be a lumberjack. But I also reported the criticisms of his concerts, and, as a result, the article drew the most negative mail I ever received in my dozen years at *Rolling Stone*.

But backstage at the Forum, looking at this happy grain of dirt, I thought about having been a Beatles fan of ten years standing; about *A Hard Day’s Night*, *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper*; about *All Things Must Pass*; and, yes, about those white socks he sported at Candlestick Park.

And I was happy – truly happy – for his happiness. □

