

The Role of The Beatles in Popularizing Indian Music and Culture in the West

Rodrigo Guerrero

*Faculty Advisors: Dr. Charles Brewer, Dr. Sarah Eyerly,
and Dr. Douglass Seaton*

College of Music

Abstract:

The Beatles were responsible for several long-lasting innovations that shaped the history of pop music and Western culture in general. As a British rock band that dominated the popular music scene during the 1960s, they made one of their most significant, yet sometimes overlooked, contributions through the incorporation of elements from Indian culture in their music and lyrics. This essay discusses the role that the Beatles played in introducing and popularizing certain features of Indian culture, and specifically Indian music, in the Western hemisphere. I first describe their relationship with Indian culture. In this section, I bring forth questions, such as why they became interested in this culture, why they decided to go on a spiritual retreat to India, and how the trip influenced their thoughts about foreign culture. After that, this essay analyzes the influence of Indian culture and Indian music on the Beatles' lyrics and music, respectively. Finally, I will illuminate the lasting effect that this cross-fertilization had in subsequent years.

The 1960s was a decade of experimentation in popular music. The Beatles, the British rock band that dominated the popular music scene during this decade, was responsible for long-lasting innovations that would shape the history and style of pop music and Western culture. One of their most significant, yet overlooked, contributions to Western culture was the incorporation of Indian musical elements into their songs. This analysis will discuss the role that the Beatles played in popularizing certain elements of Indian music and culture in the Western hemisphere.

In order to evaluate the impact that the Beatles had in spreading Indian music and culture to the West, the relationship between The Beatles and Indian culture will be described. This section will address questions such as; why the Beatles became interested in Indian culture, why the band decided to go on a spiritual retreat to the Asian country, and how that trip influenced their thoughts about this culture. Additionally, the influence of Indian culture and Indian music on the Beatles' lyrics and music will be analyzed. Finally,

Guerrero

a discussion of the lasting effect that the relationship between Britain's most popular band of the 1960s and the millenary musical culture of India had in subsequent years will be presented.

Historical Background

By 1964, Paul McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—a group of young musicians from Liverpool, England, who called themselves the Beatles—were the protagonists of a world phenomenon known as Beatlemania; which alludes to the unprecedented levels of fame and commercial success that the band obtained. Moreover, the Beatles had become “a kind of spirit-level for trends in popular music, and were widely imitated in dress, attitude, and musical style.”^[1] In 1966, still at the peak of their popularity, the group decided to stop performing live, and focused their attention on exploring new compositional and recording techniques in the studio. This led to what is often considered their most innovative and artistically accomplished period.

Among the various results that this Beatles' musical experimentation yielded, the group's venture into Indian musical element stands out as particularly influential, but also unexpected. How did a British pop group become interested in Indian culture? George Harrison described it himself:

We were waiting to shoot the scene in the restaurant [for their movie *Help!* (1965)]... and there were a few Indian musicians playing in the background. I remember picking up the sitar and trying to hold it, and thinking, “This is a funny sound.” It was an incidental thing, but somewhere down the line I began to hear Ravi Shankar's name...^[2]

In fact, Harrison met with sitar player Ravi Shankar—who by the mid-1960s had established himself as the most successful Indian musician in the West—and the maestro agreed to give sitar lessons to Harrison.^[3] In September 1966, Harrison would end up flying to Bombay to further his studies with Shankar for six weeks.^[4]

A year later, on August 24, 1967, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917-2008), an Indian guru (spiritual leader or master in Indian religions) and the founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement, gave a lecture in London, and Harrison took his band mates along to hear him speak.^[5] After meeting the Maharishi, the Beatles decided to travel to his academy in Rishikesh, India, to learn more about Transcendental Meditation. In February 1968, the group flew to India to participate in a six-week retreat. Although intended to be

The Role of Beatles in Popularizing Indian Music and Culture in the West

private, the event, nevertheless, caught the press' attention.[6] Although the trip abruptly ended after a dispute between John Lennon and the Maharishi, the fact that the most popular rock group in the world took six weeks to travel to India for learning purposes shows that their interest in Indian music and culture was genuine.

Elements of Indian Culture and Music in the Beatles' Lyrics and Music

Indian Musical Elements In The Beatles' Songs

When the Beatles' sixth studio album *Rubber Soul* was released in December 1965, the world was caught by surprise when the second track of the record was introduced by a sound that most fans had not heard before. The Lennon song "Norwegian Wood," was the first pop record to include a sitar on it. As innovative as the inclusion of the sitar was, it was only used to double the acoustic guitar in the song's still traditionally Western melody. Gerry Farrell clarifies, "This folksy song in 12/8 does not sound Indian as such...The sitar is employed in a purely colouristic manner..."^[7] The regularity of the sitar line "serves to anchor it, ironically more in the current western Folk-Rock sound than anything more exotic."^[8] Nevertheless, the impact of this song on the incorporation of Indian musical elements in Western popular music should not be overlooked due to the unidiomatic use of the instrument. Farrell describes the impact of this experiment: "It was into this febrile atmosphere of hero-worship and near-idolatry that the sitar was introduced in a Beatles song... It was inevitable that it would unleash an avalanche of such experiments in the pop world..."^[9]

The Beatles' next album, *Revolver* (1966), featured a song that was a significant change from what Harrison had done a few months earlier in "Norwegian Wood." "Love You To" was the first of George's songs to be composed entirely on the sitar.^[10] The song was modeled after North Indian classical music, and the recording features Indian musicians playing the *tanpura* (plucked string instrument) and *tabla* (percussion instrument), with Harrison on the sitar and lead vocals. Moreover, the melodic material derives from the *rāga Kafi* that (*rāgas* comprise a set of pitches that provide that tonal framework of Indian classical music).^[11] The second song of George Harrison's Indian trilogy, "Within You Without You" (1967), is the most complex composition of the three. The song features Indian instruments^[12] played by Indian musicians and a Western string ensemble playing in conversational texture (call and response interaction among instruments). Farrell notes that "within the space of five minutes Harrison makes reference

to an assortment of Indian musical genres: khyal...bhajan...filmi..."^[13] This song also uses traditional Indian rhythmic patterns. Harrison recalls, "The best part for me was the instrumental solo in the middle which is in 5/4 time, the first strange rhythmic cycles I caught onto: 12,123,12,123."^[14]

Even though the Indian influence on the Beatles is mostly evident in George Harrison's Indian trilogy,^[15] many of their post-1966 songs include Indian musical elements that often go unnoticed. Some of these songs include: "Tomorrow Never Knows" (1966), "Strawberry Fields Forever" (1967), "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds" (1967), "Across the Universe" (1967), and "Here Comes the Sun" (1969). "Strawberry Fields Forever," perhaps one of their most accomplished singles, features a swarmandal (a string instrument in Hindustani music similar to a harp) in an otherwise pop/rock song. While "Here Comes the Sun," one of Harrison's most popular songs, does not incorporate Indian instruments, it uses 11/8 and 7/8 time signatures in a manner commonly found in Indian classical music.

Elements of Indian Culture in The Beatles' Lyrics

Indian culture did not only influence the Beatles songs in terms of their melody, scoring, and rhythmic patterns, but also in terms of their lyrics. Saltzman points out, "George was influenced by the writings of the Indian scholar and sage Vivekananda and had been exploring the spiritual aspects of life..."^[16] He was not the only one; John Lennon based the lyrics of his song "Tomorrow Never Knows" on excerpts from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which is an important text in Buddhism.^[17] Although this song is not considered an "Indian song," Lennon clearly had Indian music in mind when he decided to play one single chord throughout the entire song (reminiscent of drones in Indian music).

Indian culture did not only influence the Beatles songs in terms of their melody, scoring, and rhythmic patterns, but also in terms of their lyrics...

Another one of Lennon's songs, "Across the Universe", included the Indian mantra "Jai guru deva om" (a mantra whose translation approximates to "Hail to the divine guru") in its pre-chorus. Additionally, the spiritual connotation of the words in "Within You Without You" is reminiscent of bhajan and other devotional music genres from India.^[18] Farrell argues that the importance of Indian culture in the west during that time went beyond musical style:

...the sitar did not come alone as a musical sound; it also brought with it an ambience, a pseudo-philosophy, that was a central ingredient of the

The Role of Beatles in Popularizing Indian Music and Culture in the West

magical, mythical mix which combined Indian religion and culture and objects with hallucinogenic drugs, and which became an integral part of youth culture in the 1960s.^[19]

Conclusions: Effect of this Cross-Fertilization in Subsequent Decades

The Beatles' Role in Popularizing Indian Culture and Music

This analysis has shown how encompassing the Beatles' interest in Indian music and culture was, and how this interest influenced their music and lyrics. However, how crucial was the Beatles' role in popularizing Indian culture and music during the 1960s? Music publicist Derek Taylor provides insight into this question. "The Beatles... were now interested in the music of the East... And where influential Western musicians led, Western audiences followed like lambs."^[20] In effect, the Beatles, as trendsetters of their time, familiarized their Western audience with elements of Indian music.^[21] Maharishi Mahesh Yogi understood the magnitude of influence that the Beatles had on the younger generation during the 1960s. He was quoted as saying; "You [The Beatles] have created a magic air through your names. You have now got to use that magic influence on the generation who look up to you. You have big responsibility."^[22]

It should be noted that the band's songs with Indian influences were met with remarkable commercial success. "Within You Without You" opens the B-side of the Beatles' most critically acclaimed album (Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band), and their album Revolver (which includes "Love You To") became the number-one selling album in England and in the United States in 1966.^[23] Although the casual listener might be tempted to think that the influence from India in the Beatles songs is limited to Harrison's trilogy of "Indian songs," this analysis has demonstrated that the influence was far more pervasive in their music after 1965. Some of the songs with other Indian elements such as, "Here Comes the Sun," "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," and "Strawberry Fields Forever", are among the most popular songs in Western culture.

One of the defining factors that made the Beatles' approach to Indian musical elements different from that of their contemporaries, was that unlike other pop musicians of the time who saw Indian music as a temporary fashion, the Beatles, and especially George Harrison—who traveled to Los Angeles in 1967 to help Ravi Shankar open a sitar school there—were dedicated to the study of Indian music and culture. David Reck stresses the

Guerrero

importance of this interest in their song Love You To:

One cannot emphasize how absolutely unprecedented this piece is in the history of popular music. For the first time an Asian music was not parodied utilizing familiar stereotypes and misconceptions, but rather transferred in toto into its new environment with sympathy and rare understanding.^[24]

Now that the role of the Beatles in introducing Indian music elements in Western popular culture has been analyzed, this analysis will now discuss some of the lasting effects of this phenomenon. The immediate effect was that several American and British rock bands followed the Beatles in writing Indian-influenced songs. For instance, the Rolling Stones recorded their famous Indian-influenced song "Paint It Black." The so-called "sitar explosion" that took place in 1965-1967 and originated with "Norwegian Wood" was so pervasive that by 1968, Indian exoticism (in musicology, the term exoticism refers to the incorporation of nonwestern musical elements into western pieces) songs were no longer musical experiments. According to Bellman, when the Moody Blues released their Indian album *In Search of the Lost Chord* in 1968, they "were not experimenting: they were betting on a sure thing."^[25] Indian influence in rock music did not stop in the 1960s; it continues today. The ultimate symbols that demonstrate the extent of the influence of the Beatles' ventures into Indian music were the Monterey Pop Festival (1967) and the Woodstock Festival (1969) where "Ravi Shankar...performed alongside the rock stars of the day to massive, adulatory crowds."^[26]

Misappropriation and Reinterpretation of

Indian Culture and Music by Western Society

An entire essay could be written solely on the misappropriation and reinterpretation of Indian culture by the west during the 1960s. A few important issues related to this phenomenon will be briefly explored. While the hippie movement on both sides of the Atlantic appropriated Indian characteristics in their Western music, the most common complaint among Indian musicians was the association that was made between Indian culture and psychedelic drugs. Ravi Shankar explained his frustration in his 1968 autobiography:

I found it even more difficult to bring them [hippies] to an understanding and appreciation of our music for the correct viewpoint. The reason for this was, I felt, that many of them were involved with various kinds of

The Role of Beatles in Popularizing Indian Music and Culture in the West

hallucinogenic drugs and were using our music as part of their drug experience.^[27]

Another problem Indian musicians in the West faced was the perception of their music by the general public, especially by the press. One of Shankar's concerts in New York was promoted with the slogan, "Take a peek at the primitive folk sounds of India." To which the sitar player replied, "I do not play primitive songs. This is classical music."^[28]

This analysis has demonstrated that the Beatles played a fundamental role in introducing and popularizing Indian music and culture in the Western hemisphere during the 1960s. Their role was so prominent that, ironically, raga rock (the name given to the subgenre of rock that is influenced by Indian classical music) has become less associated with an exotic Asian style than with the nostalgic Beatles-Indian style.^[29] Although some may argue that this style was not strictly true to North Indian classical music, and others may criticize Harrison's attempts as being too pretentious, there is no doubt about the importance of these musical experiments in the dissemination of Indian culture and music in the West.

Author's Bio:

Rodrigo Guerrero is an international student from Peru at the Florida State University. Although he initially came to the United States to seek a degree in Music, he is now majoring in Mathematics and Economics as well. Upon graduation, Rodrigo plans to pursue a PhD in economics.

Guerrero

Bellman, Jonathan. "Indian Resonances in the British Invasion, 1965-1968." *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 1 (1997): 116-136.

Bromell, Nicholas Knowles. *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Emerick, Geoff. *Here, There and Everywhere: My Life Recording the Music of the Beatles*. New York: Gotham Books, 2006.

Farrell, Gerry. "Reflecting Surfaces: The Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz." *Popular Music* 17, no. 2 (1998): 189-205.

———. *Indian Music and the West*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Lavezzoli, Peter. *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi*. New York: Continuum, 2006.

Reck, David R. "Beatles Orientalis: Influences from Asia in a Popular Song Tradition." *Asian Music* 16, no. 1 (1985): 83-149.

———. "The Beatles and Indian Music." In *Sgt. Pepper and the Beatles: It Was Forty Years Ago Today*, edited by Olivier Julien, 63-74. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.

Saltzman, Paul. *The Beatles in Rishikesh*. New York: Viking Studio, 2000.

Shankar, Ravi. *My Music, My Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

Taylor, Derek. *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Widdess, Richard. "Rāga." In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online., <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/48150> (accessed March 30, 2014).

[1] Gerry Farrell, *Indian Music and the West* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 171.

[2] Jonathan Bellman, "Indian Resonances in the British Invasion, 1965-1968," *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 1 (1997): 118.

[3] Farrell, 170.

[4] Paul Saltzman, *The Beatles in Rishikesh* (New York: Viking Studio, 2000), 8.

[5] *Ibid.*, 98.

[6] *Ibid.*, 8.

The Role of Beatles in Popularizing Indian Music and Culture in the West

[7] Farrell, 172.

[8] Bellman, 119.

[9] Farrell, 171.

[10] Bellman, 119.

[11] Farrell, 183. A raga is melodic mode used in Indian classical music. See Richard Widdess, "Rāga," in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/48150> (accessed March 30, 2014).

[12] The Indian instruments in this song include: dilruba, sitar, tabla, tanpura, and svaramandal.

[13] Ibid., 184.

[14] Ibid., 185.

[15] i.e., Love You To, Within You and Without You, and The Inner Light

[16] Saltzman, 98.

[17] Nicholas Knowles Bromell, *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 94.

[18] Farrell, 185.

[19] Ibid., 169.

[20] Derek Taylor, *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 121.

[21] Bellman, 125.

[22] Taylor, 124.

[23] Bromell, 101.

[24] David R. Reck, "Beatles Orientalis: Influences from Asia in a Popular Song Tradition," *Asian Music* 16, no. 1 (1985): 102.

[25] Bellman, 131.

Guerrero

[26] Farrell, 168.

[27] Ravi Shankar, *My Music, My Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 94.

[28] Farrell, 177.

[29] Bellman, 135.