

THE BEATLES AND THE GURU

BY SUSAN SHUMSKY

"George Harrison's wife Pattie Boyd began practicing [Transcendental Meditation] in February 1967. Feeling more alert and energetic, she believed it changed her life. So, the Beatles, with their significant others, attended a Maharishi lecture. . . ."

MAHARISHI Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) was the mentor of megastars like the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, Deepak Chopra, Clint Eastwood, David Lynch, George Lucas, Tom Hanks, Howard Stern, Jerry Seinfeld, and more. This extraordinary spiritual master first stepped onto America's shores in 1959. Dubbed by the press "The Giggling Guru," within 10 years Maharishi made "meditation" a household word. His brush with celebrities put him into the spotlight, but his true legacy is his gift of Transcendental Meditation (TM).

George Harrison's wife Pattie Boyd began practicing TM in February 1967. Feeling more alert and energetic, she believed it changed her life. So, the Beatles, with their significant others, attended an Aug. 24 Maharishi lecture at the London Hilton on Park Lane. Ringo Starr missed the lecture to be at hospital with his wife Maureen, who recently had given birth.

Afterwards, the Beatles met Maharishi backstage. They expressed that they had been seeking a highly spiritual experience, which the recreational drugs they took failed to deliver. The guru invited them to a retreat in North Wales, starting the next day. Attendees included the Beatles, Boyd, Cynthia Lennon, Jane Asher, so-called inventor Alexis Mardas, and the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger and his girlfriend, singer Marianne Faithfull.

Three-hundred course participants shared bunk beds in dorms at University College in Bangor and ate canteen food. There the Beatles learned TM. Since drug abstinence was a prerequisite to starting the practice, the musicians stopped using drugs—for the first five minutes, anyway.

The Beatles expressed enthusiasm about TM—and defended it to skeptics—in multiple interviews, including on "The Frost Report." In fact, the band indicated they would set up a London meditation academy. John Lennon suggested to his co-Beatles a world

tour to turn on millions of people to the practice. His song, "Across the Universe," cowritten with Paul McCartney, is an anthem to TM, and included the appellation "*jai guru deva*" ("hail to the divine guru").

Once the Beatles became public advocates, Maharishi found himself all over the press, on magazine covers, and a recurring guest on "The Tonight Show." Despite host Johnny Carson's derisive treatment of Maharishi, the shows resulted in thousands of eager students queuing around blocks to learn TM.

In February 1968, the shock waves hitting Rishikesh, India, reverberated around the world. When the Beatles, Donovan, Mia Farrow, and other celebrities attended a meditation course with Maharishi, the planet figuratively paused for a moment, then changed orbit. Though struggling to keep his sparsely constructed ashram solvent, Maharishi provided his famous guests double beds with mosquito netting, sit-down toilets, and bathtubs.

The Beatles received private lessons on Maharishi's bungalow roof or inside his meeting room. John Lennon and George Harrison embraced the teachings enthusiastically. Ringo's allergies and peritonitis caused problems with ashram food. He brought one suitcase stuffed with Heinz beans. Terrified of insects, his wife demanded "Ritchie" kill them all and remove the carcasses. On one occasion, a single fly held Maureen hostage until Ringo returned hours later.

Eggs and meat were (still are) banned in Rishikesh, but Beatles road manager Mal Evans smuggled in contraband eggs. When the staff was caught burying eggshells, Ringo asked, "Can't God see that, too?" He and Maureen returned home after two weeks.

When "Wonderwall" film director Joe Massot smuggled in hashish, John Lennon did not hesitate to imbibe, as they played Otis Redding's "The Dock of the Bay" 20 times. John asked Massot to keep it secret from George.

Ravindra Damodara Swami, one of Maharishi's *brahmacharyas* (monk disciples), noted in his diary that Maharishi said the Beatles had too much brain in the way, except for Ringo, who followed his heart and feelings. He declared George was the most spiritually advanced and this was his last life, but John had many more lives to go, and his weakness for women might ruin him.

Two weeks into their stay, John moved into separate quarters from his wife Cynthia, where he waited with excited anticipation for secret telegrams and letters from Yoko Ono. Though Cynthia hoped for a second honeymoon in Rishikesh, John virtually ignored her the entire time.

Students gradually increased their meditation time and discussed experiences daily with Maharishi. After a few weeks, he told them to meditate in their rooms all day. John and George stayed inside for weeks, meditating eight hours daily.



The Beatles and wives competed over the length of meditation. Debates raged about who was “getting it,” and who was not and “who was going to get cosmic first.” Paul McCartney said the Beatles hoped for answers for personal and world peace. However, their towering expectations included the secret of life, astral magic, supernormal powers, and global peace—all in one month.

Lennon believed there was some secret to get—then he could just go home. He suspected Maharishi’s disciples knew the secret but were holding out. When industrialist K.S. Cambata loaned Maharishi a helicopter, John volunteered to ride along, figuring Maharishi might slip him “the answer.”

The musicians (the Beatles, Donovan, Paul Horn, and Mike Love) made music in the ashram—noisy music. Students who came for deep meditation became resentful. Harrison started a daily mini-rock festival on the lecture hall roof for twenty-somethings, who envisioned a TM hippie revolution, without course fee, puja ceremony, or drug ban. The group pleaded their case to Maharishi, who responded with typical evasive giggles.

George converted a hut overlooking the Ganges into a music room, lined with carpets, cushions, and Indian musical instruments. He extended an open invitation for anyone to listen or learn to play. Maharishi hired a sitar teacher to instruct George and Donovan.

How much TM influenced the band’s songwriting is hard to say, but fans, music critics, and audiophiles laud the album “The Beatles” (aka the “White Album”)—consisting mostly of songs written in Rishikesh—as a masterpiece.

Maharishi offered the Beatles’ company Apple Corps Ltd. exclusive rights to produce a movie about TM and Guru Dev, but he also had made the same promise to someone else. In August 1967, Charlie Lutes—president of Maharishi’s Spiritual Regeneration Movement—gave meditator Alan Waite permission to film Maharishi and the Beatles in Rishikesh. David Charnay of Four Star Productions of Hollywood contracted those rights.

On March 20, 1968, Neil Aspinall (manager of Apple Corps) and Denis O’Dell (producer of “A Hard Day’s Night”) arrived in Rishikesh to negotiate the Apple Corps film deal. Aspinall intended to thwart the project, since the Beatles were under contract with United Artists. O’Dell planned to convince the Beatles to make “The Lord of the Rings.”

On March 26, Aspinall, McCartney, and Jane Asher left for London. Not long afterward, John and George cabled Aspinall to return to Rishikesh with a film crew to start shooting the Apple Corps film. Despite obvious conflicts of interest, Maharishi paid no mind and declared everyone could work together for the glory of Guru Dev (Maharishi’s guru). Though Maharishi was warned contracts did not quite work that way, he seemed undaunted.

Lutes arrived April 4 with a Four Star Pro-

ductions lawyer and a signed contract—granting exclusive rights to film Maharishi for the next five years. On April 9, the Four Star movie crew arrived overnight. At dawn, in the Beatles courtyard, the bed-headed, bleary-eyed, half-asleep Lennon opened his door to cameramen and a director yelling, “Action.”

Now the Beatles were expected to be two-bit players in the Four Star film. John and George avoided the lecture hall, installed with lights and cameras. They refused to leave their rooms. With this back-alley deal exposed, John and George suspected Maharishi’s motive all along was exploiting them for publicity, but their disenchantment over the film contract was the first rumble in a coming volcanic eruption. More heinous powers churned in the molten crucible below.

Johan Alexis Mardas, dubbed by John “my new guru ‘Magic Alex,’” seemed to have surgically attached himself to John’s hip. Cynthia, alarmed at his Svengali-like influence

“In the early morning of April 10, Alan Waite and Paul Horn were with Maharishi in his bungalow. When John [Lennon] and George [Harrison] showed up, Maharishi took them into his bedroom. Twenty minutes later, the Beatles announced they were leaving.”

over her husband, declared that Alexis made her “skin crawl.”

Alexis’ imaginary inventions included a force field to keep fans away and paint that made objects invisible. However, his most improbable device, which was the size of a trash can lid, would power a radio station, broadcast Maharishi’s message worldwide, and supply electricity to the entire region. (Reality check: Alexis was a TV repairman.)

Alexis arrived in Rishikesh near the end of March. No one ever saw him meditating—quite the opposite. Alexis told Lutes his real intention was to get the Beatles away from Maharishi.

Alexis described the ashram students as “second-rate American actresses,” “mentally ill old ladies, and a bunch of lost, pretty girls.” Yet, he had no compunction about practicing

the *Kama Sutra* with one—a shorthaired blond schoolteacher from Brooklyn, Rosalyn Bonas.

Through the thin walls, Mike Dolan, Rosalyn’s next-door neighbor, overheard Alexis and Rosalyn nightly in flagrante delicto. Whiffs of a distinct herb wafted from her room, and bottles of fermented brews came and went. The pair were told they would be expelled from the ashram.

Alexis and Rosalyn started spreading rumors that Maharishi had made sexual advances toward her. Alexis claimed he hid in the undergrowth and spied Maharishi in his bungalow trying to hug Rosalyn (both fully clothed).

Whether Alexis actually saw the purported “hug” was immaterial. What was real was that Rosalyn reported to Alexis, Cynthia, Pattie, and Tom Simcox (a Hollywood actor) that Maharishi made a pass at her. Her accusation exacerbated John and George’s disillusion about Maharishi’s exploitation of them—a wound still bleeding fresh blood.

Hypersensitive and suggestible after two months of constant meditation, the Beatles and wives stayed up all night debating the allegation. Alexis warned the evil Maharishi might hex them with black magic and that they should leave immediately. Finally, John and George started to believe the rumor.

In the early morning of April 10, Alan Waite and Paul Horn were with Maharishi in his bungalow. When John and George showed up, Maharishi took them into his bedroom. Twenty minutes later, the Beatles announced they were leaving. No one knows what happened during that meeting other than John, George, and Maharishi. Alexis claimed he was in the room, but he was not.

John Lennon returned to his bungalow, ripped up his poster of Maharishi, and tossed it, face down, onto the cement floor. Alexis scrambled to find taxis to speed the group to the airport, before anyone changed their mind. As the taxis were loading, the shaken, weeping wives pleaded with John and George to reconsider.

Alexis got what he wanted—a job at Apple Corps—and Rosalyn left the ashram one day after she became disillusioned with her guru.

However, in September 1991, in Maharishi’s presence in Vlodrop, Holland, George Harrison revealed to Deepak Chopra the real story. Here is what Chopra reported to *The Times of India* on Feb. 15, 2006:

“The Beatles, along with their entourage, were doing drugs, taking LSD, at Maharishi’s ashram, and he lost his temper with them. He asked them to leave, and they did in a huff.” Chopra said Maharishi never encountered anything like that before, and he strongly opposed it.

George told Chopra that, when he revealed this story, he felt a huge karmic weight had lifted, because he did not want to lie. ★

Susan Shumsky is the author of 14 books, most recently, Maharishi & Me: Seeking Enlightenment with the Beatles’ Guru, from which this article is adapted.