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The Beatles' 'White Album': The Inside Story of the Songs Written Under Their Guru's Influence

🕒 November 14, 2018 👤 Susan Shumsky 📁 Features 💬 0



This week (November 22) marks the 50th anniversary of The Beatles self-titled ninth album, most famously known as The White Album. To celebrate Susan Shumsky, who spent 22 years in the ashrams and six years on the personal staff of Beatles' guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, gives us an inside look on their guru's influence on the songs from the album as well as those written around that time.

The Beatles with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

An unlikely setting for songwriting, a

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at an ashram in Rishikesh, India proved one of the most creative places for the Beatles. Away from pressures of superstardom, from February to April 1968 they composed 40 songs while studying with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of Transcendental Meditation®. While in Rishikesh, Donovan suggested, because of their immense fame, the Beatles' next album could be plain white and nameless. Thus the legendary record *The Beatles* (a.k.a. the *White Album*) was born.

"I wrote quite a few songs in Rishikesh," Paul McCartney said. "George told me off because I was trying to think of the next album. He said, 'We're not [bleeping] here to do the next album, we're here to meditate!' It was like, 'Ohh, excuse me for breathing!'" Ironically, soon afterward, George began singing and playing organ or guitar on the lecture hall roof in a daily mini-rock-festival for twenty-somethings.

What are the hidden meanings of songs written by the Beatles under Maharishi's influence?

Mia Farrow's sister, "Dear Prudence" Farrow, had abused drugs and alcohol as a teenager, resulting in a stint at a psychiatric hospital. In Rishikesh, she spent nearly all her time in meditation. She abhorred the Beatles' celebrity circus and endless banging music. Maharishi placed her in a discussion group with Beatles John and George, and asked them to check on her. One day they burst into her room, singing "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band," and "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da." Though she was grateful, she just wanted them to disappear.

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Prudence suffered a terrifying psychotic episode at the ashram. A course attendee trained to handle brain disorders volunteered to stay next door, and two nurses from Delhi took turns sleeping inside her room. Prudence was ushered to Maharishi's bungalow daily, where he directed her to practice yoga postures in the corner of his meeting room. If her mind wandered, he tapped on his coffee table with a pen to get her attention and said, "Continue, continue." Within three weeks of daily massages and visits with Maharishi, Prudence returned from the abyss and became responsive and happy. Just before leaving Rishikesh, George sent Prudence a message that John had written a song for her – "Dear Prudence."



John said he composed some of his best songs in Rishikesh – pouring out of him in the hundreds. “I’m So Tired,” written three weeks after his arrival in India, chronicled persistent insomnia, hallucinations, misery, and irrational suicidal thoughts. The lyrics “I’m so lonely I want to die” in “Yer Blues” was not an exaggeration.

John said that in Rishikesh he wrote some of his best songs, which just poured out of him. One of Maharishi’s lectures about the unity of nature and mankind touched the Beatles deeply, inspiring “Mother Nature’s Son” by Paul, and “Child of Nature” by John, which mentioned Rishikesh in the lyrics (its melody was later released as “Jealous Guy”).



The lyrics of “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey” consisted of Maharishi’s favorite expressions and portrayed meditation experiences. Frequently, Maharishi used to say “Take it easy; take it as it comes,” and “it’s such a joy!” Whenever he beckoned anyone to meet with him, Maharishi would always say, “Come, come,” or “Come on.” John revealed the “monkey” was Yoko Ono.

“Revolution” originated from “The Maharishi Effect,” – the guru’s theory about world peace. He often said, “For the forest to be green, the trees must be green; for the world to be at peace, the people must be at peace.” He believed peace could never be achieved through politics or treaties, but it could be attained with a large percentage of the population meditating. He demonstrated this theory through scientific studies.



Recorded right before the Beatles arrived in India, “Across the Universe” included the term *Jai Guru Deva* (“Hail to the divine teacher”). Instead of “hello,” Maharishi greeted everyone with this salutation, recognizing his own guru. “Julia” was about John’s mother and also about Yoko, whose name means “ocean child.” While in Rishikesh, Donovan taught John clawhammer guitar, a banjo finger-picking style used by John on that song.



Richard A. Cooke III (Rik) dressed and looked like a textbook Anglo-Saxon Ivy Leaguer. His mother Nancy Jackson was taking the course in Rishikesh, and they took a tiger hunt together. After riding one of eight elephants that drove tigers into a kill zone, Nancy spotted the tiger from a high platform in a tree, and Rik shot it in the head. John, Paul, George, and Jane Asher happened to be in Maharishi's bungalow when the hunters returned to describe their tiger kill, while Maharishi glared silently at Nancy. Rik said it was the only time he ever saw him angry. What's bizarre is the hunters expected the vegetarian Hindu yogi would react differently.

When Maharishi asked Rik whether he no longer had the desire to kill animals, the collegiate answered he would never kill again. When Rik asked whether he was just an agent of change, John Lennon piped in with, "Don't you call that slightly life-destructive?" Nancy retorted, in defense, "Well, John, it was either the tiger or us." Maharishi responded, "Life destruction is life destruction. End of story!" Thus was born the "The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill," which John described as "written about a guy in Maharishi's meditation camp who took a short break to shoot a few poor tigers, and then came back to commune with God."

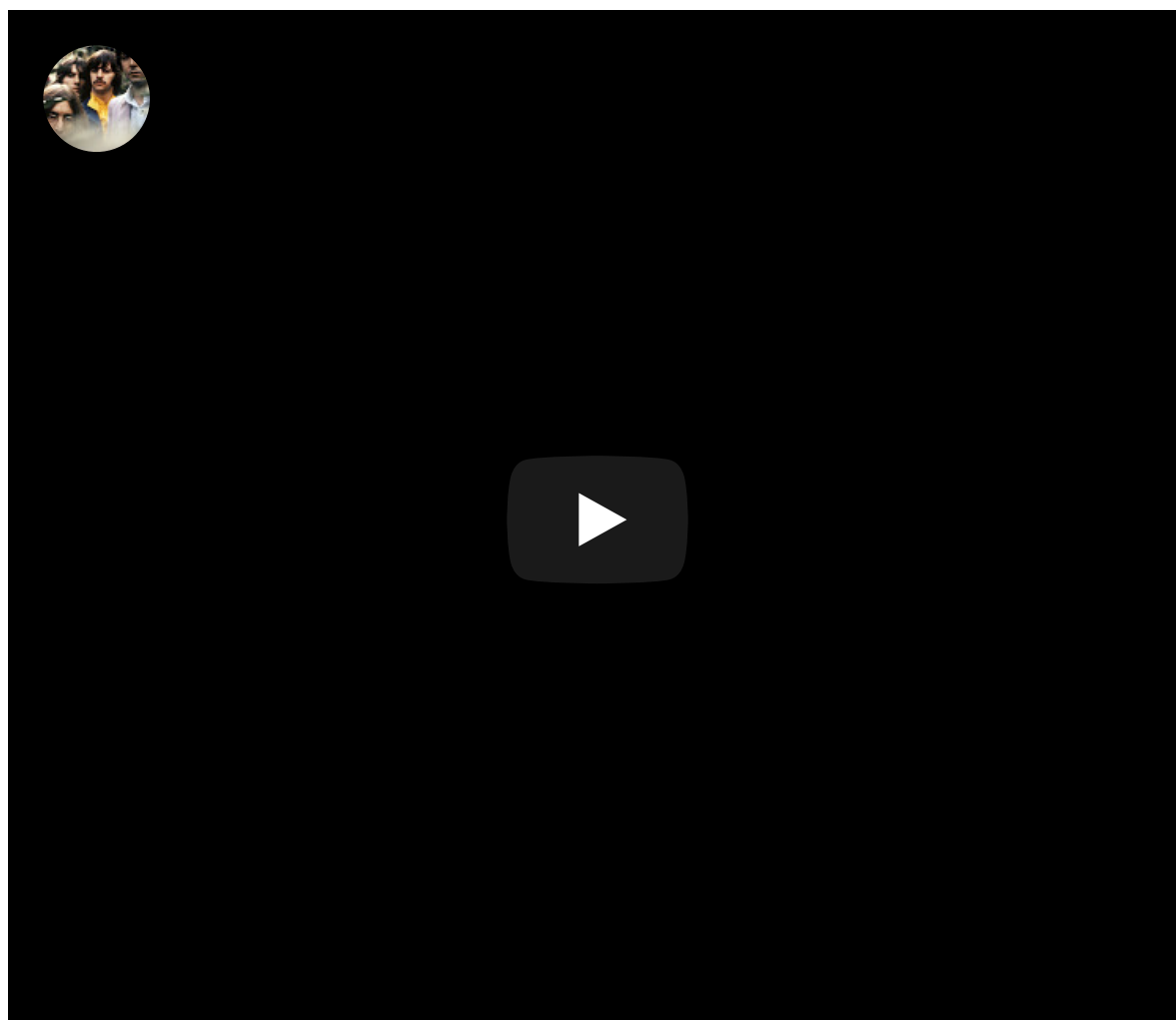


Terry Gustafson, originally from Tucson, AZ, was a Ranger in Sequoia National Park. A bitter divorce and tough years drove him to LSD, which he took weekly for six months – enough to realize drugs weren't the answer. In January 1967, he learned TM, and at the end of 1967, he quit the Park Service and flew to Rishikesh.

Terry, dressed in short hair and khakis, came across John Lennon outside the lecture hall one night. John wore a flowing paisley cape, red sash, white bell-bottom pants, and green Egyptian slippers with curled-up toes. His hair was dyed five different colors. Strobe lights built into his eyeglasses flashed on and off. "Look at you!" "Look at me!" John exclaimed. "One of us don't belong 'ere. Get back to the forest! Get back to Tucson Arizona! Get back where you belong!" After that, John often told Terry to "Get back!" when their paths crossed. This was how the song "Get Back" was conceived.

Paul McCartney wrote "Cosmically Conscious" because Maharishi talked endlessly about Cosmic Consciousness, and also often said, "It's such a joy." When Paul heard loud crowing in the early morning, he wrote "Blackbird." However, years later he ascribed deeper significance to it, paralleling the lyrics to the Civil Rights Movement. Paul wrote "Why Don't We Do it in the Road?" after he saw two

monkeys copulating. It occurred to Paul that people's sexuality should be natural, simple, and free as animals.



One day at breakfast, Paul sang “Back in the USSR” with its Beach Boys' sound to Mike Love. Mike suggested mentioning girls from Moscow, Ukraine, and Georgia, as a nod to “California Girls.” Paul said “Fool on the Hill” was about someone like Maharishi, whose detractors called him a fool and didn't take him seriously because he constantly giggled. “The Long and Winding Road” could be interpreted as being about the path to spiritual enlightenment.

In “My Sweet Lord,” George Harrison sang words from the puja ceremony chanted by every Transcendental Meditation teacher when they initiate new students. Here's the translation of the Sanskrit words *Gurur Brahma, Gurur Vishnu, Gurur Devo, Maheshwara, Gurur Sakshaat, Parabrahma, Tasmayi Shree, Guruve Namah*, which originated from the ancient *Guru Gita* (Song of the Guru): “The guru is Brahma, Vishnu, and the great Lord Shiva. The guru is the eternal Brahman, the transcendental absolute. I bow to the supreme guru, adorned with glory.”

George's "Dehra Dun" criticized students running off to buy ashram-forbidden meat and eggs in the town Dehra Dun, 28 miles away—far from the spiritual riches of Rishikesh. George's "Long, Long, Long" was about tears shed in losing and finding God. His "Sour Milk Sea," written in 10 minutes one evening, promoted the simple process of TM as the way to overcome dissatisfaction and limitation.

There were three reasons why, after two months in Rishikesh, John and George suddenly left Maharishi in a huff. One reason was a course participant from Brooklyn, Rosalyn Bonas, claimed Maharishi made a pass at her. As the Beatles waited for taxis to extract them, John took out his vengeance, singing "Maharishi, you little [bleep]. Who the [bleep] do you think you are? Oh, you [bleep]." When George complained the lyrics of the song "Maharishi" were ridiculous, John changed the title to "Sexy Sadie."

Beatles fans, music critics, and audiophiles laud *The Beatles* (a.k.a the “White Album”), consisting mostly of songs written in Rishikesh, as a masterpiece.

Susan Shumsky's book ***Maharishi & Me: Seeking Enlightenment with the Beatles' Guru*** is available now at www.maharishiandme.com.

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THE BEATLES

THE WHITE ALBUM

About Susan Shumsky > 1 Article

Susan Shumsky is a rare insider who spent 22 years in the ashrams



and six years on the personal staff of Beatles' guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of TM (Transcendental Meditation). Her memoir, *Maharishi & Me: Seeking Enlightenment With the Beatles' Guru*, illuminates the behind-the-scenes

story of Maharishi's influence on the Beatles and his other celebrity disciples.



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