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# Indian Resonances in the British Invasion, 1965–1968

JONATHAN BELLMAN

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**B**y the mid-1960s, roughly ten years after its inception, Rock music was poised to undergo an extremely concentrated period of growth and experimentation. Conventions were being shed, prescribed patterns superseded, and an extremely rapid development ensued. The 12-bar blues and standard pop-song formats certainly did not disappear, and continued successfully in the Rock mainstream, but they were no longer as dominant as before. New musical influences and instruments began to be heard, and the magic of the recording studio made previously unthinkable effects commonplace. Much of this exploration would be done by English groups, members of the “British Invasion,” so called because of their success and influence on the American musical scene. As some of these bands began to experiment with exotic influences, the traditional Rock language began to expand.

As such musical explorations became more common in the Rock world, they also became more confident, less cute and novelty-like. In 1964, the Kinks (most famous at that time for the hit singles “You Really Got Me” and “All Day and All of the Night”) told the British

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pop-music newspaper *Melody Maker* that “we’re always looking, searching for new sounds.”<sup>1</sup> By early 1965, the Yardbirds were listening to medieval liturgical chant and Indian music, also seeking to expand their outlook.<sup>2</sup> The Beatles would start blending styles in 1965, and proceed to tape effects and real studio magic in 1966,<sup>3</sup> the same year that the Rolling Stones released *Lady Jane*, a restrained and somewhat tentative pseudo-Elizabethan song that featured a dulcimer as its most prominent obbligato instrument. In the years following, Art Rock as a continuing genre would be introduced by the New York Rock and Roll Ensemble and the Left Banke; Jazz-Rock fusion would become a discrete genre, Spanish influences would be felt in the Doors’ “Spanish Caravan,”<sup>4</sup> and Rock and pop music would undergo a complete transformation.

In this flowering of experimentation, the most recurrent topos in Rock exoticism of the middle sixties is that of India. Because of the heritage of the Raj, its resonances in British comedy and music hall (particularly of the satiric, *Goon Show* variety), and the presence of London’s large and thriving Indian community, Indian culture was undoubtedly more familiar in England than it was in the United States. (Indeed, in mid-60s London, exposure to it may have been virtually unavoidable.) Nonetheless, the mystical symbolism that came to be associated with this music was quite new for the popular culture, and it had a far-reaching effect.

## The Beatles

Beatle George Harrison’s songs are undoubtedly the best remembered of the sixties’ “Raga Rock” genre;<sup>5</sup> this is not

<sup>1</sup> August 22, 1964 issue, cited in Jon Savage, *The Kinks: The Official Biography* (London, 1984), 58.

<sup>2</sup> John Platt, Chris Dreja, and Jim McCarty, *Yardbirds* (London, 1983), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Eventually Beatle records would use tape collage techniques, English music hall styles, country and folk styles and so on.

<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1970s, the group Carmen would build an entire sound on a Flamenco-Rock blend.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “Raga Rock” was apparently the invention of a publicist, who was characterizing the Byrds’ (an American group) single “Eight Miles High” (March, 1966), which supposedly made use of a sitar. This catch-phrase eventually came to describe any Rock song that evoked an Indian or generally Oriental mood, whether by use of sitar or another instrument imitating it. (Lillian Roxon, *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia* [New York, 1971], 398.)

The Byrds’ lead singer, Roger McGuinn, offered an interesting insight on the band’s exposure to Indian music when interviewed as part of the 1995 PBS television documentary *Rock and Roll*. He explained that in the early days (1964–65) the band had been recording at World Pacific Studios, house studio of World Pacific Records. Their producer at the time, Jim Dickson, introduced them to some of the world music that the label also featured, including Ravi Shankar. It is hard to tell exactly what came first at

inappropriate, as his love for Indian music (which he studied in earnest, not being content simply to evoke it) was profound and ongoing.<sup>6</sup> But to remember his work and no other in this context is to ignore the atmosphere of experimentation that flourished in the London Rock scene at that time.<sup>7</sup> It is also to ignore the testimony of at least one proximately-placed individual, which suggests that Harrison's exposure to Indian music did not happen quite the way he said it did.

Harrison's own account, reflecting the mystical inevitability of his adopted Indian perspective, was given in perhaps its most complete form in a *Billboard* interview with Timothy White from December, 1992. Harrison speaks, here, of the filming of the Beatles movie *Help!*, in particular the Rajahama Restaurant scene, which was shot at Twickenham Film Studios on April 5 and 6, 1965.

We were waiting to shoot the scene in the restaurant . . . 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. The third time I heard it, I thought, "This is an odd coincidence."<sup>8</sup>

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Harrison had found the music faintly familiar, and wondered if he had heard similar sounds as a child, when his mother would listen to the shortwave radio, getting broadcasts "from Algeria or somewhere." Then, he began to sense that he would soon meet Shankar face to face, which was precisely what happened: "Sure enough, a few months elapsed and then I met this guy from the Asian Music Circle organization who said, 'Oh, Ravi Shankar's gonna come to my house for dinner. Do you want to come too?'"<sup>9</sup>

this point, since (as will be seen) other Indian-influenced pop songs had already been released by the time "Eight Miles High" was recorded, in December, 1965 and January, 1966. Another "Indian" aspect of "Eight Miles High," incidentally, is the four-note guitar figure that functions as transition from the opening harmonic background to the song proper: it is lifted from John Coltrane's "India." (Robert Palmer, *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History* [New York, 1995], 165.)

<sup>6</sup> Although these songs were released as album tracks and single B-sides by the Beatles, the involvement of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and Ringo Starr in Harrison's Indian-influenced songs ranged from slight to nonexistent.

<sup>7</sup> There are very recent examples of this familiar oversight. The 1995 PBS *Rock and Roll* documentary, which mentioned only Harrison and Shankar in the context of Indian influences on English musicians in the mid-1960s. In *The Beatle Anthology*, another much-publicized TV documentary of the same year, Harrison wearily rehearsed a somewhat shorter version of the story that appeared in the Timothy White interview, cited immediately below; contemporaries went unmentioned.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy White, "A Portrait of the Artist," *Billboard* (December 5, 1992), 23.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

Harrison and Shankar developed an immediate affinity for one another, and Harrison later went to India to study with him. While the other Beatles were also interested, for Harrison “it unlocked this enormous big door in the back of my consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> On October 12, 1965, the Beatles recorded “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown),” which became the first pop record with an actual sitar on it. The 1966 Beatle album *Revolver* features Harrison’s first song composed entirely on the sitar, “Love You To,”<sup>11</sup> and the 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band* opens side two with “Within You Without You,” the most developed of Harrison’s Indian pieces, an extended song that features Harrison (and no other Beatles) accompanied by both Indian session musicians and English string players, working from a George Martin arrangement, trying to approximate Indian performance techniques. (“The Inner Light” was a later effort, the B-side of the 1968 “Lady Madonna” single, and also featured Harrison and Indian musicians but no other Beatles.)

There is little that is noticeably Indian, other than the sitar itself, going on at all in “Norwegian Wood.” The song is a John Lennon composition dealing (according to him) with an extramarital affair, or almost-affair, and Harrison plays the sitar in a very guitar-like fashion, offering a signature riff to introduce each verse and close the song.<sup>12</sup> While the harmony remains constant for two lines of text, the sense of an actual drone is missing, and the song’s waltz meter does not serve to evoke a distant locale. The very regularity of the sitar riff serves to anchor it, ironically, more in the current western Folk-Rock sound than in anything more exotic.

By comparison with “Norwegian Wood,” “Within You Without You” and “Love You To” are full-blown exotic excursions. Here, the Indian ethos is suggested by a variety of exotic gestures: persistent drones in the bass; a corresponding harmonic stasis (in these two cases, one harmony sounds throughout each song without changing<sup>13</sup>); and small ornamental slides, particularly in the bass, which suggest Indian bowed instruments. Central to the Indian “feel” is the melodic language Harrison employs, which is clearly meant to evoke Indian Ragas. (Raga is defined in one standard Indian Classical music

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> George played guitar and sang, Anil Bhagwat played tablas, and although it has been assumed that Harrison also played the sitar, recently discovered notes from the recording session seem to indicate that another member of the Asian Music Circle played it. See Mark Lewisohn, *The Complete Beatles Chronicle* (New York, 1992), 217.

<sup>12</sup> Wilfrid Mellers also remarks on this western, or at least unadventurous, use of the sitar. *The Music of the Beatles: Twilight of the Gods* (New York, 1973), 59–60.

<sup>13</sup> A large proportion of Rock songs are based on three chords, and some songs on two, but to use *one* is highly atypical. It can also happen in Funk music, but Funk is a very different style.

text as the “modal system of Indian classical music; a melodic mode distinguished from others by a potential variety of elements: selection of pitches (scale-type), melodic shape, melodic motive, pitch hierarchy, pitch register, ornamentation, mood.”<sup>14</sup>) It is undoubtedly from the Ragas that such Indian clichés as the lowered seventh scale degree in major mode, used prominently both ascending and descending, are derived. In addition to this virtually all-encompassing melodic material, “Love You To” and “Within You Without You” use sitar and tablas, and “Within You Without You” uses other Indian stringed instruments as well (svarmandal, tambura, and dilruba).

### Predecessors and Contemporaries

The dates are important here, for a simple reason. In late January, 1965, three months before Harrison first encountered a sitar on the Twickenham movie set, Ray Davies, lead singer and primary songwriter of the Kinks, wrote an Indian-influenced song, “See My Friends,” which his musical contemporaries found extremely influential. He remembered the episode this way:

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We stopped off in India on the way to Australia. I remember getting up, going to the beach and seeing all these fishermen coming along. I heard chanting to start with, and gradually the chanting came a bit closer and I could see it was fishermen carrying their nets out. When I got to Australia I wrote lots of songs, and that one particularly.<sup>15</sup>

It is only fair to mention that one of the Kinks’ producers of that time, Shel Talmy, felt that Davies wrote in the Indian idiom only after hearing a song by guitarist Jon Mark (later a sideman with John Mayall) Talmy had played for him and suggested as a model.<sup>16</sup> Regardless (it is perhaps only human nature to claim a piece of such a good idea), Davies sought to achieve an Indian sound, substituting a controlled feedback for the drone, and his approach differed markedly from Harrison’s:

On “See My Friends” I was interested in getting this little feedback sound, playing the notes on my twelve-string Framus [the make of his guitar] and placing it near the amp, so that they’d feedback like a droning sound. When we recorded it we limited it very heavily,

<sup>14</sup> Bonnie C. Wade, *Music in India: The Classical Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1979), 240.

<sup>15</sup> Savage, *The Kinks*, 57–58. For dating of the trip to India, see p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> John Mendelssohn, *The Kink Kronikles: An Unauthorized—and Uncensored—History of the Second Longest-Lived Group in Rock* (New York, 1985), 59.

putting on loads of compression. That's why it's wonderfully squashed, *shhhhhh*, surging: that's the limiters pulsing, very basic but very effective.<sup>17</sup>

Historically, the song may have even been more influential than is generally assumed. Barry Fantoni, an illustrator and saxophonist who had been associated with the Kinks from their earliest years, recounts an episode involving some of the Kinks' contemporaries and their immediate response to "See My Friends." He said,

I remember it vividly and still think it's a remarkable pop song. I was with the Beatles the evening that they actually sat around listening to it on a gramophone, saying "You know, this guitar thing sounds like a sitar. We must get one of those." They were vandals. Everything Ray did they copied.<sup>18</sup>

This is obviously a problematic anecdote from a biased source, but the partisan and vitriolic outburst at the end does not necessarily make the story untrue.<sup>19</sup> "See My Friends" was released in late July, 1965;<sup>20</sup> after entering the British charts on August 5 it became a hit,<sup>21</sup> being overall no. 18 for the month of September.<sup>22</sup> This means that it saturated the London airwaves the very month before Harrison and the Beatles recorded "Norwegian Wood" in October, and a substantial period of time before Harrison's later, more recognizably Indian efforts were written and recorded.

Of course, Fantoni's version of events is unverifiable, and (not surprisingly) has been utterly ignored in the Beatle literature. However, Fantoni (and the Beatles, if his memory is clear) would not have been alone in finding the song remarkable: the Who's Peter Townshend, another mid-sixties Rock visionary, realized exactly what Ray

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Savage, *The Kinks*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Ray Davies, in his recently published "Unauthorized Autobiography," *X-Ray* [1994] (London, 1995), which is a fictionalized treatment of the early years of the Kinks, speaks very highly of Fantoni, and mentions his early proximity to and friendship with him. This particular incident is not mentioned. In any case, Davies himself, oddly, does not seem to care much about pioneering the Raga Rock genre. He discusses the songs, sometimes in detail ("See My Friends" on pp. 204–05 and 275–76, and "Fancy" on pp. 40 and 274), but betrays no interest in the later development of the genre. This is particularly interesting because it is obvious from the book that a sense of competition with the Beatles was keenly felt.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 173.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Gambaccini, Tim Rice, and Jonathan Rice, eds., *British Hit Singles*, 8th ed. (New York, 1991), 153.

<sup>22</sup> Dave McAleer, compiler, *The All Music Book of Hit Singles: Top 20 Charts from 1954 to the Present Day* (San Francisco, 1994), 110.



Davies had done. Townshend was already an admirer of the Kinks, and had at that time already written “I Can’t Explain,” a Who classic, as an explicit attempt to interest Shel Talmy in his own group. Here is his assessment:

“See My Friends” was the next time I pricked up my ears and thought “God, he’s done it again. He’s invented something new.” That was the first reasonable use of the drone—far, far better than anything the Beatles did and far, far earlier. It was a European sound rather than an Eastern sound but with a strong, legitimate Eastern influence which had its roots in European folk music. On our first album there’s a couple of songs that were directly influenced by that song: “The Good’s Gone,” for example.<sup>23</sup>

Townshend’s point is a crucial one: for a western pop listener, an Indian/Rock blend had to retain a sufficient amount of traditional western elements to be successful. What Ray Davies did (and Harrison did not do) was to allow more than one chord to enter the picture. Traditional Indian music is based on drones and not on harmonic progressions, so Harrison sought to be faithful to that aesthetic—he wrote songs in which the prevailing harmony did not change. With Davies’s “See My Friends,” almost the entire verse is based on a drone, but the harmony changes at the very end, and a contrasting chord progression appears in the middle section. The overall sound remains jangling, drone-based, and unquestionably quasi-Indian, all that is necessary in a pop-exotic context, and while the flattened seventh scale degree is melodically very prominent, it is used with no functional pull to the subdominant whatsoever. The variety expected by western ears is still provided by the extremely judicious use of contrasting chords.

For all the artistic success of “See My Friends,” it is in my opinion at least equaled by the Kinks’ only other contribution to the genre, “Fancy,” from their 1966 album *Face to Face*. Not only is Ray’s Framus-driven Indian drone easier to hear, but there are more *faux*-Indian slides in the bass, and the rhythmic feel suggests a more familiar kind of exoticism: the song’s slow-to-moderate 4/4 meter with a subdivided second beat radiates the kind of undulating snake-charmer motion that has signified the Seductive East for a century and a half.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>23</sup> Savage, *The Kinks*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> A post-colonialist critic might point out that such a beat is more reminiscent of traditional evocations of the Arab worlds, not India, and that this kind of pan-Eastern exoticism, lumping together only barely-related gestures in one exotic whole, represents a kind of us-vs.-everybody else colonialism. Such a critic would be right but, rightly or wrongly, it does not matter; the addition of that evocative beat in a western pop song provides an exotic center off which the other exotic gestures can play.

lyrics are somewhat more suggestive of an exotic topos (“My love is like a ruby / that no one can see / only my fancy”), and while the song has a second chord, we hear it only after two full verses over the drone and a vocal flourish. This chord is a second-inversion subdominant sounded over the same bass, so there is no sense of movement required to get there; the drone sounds throughout. It is perfectly set up, and a chord that might have gone unnoticed becomes a major event, highly effective and expressive.

*Face to Face* was released in October, 1966.<sup>25</sup> Davies has dated the composition of “Fancy” after the song “Sunny Afternoon” came out, in June of that year.<sup>26</sup> Positing a July–early August composition date (given recording-release turnaround time, it could not have been much later), this means that he still would not have heard any strongly Indian-influenced songs from Harrison and the Beatles, because “Love You To” was only released in August.<sup>27</sup> (John Mendelssohn’s claim that “Fancy” preceded “Love You To” by several months is therefore mistaken.<sup>28</sup>) But, by the same token, since “Love You To” was recorded on April 11 of that year,<sup>29</sup> Harrison could not have been influenced by “Fancy,” although (as Fantoni claimed, and as the chronology makes clear) he could well have been by the earlier “See My Friends.”

Other sitar-based experiments were taking place contemporaneously. In late June, 1965, five months after “See My Friends” was written, one month before its release, and just two to three months after Harrison picked up a sitar for the first time, the Yardbirds released “Heart Full of Soul,” a biting, minor-key single (with no exotic lyrical content) that was an immediate hit on both sides of the Atlantic; in Britain, it was no. 2 for the month of July.<sup>30</sup> Jeff Beck’s famous wailing guitar riff had been intended for sitar, which would have put it well before “Norwegian Wood,” had the plan been followed through. Here is how Yardbird Jim McCarty remembers the recording session:

The riff on the demo suggested a sitar, and Giorgio [the Yardbirds’ manager, Giorgio Gomelsky] actually hired an Indian sitar player

<sup>25</sup> Savage, *The Kinks*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Hunter Davies, *The Beatles* [revision of 1968 authorized biography] (New York, 1978), 357.

<sup>28</sup> John Mendelssohn, Liner notes to *Kink Kronikles*, a 1972 Warner Brothers double album anthology of the Kinks’ music.

<sup>29</sup> Lewisohn, *Beatles Chronicle*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> McAleer, *The All Music Book of Hit Singles*, 110.

and tabla player, God knows where from—probably the Indian restaurant where he'd just had lunch. We walked into the studio and saw these two sitting on the floor, in the full gear, with Roger, the engineer, trying to mike up their instruments. We spent a couple of hours trying to get a decent sound, but it didn't work; it sounded terribly thin. Then someone had the bright idea that Jeff could produce a sitar-like effect on the guitar, which he did.<sup>31</sup>

Fine as Beck's lead is, it is regrettable that the engineer was unable to satisfactorily record the sitar. An out-take from the earlier portion of the session survives, with the sitar part intact (and, indeed, too soft), and that instrumentation adds a wonderfully exotic flavor to the song. (On the other hand, in the final version the song sounds much better rehearsed, and a fairly witless oom-pah drummer-boy beat in the choruses has been replaced by a far more effective, roll-to-the-beat figure on the snare-drum.) In general, though, "Heart Full of Soul" has markedly less exotic content than "See My Friends," relying as it does on a more familiar Rock beat and more frequent chord changes.

Since it was released a month before "See My Friends," "Heart Full of Soul" would have been recorded before the Yardbirds could have known anything about Ray Davies's Indian experiment, much less Harrison's. In early March, 1966, the Rolling Stones recorded "Paint It Black,"<sup>32</sup> which featured Brian Jones on sitar and is somewhat related in mood (and lack of Indian lyrical content, despite the use of an Indian instrument) to "Heart Full of Soul."<sup>33</sup> As far as actual recordings, the Stones could only have known about "See My Friends," "Heart Full of Soul," and "Norwegian Wood" at this time; none of the Beatles' developed Indian pieces had yet been released.

All of this serves to illustrate a central point about the genesis of Raga Rock: easily lost in the blizzard of Beatles literature and retellings of Harrison's introduction to Shankar is the fact that experiments with Indian instruments and musical content really happened simultaneously, in several quarters, some months before Harrison's first efforts. Many of the musicians in the London Rock scene knew each other, and while there is no firm data showing that they traded sitar experiments and other Indian exotica around, it is hard to imagine

<sup>31</sup> Platt et al., *Yardbirds*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Felix Aeppli, *Heart of Stone: The Definitive Rolling Stones Discography, 1962–1983* (Ann Arbor, MI: 1985), 81–82.

<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, a kind of residual Indian feel is acknowledged by the silly caricature of five Indians that graced the sleeve of the single version released in Spain, May, 1966, which is shown in Aeppli, 88.

that such influences would not have been “in the air.”<sup>34</sup> And while much has been made of the Beatles’ “Norwegian Wood” because it was the first pop record to use a sitar, it was recorded well after the Kinks’ clearly Indian “See My Friends” was released, and was only first because the Yardbirds’ recording technology failed.

### Music, Drugs, and Meditation

For the public at large, an awareness of Indian culture occurred neither before nor in tandem with these widely-disseminated musical experiments; it lagged behind. Yet, a clear connection developed between cultural and musical worlds. The main publicists for Indian culture (however imperfectly understood) were the Beatles, and the catalyst would be their infatuation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a Hindu monk and apostle of Transcendental Meditation (TM), who catered especially to celebrities. And it was through the specious connections between sitar music, the Maharishi, drugs, and the Beatles that Raga Rock acquired its sense of the slightly forbidden.

A western awareness of India had been growing, particular as growing numbers of young people found themselves in Asia for other (often drug-related) reasons. It is true that opium poppies were grown in and exported from India, but that country was no more than a medium-sized producer of that particular crop. To Indians, of course, there was no connection between meditation and drugs. One writer expressed frustration with the commonly-made connection between drug use and TM this way:

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I confess to being rather annoyed when hippie-type visitors come through Asian countries—and in recent years many have visited India, if only going to or from Laos or Nepal—who compare transcendental meditation with an LSD experience.<sup>35</sup>

Certain westerners were perceiving a connection they wanted to exist, in other words. To the practitioners of this kind of meditation, which was based on ancient Indian traditions, it was thoroughly traditional, non-subversive, and non-chemical. The entrance of the Beatles, heroes of the youth culture, onto this particular scene only made the connections easier to make.

<sup>34</sup> With regard to the two primary groups in question, Ray Davies’s *X-Ray* gives no impression of friendship between the Kinks and Beatles, just a sense of competitiveness and distrust.

<sup>35</sup> Krishna Singh, “How Does Meditation Work?” in Martin Ebon, ed., *Maharishi, The Guru* (New York, 1968), 33.

The Beatles' well-publicized meeting with the Maharishi would not occur until August, 1967, when they would come to share Harrison's interest in him. However, this was more than a year after "Love You To" had been recorded, some five months after the recording of "Within You Without You," so Harrison had already been involved with Indian music for a long time. For all the appearance of a connection, then, the Maharishi could have had absolutely no role in the Beatles' initial interest in Indian music.

They were with the Maharishi when their manager Brian Epstein died of a drug overdose, and the Maharishi was able to offer them comfort, explaining that death meant little, that Epstein had only gone on to the next stage, that he would be reincarnated. Later, the group even made a pilgrimage to the Maharishi's camp in India to study with him, but they would become disenchanted with him and leave. In fact, Lennon's extraordinarily bitter "Sexy Sadie," from the Beatles' 1968 "White Album" (the official release title was simply *The Beatles*) was originally called "Maharishi"; Lennon agreed to "Sexy Sadie" in order to avoid legal complications, at the urging of the other Beatles.<sup>36</sup> The lyrics, which otherwise remained unchanged, spoke clearly of disaffection: "She made a fool of everyone . . . However big you think you are . . . you'll get yours yet . . . we gave you everything we owned just to sit at your table . . ."

That Harrison had been interested in Ravi Shankar long before his interest in the Maharishi and TM, and that TM was based on ancient Indian traditions and had nothing whatever to do with drugs—these were subtleties lost on the transgression-addled 1960s public. Even distinguished cultural critics tended to make facile connections between India and Indian-influenced music, TM, and the much-celebrated and feared culture of drugs and psychedelia.

Richard Poirier, for example, in a *Partisan Review* (Fall, 1967) commentary on recent Beatles recordings, gave a loose and somewhat jaundiced account of the whole phenomenon. In his discussion of the recently-released single "Baby, You're A Rich Man," he refers to the "accompaniment of bursts of sitar music and the clip-clopping of Indian song." He continues:

The sitar, an instrument Harrison studied in India for six weeks with the renowned Ravi Shankar . . . here suggests not the India of "Within You, Without You" evoked on the Sgt. Pepper album, the India of the Bhagavad Gita. It is rather another India, of fabulous riches, the India of the British and their Maharajahs, a place for exotic travel, but also for josh [sic] sticks and the otherworldliness of

<sup>36</sup> Bill Harry, ed., *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia* (New York, 1992), 427–28.

a “trip.” (. . .) [The Beatles were] once close to home both in fact and in their music but [are] now implicated not only in the Mersey beat but in the Ganges sound, in travel to India and “trips” of a kind for which India set the precedent for centuries.<sup>37</sup>

Poirier’s clumsy emphasis on the parallel meanings of “trip” and the involvement of various Beatles with LSD was not a rogue action: locating TM on the same line as drugs, if perhaps a bit further along, had been done (intentionally or not) by the Beatles themselves. Harrison put it this way in an interview with the *Los Angeles Free Press*: “Acid is not the answer, definitely not the answer. It’s enabled people to see a little bit more, but when you really get hip, you don’t need it.” Of LSD, Paul McCartney said to Hunter Davies of the London *Sunday Times*, “It was an experience we went through, and now it’s over we don’t need it any more. We think we’re finding other ways of getting there.”<sup>38</sup> After offering these two quotations, Poirier opines that “in this effort they’re apparently being helped by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Indian founder of the International Meditation Society.”<sup>39</sup> As these comments post-dated the Beatles’ introduction to TM, the implication was clear: TM was the Next Big High after drug use.

Advocates of and publicists for TM were even clearer about the connection between the two, the natural progression from chemical to meditational highs. An odd little volume from 1968, edited by Martin Ebon,<sup>40</sup> entitled *Maharishi, The Guru* and published by Signet books, gives ample evidence of this viewpoint. The book is a collection of rave essays by favorably-disposed journalists and followers of the Maharishi, including such pieces as “New York is Ready!,” “Beyond Pot and LSD,” and “He Turned Us On!” The Beatles are paraded about in the volume, in two pieces particularly. The first is called “The Beatles Without Mask,” and outlines how TM became the mature choice of these four enlightened young people, who were too experienced to bother with drugs any more. A David Frost TV interview with John Lennon and George Harrison is also included, and the two Beatles talk of their past drug use and of how different meditation was. (By the time the book came out, of course, the Beatles had already broken with the Maharishi.)

So, despite the Maharishi’s repeated statements that TM had nothing to do with drugs, and his oft-repeated demands that students

<sup>37</sup> Richard Poirier, “Learning From the Beatles,” *Partisan Review* (Fall, 1967), 534.

<sup>38</sup> Both quoted *ibid.*, 541.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Ebon, be it said, was last sighted as a “historian of Santa Claus” on a *Biography* episode on the Arts & Entertainment cable TV channel.

stay clean for fifteen days before they started learning TM, and despite Harrison's prior Indian experience, drugs and TM were frequently assumed to belong to the same cultural matrix. Here, for example, is the page one advertising blurb from *Maharishi, The Guru*:

**BEYOND  
POT**

**AND  
LSD**

is the title of a chapter in this fascinating book. In it, the California hippies tell how they gave up drugs in favor of Maharishi's non-drug turn-on, a trend that can be seen in more and more of the psychedelic generation—and among men and women from all walks of life—as Maharishi tours the U.S. with his message of spiritual regeneration.

A quick browse through this book leaves no doubt as to its tenor and message. Here, Krishna Singh quotes the Maharishi's words on the subject of the ultimate goal, the transcendental state of being:

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The transcendental state of Being lies beyond all seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting—beyond all thinking and beyond all feeling. This state of the unmanifested, absolute pure consciousness of Being is the ultimate state of life.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Rock musicians such as the Beatles, by virtue of their mere presence and visibility, lent celebrity status to the TM movement itself. Chester Butterworth presents this skewed view of the Beatles' involvement, complete with an explanation of the things that made Harrison's commitment the most profound:

And because they are farther out than most, and more experimental, and richer, too, it was the Beatles who had the first real Western crack at Maharishi's transcendental meditation. George went to India, moved from playing the guitar to the sitar. He swallowed the huge subcontinent whole. Then he got the other three to share his enthusiasm for everything from incense to Hindu mythology. They don't do things by halves. George had his minicar painted with Indian symbols. On the roof, he reproduced an eighteenth-century Hindu painting of the sun in a gold rectangle. One car door is covered with the picture of a boar, supposed to be the Hindu god Vishnu in his third reincarnation.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Singh, "How Does Meditation Work?" in Ebon, *Maharishi*, 35–36.

<sup>42</sup> Chester Butterworth, "The Beatles Without Mask, in Ebon, *Maharishi*, 56.

Don McNeill, writing about the Maharishi's tour appearance in Los Angeles in fall, 1967, offers this (in retrospect) quaint anecdote about other musicians' reactions to him:

The next day, he [the Maharishi] spoke privately with Donovan, Mick Jagger, and several members of the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane, an audience which yielded other disciples. "It was really boss," [the Grateful Dead's Bob] Weir recalled, "He turned us on."<sup>43</sup>

Finally, TM was most clearly situated within the (apparently codified) hippie cosmology by James Crenshaw:

Since the hippie's avowed aim is to "have an ecstatic, beautiful, productive, wide-awake, self-realized life," experiments with various drugs, especially the mind-expanding variety, appealed to him. However, since the dangers of LSD have been proven in many instances, its use is dwindling, and the hippies are leaning more toward marijuana, mescaline, or peyote.

The fact that impressed us most, though, was that "meditation" à la Maharishi is replacing even these drugs for many of the hippie practitioners. It has become more than a substitute for the drug experience. They refer to it as such an *indescribable* spiritual experience that it can not be compared with any type of drug experience. Those who have fallen under the Maharishi's spell would not consider going back to drugs.<sup>44</sup>

### The Moody Blues: Raga Rock Becomes a Cliché

By 1968, these pervasive cultural connections had, finally, come to be reflected in the musical world. Moreover, what had been musically experimental had become a kind of convention, as was demonstrated by a prominent album released that year by the Moody Blues, *In Search of the Lost Chord*. The Moody Blues were an English Art Rock band who built a reputation on superb musicianship coupled with a fairly windy mysticism. Their albums often involved months of recording time and solid multi-instrumental proficiency on the part of each band member. They also had a penchant for superficial poetry, recitations of which were assimilated into the musical continuum. *In Search of the Lost Chord* is a showcase of all these characteristics.

<sup>43</sup> Don McNeill, " 'He Turned Us On!' " in Ebon, *Maharishi*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> James Crenshaw, "Beyond 'Pot' and LSD," in Ebon, *Maharishi*, 100.



This was the first Moody Blues album on which the band members themselves played *all* of the instruments, some twenty of which are listed on the record jacket (including sitar and tablas), several played by two or more band members (or “Members of the Expedition,” as the jacket has it). The jacket provides not only an explanation of the *mantra* concept, and of the word *Om*, but also features a large, geometric figure called a *yantra*, which “is used much the same was as a *mantra*, though visually.” The characteristic poetry is also there, on the jacket and on the record, e.g. “Between the eyes and ears there lie / The sounds of colour / And the light of a sigh.”<sup>45</sup>

In glaring contrast to the Raga Rock music of 1965–67, *In Search of the Lost Chord*, taking its cue from the zeitgeist, was completely dependent on the connections between drugs, meditation, and India. The songs on the album deal with various kinds of journeys, both drug-assisted and otherwise, and wonderful soaring effects are produced by both musicianship and recording mastery. The journeys are, if one takes them literally, somewhat random; a song about explorer [David] Livingstone coexists with a song that claims that “Thinking is the Best Way to Travel,” while other songs entitled “Visions of Paradise” and “Voices in the Sky” evoke the celestial. More specific songs address both drugs and Indian culture: a frank paean to LSD high priest Timothy Leary (“Legend of a Mind”) amounts to an endorsement of psychedelics, while the sitar-and-tabla-laden “Om” exalts meditation. Of course, if everything is taken metaphorically rather than literally, the album can be seen to deal with The Great Journey (even the lighthearted “Dr. Livingstone, I Presume,” which sounds in parts like an English vaudeville number, features a line, “We’re all looking for someone . . .”<sup>46</sup>). Still, the actual mystic and philosophic content of the album is superficial, which is why it is so effective in connecting TM, India, drugs, exotic musical instruments and styles, and everything else into the same blandly mystical constellation of mind expansion; any deeper thought on the issue would have exposed the flaws of approach.

“Om,” the final song, has the clearest use of Indian musical elements. The lyrics, predictably, are about meditation, the infinite, and so on. Between the second and third verses, where a guitar solo might be expected, the beat is suspended, and there is a long passage for sitar and tablas that uses, rather than a fixed Western beat, the gradual *accelerando* characteristic of Hindustani (North Indian) musical

<sup>45</sup> The poetry is by drummer Graeme Edge.

<sup>46</sup> This song has a very light touch, showing the same music hall influences that Paul McCartney liked to use in his work.

performances.<sup>47</sup> In marked contrast to the earlier “Raga Rock” songs, the lyrical content is complementary to the instrumentation and style involved.

Coming out as late (relatively) as it did, the album lacks the earlier Raga Rock songs’ sense of riskiness and immediacy. The Indian topos and use of sitar were already well-established on the airwaves and in musical culture. On the other hand, the Moody Blues’ level of musicianship and recording expertise far outshone what had appeared previously. Musically, the use of Indian exoticism in 1968 was no longer an experiment; it was a familiar lode to be mined. The Moody Blues were not experimenting: they were betting on a sure thing.

In a sense, *In Search of the Lost Chord* conventionalized the subject matter of its lyrics in the same way it did the use of Indian instruments and styles. As with the musical elements, what had previously been fairly risky, more-or-less successful musical experiments had in this album become finished and polished. What had previously evoked the forbidden and experimental was now somehow made accessible, even prosaic. When meditation, LSD, mind-travel, India, Voices from the Sky, and even Dr. Livingstone are placed carefully and neatly—almost systematically—next to each other on a record album, the composite effect is less vivid and alluring than safe, in a kind of shrink-wrapped way. One imagines the adolescent record owner: Here is my record album about Journeys: physical, chemical, and spiritual. I keep it on my shelf, right *here*.

### The Exotic and the Personal

The various Raga Rock artists had distinct reasons for making use of Indian instruments or styles. Of the earliest wave of Rock exoticists, George Harrison at least had developed a passion about Indian philosophies and ideals when he took interest in Indian music, and he sought to write Indian-influenced songs so as to evoke something for which the normal Rock language was unequipped. But Harrison was, as we saw, not the first to work in this area. The Yardbirds’ and Rolling Stones’ efforts seem to be purely musical experiments, seemingly less attached to any exotic topos or lyrical content than to an attractive new sound. The Moody Blues were so long after the fact that all the symbolism had been spelled out for them already, and may even (bluntly) be said to have been cashing in. But with the Kinks’ Raga Rock songs, Ray Davies had a very different motivation.

<sup>47</sup> The methods by which this *accelerando* takes place are discussed in Wade, *Music in India*, 121. For purposes of comparison, the corresponding increase in rhythmic density *without* an actual *accelerando* that characterizes Karnatic (South Indian) performances is discussed on 126–27.

Davies had also used the Indian ethos to access the inaccessible, but he was originally singing about an area far more remote and taboo to Rock listeners of the time than mere India. As he put it in an interview with Maureen Cleave:

["See My Friends"] is about homosexuality. I know a person in this business who is quite normal and good-looking, but girls have given him such a rotten deal that he becomes sort of queer. He has always got his friends. I mean it's like football teams and the way they're always kissing each other. Same sort of thing. [ . . . ]

It wasn't fiction. I can understand feeling like that. As it didn't come from a deliberate I-want-to-write-a-song-about-this, it's difficult to recall the memories. It's about being a youth who is not sure of his sexuality. I remember I said to Rasa [his wife] one night, "If it wasn't for you, I'd be queer." I think that's a horrible thing to say to someone of seventeen, but I felt that. I was unsure of myself, and I still find it hard to relate to guys who are out with the lads. I remember boxing and at the end of the fight the trainer came on to me and said, "You've got to work on your stomach muscles," and put his hand on me and started feeling me up. On the surface they're all really mannish, real he-men, but it exists just *there*. That really made it, for me, a bit of a lie.

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Maybe I was becoming aware of how destructive women can be, how any kind of love affair can be disruptive. The song is about acceptance: that's the way the situation is, and you must tolerate it. That's not the way I was, so it's quite mature in that sense.

I didn't know what I was writing. I just let the words come out. . . . I probably made it up, unaware of what I was singing, because I was more interested in getting this funny sound, yet not being experienced enough to know how to write.<sup>48</sup>

For the mainstream public, it seems the real message of "See My Friends" hardly got out at all. As Ray put it,

I know there was resistance to it. Maybe that was a good thing; it gave it some sort of notoriety. I remember that Keith Altham of the *New Musical Express* hated the record. I talked to him about duality and people, bisexuality and things like that, and the *NME* wouldn't print that sort of thing. They wanted us to be really normal . . . boys—you know, have a pint and piss off. But I wasn't like that.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ray Davies, interview with Maureen Cleave, quoted in Savage, *The Kinks*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* Davies offers a longer and somewhat more vague discussion of "See My Friends" in *X-Ray*, 275–76.

The Kinks' other Indian-influenced song, "Fancy," is a Davies composition dealing not specifically with sexuality but with other matters profoundly personal and revealing: relation to and protection from others, desire, misconceptions. Biographer Jon Savage felt that "'Fancy' stands as one complete statement of Ray Davies's philosophy."<sup>50</sup> Davies himself provided further commentary on the song and its lyrics:

I remember writing "Fancy" really late one night. I think I wrote the song after "Sunny Afternoon" came out because I had this silly old Framus guitar that I played on all those records. I had the wrong strings on it, but it had a nice quality. It was a picking sound, and I could sustain one note, as Indian music does. I didn't intend it to be that way, really. A friend of mine didn't like the words "Fancy all the girls you see." They were too specific for her. But I question that because sometimes you got [sic] to make people feel at ease, just put something normal in. It's not a rule, but sometimes it's wrong to be totally off the wall. The song deals with perception. I think love is like something that you hold. You've got to put love in your hand like *that*, but you must never grasp it. That's the secret. If you grasp it, it goes away. It's got to be allowed to shine. That line "My love is like a ruby that nobody can see," it's a bit possessive but it's charming. And "No one can penetrate me"—what can I say about that? A virgin! It's inside me, really. When I started writing that it was at the time when people really wanted to find out what was wrong with me. All my life I've been able to keep them out.<sup>51</sup>

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That Davies's friend objected to the explicitly heteroerotic line, and that he justifies it on the basis of not wanting to shock audiences all the time, is revealing. While not explicitly dealing with sexual matters, this song uses an exotic musical language, to that point only heard in the Rock world in "See My Friend" and, to a more limited extent, the aforementioned songs by the Yardbirds and Rolling Stones, to show us the inner man, carefully and successfully self-protected. Perhaps Davies's friend was troubled by the disguising of a key piece of the puzzle: homosexuality, the very issue around which "See My Friends" had centered. The relationship between the two songs was not lost on Savage, who singled out the drone device, hallmark of probably the most obvious and available "Other" music known to Davies, as the vehicle he used to get to his "innermost feelings" in both songs.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 60.

Homoeroticism was too dangerous for the world of mid-1960s popular music, where gender roles were, after all, clearly spelled out. The thread was not picked up by other Rock musicians (or even, it seems, much noticed by the public). But the Kinks' use of eastern musical influences to allude to personal and sexual matters is directly in keeping with historical uses of exoticism as signifier for forbidden sexuality: examples include the "Turkish" Style of the late eighteenth century,<sup>53</sup> nineteenth-century Russian musical Orientalism,<sup>54</sup> and twentieth-century evocations of the gamelan.<sup>55</sup> There is no indication that Davies was aware of any of these repertoires.

The artistic (as opposed to commercial) success of the Kinks' two Indian-tinged pieces relative to Harrison's early efforts in that area illustrates another key point about exoticism in general, touched upon by Pete Townshend. For western music, art music or Rock, to achieve a successful "exotic" effect, it cannot have, ironically, too much ethnomusicological verisimilitude. Our ears are anchored in the familiar. If too much of the home product gives way to exotic elements, the end result sounds like an unconvincing copy of a foreign music: not very evocative, paradoxically, of that exotic frame of reference. There is a profound difference, Edward Said has reminded us, between Orientalism and the actual East. "Fancy" in particular suggests the Exotic East to us with every gesture that we westerners subliminally understand to be Indian: drones, harmonic stasis, flattened-seventh scale degrees, keening vocals, hypnotic beat, Raga-like melody, and lyrics that suggest that the singer's inner reality is at least as real as the outer, physical one. But the framework remains Western: the best remains regular, the structure is strophic, and there is a chord change. "Fancy," like "See My Friends," evokes this mood without ever suggesting that we are listening to anything other than Western musicians. The exotic card is thus played perfectly, not overplayed.

In retrospect, it is clear that Raga Rock's most common associations, TM and drugs, were not intended by the Kinks, Yardbirds, or Beatles, but were more the result of other forces active in popular

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Mary Hunter, "The *Alla Turca* Style in the Late Eighteenth Century: Race and Gender in the Symphony and Seraglio," in Jonathan Bellman, *The Exotic in Western Music*.

<sup>54</sup> See Richard Taruskin, "Entoiling the Falconet: Russian Musical Orientalism in Context," *Cambridge Opera Journal* IV/3 (1992), 253–80, and a postscript to the same article, *Cambridge Opera Journal* VI/1 (1994), 81–84; both reprinted in revised form in Bellman, *The Exotic*.

<sup>55</sup> See Philip Brett, "Eros and Orientalism in Britten's Operas," in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., "Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology" (New York and London, 1994), 236–56.

culture,<sup>56</sup> only later to be made explicit by the Moody Blues. The historical pattern is familiar: original intent is superseded by something more resonant to the popular mind. What is striking is how quickly it all happened. Perhaps in the second half of the twentieth century, this is no surprise after all; an idea is no sooner born than it is available to the world through mass media, and the birth-to-death evolutionary curve of at least the first phase of such a musical-cultural development is bound to be much shorter than it would have been in previous eras. Memories are shorter, and awareness more fleeting. The end result was, in this case, that a stylistic strain in Rock music that sought to evoke the profound, the enlightened, and the timeless appeared and all but disappeared in the proverbial wink of an eye.

That is, the original form all but disappeared; given the speed with which Raga Rock became a cliché, there may have been no other alternative. But it should be pointed out that Indian influences in Rock and popular musics did not completely cease with the Moody Blues; in fact, they continue to appear up to the present time. On one hand, after the late 1960s, the approach became broader: more musicians have sought an actual East-West blend, as opposed to merely a piquant taste of the East.<sup>57</sup> But on the other hand, there is a nostalgia factor, too: a 1994 song by Sam Phillips, "Baby I Can't Please You," alternates a flawlessly Beatlesequ Raga Rock chorus with a completely different musical style in the verses, a Mersey-beat sound more reminiscent of the Beatles' "From Me to You." Raga Rock thus becomes less an exotic style than "one of the things the Beatles did," less evocative of the Exotic East than of other homegrown Indian-influenced exotica. There is a delightful irony in this: a stylistic strain in Rock and Roll that referenced the time-worn trope of the Eternal

<sup>56</sup> Although, it is interesting that John Lennon's one truly exotic work is also both an LSD song and a religious song, and that it excited nowhere near the interest Harrison's songs did. This is "Tomorrow Never Knows," from the 1966 album *Revolver*, a song for which Lennon requested some kind of apparatus that would make him sound like the Dalai Lama singing from a hilltop. The strategy involved recording his voice through a revolving Leslie speaker, then adding many overdubs, tape loops, tracks of Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr playing bass and drums in rhythmic unison, one organ note played continuously, two guitar solos (one also put through a Leslie speaker and the other distorted), and a honky-tonk piano. (Lewisohn, *Chronicle*, 70–71.) Lennon supposedly wrote this on LSD (Paul called it "an LSD song, probably the only one"), and for his lyrics used material from Timothy Leary's version of the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. The words were thus far closer to the real thing than anything Harrison or the others had done. The music was totally uncommercial, however, and thus it was not the song to start or continue a trend.

<sup>57</sup> Guitarist Ry Cooder's CD, *Talkin' Timbuktu* (Hannibal 1981, with Ali Farka Toure), and *A Meeting by the River* (Water Lily Acoustics 29, with Vishwa Mohan Bhatt), illustrate this more subtle approach.

Orient ends up by reminding us more of *us thinking about* the Eternal Orient than the Orient itself. Raga Rock is thus like other musical exotica in that it pairs, perhaps in equal measure, an exploration outward with a penetrating look in the mirror.

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### Appendix: Selected Discography

The purpose of this brief discography is to give information on availability, as of this writing, of the songs discussed.

#### **Beatles.**

Inner Light: *Past Masters, vol II*. CD: Capitol/EMI 90044.

Love You To: *Revolver*. CD: Parlophone 46441.

Norwegian Wood: *Rubber Soul*. CD: Parlophone 46440.

Tomorrow Never Knows: *Revolver*. CD: Parlophone 46441.

Within You Without You: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. CD: Parlophone 46442.

#### **Kinks.**

Fancy: *The Kink Kronikles*. CD: Reprise 6454.

See My Friends: *Kinks-Size Kinkdom*. CD: Rhino Records 75769.

#### **Moody Blues.**

Om: *In Search of the Lost Chord*. CD: Polydor 820 168.

#### **Rolling Stones.**

Paint It Black: *Hot Rocks, 1965–1971*. CD: ABKO Records 6667.

#### **Sam Phillips.**

Baby I Can't Please You: *Martinis and Bikinis*. CD: Virgin 39438.

#### **Yardbirds.**

Heart Full of Soul (commercial release): *Greatest Hits, vol. I: Smokestack Lightning*. CD: Legacy Records 75895.

Heart Full of Soul (sitar version): *Greatest Hits, vol. II: Blues, Backtracks, and Shapes of Things to Come*. CD: Legacy Records 48658.