



Excerpt from:

# WORKING CLASS MYSTIC

## *A Spiritual Biography of George Harrison*

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By Gary Tillery

*Taken from Part Two: The Making of a Mystic, Chapter Six: Krishna*

During his visits to India, he had become fascinated by Krishna. Known as “the dark one,” the god was easily distinguished by being shown with blue skin. He was often depicted in the company of a retinue of Gopis—lovely maidens who tended to his needs—charming them by playing his flute. Adding to the weight of Pattie’s despair, George said openly that he felt a desire to become such a figure himself—a spiritual being surrounded by women.

Despite his spiritual hunger, the temptations of a rock star were still too much to resist. He had affairs with other women, and he became less guarded about them with Pattie. He invited a French girl who had just broken up with Eric Clapton to stay at their house. Pattie soon sensed that the relationship was more than just friendly. When she confronted George about it, he dismissed it as her imagination. Angry, she went to London to stay with friends. Six days passed before George called to tell her that the French girl had left.<sup>i</sup>

Meanwhile, the Beatles began work on their next album, titled *The Beatles*, but which came to be known as *The White Album*. Rishikesh had inspired them all. John, Paul, and George had come up with dozens of song ideas—even Ringo had one in mind. In the third week of May 1968, they went to work. They met first at Harrison’s house to tape 23 demo

recordings, then moved into the studio on May 30 and worked on the album intermittently through October 17. They had such an abundance of new material that, against the advice of George Martin, they decided to release a double album.

Besides taking far more time to record than any other Beatles album, *The Beatles* was notable for other reasons. George, accustomed to having two or at most three songs on any LP, contributed four. John, who had left Cynthia and become attached to Yoko Ono, broke an unwritten code by bringing her into the studio while they worked. Also, for the first time, the Beatles had a guest star on one of their records—Eric Clapton, whom George invited to play lead guitar for the classic “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the song’s lyrics, Harrison’s new perspective on the world comes through clearly. “I look at you all” he begins, addressing the countless millions who will hear his voice, and laments the tragedy of “the love there that’s sleeping”—the latent love unexpressed by people who are distracted. He sees in the cluttered floor, which “needs sweeping,” a symbol of their cluttered vision. The misdirected people he sees are “controlled,” “bought and sold,” unable to unfold the love inside. However, the world keeps turning. Surely we will learn from our mistakes—won’t we? The ponderous cadence, the sorrowful voice, and the anguish of the guitar suggest that the answer is no. George, now feeling enlightened to the way things really are, sees all through the eyes of a melancholy prophet.

The isolation he felt was about to be partly alleviated by his encounter with like-minded souls. On a cold December day in 1968, a crowd waited outside the Apple building, hoping as always for a glimpse of one or more of the most famous entertainers in the world. In their midst stood a strange American in a high-necked, Eastern-style robe with a head shaved except for a top-knot known as a *shikha*. Yoko Ono arrived in a Rolls-Royce. As a

doorman hurried to open her door she noticed the singular figure. "You must be one of George's," she said. "Come on in." The man followed her and was directed to a lounge where some fifty people waited for various reasons. The Beatles were involved in a meeting. When it broke up the other three left the building, but George came and opened the lounge door. As soon as he spotted the man with the shaved head, he crossed the room and came straight up to him as though he knew him. "Hare Krishna," he said in greeting. "Where have you been? I've been waiting to meet you."

The surprised devotee of Krishna introduced himself as Syamasundara Das, a disciple of Swami Prabhupada. George recognized the latter as the man whose recording of Hindu chants had so captivated him two years before. He mentioned how he and John Lennon had started to chant after hearing the album, and had spent hour after hour doing so while sailing among the Greek islands. Ever since George had toured India with Ravi Shankar in late 1966, and encountered Krishna devotees chanting in public and happily joined in with them, he had been keen on meeting some of their Western counterparts.

Harrison said that what he was most interested in knowing was, out of all the deities in the Hindu pantheon, why *Krishna*? Why single him out for worship rather than Shiva, Brahma, Ganesh, or another god? Syamasundara replied that, according to the beliefs of his group, Krishna was God's original *personal* form, the source from which all the others came. He was the one who merited the most veneration. Intrigued, Harrison invited the devotee to come out to his home in Esher that weekend.

In the rich scent of sandalwood incense, the twenty-three-year-old Syamasundara told George and Pattie his story. He had been a Fulbright scholar turned professional skier, yet he felt spiritually hollow. Like the protagonist of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and *Desolation*

*Angels*, he found himself keeping an eye on the forests of the Northwest from a watchtower, passing the time by reading about Eastern mysticism. Then, on a visit to Haight-Ashbury, he went to a branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and heard Swami Prabhupada lecturing about the Bhagavad Gita and the value of chanting. His life changed.

George, dealing with the anxiety-inducing relations between the Beatles and the crumbling of the Apple venture, was fascinated. He knew very well how meditation and chanting had sustained him during distressing times. He was also impressed by the devotee's buoyant spirit. He asked how the ISKCON members viewed death. Syamasundara explained that devotion to Krishna would be repaid by release from further births and a return to Krishna in his cosmic form. The essential requirement was to keep Lord Krishna in mind at all times, and reciting the Hare Krishna mantra made that a simple task.

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<sup>i</sup> Boyd and Junor, *Wonderful Tonight*, 122-123 (see intro., n. 2).

<sup>ii</sup> Norman, *Shout!* 340 (see intro., n. 2); Lewisohn, *Beatles Chronicle*, 283-304 (see chap. 1, n. 18).