



ORIENTAL INFLUENCES ON THE SONGS OF THE BEATLES

Dr. GAURI

Assistant Professor of Music, BLM Girls College, Nawanshahr, Punjab, India



ABSTRACT

Across all cultures, Music is traditionally associated with spirituality. The quest for spirituality is one of the key reasons for cultural fusion. Aided by technological development, cultural fusion takes place throughout the world and such a cultural fusion is evident in music as well, particularly in the songs of the Beatles, the highly popular music band of the 1960's. Beatles were greatly inspired by the Oriental music in both its form and content, in physical and spiritual aspects and that is why oriental element ranging from Taoist philosophy to Hindu Vedic and Puranic traditions are noticeable in the lyrics of the Beatles. The form of the Beatle's music is more Indian than Chinese. This inclusion of the oriental element into the occidental may be attributed to the quest for spirituality or the charm and fascination for the orient or both, but the fact remains that the influence of the orient on the Beatles was considerable.

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Introduction

Technological advancement has greatly facilitated cultural fusion worldwide. Cultural fusion is the fusion of two or more cultures in their attributes to result in a hybrid that contains the features of its constituents. It is not uncommon to find cultures incorporating the features of other cultures to result in a new hybrid culture. One such noticeable influence in case of cultures is the influence of the eastern or oriental music on the western or occidental music.

Since times immemorial, music has been considered a link between human and the Divine and that is why music is taken as the oldest and a confirmed form of healing. Various old cultures like Greeks, Chinese, East Indians, Tibetans, Egyptians and American Indians have recognized its worth in their lives. Music therapy has been mentioned in 2,300 years old China's first medical text, *The Yellow*

Emperor's Classic of Medicine. Based on traditional Chinese Five-Element theory, this therapy considers five elements-earth, water, fire, metal and wood-corresponding to five notes or sounds — *jiao, zhi, gong, shang, and yu* of traditional Chinese music. These five elements also correspond to internal organs. Chinese medicine takes into consideration the relationship between internal organs and musical notes, to achieve different healing purposes.

Oriental music with all its healing qualities has traditionally been imbued with spiritual overtones. In Indian Music, the trinity of Carnatic music (consisting of *Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar* and *Shyama Shastri*) and many other saints employed music as one of the ways to sing the praise of God. In North Indian music, among Sikhs, the recitation of the holy word *Gurbani* is with the accompaniment of Music. The spiritual element of Indian music inspired Beatles to a great extent and

that is why Indian element is so much obvious in their music.

The Music of Beatles

The Beatles contributed greatly to popularize Indian classical music in the west and that is also one of the reasons that there appears a noticeable influence of Indian Classical Music on the western pop music. The Beatles were a group of young Liverpool musicians- Paul McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—which became highly popular by 1964. The Beatles in their times were considered a kind of standard, ‘a spirit-level for trends in popular music’. Their influence was so great that they were ‘widely imitated in dress, attitude, and musical style’ (Bellman, 1997)

Beatles incorporated various features of Indian music in western music. Indian classical music is monophonic (single melody format). Here all *swaras* (notes) are in relation to a tonic note. Western music on the other hand is monophonic as well as polyphonic having multiple notes (chords and harmonies). Indian classical music has *Tala* which are elaborate rhythmic cycles, and is taught orally without any specialized notation whereas forms of western music have elaborate notation system.

The 1960s was an age of Rock and Roll in Western music, specially in the United States as Jazz was being replaced by Rock music. This was the time when the popularity of the Beatles was very high. But in the coming years, their style of music changed as they incorporated Indian spiritual element in their songs and music to a great extent. Their involvement with Indian music and spirituality earned for them a distinctive musical style- evident in the album *Rubber Soul* and afterwards-and left a durable impression on the sands of time.

The Beatles' were influenced with the oriental philosophy. And this was due to their association with the Indian religious leader or Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an expert in Transcendental Meditation. They attended a lecture by him at the London Hilton on Park Lane in August 1967 and had a private audience with the Yogi at the end of the lecture.

Harrison's interest in Indian culture and Hinduism increased when he and his first wife came

to India in 1966. Here, he learnt sitar and visited places of religious significance. He also met Maharishi Mahesh yogi. In 1968 all four members visited India and met Maharishi Yogi in Rishikesh. This meeting had a purpose behind it: to study meditation. However, this association with the Yogi ended soon but the interest of the Beatles-particularly Harrison's- in oriental cultures and philosophy remained as such. In following years Harrison became a member of the *Hare Krishna* tradition and in 1969, he produced the single *Hare Krishna Mantra* which was performed by the devotees of the London Radha Krishna Temple. Harrison continued with the *Hare Krishna* tradition particularly its *japa-yoga* which is chanting with beads. He remained a lifelong practitioner of the cult until his death in 2001. So much was the Hindu influence on him that remained a vegetarian, on religious grounds, from 1968 until his death.

George Harrison's three songs were heavily influenced by the Indian classical style. *Love You To* has significant Indian influences, so much so that Lester Bangs labeled it as ‘the first injection of ersatz Eastern wisdom into rock’ and Richie Unterberger called it Beatles' "first all-out excursion" in raga rock. Released in 1966 as a part of the album *Revolver*, the song employs the pitches of the *Kafi That* which is the Dorian mode in its Indian equivalent. It is based on the *khyal* vocal tradition of Hindustani classical music.

In the next year the second side of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* opened with *Within You Without You*. It is the first of many songs in which Harrison deals with Indian, or more specifically, Hindu, spiritual concepts in his lyrics. This song can be called an altogether Indian composition as it has no Western influence. Harrison arranged the song with Indian musicians. The inspiration for the song came from Harrison's regular exposure to the Indian music during his six-week stay in India with Ravi Shankar, who was his sitar *Guru*, during the September and October of 1966. Harrison later said that the tune for the song came about through his regularly performing musical exercises *sargam*, having the same scales as those found in *ragas*. Gerry Farrell (1997) said that Harrison had created a ‘new form’ with the song,

calling the composition: 'a quintessential fusion of pop and Indian music.' The song was different from other compositions of Beatles as it pinpointed the Indian devotional tradition as well as indicated Harrison's absorption in Hindu philosophy and the teachings of the Vedas, through its lyrics. Not just this, the album cover depicted Indian yogis such as Paramahansa Yogananda, Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya and Sri Yukteswar which further highlighted the growing influence of the Orient on Beatles.

Another significant song of Harrison's oriental trilogy was *The Inner Light*, which was released on a non-album single in March 1968, as the B-side to *Lady Madonna* and was his third fully Indian-styled number. The song was the first Harrison composition to be featured on a Beatles single and it showed the Beatles', particularly Harrison's, inclination towards Transcendental Meditation and their increasing interest in oriental music. The lyrics of the song were based on the Taoist holy book *Tao Te Ching*. The song's background track was recorded with Indian musicians in January 1968 in Bombay and the lyrics were taken from Juan Mascaró's translation of the poem. Mascaró at that time was a Sanskrit scholar at Cambridge University. In one of his letters to Harrison, Mascaró enclosed a copy of his book *Lamps of Fire* and suggested that a passage from the *Tao Te Ching* which he had translated might prove a good subject for a song. Harrison incorporated the passage in the lyrics of the *The Inner Light*. The song is thus an extraordinary combination of three diverse musical and lyrical styles and traditions: Chinese Philosophy, western music and Indian musical instruments. The lyrics lay stress on the power of meditation, how it awakens the awareness of the self and the external world and affirms that the real understanding comes from within, not without as is evident in its words 'Without going out of my door, I can know all the things on the earth.'

One song that belongs to John Lennon of the Beatles is *Across the Universe*. The song has considerable Indian Influence which is evident in Lennon's chanting of *Jai Guru Deva*. The lyrics are almost incomprehensible but the repetitive chanting

of *Jai Guru Deva, Om* indicates the spiritual nature of the song.

Released in November 1970 in *All Things Must Pass*, Harrison's *My Sweet Lord* is unique in itself as it celebrates two different religions. It praises the Hindu god Krishna but with the repetitive blending of the Hebrew word *hallelujah* with the chanting of *Hare Krishna*. In his autobiography, *I, Me, Mine* (1980) Harrison explained that his repetition and alternation of *Hare Krishna* and *hallelujah* was actually to indicate that the two terms meant the same thing. Apart from *Krishna*, the song also sings praise to the Hindu god *Rama*. It also incorporates an ancient Vedic prayer from the *Guru Stotram* which equates the Guru or the spiritual teacher to the divine trio or *Trimurti* – *Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara* – even to the Brahman, the highest and the ultimate.

Conclusion

Beatles were the ace musicians of 1960's who incorporated oriental element in their music and in their lyrics. The reason behind this may be the quest for the spirituality or the charm and fascination for the orient or both but the influence of the orient on the group was considerable, most evident in George Harrison and John Lennon. This inclusion of the oriental element in their works led to the popularization of the oriental music in the west and also resulted in the emergence of a new genre or a new music style called *raga rock*. However this influence did not carry forward as strongly as it was in the times of the Beatles but the Beatles can definitely be credited for introducing oriental element in western pop music.

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