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"I'VE NEVER BEEN CLOSER TO THE LIGHT"

PAUL McCARTNEY

Barefoot in India, 30 years on

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When Paul McCartney first visited an Indian ashram in 1968, the world's press followed, trying to glimpse the Beatles at their most hippyish, dabbling with transcendental meditation.

Some 35 years later, he returned – quietly – to the country that inspired his most enigmatic songs, with a new woman on his arm. **Siobhan Grogan** reports

Getting back



📷 MARK SELIGER

PAUL

McCartney is in love, love, love. Yesterday, he flew to London from New York on Concorde with his fiancée, Heather Mills, and fondly lets slip how she used the time to read wedding magazines. In fact, it seems as though the couple have spent much of their time together seeing the world. She was, he says, the spur he needed to return to India more than 30 years after he first visited with the Beatles.

"I've always wanted to go back, since the Maharishi days [Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was the Indian guru the Beatles spent time with in 1967-8]. I'd talked about going, but I'd never actually gone."

The Beatles' fascination with India was played out louder and louder on subsequent albums from *Revolver* ("Tomorrow Never Knows") to their final, *Let It Be* ("Across the Universe").

blue Ganga waters. Yes, they know it will purify them." They promptly swapped their swinging London threads for kurtas and trousers; the women in the circle – including Jane Asher, McCartney's rather prim TV presenter girlfriend – wore saris and smeared kum kum [vermillion powder] on their foreheads.

However, the spiritual love-in came to an abrupt, and still unexplained, end. In the last week of February 1968, McCartney and Asher, along with Ringo Starr and his wife, quit the ashram and flew back to London. The rest followed shortly after.

"When we were there, it was great," explains McCartney. "It always felt magical. At the time, I'd said if I'm totally sold on this, I'll just stay. In actual fact, I didn't think I needed to stay forever. I thought I got enough of the meditation experience, so I came back after a month and never went back."

That is until he met Heather. "We spent

to do with that. I wrote three other songs when I was there, just because I had time and was very laid back. We spent a little bit of time in Goa and, although I didn't go to the rave clubs, it was all very... laid back."

These days, McCartney sees the Beatles' history as a stream of good friends, silly anecdotes and fleeting details – like looking back through a photo album. "It doesn't really feel like me," he says. "I mean, I know it is. I've just seen a photo from that era and it was like 'Wow, hey, not bad'. So looking back at stuff, it's kind of nice to go 'Wow, good suit', or 'That's a good look' or 'Hair's looking good in that one, not so good in that one'. Same as everyone when they look back on the past."

He recalls a time, in the band's early days, when he and Harrison hitchhiked from Liverpool to Harlech in north Wales. After befriending a young guy in the local coffee bar, they spent the night at his parents' house, only

"I'VE JUST SEEN A NEW PHOTO FROM THE BEATLES ERA, AND IT WAS LIKE 'HEY, NOT BAD'. LOOKING BACK, IT'S NICE TO GO 'WOW, GOOD SUIT'"

It came about after George Harrison met the revered musician Ravi Shankar and told him he wanted to learn the sitar. Harrison and his then wife, Patti Boyd, were promptly invited to Bombay. On their return, Boyd convinced her husband, John Lennon and McCartney to attend an appearance by Maharishi at London's Park Lane Hilton.

The band had a private audience and were invited first to a course on his transcendental meditation technique in Wales (after which the new recruits held a press conference to renounce their drug-taking, and about which Paul later claimed was the moment he realised taking drugs was "like taking an aspirin without having a headache"), then to his ashram in Rishikesh, India. The visit was pivotal in shaping the band's future, and Harrison's later conversion to Hare Krishna.

In February 1968, having completed the sessions for the *Yellow Submarine* film soundtrack, they booked off two months and, together with partners and friends like the Beach Boys, Donovan and Mia Farrow, were received by the Maharishi at his Academy of Meditation in Shankaracharya, Kashmir. Two 30-minute sessions of transcendental meditation a day, the Maharishi said, would enable them to perceive the divinity within themselves.

The press were waiting at the retreat's iron gates. Mal Evans, the group's road manager, explained what the boys hoped to achieve from the trip. "Peace – lots of it – taped Indian music, vegetarian food, and a dip in the cool,

millennium night in Liverpool, where I'm nothing, down home for a piss-up, basically, with a lot of family..." He pauses, his mind once again racing ahead of him to ensure he doesn't miss a beat. "Someone said they were going to India, and I thought, well, I've never been back, but I'd love to go. It turned out Heather had been once and hadn't been back for about 15 years either. So I sat around and organised this holiday and took really good care to try and make it very special. And it was..." He searches for the right word. "Fantastic."

Was returning to India after so many years a strange experience for McCartney? "There are a lot more cars, but there are still rickshaws, it's still chaos. It was cool. The guys would be like, 'We'll take you from this car to this car', and we'd be like, 'Wait a minute, we're in India! We want to experience it and walk around. It's all right. We're grown-ups!' It panicked the guide, but we'd get rickshaws down all the little crowded streets where the bazaars are, and we got a video camera... and we were real tourists. We really loved it. Had a great time. It just has a very special atmosphere, and it's kind of a spiritual thing for me."

Just as his first trip to India inspired a handful of tracks on the Beatles' seminal *White Album*, his return to the subcontinent more than 30 years later made its way on to McCartney's latest collection, *Driving Rain* – and nowhere more clearly than on *Riding Into Jaipur*. "I took this train from Delhi to Jaipur through the night, which was really cool, and the lyrics are basically

to discover they weren't the only two sharing their room.

"There were two bloody great what we thought were tarantulas," McCartney says with a grin. "And because we came from Liverpool – it's not the country, and even on an estate your mum would dust cobwebs – there were never spiders living there. We were having visions of them coming down and attacking us in the night. So we got a newspaper, put them in a little bit of tissue and put them down the toilet. The next morning, we were having breakfast and loving it, you know, and Mrs Bryley said: [adopts Welsh accent] 'And did you meet Jimmy and Jemima?' We went, 'Er, what do you mean, like?' And she said, 'Oh the two pet spiders.' We went, innocently: 'No! Didn't see anything. Don't know what you're talking about, love!' Ah, I've been busted now..." He shakes his head with a smile.

While it may feel as though we know everything about the Beatles by now, McCartney's memories of those days and his friends are still private and treasured. He even seems barely aware that they would mean anything to anyone else, although, he points out: "My 30 quid bass is worth more than I paid for it now. A good old Stratocaster is like a Chippendale chair, and I like that. Bill Wyman collected everything. He's got videos of everything the Stones were ever on, but we could never be bothered. We were too busy doing it to collect, you know. I haven't collected anything from last year, never mind 30 years ago."

McCartney is bemused by the absurdities of



Petal gurus. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (centre) with his disciples in Rishikesh, March 1968. From left: John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Mia Farrow, an unnamed follower and Donovan

the Beatles memorabilia industry. "The best was a piece of toast that George Harrison had bitten into, with a letter of authentication. It went for \$14,000! So at that point you have got to laugh. The next day – we found out about this at breakfast – my kids were saying, 'You don't want that egg do you, Dad? Dad, that bit of toast there, have you finished with it?'"

Looking back over the band's various fashions raises a smile with McCartney. About his Sergeant Pepper period look, he says: "The moustache was quite good," he chuckles. "I only figured out recently why I did that. I was with a mate of mine in Liverpool and for some reason I had a couple of mopeds and we were driving around. Not being a big biker, I was looking at the full moon and looked too long and next I discovered myself about to hit the pavement in slow-mo. And my tooth came through there," he says, pointing to above his upper lip, "and smashed it all up."

"I had to get stitched by this doctor who was drunk because it was Christmas and when he put the stitches in the thread came out and he said: [slurring] 'Sorry, I'll have to do that again.' He put it through twice so I had a big fat lip for a long time and that was why I grew a moustache. Then it became the Pepper thing, and all the other guys grew one. We always did things in groups. If John got a cool black suit, we'd all get a cool black suit."

It's now 21 years since John Lennon was killed in New York, and McCartney says if he could change anything, it would be that "people you really miss", like Lennon, George ("a really beautiful guy who I love dearly, full of love for humanity") and his late wife, Linda, were still around. What would John be like if he were alive today?

"Dead cool," he laughs. "That was the shame about when he died. He'd really worked out a lot of issues and got a lot of his craziness

out. He had a lot of issues when he was a kid because his dad left home when he was three, and he didn't live with his mum and he idolised her and then she got run over when he was 16. So he'd had a lot of tragedy in his life.

"His first marriage didn't work out and stuff and he didn't see enough of his son. I know there were a lot of regrets and he was managing to work them out, so he was getting really cool. And, you know, he was writing, he'd learned to type – which isn't such an amazing skill now, but then the only guys who learned to type in my knowledge were journalists – and John was writing on a typewriter so he would probably have been really into computers and stuff. But he was such a great guy and he was mellowing out, so I think he'd be really cool."

AFTER the brief withdrawal from the public eye that followed Linda's painful death a few years ago, McCartney, too, seems content with his life again. Last year's *Driving Rain* album was recorded during spontaneous sessions in Los Angeles, with McCartney doing what he admits he does best: "I play a pretty good bass line and I sing okay. That's me." He hints with some relish that he may even do some festivals this summer, including Glastonbury, and may headline at the

special concert to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee in June. By way of a warm-up, this month he embarks on his first US tour in ten years, taking him from California to New York.

"When you start in a band in your teenage years, it's really just to groove," he says. "It's like, yeah, get some mates, hang out, play some stuff. Have fun. You listen to music to escape and get out of your day. I go home now and have a drink and put music on. It's still about going to a special place." ■



"But George, it's not a nose flute, it's a sitar..."

McCartney under the influence

Paul's Beatles songs written in – and inspired by – India

MOTHER NATURE'S SON

One of the band's last songs to have been written by both Lennon and McCartney, penned after the Maharishi gave a lecture on the unity of man and nature.

BLACKBIRD

Beautiful ballad that "tumbled out spontaneously" after McCartney was woken one morning by a blackbird singing, though not in the dead of night. He later admitted it might also have been a thrush.

ROCKY RACCOON

From a jam session "on a roof in India" with John Lennon and Donovan. A wild-west song story, set in the Appalachian mountains. Lyrics eventually changed from Rocky Sassoon to make the central character sound more like a cowboy.

BACK IN THE USSR

Impressed by the Beach Boys, with whom the Beatles had hung out and jammed with in Rishikesh, Paul wrote this as a parody of *California Girls* ("those Ukraine girls really knock me out...") and a counter to the yee-hah patriotism of Chuck Berry's 1959 *Back in the USA*.

WILD HONEY PIE

Inspired by one of many spontaneous singalongs in India, the *White Album*'s most disposable track is remarkable for having been recorded in one take by a solo McCartney, singing and playing bass, drums, electric and acoustic guitars. "It was a fragment of an instrumental which we were not sure about," Paul said later. "But Pattie Harrison liked it."

BIRTHDAY

Improvised in Abbey Road Studios upon the band's return. Without a piano in India – the band were restricted to the stringed instruments they took with them – McCartney was eager to get back to his rock 'n' roll roots. ■ Paul Clements

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