Life



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BRITISH INVASION:
GEORGE HARRISON

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Today on British Invasion — the column that talks about both Mr. Blobby and The Beatles in the same breath — I hope to start a series exploring the solo careers of all four Beatles members. As one of the most well-documented bands in history, it's interesting to see what these men did after they struck out on their own. First up on our docket will be George Harrison, the "quiet Beatle."

Let's start at the beginning of the end. Despite two previous studio albums — a soundtrack album and one that's mostly just Harrison mucking about with Moog synthesizers — Harrison's real post-Beatles debut was the sprawling 1970 album "All Things Must Pass."

The first triple album of its kind, it was recorded at Abbey Road between May and October 1970 with Phil Spector — who worked on the last Beatles album "Let It Be" — and received immediate critical and commercial success. After years of fighting to get two or three songs featured on a Beatles album, Harrison gets to show off the songwriting chops he built during the 1960s, and his increasing interest in artists like The Band and Bob Dylan.

"My Sweet Lord" is the best example of Harrison's songwriting prowess, a beautiful song about spirituality and God that could take you to a higher plane with its intricate, expressive slide guitar solo and upbeat chants of "Hallelujah" and "Hare Krishna."

In 1970, Harrison bought the Friar Park estate in Oxfordshire, England, built by an eccentric lawyer, Sir Frank Crisp. Harrison and his wife Olivia restored the Victorian Mansion and its 32 acres to its former glory and even used the main lawn as the background for the album cover for "All Things Must Pass." Gardening soon became an important part of Harrison's identity; his 1980 autobiography is dedicated to "All gardeners everywhere" and he viewed it as a form of escapism from the world.

Speaking of escapism, a big influence on Harrison's songwriting and mindset was Indian culture and music. He took two pilgrimages to India, one with his first wife Pattie Boyd in 1966 and another with the rest of his bandmates two years later to Rishikesh, India, studying meditation under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

It was during his first visit that he met Ravi Shankar, a prodigious sitar player who taught Harrison the instrument and gave him multiple texts on Hinduism and yoga, a spiritual practice that originated in India and on that Harrison advocated for during the rest of his life.

Shankar was also the person who brought Harrison's attention to the plight of the Bengali musician's homeland in what was then known as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). After being ravaged by the Bhola cyclone in 1970 and fighting a war for independence from Pakistan the next year, there was a massive refugee problem. Harrison responded to Shankar's request for a charity event, in the hopes of raising aid for refugees.

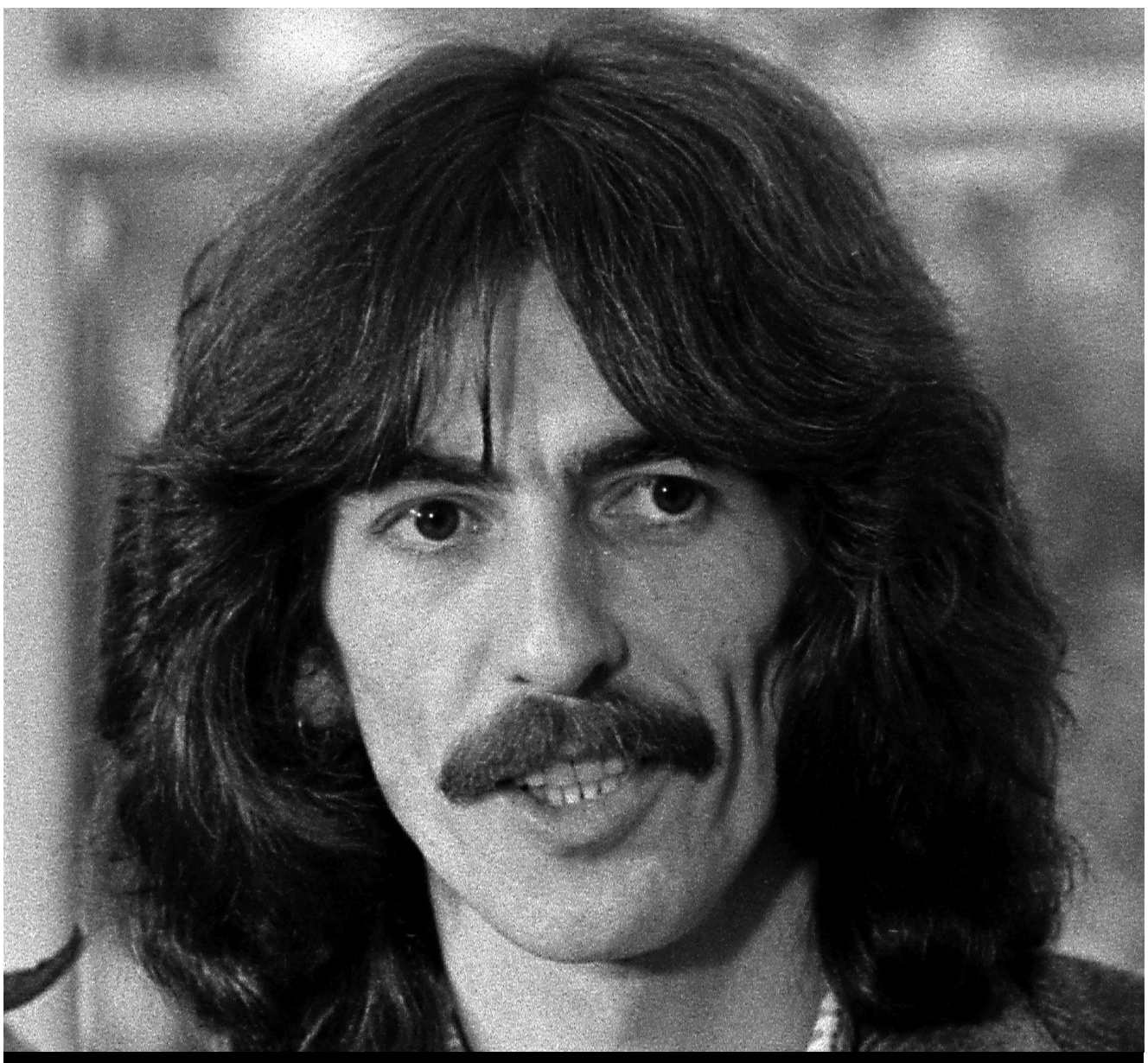
This request culminated in The Concert for Bangladesh, a star-studded charity concert that included performances from Shankar, Harrison, Dylan and more. Over 40 thousand people attended the two shows in Madison Square Garden and raised over $250,000 in aid through gate receipts. Not only did this show raise awareness about Bangladesh, but it also served as a precursor to later benefit shows like Live Aid.

After a disastrous North American tour in 1974 and after 1982's "Gone Troppo" barely made a squeak in America, Harrison retreated from the spotlight to produce films. With production company HandMade Films, he produced Monty Python's "Life of Brain" in 1979 and the Madonna/Sean Penn flop "Shanghai Surprise" in 1986. Harrison recorded some songs for the soundtrack, which gave him the itch to work on his first album in five years, "Cloud Nine."

"Cloud Nine" was effectively a career revival for Harrison, who co-produced with Jeff Lynne of Electric Light Orchestra. With Lynne and his long-time collaborators in tow, they managed to get the last U.S number one hit from a Beatle with the cover of James Ray's "Got My Mind Set On You."

Stereogum writer Tom Breihan succinctly describes the song as "a fantastically successful 44-year-old man singing a song that he liked when he was a kid." A lot of your enjoyment from this cover will stem from how much you like George Harrison the man.

In 1997, he was diagnosed with throat cancer, which was fortunately treated through radiotherapy. Two years later though, he was attacked in his home at Friar Park by a home intruder, and the stab wounds he received in his lung brought back his cancer. After going through cancer treatments in 2001, he passed away in Los Angeles, Calif., on Nov. 29, 2001. According to his wife Olivia, his final messages for fans of his work said, "Everything else can wait but the search for God cannot wait, and love one another."



George Harrison, lead guitarist for the Beatles. After the group broke up in 1970, he had a solo career of his own.

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