

George Harrison in San Francisco: A Love-Haight Relationship

When George Harrison died on December 1, 2001, the phone started ringing – it was those damned media outlets again – before I had time to sort out my thoughts about him. I'd covered a tour of his for a *Rolling Stone* cover story in 1974. That may have explained the volume of calls. But when one of the callers turned out to be the *San Francisco Chronicle*, looking for a set of recollections, I had to untangle my various feelings about “Beatle George”—from admiration for his musical accomplishments -- especially in the shadow of John and Paul -- to a lingering uneasiness about the article I wrote about him way back when. That piece, along with a report on the furious reactions to it from some Harrison fans, is in *Not Fade Away*. I was witness to the beginning of that tour, and it was a rough start. I reported what I saw and heard, and still stand by my article, which included an interview with a defensive, defiant Harrison.

But now, with Harrison gone at age 58, and knowing that he'd had a difficult few last years, including the news that he'd been felled by throat cancer in 1998 and by a knife attack by an intruder at his home the following year – I wanted to offer an appreciation. A balanced one but an appreciation nonetheless.

It would be a stretch to say that George Harrison ever left his heart in San Francisco.

But the last time he was in the Bay Area, on a tour I covered for *Rolling Stone* magazine, he left a lot of much-needed money and single-handedly kept a major part of the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic afloat.

Harrison played in the Bay Area three times as a Beatle and once by himself. When the Beatles first performed in the city (or just across a border, in Daly City, at the Cow Palace) in August 1964, their appearance marked the first of the Fab Four's first full tour of the United States and Canada.

A year later, again in August, again at the Cow Palace, they performed the last show of a brief, two-week tour, begun just after the release of their second film, "Help!"

And then, on Aug. 29, 1966, they played Candlestick Park, not knowing that they were performing their last paid concert.

Although I was a certifiable Beatlemaniac—even had every song on *Rubber Soul* memorized—I didn't see the band live until that summer evening in 1966 at Candlestick Park. I vividly remember George Harrison as the man in white. Socks, that is. I remember the sonic blur of their music—they played, as Paul McCartney once told me, at double-speed and couldn't hear themselves above the teenaged din—and I recall telephoning a college buddy at home, so that he could at least hear some of the din. But most of all, I remember George's white socks. He may have been the "quiet Beatle," but he knew how to stand out.

As shy and reclusive as he was said to be, he stood out again when he came back to San Francisco on August, 8, 1967, and visited the Haight. He and Patti had traveled from England to Los Angeles the week before, renting a house on Blue Jay Way, which gave Harrison an idea for a tune. He'd helped promote, and he'd attended, a concert by Ravi Shankar, the Indian composer and sitar player, in Hollywood.

Now, in San Francisco, he told reporters that he was simply curious about the hippie phenomenon. George, then 24, Patti, and press agent Taylor drove into the area in the early evening and strolled, unnoticed, along Haight Street. They reached the sector of Golden Gate Park then known as "Hippie Hill," where they found a young man performing before a gathering of about 20 longhaired youth. After a few minutes, Harrison asked to borrow the musician's guitar, and proceeded to play. A few more minutes later, one young woman finally recognized him.

"Hey," she shouted. "That's George Harrison. That's George Harrison!"

David Swanston, a Chronicle reporter on the scene, noted what happened next:

"As the cry echoed through the park, hippies clambered down hills, dropped from trees and sprang from behind bushes. A sizable crowd formed.

"Harrison played for about ten more minutes and then shouted, 'Let's go for a walk.'

"'Yeah,' shouted the hippies, 'let's go.'

"And off they went. Harrison strumming the guitar, the hippies following along. As the crowd left the park and moved down Haight, it grew. And grew.

"As Harrison strolled and strummed, hippies bubbled up beside him and posed questions:

"How does it feel to have the family all together?' one asked.

"It's gettin' better all the time,' Harrison responded.

"What do ya think of the Haight-Ashbury?' another queried.

"Wow, if it's all like this it's too much,' Harrison answered."

But that's not what he told others. In *Dark Horse*, a Harrison biography, author Geoffrey Giuliano quotes him saying that he'd thought the Haight "would be something like King's Road (in London), only more. Somehow I expected them to all own their own little shops. I expected them to be nice and clean and happy."

Instead, he said, he found the hippies "hideous, spotty little teenagers."

Harrison didn't forget the Haight. In 1971, riding high on his triumphant three-record set called *All Things Must Pass*, which included the Number One hit, "My Sweet Lord," he helped stage and host an all-star rock benefit, to raise money for starving children in Bangladesh, in East Pakistan. Harrison was now a devotee of Indian music and Eastern spiritualism.

Before the 1974 tour he had decided that several concerts would be benefits, and he had heard about the plight of the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic. The clinic had lost federal revenue-sharing money marked for 1975 and was set to shut down the medical sector, which, the previous year, spent \$67,500 to treat 10,000 patients. Harrison donated net profits from his first Bay Area concert to the clinic—a total of \$66,000.

The day after that first concert, Harrison, future wife Olivia Arias, who was at that time working for his record label, Dark Horse, and several others visited the clinic. This time, he was no piper leading an adoring mass. Patients at the clinic recognized him. But, as founder Dr. David E. Smith said, "Nobody gaped; nobody mobbed him or kissed his ass."

Harrison toured the facilities and chatted with several staff members. "He said he hoped to start a ripple with other musicians doing the same kind of things," writer Amie Hill, a clinic volunteer, reported.

And as he spoke, he broke into one of his songs, "The Lord Loves the One."

Which brings us to the matter of the mixed reviews. On his tour, which began in Vancouver and Seattle, then headed into San Francisco and Oakland, he pointedly disavowed his Beatle past at the risk of upsetting his fans. He wanted his fans to listen to Shankar's music, and gave a large portion of the concert over to Shankar's Indian orchestra. When he deigned to perform Beatles songs or hits of his own, he changed lyrics, so that it was "In my life, I love *God* more," and he guitar no longer gently wept, but smiled. He sang those lyrics in a voice strained by overuse during rehearsals. As it turned out, the protests came not only from newspaper critics, but from his inner circle, and from some fans as well.

I covered the beginning of the tour for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and after the Bay Area shows, we met between concerts at the Forum in Los Angeles, where, backed by Olivia and several others, he stoutly and stubbornly held his ground. I asked what he had to say to those fans who'd paid \$9.50—then a top price for concert tickets—and wanted at least a taste of "Beatle George."

Harrison leaned forward: "Well, why do they want to see if there is a Beatle George? I don't say I'm Beatle George."

"Well, one of the things you don't control..."

"I *do* control..."

"...is how the audience feels about you. The conceptions..."

"Okay, but I certainly am going to control my own concept of me. Gandhi says create and preserve the image of your choice. The image of my choice is not Beatle George. If they want to do that they can go and see Wings, then..."

At a pre-tour press conference. Harrison had opened with an odd statement: "I really didn't want to do this for a living. I've always wanted to be a lumberjack." When I asked what he meant by that, I got a dose of the humor that, like his musicianship, was noted all too little.

"I feel great," he said. I believe that he truly did. No matter how he sounded, and no matter the poor reception he had received. And no matter that the article I wrote drew the most negative mail in my dozen years at the magazine. He was a happy grain of dirt, and I was happy for his happiness.

We had both come a long way since I saw him at Candlestick, and found myself so taken by his white socks.

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