

CONCERT FOR BANGLADESH

Madison Square Garden, New York City, August 1, 1971

It launched a geopolitical issue into America's collective psyche in a way that no concert ever had before. Harrison closed the show with a brand-new song. He called it "Bangla Desh." The lyrics were a simple plea to his millions of fans to help a suffering people.

JASON MIKLIAN AND SCOTT CARNEY

Ravi Shankar methodically plucked the seven top strings on his sitar, drawing twanged melodies out of the four-foot-long instrument. Surrounded by marigolds and burning incense, Shankar paired the heavy top strings with notes from the airy twelve bottom strings, making complex sounds that a guitar could never attain. Barefoot, sitting cross-legged on a large antique rug, and draped in an exquisite white kurta, he was the world's best known sitar player and a musical deity in his home of India.

Shankar paused for a moment; the packed Madison Square Garden crowd cheered wildly. He smirked like he was remembering a joke. He'd toured the United States for a few years now and gotten used to the flower-power hippie crowd trying to find God by mixing his live music with drugs.

He finished adjusting his instrument and took the microphone. "If you appreciate the tuning so much, I hope you'll enjoy the playing more."

To be fair, a sports arena was a pretty odd place to showcase an instrument best suited for intimate rooms or beneath banyan trees. Still, Shankar couldn't resist gently mocking their musical ignorance. They cheered again, their marijuana haze easily deflecting his barb. Shankar played on as his sharp,



George Harrison and Bob Dylan perform at 'The concert for Bangladesh' in Madison Square Garden on 1 August 1971.

John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and Ringo Starr soaked in the subcontinent like typical tourists, hitting up spiritual hotspots to taste transcendent religious bliss, only to have it evaporate by the time their plane touched down in London. But Harrison was different. He spent the next four years diving ever deeper into Indian mysticism. He flew around the world to seek out temples and ashrams, rereading the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and studying at the feet of gurus, babas, and swamis. With music part and parcel of his spiritual journey (not to mention copious amounts of LSD, weed, and cocaine), he'd sought out India's most famous musician.

The moment Harrison heard Shankar play, he said, "I felt I wanted to walk out of my home that day and buy a one-way ticket to Calcutta. I would even have left my wife behind." The feeling wasn't exactly mutual. Shankar had never heard a Beatles song in his life. Harrison told the Bengali musician he played sitar on their megahit "Norwegian Wood." When Shankar listened to it later, he told a Rolling Stone journalist: "To tell you the truth, I had to keep my mouth shut. I couldn't believe it. It sounded so terrible." Still, Shankar loved Harrison's earnestness. Harrison loved that Shankar was one of the only people who never asked him for anything. They became fast friends.

And when Harrison came by Shankar's house that summer day in 1971, Shankar asked his first-ever favor. "George, this is the situation, I

know it doesn't concern you, I know you can't possibly identify . . . but would you help me?"

Shankar mailed Harrison newspaper clippings of the atrocities that had been written by journalists who snuck back into Dacca to document Yahya and Tikka's genocidal path, but he didn't know if Harrison cared enough to read them. Shankar hoped they could do a fund-raiser together. With luck they might get \$25,000. Harrison sat back and squinted, calculating the request. Maybe I went too far, Shankar thought. Now he looked like just another hanger-on hoping to

sway along in the front row. Behind them, 19,500 fans itched for Shankar's long set to wrap while they waited for the main event.

Shankar tore through the last few dozen notes at 140 beats per minute, grinning from ear to ear. The crowd broke into wild applause. Then Shankar bowed, picked up his ten-pound sitar, and strolled backstage as the audio-visual team flicked on a documentary. The movie aimed to shock. Thousands of screaming fans hushed themselves to silence while absorbing nauseating images of crows picking at rotting corpses on the outskirts of Calcutta, Bengali

mothers wiping biting flies off toddlers too weak to protest, and cholera victims dying in ditches. The film's credits rolled with a plea to give to UNICEF and Harrison took the stage. He scanned the crowd nervously, white electric guitar in hand. The cord got wrapped around his foot. He had no idea if the show was going to be legendary—or just a legendary debacle. He wore a white suit with a red Om embroidered on the lapel in Sanskrit, a red button-up shirt, and a full Jesus beard and hair. He shook off the cord and strummed the opening bars of one of his biggest post-Beatles hits, "Wah-Wah." Ringo delivered drums right on cue.

Emotions rose as they played a series of massive hits, one after another, including "Jumpin' Jack Flash" to honor Mick Jagger, as well as some Beatles' tunes sung live by a Beatle for the first time in several years. A mustachioed Clapton floated his way onstage, dressed in a navy blue sports coat and jeans. He accessorized the outfit with a bloodstream packed to the gills with opioids. Clapton wedged his lit cigarette into his guitar's headstock and launched into a duet with Harrison. Together, they did the first ever live performance of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." Clapton later said he was ashamed because he was so high he could barely walk, let alone play. The crowd was too enthralled at the sight of George Harrison and Eric Clapton riffing together to care. Now they were rolling. Harrison wrapped up "Here Comes the Sun," then took a quick sip from

through his song selections.

The concert was just one of dozens of public outpourings in support of the Bengali cause during that summer and fall. West Pakistan imprisoned a pregnant woman from Philadelphia for illegally crossing from India to East Pakistan to deliver saris. A Dutch man stole a famous Vermeer painting and tried to fence it for millions of dollars in order to give the sum in relief aid. Children in thirty thousand schools across America fasted for a day so that they could donate their lunch money to the cause. Activists built a refugee camp out of sewer pipes in front of the UN, about a mile and a half northeast of Madison Square Garden. They tried to shock the diplomats and ate the same single daily meal of rice and lentils that refugees did, while Allen Ginsberg read poetry.

In Paris, a former French special forces officer took a pistol and a briefcase bursting with colorful wires up to the cockpit of a Pakistan International Airways plane bound for Karachi. He hijacked it, demanding twenty tons of medical supplies for the Calcutta refugee camps. During the tense standoff, the French Red Cross brought the supplies as requested. Commandos disguised as airport workers loaded the crates, then captured the skyjacker. Though he only carried a toy gun and some wires, he still got five years in jail for the stunt. Nevertheless, the French Red Cross delivered the goods to the refugee camps as promised.

Yet none of those protests captured the imagination quite like the Concert for Bangladesh. It launched a geopolitical issue into America's collective psyche in a way that no concert ever had before. Harrison closed the show with a brand-new song. He called it "Bangla Desh." The lyrics were a simple plea to his millions of fans to help a suffering people. Harrison and the rest of rock's biggest stars left the stage, pumping their fists to raucous whistles and whoops. Clapton said, "This will always be remembered as a time that we could be proud of being musicians. We just weren't thinking of ourselves for five minutes."

Shankar agreed: "It was a miracle, really."

At the after-party, Keith Moon demolished a drum set and hotel room in celebration, as they all reveled in a job well done. The live concert album sold millions of copies and won a Grammy.

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The above-mentioned writers are the authors of the book, titled *The Vortex: The True Story of History's Deadliest Storm and the Liberation of Bangladesh*, HarperCollins India(2022). This article is an excerpt from the book.



A poster for the Concert for Bangladesh

lingering notes reverberated through the cavernous steel rafters and echoed away into oblivion. Backstage, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, and Ringo Starr waited their turns to perform.

This was the birth of a new phenomenon in American music: the rock-and-roll charity benefit concert. The idea was as simple as it was unorthodox: leverage the power of celebrity musicians to draw attention to an under-recognized human rights issue and raise money for organizations working in the field.

Two months earlier, Shankar paced around his Spanish-style villa in the heart of Hollywood. He'd followed the horrors in Pakistan, like every other overseas Bengali, and felt a kinship with the Pakistani Bengalis from just across the border of his own home in Calcutta. As the most famous living Bengali in the world, friends, gurus, and countrymen all asked him to help. Could he play a benefit at the local temple? And one at a high school too? Shankar agreed time and again, but the pitiful handfuls of money, one three-hour show at a time, couldn't possibly move the needle when ten million were starving to death.

Then Shankar's friend George Harrison called. He was coming to Los Angeles to work on a film score and would love to get in a sitar lesson or two. Shankar and Harrison had been friends ever since the Beatles ventured to India in 1966.



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Shankar and Harrison at the press conference for the concert.