

Between February 2004 and February 2005 I wrote twenty six freelance articles for Francophile internet magazine Bonjour Paris + one article with Karen Fawcett (President) and Sarah Gilbert Fox (Directeur Général), which was published in the guide-book, "Paris For Dummies." Here is one of the original twenty six, with the original self-penned lead...

The Ganesh Festival

Non-roving reporter Pat Brien steps out of his apartment in the 10th Arrondissement straight into the Indian Community's annual shindig, the Ganesh Festival, a celebration to honour Ganesh, the god with the elephant's head, and finds himself carried along with a mass of happy people, carriages decked out with flowers and laughing children, flute players, dancers and drummers, towards the holy Temple of Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam.



Sunday, 05 September 2004: Clambering out of bed late and realizing that my neighbours were missing their weekly Sunday dose of British Culture, I pulled Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band out of the rack and was about to stick it in the machine when the distant, hypnotic sound of flutes drifted through my sixth floor attic window.

I froze; pricked up my ears. Had my neighbours formed a cultural resistance movement designed to do battle my four Liverpoolian buddies, The Beatles? I decided to go with album-2 of the White Album instead, and Helter Skelter those spunky little Frenchies into submission. OK, lads... One, Two...

Wait a minute.

A full frontal flute attack? Nah. Maybe a Serge Gainsbourg Techno album or something. That I could understand. Even respect. But flutes? Then again, they did sound good: seductive, melodic, other-worldly. The sky was blue and a cool breeze drifted in, carrying the happy tunes to my window and blowing them softly into the air around me.

I noticed that they were punctuated by the distant sound of drums, along with faint shouting and laughter.

There was a street-party out there.

Hurrying, I put on my shades, then fell over backwards as I blindly pulled on my trousers. The lads would have been proud of me. I would be fashionably late, of course, but then I was always fashionably late for parties. Usually on account of not having been invited in the first place. I walked out onto my street, rue Louis Blanc, and Bang!

Indian Community action was everywhere.

This is the 10th arrondissement. Between here and the 18th lies the heart of the Indian community in Paris -- cool, friendly people and hot, spicy food at give-away (or rather take-away) prices -- but it wasn't usually like this: Shops had pretty, hanging decorations and Indian music blasted out of each of them. The street was a blanket of heat and people; a blaze of colours and peacock feathers held by beaming children in dazzling suits and dresses, many seated atop cars and vans.

Everybody smiling. Everybody happy.



The action seemed to be veering towards the first street to the left of my apartment-block, rue Philippe-de-Girard, so I turned up there. The further I went up, the thicker the crowd became, until I finally came out at Place Paul Eurard, where a huge number of people had gathered. I took a breather at a nearby café, where a young Indian man sat holding a Sitar.

A friendly chap, I tried to explain to him that the Sitar had been invented in the 1960's, in Liverpool, England, by a man called Beatle George. But he didn't seem to understand me.

He just kept laughing.

Then came the moment the crowd was waiting for. The huge procession, sporting three or four carriages decked out with flowers and yet more peacock-feather wielding children in

beautiful costumes, accompanied by flute players, dancers, drummers and nageshvaram players, moved across the Place towards the street I'd just come from, rue Phillippe-de-Girard.

The crowd was so thick here that I had to fight my way forward to actually see the procession. Then, inexplicably, everybody surged forward, fell back just as quickly, and I found myself in it! I was at the front, behind one of the carriages, and I was being watched by a thousand people.

I wasn't sure whether or not to wave at them.

It was moving quickly, too, and the people behind me smiled at me. I smiled back, but I was nervous. 'Why am I at the front?' I thought. 'Maybe it's a race? The winner is turned into a sacrificial victim. The loser has to go home and watch French TV?'

I was beginning to get paranoid.

I noticed that the mass of people on the rue Phillippe-de-Gerard were milling around the arch-way of an apartment block at No. 72. A carriage up ahead disappeared in there. The crowd on this street and the procession had become as one. There was no way to move in any direction. It was choc-a-bloc. I looked down at my hard, shiny black brogue shoes, and at all the bare legs and sandal-clad feet around me.

'I could stomp my way out,' I thought, 'Then make my escape. What difference would it make? They'd just presume I was an American.'

But I couldn't do it. They were too beautiful, too colourful, too musical, too open and friendly. They handed out drinks and food. They looked into my dark ray-ban shades, into my dark, cynical, British mind, and lit it up. They wouldn't sacrifice me. Kill me with kindness, maybe, but that was all. They were sweet people, civilized and courteous.

But I was still nervous.

Swept helplessly inside the archway, the first thing I noticed, with a dark sense of irony, was a few hundred pairs of shoes, removed by worshippers about to enter the residence of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, son of Parvati and Shiva; or rather, the Holy Temple set up to do him honour.

Realising that Ganesh was wise to me, I tried to turn, but the crowd was moving me forward, carrying me helplessly along a river of faith towards their god. I tried to remember the last time I'd talked to my own, but I couldn't.

I panicked slightly, knocking my sun-glasses askew and turning quickly into Woody Allen.

‘I don’t want to see an Elephant god!’ I whimpered to a smiling Indian man who was trapped beside me. ‘The movie about the Elephant-man was too much for me! HE’LL banish me or something! I have no meekness! And I’m low on wisdom! I keep meaning to get some, but the books that provide it are so big! And with such small print! How come the wise never just get to the point, anyway? Why do they have to be such whores about it?’

The guy nodded at me, smiling. Amazingly, he’d understood every word. ‘He who walks with the wise, becomes wise,’ he told me.

‘Not if he does all the talking,’ I pointed out. ‘Which I plan to.’

I wanted to scream: ‘Get me out of here! I’m an American! Honest! Send me a god-damn helicopter! Air-lift me to a McDonalds! I demand my right to get fat!’ But my Indian neighbours had no intention of forcing me inside their Temple.

Instead, I found myself in the grounds of the building. A small area, a square, with the modest looking Temple entrance off to one side.

Groups of people sat around in the square, eating and talking, laughing and playing with the kids. One family, sitting cross-legged in the square, looked up at me and smiled. ‘Bon appétit!’ I told them. They beamed back.

I didn’t go inside the temple. What was the point? The only way for an outsider to get to know the strength and wisdom of somebody else’s god is to study the behaviour of the people who worship that god.

Based on that, Ganesh, the elephant headed god, had made a powerful impression on me.

So when the crowd thinned out a little, I made my way back home, picking up some spicy Indian rolls and a cup of sweet Indian tea on the way, so full of respect for other people’s culture’s and religions that, rather than blast Beatle music out into the hot air on this holy day, I decided to blast out a George Harrison album instead.

I was one with the meek.

