Royston Ellis: The Nonconformist Who Almost Became a Beatle

Posted on

As a teenager, he had the nerve to recite poetry to rock and roll music in England’s clubs and dance halls, a genre he termed “rocketry”, the rap version of the 1960s. He was the provocateur extraordinaire who spoke on racy matters; on one occasion, his audience threatened to burn his beard. Royston Ellis, the internationally known novelist and travel writer who lived in Sri Lanka, pioneered England’s Beat music scene, a fusion of poetry recited to rock and roll music. He was the bearded poet, the “poet laureate of rock and roll” who dared to experiment and offer teens food for thought. Here is his story.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Royston Ellis enjoying a moment, peering outside from his home.

A Chance Encounter

It was May 1960. Beat poet Royston Ellis had finished performing at an arts festival at Liverpool University. He drifted towards the Jacaranda club, a coffee bar and live music venue serving modern American-influenced music to teenagers. There he met George Harrison. Later that day, taking him to a cramped space called Gambier Terrace, his new acquaintance introduced Ellis to John Lennon and Stuart Sutcliffe. The fourth occupant was Paul McCartney. They were fledgling musicians at school and college, trying to break into the local music scene.

The fivesome hit it off at their first meeting. Royston Ellis, at 19, was a published poet who performed his poetry on stage and television to the backing of rock and roll music, famous as rocketry. He was the authority extraordinaire on teenage life, with a reputation as “one of the most outspoken teenagers in Britain”, who was invited by television channels to speak on what being a teenager was all about as his first volume of poems, Jiving to Gyp, told the story of a teenager caught up in the world of rock and roll, jazz, coffee bars, jukeboxes, and night parties. By then, he had his own program, “Living for Kicks,” in which he spoke on subjects deemed controversial in those halcyon days, like pep pills and sex before marriage.

The four young men were fascinated by the more experienced Ellis, who by then had a broader worldview and offered valuable tips to the budding musicians on staying awake at night with the help of an ordinary nasal inhaler. Much to their amazement, he even told them that one in four men was a homosexual, something that had not crossed their closeted Liverpudlian minds. Ellis, who was supposed to leave that day, stayed with the four young men who would rise to global stardom as Beatles one day.

The above is one exciting story from the life of Royston Ellis, poet, novelist, and travel author from England who made Sri Lanka his home in 1980. Ellis regularly contributed to the Explore Sri Lanka magazine as a travel writer. Not many know of Ellis’ tryst with fame with the doyens of the rock and roll, pop, and jazz cult of the sixties. Many wouldn’t know that Ellis, who made Sri Lanka his new home, had dedicated much of his adolescent life as an influential Beat poet, working with the greats of the rock and roll era. The Beat poet’s colorful encounters with the likes of Lennon, McCartney, the Beatles, Cliff Richard and The Shadows, and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin are described in their biographies.

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Ellis (center) in Liverpool was backed by Beatles.

Stepping Out Of The Mould

Royston Ellis dared to be different as a teen, the perpetual experimenter and novice on the job whose suaveness helped him sail through a chequered career. His intrepid nature is seen in his intermittent career choices, from being an ambitious paperback writer and poet to an actor and television interviewer to a barman, Docker, and ferry boat engineer. But by 18, having quit school at 16, Royston had worked as an office boy, duster salesman, gardener, milk-bottle washer, building laborer, and farm hand.

As a poet, he would walk into clubs, pubs, and coffee bars to tell people that he was Royston Ellis, the teenage poet, or walk into provincial newspaper offices, plugging

himself as the person they were waiting for, for their ultimate masterpiece. In 1959, the Daily Mail described Ellis as a “weirdie” from Weirdsville below his picture. With his optimism and audaciousness in plain sight, it wasn’t surprising that Royston, upon a successful evening of poetry reading backed by Lennon, McCartney, and the rest of the Beatles at the Jacaranda, had urged the lads to leave their school, college, and work commitments to realize their big dream by moving to London. He did the same as a teenager from Pinner, Middlesex, going to the capital to promote his unique rocketry. But before he met the fledgling Beatles in Liverpool, Ellis met Cliff Richard in 1959 at a London studio. Ellis was 18, and Cliff was 19. By now, Ellis was losing patience with teens, his target audience who refused to read his poetry. He conceived the idea to recite his poems to the sound of rock and roll, emulating the founders of America’s nonconformist Beat Generation of the post-war era. And so was born the Beat Poet of England.



Royston autographs a copy of ‘Jiving to Gyp’ for Cliff, Harrow, 1959.

Ingenious Ellis told Cliff Richard of his intention to dedicate his first book of poems to him. Although puzzled, Cliff had nonetheless consented to the idea. In the meantime, Ellis was also contracted to write a book, “Driftin’ With Cliff”, describing life on the road with the singer and his crew on tours.

Interestingly, Cliff Richard was initially a tad aloof towards Ellis when he joined him on tours. On the other hand, his bass player, Jet Harris, and drummer, Tony Meehan, accepted Ellis as they were excited about his Beat poetry. After their success performing Beat poetry at a dance, Ellis went on to recite poetry to the backing of rock and roll music from The Drifters first and later when they became The Shadows, including appearing together on television shows.

Back to the Beatles. According to Ellis, when it was time to leave Liverpool, he convinced the young men undecided on how to spell their band's name, to settle for Beatles over Beetles, the letter 'a' as a double play on Beat poetry and Beat music, as a nod to their role in the Beat culture. As Lennon's biographer, Phillip Norman would reveal, although Ellis had built a reputation as an English pioneer in combining rock music and poetry, the Beat poet had bigger ambitions of becoming a paperback writer. The Beatles' 1966 hit, Paperback Writer, composed by McCartney, is believed to have been inspired by Ellis. Polythene Pam by Lennon was about an exciting encounter in 1963 when the Beatles played in Guernsey on Channel Island. Ellis was working as a ferryboat engineer on the island. Lennon being his friend, was invited by Ellis to his flat to meet his girlfriend, who dressed up in polythene for kicks. Lennon, Ellis, and the woman spent the night in the flat; the rest, as they say, is history. This account of what inspired Polythene Pam has come straight from the horse's mouth, from Lennon and McCartney in their biographies.

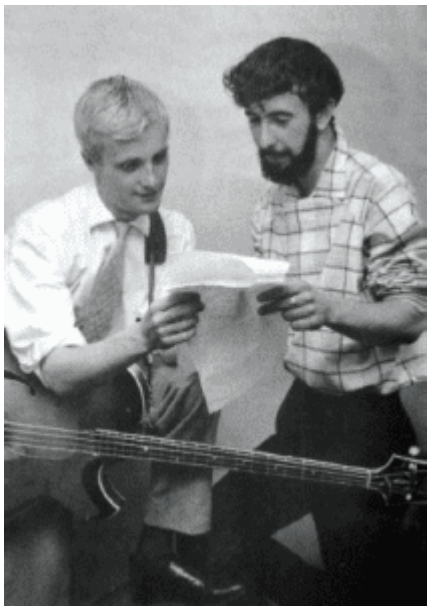
When the Beatles were finally taking off with a team and a manager and looking for a fifth member, Lennon had considered asking Ellis to join them as "poet-compere".

Ellis was closest to Lennon, who described him as the converging point between rock and roll and literature. So much so that when the Beatles were finally taking off with a team and a manager and looking for a fifth member, Lennon had considered asking Ellis to join them as "poet-compere".

As he continued performing rocketry, Ellis met more fledgling musicians. In 1960 Ellis made friends with Jimmy Page, who was playing with a band called the Red

Cats. Jimmy Page, the founder, and guitarist of Led Zeppelin, appeared several times with Ellis on television and at stage shows playing the guitar. The high point of their collaboration was when they performed at a Festival of Poetry at London's Mermaid Theatre in July 1961.

Before he decided to quit public poetry recitals as he was no longer a teenager, Ellis published Driftin With Cliff and The Shadows and The Shadows By Themselves and, in 1961, published The Big Beat Scene, described as "an outspoken exposé of the teenage world of rock and roll" in Britain, which was a pioneering piece before bands like the Beatles broke onto the international music scene as champions of rock and roll.



Royston and Jet reviewing a poem.

Pursuing the Bigger Dream

Just when he could have expanded his Beat poetry, in 1962, 20-year-old Ellis left England, beginning a new chapter in his quest to become a writer, his first stop being the Channel Islands. He then moved to the Cannery Islands, the setting of his first novel, The Flesh Merchants. In 1966 Ellis went to live in Dominica, where he focused on historical plantation novels, churning out the bestselling The Bondmaster series written under the pseudonym Richard Tresillian, a name adopted

to achieve consonance with the historical nature of the story, as per the publisher's request. He was not alone in Dominica. Some of his old friends from the Beat music era reconnected with him on the tropical island. Tony Meehan, The Shadows drummer, stayed with him for a while, with Jimmy Page coming over during a Led Zeppelin tour break in the USA.

His final and long sojourn in Sri Lanka was accidental. Ellis was enjoying life as a writer in Dominica when his house was destroyed by a hurricane. He set forth on his onward journey, briefly choosing Sarawak. But meeting a Sri Lankan hotelier on decided his destiny. He was invited to the eastern district of Trincomalee, and in 1980 he set foot in Sri Lanka. He eventually settled in the south of Sri Lanka in Bentota. The equatorial climate appealed to him, and Ellis built his first residence – the Royal Cottage in Bentota. Living in Sri Lanka, he continued to write the Bondmaster, Flesh Traders, and Bloodheart series.

His Own Master

Royston declared, "I am my own master, doing what I enjoy", so he did it on his own terms. Attuned to the finer things in life, he would invest in the best-malted whiskey to sip at sundown on his porch but would pull on the sarong for bed and enjoy rice and curry for a meal. Ellis would dress up for formal gatherings in true English style with three dinner jackets in black and white and a bowtie, while the Bangkok-tailored safari suit was his unvarying attire on work assignments. His shoes were handmade in Sri Lanka. The one-time Beat poet had his personal hairdresser from Colombo who had mastered the art of styling Royston's beard. Ellis wore a beard since his teens, following a family tradition rather than style.

He always traveled in the front of the plane, embracing the mantra that comfortable traveling is better than staying in a five-star hotel at the destination, seeking the most exotic over the most expensive accommodation. Ellis didn't bother to learn Sinhala despite persuasions from friends but knew a few important words to him, such as to ask for tea and the pub. In October 2006, Ellis met McCartney at the Le Bristol Hotel in Paris, where the former Beatles member remembered to recite a line from one of the Beat poems performed by Ellis more than 30 years ago. After over 45 years, Cliff Richard and Ellis met in 2007 when the former was in Sri Lanka for a concert. His friendship with Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin had endured for over 60 years. The two remained good friends after Ellis quit performing rocketry, with Page writing the foreword to a collection of Ellis's Beat poems, "Gone Man Squared," published in 2013, poems that he had written between 1959 -1967.

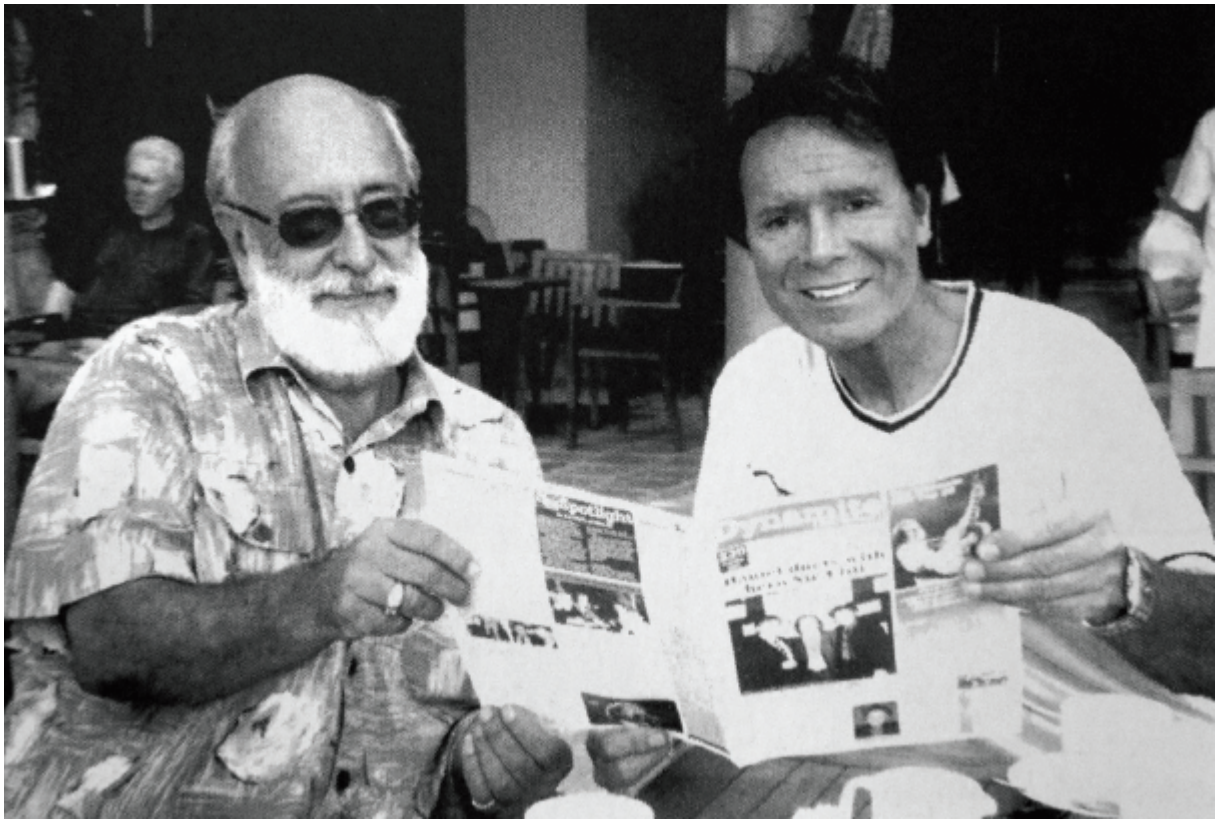
> Royston declared, “I am my own master, doing what I enjoy”, so he did it on his own terms.

Royston Ellis was born to write, be it poetry or story. He always kept his penchant for writing until the end. The pandemic lull was an excellent opportunity for him to reconnect with a childhood friend, Ruth Smith, who he had known in the 1940s. They began a unique collaborative exercise during the first COVID lockdown in 2020. It started with Ellis writing the first 500 words of a short story, which Ruth continued, the story traveling back and forth via email, each not knowing its end. The fun project produced 18 short stories published in 2021 as Beach Shorts – Stories For Holiday Reading. That was Royston Ellis’s last project as an author. As an octogenarian, the writing spark hadn’t diminished, if not shone brighter. Ellis passed away on February 28, 2023 at 82, leaving a sea of knowledge in his writing.

Indeed, he lived life to the fullest and on his own terms, sharing his joy and pain with a small group of friends in Sri Lanka.

Neel Jayantha had been Ellis’s closest aide since he was a boy and from the day the Englishman made Bentota his new home. Neel remembers Ellis as a man who had the energy to live a good life, ending a day of writing and work with a glass of whiskey over interesting conversations of his past exploits. Neel said that he lived on his terms while refusing to judge others for their choices.

Royston eventually sold his second home, Horizon Cottage, and moved in with Neel, who devotedly attended to the needs of an ageing man, who not only embraced Sri Lanka with zest but ensured that those who served him were secure for the rest of their lives. The biographies of his rocketry backers are carefully preserved at Neel’s house, with Ellis marking the pages that refer to their association for easy reference. There are pictures and memorabilia too. Ellis spent a lot of time on the large veranda until the end. In the large open house, his presence still seems to linger. At his passing, only those who knew the paperback writer of rock and roll fame intimately miss his friendship and delightful character profoundly.



Royston with Cliff in 2007.



Royston rehearsing with the then Drifters, 1959.



On the road 1959; Royston Ellis (second right) with Cliff, band members and friends.



Royston Ellis beat poet at work.



Royston Ellis, Jimmy Page and Neel Jayantha at Royston’s Poetry Reading at The Poetry Cafe, Covent Garden, London, England, May 2015.