

Bath musician opens up about ‘cult’ experience in new memoir

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By Bob Keyes

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It took 34 years and a pandemic for Bath resident Peter Macdonald Blachly to finally carve out of the space to tell the story he has carried around inside all that time.

Living in a 19th-century home at Clapp Point on the banks of the Kennebec River helped, too.

Blachly, a musician, painter and writer – and sea captain, house builder and backyard auto mechanic – has hinted at the time he spent in what he described as a religious cult in conversations over the years, but only vaguely and in passing.

“That’s a story for another time,” he said in a 2017 [interview about the rock opera, “One Way Trip to Mars,”](#) that he co-wrote with his wife, Johannah Harkness. “Maybe someday.”

Someday finally arrived when Blachly, who uses the name Peter Alexander in his musical performances, wrote about his experiences in a 308-page memoir self-published last year.

Now 72 and with many of people who were part of his previous life no longer living, Blachly felt more freedom to write the memoir than he would have otherwise. The pandemic gave him the time to finish a writing project that began many years ago, and living in old house with an expansive view of the river gave him the space to think and a place to ponder.



Blachly holds a copy of his self-published memoir about the 17 years he spent in a religious cult. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

His book, called “The Inner Circle, Book One: My Seventeen Years in the Cult of the American Sikhs,” which is available at Gulf of Maine Books in Brunswick, tells the story of his journey as a popular musician in a nationally touring rock band during the Vietnam War and Woodstock era to becoming a close confidant and musical liaison to Yogi Bhajan, a kundalini yoga guru and spiritual leader of the 3HO Foundation.

The organization’s name stands for Healthy, Happy and Holy and remains an active nonprofit dedicated “to living a life that uplifts and inspires,” according to its website. Although it claims to follow the tenets of Sikhism, a religion that originated in India in the 15th century with more than 25 million followers worldwide, it has been criticized for misrepresenting the religion and denounced by traditional practitioners. A spokesperson for 3HO declined to respond to a reporter’s questions for this story. A spokesperson for the Sikh Coalition, a New York-based Sikh-American advocacy group, declined to comment on 3HO.

The organization formed in 1969 and Blachly joined in 1970 at age 20, because he was interested in yoga and a healthier lifestyle. He became deeply involved out of a genuine desire for spiritual understanding and personal peace, he said, and a love of music. As a musician, he achieved respected status in the movement, traveling among Sikh communities in the United States and India while learning to play the sitar, mastering tabla (or Indian hand drum), speaking Punjabi and performing at holy shrines across India, including the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

After Yogi Bhaajan died in 2004, many of his followers accused him of rape and sexual misconduct. In his book, Blachly, who has two daughters from an arranged marriage through his association the spiritual leader, accuses him of manipulation, control and financial malfeasance.

“I have held off telling this story for a lot of reasons, including my family,” he said in an interview at his Bath home. “I started writing this book more than 25 years ago. But a lot of people in it were still alive at the time, who are now dead. Some of the people who were core to the group have left the group. Some of my good friends are no longer there. And I needed to come to some perspective. It takes a long time to process this stuff, and to come out of a cult. You do not flip a switch and are out of a cult. You have to work to come to grips with, ‘How did you get involved in the cult in the first place?’ ”

His second wife, a therapist, encouraged him to write and share his story.

“When Peter would talk about it, I would be mesmerized by all the experiences and the times,” Harkness said. “A lot of people who missed the ’60s have romantic visions of it. He had a repository of stories and experience that I thought people would find as interesting as I did.”



Peter Macdonald Blachly, a well known and accomplished musician and artist, paints in his studio in December. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

FROM ROCK TO RELIGION

Blachly grew up in Washington, D.C., in a musical family, with a private education and a summer place in Harpswell, where he learned to sail and live a self-reliant life. He excelled at music and learned to play both the piano and guitar during the 1960s, when musicians and rock music took center stage in American culture. His band, Claude Jones, achieved star status in Washington and toured nationally for a few years in the late 1960s.

His rock 'n' roll dreams evolved into a spiritual quest that started with a simple desire to feel better through yoga, meditation and healthy eating. He describes the earliest days of his conversion, in 1970, when he walked into the yoga studio at 17th and Q streets in Washington while living in Dupont Circle.

“I had done virtually no exercise for several years, and even though I was only 20 my body was stiff and unhealthy,” he writes in “The Inner Circle.” “I was six feet two inches tall and weighed only 145 pounds, the result of two years living as an impoverished, cigarette-smoking, psychedelic rock musician.”

Not too much later, he was wearing a turban and explaining to his parents that he was married and living in an ashram, a place of spiritual retreat and yoga. And not long after that, he and his wife were raising a family in an unloving and unhealthy marriage, and Blachly

began a whirlwind lifestyle that sometimes resembled the one he left behind, as he traveled side by side with a popular and influential spiritual leader as he built a global religious following.

Blachly's account of his time in India and at the temples and markets of old Delhi and New Delhi reads like both a travelogue and a mystery, full of precise descriptions of unimaginable beauty, as well as intrigue and suspense as he goes deeper into his conversion. He recalls his first vision of the Golden Temple, a spiritual site that includes a large man-made lake that reflects the temple in the middle.



Peter Macdonald Blachly, a well known and accomplished musician and artist, who recently self-published a memoir about the 17 years he spent in a religious cult, in his studio at his home in Bath. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

“Spontaneously, most of the Americans went to their knees and bowed their foreheads to the cold marble,” he writes. “I had never seen anything so beautiful, or sensed such a deep connection and profound reverence. The place, made by man, seemed to contain a tangible part of God.”

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Blachly, who has lived in Bath since 2008, has met some resistance since he self-published his book, including from his daughters, one of whom remains involved in the organization. They objected to his description of their mother, and Blachly changed some passages after its initial printing to reflect their concerns – something he could do as a self-published author. He declined to make his daughters available for interviews for this story, describing their relationship as “quite loving and we communicate quite well about most subjects. I would say it is wonderful as long as we don’t touch on this stuff.”

He said that his older daughter, who was born into and remains involved with 3HO, called him after she read the book and said, “This is not a cult. I am not in a cult.”

Despite his negative feelings toward the spiritual leader, Blachly credits his good health now to the lifestyle he learned at a young age. He learned to eat well and exercise, and mastered the discipline associated with attending to one’s spiritual needs. He also learned to live within a community and to work for the betterment of all.

“I credit it for saving my life,” he said. “I was not doing drugs or alcohol when my peers were, and I would have been had I stayed in the band. It was not all bad. The discipline of learning meditation has served me well.”

Leah Lamb-Allen, a pediatrician from Colorado, knew Blachly when he played in Claude Jones and met him in a yoga class in D.C. They joined 3HO at about the same time, and she stayed with the organization for 20 years.

“Claude Jones was a fabulously popular band,” she said, “so it was interesting to watch someone who was in this cool rock ‘n’ roll band renounce all that and do yoga. ... It was a very interesting time. His parents, and my parents, were dismayed, to say the least.”

She remembers Blachly as a gifted musician, then and now.



Blachly, a well-known and accomplished musician, plays guitar in his studio. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

“You put anything in his hands and he can play it. If it is a piano, a guitar, violin, the drums, sitar – he can play it,” she said.

She also remembers him as a true believer, as was she. “We were looking for a better way to live, a better way to be married, a better way to live in a community. I would say we were sorely let down, but in the beginning it was really quite a heady experience.”

In a phone interview, Lamb-Allen had no hesitation calling 3HO a cult. “None whatsoever,” she said. “My mother told me in 1971, ‘You’re in a cult.’ I said, ‘No I am not. I am a Sikh. It is the fourth-largest religion.’ She said, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, you are in a cult.’ My parents looked at hiring a deprogrammer.”

Stephen Josephs, another friend then and now, has shared a musical bond with Blachly for 50 years. A classically trained guitarist, Josephs began playing with Blachly in the early 1970s as Sikhs. At the time, Josephs ran an ashram in western Massachusetts, and Blachly made an instant impression when he came to visit.

“Somehow when we played together it was magic. I went into states of ecstasy playing with Peter. His lines when he improvised were incredibly melodic. He has a great ear for harmony, and his rhythm is fantastic. When he picked up the tablas, he was as good as I have ever heard,” Josephs said.

Like the others, Josephs joined the movement because he wanted something more from his life. And like Blachly, he achieved high status within the organization because of his ability to lead people with music.

“It was a lot of fun in those early days. We got up very early in the morning, 3 o’clock, took cold showers, meditated, did yoga, and went into the garden and weeded,” he said, laughing. “It was a lot of fun and very fulfilling.”

Josephs, who lives in California and works as an executive coach, also had an arranged marriage. His lasted. He and his wife will soon celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. But there is no doubt he was involved in a cult, and he credits Blachly for writing about the experience clearly so others can understand the experience.

“I think everyone who is in that organization is in because there was something incomplete or broken in their psyche and they needed to work it out,” he said.

Their “schedule of departure,” he said, was very individualistic. He left after 10 years.

He appreciated Blachly’s book because of its honesty and Blachly’s self-reflection. His friend is accountable for his own behaviors and flaws, Josephs said. “A lot of his writing is about discovering things that he needed to correct in himself. He lets you in on his struggles and his progress as it emerges. ... You don’t have to be a cult victim to understand that kind of self-analysis and desire to make things better, and to have your life square with your values. He really let you in on that.”

Blachly calls “The Inner Circle” book one, meaning he intends to write a second volume. If he completes that task, book two will be about his recovery and how he has structured his life since leaving the religious organization. The process of looking back, he said, has been difficult, but healthy. He has plenty of blame to spread around, but accepted and reconciled his role in both joining and staying in the organization as long as he did.

“Getting enough distance to actually start looking objectively and critically at myself, that was a huge piece of this,” he said. “A lot of people who got into cults, when they leave it is all about blaming the cult leader or blaming the organization. I got to the point where I said, ‘Wait a minute, how did I end up in there and a bunch of people I ended up going to yoga classes with at the same time, down in D.C., they didn’t get involved. They didn’t get sucked in. What was it about me that made me vulnerable to the ideology and charismatic nature of this cult?’ “

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